

Gospel Doctrine

Lesson: Matthew 3-4

Reading: Matthew 3-4, John 1:35-51

PDF Version of Notes

I. Approach

These represent the notes I made during my reading of the scriptural text for this lesson. It is not a lesson outline or a lesson plan but really notes about issues and questions that struck me as interesting during my reading. Consequently, the notes do not have a conclusion and very little mention of application. I like to let those things arise while I teach.

II. Images of Moses

In my view it is important to remember that we are still in the middle of Matthew's image of Jesus as a new (and greater) Moses:¹

1. A male child is miraculously born.
2. A evil or at least pretty bad tyrant rules the land.
3. The child is protected from harm in Egypt.
4. The child leaves Egypt.
5. He passes through waters (of Baptism).
6. He is tested in the wilderness for 40 units of time.
7. He delivers God's law on a mountain (mount).

III. John the Baptist

Read Matthew 3:1-6:

1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 2
And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3 For this is he that
was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying,
The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

¹This outline is adapted from Ehrman, Bart D., 2004, /The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings/, Oxford University Press, but you can find something similar in lots of sources.

4 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, 6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

- How should we understand John's call to repentance? Is John talking about or calling for repentance at the individual level? Is John calling for the repentance of Israel collectively? Could it be both?
- Suppose that John is calling for repentance on both the individual and the collective level. Should we understand a call for "Israel" to repent as different than call for individuals to repent? Why or why not?
- Do you think a call for collective repentance is also a call for social change? What kind of social change might John have in mind?
- "Wilderness" is mentioned both in verse 1 and John's quoting of Isaiah 40:3. Is Matthew's (and John's) use of "wilderness" important or just an indication of John's location?
- Does this wilderness image allow the reader to look both forward and back?
- Do you think it is fair to say that Matthew is using Elijah imagery to describe John the Baptist (for example, the hairy mantle imagery (2 Kings 1:8))?
- Suppose Matthew is linking John and Elijah. Why this allusion? Does it make sense to see them as similar or is there some other reason for the allusion?

IV. Baptism by Fire and the Holy Ghost

Read Matthew 3:7-12:

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: 9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. 10 And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. 11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: 12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

A. *Generation of Vipers*

The Pharisees and Sadducees are described as coming to his baptism. Is this description revealing, inconclusive, or unimportant?

John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees *a brood of vipers* or *generation of vipers*. What do you think this means? Do you think this has the same kind of meaning as calling someone a *snake* in modern society? How can we tell? Does the narrative give us any clues?

- Does the rest of John's speech give any clues about what *brood or generation of vipers* might imply as an insult? Why might John anticipate that these two groups would respond by emphasizing their ancestral link with Abraham?
- Malina and Rohrbaugh, in their commentary on the synoptic gospels, suggest that John's pointed observation and commentary are linked in the following way:²

“Brood of vipers (literally: offspring of snakes, snake-bastards) would be as insulting a label as one could imagine in a society in which social standing and the honor bound up with it are fundamentally a function of birth.

- Does the preceding shed light on why John called the Pharisees and the Sadducees a *brood or generation of vipers*?
- What is verse 9 all about? Why was John so confident that the Pharisees and Sadducees would start thinking of their ancestral link with Abraham? What does this reveal about the theological and cultural beliefs of the Pharisees and Sadducees?
- Well, at least to me, it seems to suggest an underlying attitude that being the son of the Abraham (i.e., born into the covenant) is enough and would be assured of a great reward because of their heritage. This has been called “covenantal nomism.”³
- How would you compare the message of Jesus (and John too) with a theology like “covenantal nomism?” Do you think an important or central part of the message of Jesus fights directly against “covenantal nomism?” Do you think Jesus' message contradicts “covenantal nomism” but it isn't a core part of Jesus' message to the world?

B. *Stones and Abraham*

John goes on to tell the Pharisees and Sadducees that “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” What does this mean? What is John trying to tell the Pharisees and Sadducees? Is this a direct assault on “covenantal nomism” or something else?

What about the use of the word “stone/rocks?”

²Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 33.

³Allison, Dale C., 2001, “Matthew” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 851.

1. Well, they are in the wilderness. Rocks would have probably been plentiful in John's present location. Maybe John wants to compare the Pharisees and the Sadducees with the most common object in their current environment. What do you think of this possibility?
2. Relatedly, maybe John makes this contrast between man and God because stones are usually fairly useless to man but God can do great things with them. What do you think of this possibility?
3. Lots of commentators note that in Aramaic (what John would have been speaking) there is possible word play between "children" and "stones."⁴
4. John may be drawing on Old Testament imagery. Specifically he may have Isaiah 51:1-2 in mind. Do these verses in Isaiah give us insight into the metaphor of the stones? Does it hint at how John's audience might have understood his words?

1 "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness,
You who seek the Lord:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.

2 Look to Abraham your father,
And to Sarah who bore you;

For I called him alone,
And blessed him and increased him."

C. Fruits and Repentance

What does it mean to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance?" Does it mean something like, "to do good works which will demonstrate your seriousness to repent?" Or something more or different than the preceding?

Let's look at what bringing forth fruit means or gets associated with in an Old Testament passage. Read Jeremiah 17:5-8:

5 Thus says the Lord:
Cursed is the man who trusts in man
And makes flesh his strength,
Whose heart departs from the Lord.

6 For he shall be like a shrub in the desert,
And shall not see when good comes,

⁴France, R.T., 2007, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 110.

But shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness,
In a salt land which is not inhabited.

7 Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
And whose hope is the Lord.

8 For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,
Which spreads out its roots by the river,

And will not fear when heat comes;
But its leaf will be green,

And will not be anxious in the year of drought,
Nor will cease from yielding fruit.

- According to Jeremiah what does it mean to bring forth fruit (it just says fruit here but I think it is pretty clear that it is good fruit), and under what circumstances can a person bring forth good fruit?
- The whole thing has overtones of grace for me. We bring forth “good fruit” or “good works” but only really through the grace of God. He ensures or causes us to be planted by the water. The images of grace and of covenant are pretty strong here (maybe even prevenient grace).

D. Baptism, Fire, and the Holy Ghost

I think normally Mormons equate “baptize you with the Holy Ghost” and “baptize you with fire” together. In other words, they refer to the same baptism and not to separate and different baptisms. This seems like a reasonable reading (although not the only reasonable reading of this text). Thus, the fire metaphor informs us or helps us understand what it means to be baptized by the Holy Ghost.

- What does the image of fire bring to mind here? How is it related to the Holy Ghost or more specifically baptism by the Holy Ghost?
- Purification: Does this metaphor convey something about purification? In general? What about in this pericope specifically?
- Do you see a link here with some of the imagery found in Malachi 3:1-3?

1 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. 2 But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: 3 And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.

- Do you think fire as a purifier works here in this context? Does it tell us something about the nature of baptism by the Holy Ghost?
- Does the fire image/metaphor help us understand related concepts or metaphors such as being “born again?”
- Does the fire imagery also bring to mind judgment? Does that fit into this context as well?
- Does the surrounding context suggest a purification or judgment message for the baptism of fire? Does it suggest both?
- Do you see purification and judgment as linked in some sense? In this pericope? What about in Malachi 3:1-3?
- It seems unlikely to me that we end up with fire and water describing two different kinds of baptisms in the passage by accident. Do the contrasting images of water and fire provide insight into how the two baptisms are different and related?
- Does John’s speech in verses 8-9 tell us something about when a baptism has efficacy and when it does not?

E. Fire Again

I think the general message in verse 12 is reasonably clear, but some of the specifics of the metaphor may not be. Here is how the NRSV renders verse 12:

12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

- “A winnowing fork was used to toss grain in the air to separate the chaff or husks from the seed.”⁵
- The fire imagery continues in verse 12. How is the imagery of verse 12 related to the baptism of fire?

V. The Baptism of Jesus

Read Matthew 3:13-17:

13 Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. 14 But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? 15 And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus

⁵Coogan, Michael D. (Editor), 2001, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford University Press, 12.

it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. 16 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: 17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

- It is probably hard for Mormons not to think of 2 Nephi 31:4-11 when we hear the phrase “fulfill all righteousness.”
- Notice the phrase that is used here in Matthew:

Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh *us* to fulfil all righteousness.

- Jesus indicates that they (John and Jesus) are jointly fulfilling all righteousness. Is that important?
- Is it important that Jesus’ response to John, in these verses, are the first words he speaks in the gospel of Matthew?⁶
- In what sense did Jesus’ baptism prepare him for his mission and help him preach his gospel?
- Did being baptized by John allow Jesus’ to build on top of John’s doctrinal foundation (including John’s call to all of Israel that they must repent)?

A. *The Dove*

Have we seen a dove before in the Old Testament? Are there parallels between the situations? Is the Holy Spirit ever a dove in the Old Testament?

i. *Noah’s Dove*

The first thing that comes to my mind is Noah’s dove (apparently this connection goes back at least to Tertullian).⁷

- Do you think Noah’s dove provides insight into the situation? Is there a common element between the two situations?
- Is baptism the important connection between both of these stories?
- Maybe the central connection is that both stories are about deliverance? That God can and will deliver us from sin?

⁶Powell, Mark Allan, 2000, “Matthew” in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, Harper & Row, 873.

⁷Allison, Dale C., 2001, “Matthew” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 851.

- While, I think, it is tempting to see a connection between these two stories, I think it is important to remember that in the flood narrative the dove is just a dove (not the symbol of the Holy Spirit).

ii. *The Creation Story*

The imagery I am talking about comes through better in the NIV. Read Genesis 1:1-2 (NIV):

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

The Spirit of God is hovering over the waters. There is no mention of a dove, but the image is certainly of a bird.

- What about this parallel? Does it tell us something about this wonderful event (the baptism of Jesus)? Does it tell us something about the role of the Holy Spirit?
- Does this parallel help us understand why Mark begins his narrative with the baptismal story rather than the actual birth of Jesus?
- In these chapters Matthew links the Holy Spirit with fire and a dove. Those are strikingly different images. What does this striking contrast suggest?

VI. Testing

Read Matthew 4:1-11:

1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. 3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. 4 But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. 5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, 6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. 7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. 8 Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; 9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. 10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written,

Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. 11 Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

- What do you view as the purpose of this experience? What is Satan attempting to show and what does Jesus show or prove?
- Is it important or significant that Satan appears to challenge and only challenge the notion that Jesus is the “Son of God?” Why would Satan want to disprove the legitimacy of this claim more than any other? Is this the foundational claim of Jesus?
- Why would Satan challenge that idea? Is Satan suggesting that Jesus is trying to elevate himself (and his status in society) to a level that he has no right to claim?
- Why does Jesus respond each time by quoting scripture? What does the act of quoting scripture in response show or reveal about Jesus, his status, and his relationship to God?
- Is it fair to summarize this pericope as a test of Jesus’ covenant loyalty?
- Malina and Rohrbaugh, in their commentary on the synoptic gospels, give the following background about the word *Satan*:⁸

[A] cosmic personage whose name (“Satan”) comes from Persian where it designated the role of a secret service agent who worked under cover testing people’s loyalty to the king.

- Does this background affect how you read this pericope?
- Is it important that the order of the temptations in Matthew and Luke are not the same (see Luke 4:1-13 for comparison)? What do this difference reveal?

VII. Calling Disciples

Read Matthew 4:18-22:

18 And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. 19 And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. 20 And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. 21 And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. 22 And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.

⁸Malina, Bruce J. and Richard Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 33.

Jesus' calling of his disciple here in Matthew reminds me of the calling of Elisha to discipleship by Elijah (1 Kings 19:19-21):

19 So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. 20 And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee? 21 And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.

- How are these two call narratives similar? How are they different?
- One similarity seems to be how both Elijah and Jesus call their new disciples. Is it fair to say that they both summon rather than invite? Is this important?
- Another similarity seems to be that Elisha and Jesus' disciples leave everything behind. Is this important?
- One big difference is that Elisha is allowed to go visit his father and mother but the disciples follow Jesus immediately. Why this difference? Has discipleship changed now that Jesus has ushered in a new covenant?
- Does this immediacy apply specifically to the discipleship of the twelve? Does it hint at the great personal sacrifice that awaits them? Is Jesus making them aware of the sacrifice that is ahead of them from the very beginning?
- Is it important that there is no record that any of the disciples knew Jesus or previously had interest in him (the same could be said for Elisha)? What does this fact underscore about Jesus' ministry?
- What should we learn from the differences? Does it tell us something about the nature of our discipleship?