

[The Wilderness E8 Transcript]

[Recap of Theme and Setup for John the Baptizer (0:00—15:53)]

Jon: We've been tracing the theme of the wilderness through the story of the Bible. The wilderness is a dire place, hostile to life, full of tests. And while the wilderness can feel like a punishment or maybe even a pointless hardship, the biblical authors want us to see the wilderness as an opportunity.

Tim: God can take someone's presence in the wilderness and turn it into an important time of testing and preparation to go back into a garden land.

Jon: God brings Israel into an abundant garden land to live by God's wisdom and share God's life to the world. But they turn from God and they choose violence and oppression instead. And so God lets empires take them out of the land.

Tim: What Ezekiel calls "the wilderness of the nations."

Jon: But Ezekiel sees hope.

Tim: That God's going to transform his people in the wilderness so that they can become his covenant partners in the garden land.

Jon: This hope remains beyond reach as the Hebrew Bible comes to a close. But lo and behold, the story of Jesus begins with a prophet preparing the way of God through the wilderness. This is John the Baptist. He's baptizing people in the waters of the Jordan River as a sign of repentance, a symbol to show that Israel is ready to re-enter the garden land.

Tim: That connection of water and wilderness are opposites, but they become parallel symbols of something deadly or dangerous. And when God leads people through the waters or through the wilderness, they both have a purifying effect.

Jon: Jesus comes on the scene, and he asks John to baptize him. And John knows who Jesus is, and he refuses. Why would Jesus need to go through this act of repentance? But Jesus insists.

Tim: Jesus has nothing to repent of. So we're already seeing here a pattern of Jesus identifying with the weakness, and frailty, and suffering, and sin of his people, an amazing act of generosity.

Jon: Today, Tim Mackie and I look at the baptism of Jesus in the wilderness. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical Break (2:15—2:20)]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hello, Jon. Hello.

Jon: We've been talking wilderness—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And we are now going into the story of Jesus.

Tim: Mmm. This is always an important moment—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In our theme conversations—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Through the story of the Bible. This is the Jesus moment.

Jon: It is.

Tim: We got here.

Jon: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Tim: We got here. I think we're, like, eight episodes in or more—

[Laughter]

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: And we're to Jesus.

Jon: Yeah. In a way, I feel like all of this has been preparation to read, like, a couple stories in Jesus' life.

[Laughter]

Tim: Totally. Yeah. We're going to meditate on two important moments from the Gospel according to Matthew's retelling of John the Baptist in the wilderness, and how that was an important entrée moment for Jesus to enter the scene, and then Jesus' own experience in the wilderness. But let's see. We did a big recap—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In the previous episode of—

Jon: We did—

Tim: The wilderness theme. The wilderness is a hostile environment. It's pre-creation, opposite of creation.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So the garden and the wilderness become binary opposites. The garden is the place of order, life, Heaven on Earth, abundance, the ideal. The wilderness is the opposite of all of that. But when humans find themselves in the wilderness because of their own folly—I guess I'm doing a recap.

Jon: Yeah. Do it.

[Laughter]

Tim: Or because of the folly of other people that's—right—heaped on them, and they are cast into the wilderness through no fault of their own, God can take someone's presence in the wilderness and turn it into an important time of testing and preparation

to go back into a garden land. What happens, though, in the history of the Hebrew Bible, is that the wilderness keeps not doing what you hope it would do in people's hearts and minds: to trust that God wants to give them Eden even in the middle of the wilderness. And so the cycle of Israel's story and history ends them up in what Ezekiel calls "the wilderness of the nations," which is exile among the nations primarily because of Babylon. But he calls it a wilderness, which means he sees hope that God's going to transform his people in the wilderness so that they can become his covenant partners in the garden land. And that is a hope that remains constantly just beyond reach as the Hebrew Bible comes to a close. And that's exactly why the Gospel of Matthew begins the way that it does. Because what we're looking for is an Israelite covenant partner who will be the covenant partner that the people of Israel consistently failed to be over the course of the story of the Hebrew Bible. And th—

Jon: And you can fail while in the wilderness. You can fail while in—

Tim: Ooh.

Jon: The garden land.

Tim: That's right. Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And both of those stories happen over and over. And when you fail in the garden land, you end up back in the wilderness.

Tim: Back in the wilderness, yeah.

Jon: And in the wilderness, you can frame it as a consequence, which it is, but then you can look at it at a different angle and realize, "Oh, this is an opportunity."

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: "This is an opportunity for me to be reformed, to get out of my own way, to learn what I really need and that I can trust and I can listen to the voice of God in a more pure way." And when you really turn up the volume of that angle, you get to the point of where you start talking about it as, like, being this intimate—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Connection to God.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Falling in love—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: With Yahweh.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And then it could prepare you to enter the land.

Tim: Yes. Yeah.

Jon: Yet—

[Laughter]

Tim: Mmm.

Jon: All the stories in the Hebrew Bible of every character going through that end up not prepared to actually go into the land.

Tim: Yeah. That's right. That's good. So the wilderness can have multiple functions. It can feel like punishment. It can feel like sitting in the consequences of my own destructive decisions or others' decisions. But it then can also be transformed into a, a refuge, an intimate place where the suffering strips away the illusions that I can provide for myself, that I am in control. And it makes me learn that, as Moses said in Deuteronomy eight—that humans don't actually live by the things that they provide for themselves, like bread—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But rather, real life comes to us, whether in the garden or the wilderness, from the word of God that proceeds out of his mouth. And that's a lesson that God's covenant partners didn't learn in the story of the Hebrew Bible. And that's told within a story that begins with Genesis one through 11, that tells you all humanity keeps not learning that lesson—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Outside of Eden.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Which makes you wonder: Is—okay, I guess, could there ever be a human who's outside of Eden who would learn that lesson and become the ideal human or the faithful covenant partner? I wonder.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. That's the setup.

Jon: Can I ask, though, then: you can learn this in the garden, and you can learn this in the wilderness—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Right—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: So if you are—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: The true, faithful covenant partner, wouldn't you be learning it in the garden?

[Laughter]

Jon: Right?

Tim: Uh—

Jon: Isn't—

Tim: Well—

Jon: It most faithful, beautiful way to learn this—is to not have to go to the wilderness at all?

Tim: Sure.

Jon: But it's the Adam who—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Said—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "I'm not going to eat that. I'm going to go to you, God, for wisdom."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: “Let’s take a walk, God. Help me out and—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “We’ll stay in the garden.”

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: That’s the most faithful human.

Tim: That is. But the situation when Jesus comes onto the scene could be just that Jesus, as the God of Israel become human, could just enjoy a garden existence within his communion with the Father—

Jon: Mmm, but he would be on his own.

Tim: Through the Spirit. But there’d be all these people dying out there in the wilderness, and Jesus would just be, “Well, it sucks for them, but I’ve got a good thing going here.” But what if the generosity and mercy of God was so great that God, in the person of Jesus, would lea—

Jon: Join them in the wilderness.

Tim: Leave the garden and suffer alongside those outside of Eden? Yeah. That’s an interesting way to think of what is happening in the story we’re about to read.

Jon: Mmm. Okay.

Tim: Actually, ah, there’s no better way to summarize the story we’re about to read. Thank you for that.

Jon: Cool. Okay.

Tim: Okay.

Jon: Sweet.

Tim: Matthew chapter three. Okay. Uh, Matthew one and two is the genealogy of Jesus as the son of Abraham and the son of David. Then you get the stories of Jesus’—his birth, his exile to Egypt, and then coming back—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Then the days of Herod. And then his family lands in Nazareth. That’s at the end of Matthew two. And then, all of a sudden, just, he’s grown up, and we fast forward a few decades. And here we go, Matthew chapter three, “Now, in those days—”

[Laughter]

Tim: “*Ioannes* the Immerser arrived.” *Ioannes* is how you—

Jon: You say John?

Tim: You say John—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In Greek.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: His Greek pronun—so *Yokhanan* in Hebrew—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: *Ioannes* in Greek. And he’s the Baptizer, that is, the Immerser. So he arrived, “Announcing in the wilderness of Judea.”

Jon: So he’s in the wilderness—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Of Judea.

Tim: And I—you know, I—it’s so funny. There’s just things you never look up until you think about it. I just looked up the phrase “the wilderness of *loudaia*.” This is in Greek. Matthew’s in Greek. And the phrase appears in only one time in the Hebrew Bible or the Greek Bible.

Jon: Oh, which is?

Tim: It’s the heading of Psalm 63, “A prayer of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judea fleeing from Saul.” And it begins, “My tongue is parched. My body longs for you as in a dry and weary land where—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “There is no water.”

Jon: Oh, wow. Cool.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So he’s out there—

Tim: So the w—

Jon: Announcing.

Tim: The wilderness of Judea is where the king of Israel, the first real, faithful king of Israel, spent a long period of testing—

Jon: Mmm. Preparing himself.

Tim: In the wilderness. Yeah. That's the other time this phrase appears. So all of that is surely meant to be in our minds because this is going to be about another son of David —

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Coming onto the scene. And his entry point is in the wilderness of Judea.

Jon: Yeah. Where would this have been? Like, because Judea is in the hill country, right?

Tim: Oh, yes. Actually—yeah. There's—fair amount of debate. So if you go down kind of due east from Jerusalem—there's a highway now—down into the Jordan Valley, it's right near where the Jordan Valley empties into what is now the, the Dead Sea.

Jon: Yeah. It's pretty dry there.

Tim: Super dry.

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: Like, one of the lowest points on the planet.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's a deep, deep ravine.

Jon: And this is where the Dead Sea Scrolls were, in the Qumran community.

Tim: Yes, which we'll talk about.

Jon: We'll get to it? Okay.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: All right.

Tim: The Gospel of John's portrait of where John is doing his thing, and then where Matthew, and Luke, and Mark portray John doing his thing in the wilderness of Judea—and there's some tensions there—

[Laughter]

Tim: About where exactly John was. We're not going to go into that right now.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So he's just out there in the wilderness announcing, "Repent." Or in normal English, "Change your direction." "Go a different direction—"

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "Because the Kingdom of the skies has come near." So the arrival of God's Kingdom—

Jon: Who's he talking to? There's other people out there with him?

Tim: Oh, you have to wait. You'll see in the corresponding panel—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Here. Why was John out there doing this—saying this? Because, "This is what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying," quote, "'A voice calling in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths.'"

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So this was a wilderness passage in the Prophets that we didn't read in the previous conversation because they were—

Jon: No, but we read it in the New Exodus—

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: Conversation.

Tim: Yeah. These—from the opening paragraph of Isaiah 40, which is a key hinge text in the shape and structure of Isaiah the prophet.

Jon: And the wilderness here is referring to the wilderness between Babylon and Israel? Because they need to come back.

Tim: Right.

Jon: So there needs to be a highway through it.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And so that's the wilderness—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Referred to?

Tim: Yep. So Isaiah 40 is an announcement that the exile—

Jon: The wilderness of the nations.

Tim: The wilderness of the nations, as Ezekiel called it—that it's fulfilled its purpose and that the time is over. And now is a time of comfort.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's how Isaiah 40 opens, "Comfort, comfort my people, and tell her that the hard season is over and that in the wilderness there is a voice calling out, saying: 'Yahweh is coming back.' So let's make a highway, a road, through the wilderness, a road in the desert. And Yahweh is going to come back, and the glory of Yahweh will be revealed, and all humanity will see it. This is what Yahweh says." So there was this hope for return and the regathering of God's covenant people in the garden land where a temple would be restored as a I—city on the hill and a light to the nations. This is Isaiah 60, and 42, 49, all that.

Jon: Hmm. However, that voice calling Israel back out of Babylon into the land—that happened already, right?

Tim: Ah, okay. Well, this is interesting. So the shape of Isaiah makes you think that: Oh, this is what happened a generation after the exile in Babylon.

Jon: Yeah—

Tim: So somewhere in, like—

Jon: They got to come back.

Tim: In the 500s BC.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: And then—

Jon: And then they rebuilt the temple—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: And they took the land.

Tim: And then Zerubbabel, and then Ezra and Nehemiah—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And for sure, it seems that the people who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple—that they were fueled by the prophetic hopes like this that we read about in Isaiah. But then, Isaiah itself registers the failure of those hopes, and that Israel back in the land with the rebuilt temple was just as corrupt and idolatrous as they were before.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So whatever Isaiah 40 meant was something for even a yet-future generation to hope for because now they're back in the land, but they may as well still be in the wilderness—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Because things have not improved.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Yeah. So Isaiah 40 still speaks a word of hope—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Centuries later, like in the days of John the Immerser.

[Musical Break (15:28—15:53)]

[John's Background and Words to the Pharisees (15:53—38:03)]

Tim: So first, you should know, John dressed like Elijah the prophet.

[Laughter]

Tim: He wore camel hair and an animal skin belt, and he ate insects and wild honey. He lived off the land. He's a wild man. He's living out in the heart—he's living in the wilderness.

Jon: Yeah. He made his home in the wilderness.

Tim: Yes. Yeah. "And there came out to him the city of Jerusalem." You're like, "Whoa. Okay." The—I.E., the population. "But all of Judea and the surrounding regions of the Jordan—people coming from all over are coming out into the wilderness." "And they were being immersed, or baptized, in the Jordan River—"so there's some new information—"and confessing their sins—confessing their failures." So John has intentionally chosen the section of the Jordan River where Moses led the people right to the other side. And then, Joshua crossed over with the people when they first came to enter the land. John chooses that spot to do this passing-through-the-waters symbol.

Jon: Mmm.

Tim: Mhm. Ooh. Okay. So he's in the wilderness—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But then he's making people pass—

Jon: Come into the land.

Tim: Through the waters.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Remember that connection of water and wilderness—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: We talked about—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Man, many conversations ago from Genesis one, verse two in the garden of Eden story. The waters and the wilderness are opposites in terms of—wilderness is a land without water. But they become parallel symbols of something deadly or dangerous. And when God leads people through the waters or through the wilderness, they both have a purifying effect. They're kind of like opposites that have the same symbolic meaning.

Jon: Right. Okay. To get into the land, you go through the wilderness.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: To get into the land, you go through the waters.

Tim: That's right. Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's it. Yeah. That's it. I cou—

Jon: And they both prepare you.

Tim: Yeah. I should have just said that.

Jon: No, no—

[Laughter]

Jon: I was just summarizing—no, what you said was helpful.

Tim: So that's John. Now, one question is, like: Where's this guy coming from? Luke provides a bit of John's backstory.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: He's a priest—the son of a priest. His parents are really well-established, Torah-observant Israelites in Jerusalem—lots of connections. So what's he doing out here? Why isn't he preparing for the priesthood?

Jon: Yeah. He's taking more of a prophetic role than a priestly role.

Tim: Yeah. Okay. So here's what is super interesting. This could be a long detour, and we're not going to go down it. But uhm—

Jon: Are you daring me?

[Laughter]

Tim: I guess so. I guess so. So the Dead Sea Scrolls—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Famous—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Very important discovery of ancient biblical—and just manuscripts from a Jewish community that relocated from Jerusalem to the slopes of the Dead Sea on the western side of the Dead Sea, but in other words, “in the hills and wilderness of Judea” in exactly the same region that Matthew marks as John being here. So these manuscripts came into public view in the 1940s. It’s a fascinating story that I will force myself not to retell—

[Laughter]

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But it’s so cool. In—found in a number of caves in the slopes up above the Dead Sea. And these are exactly the hills and the types of caves that David was, like, hiding out in and fleeing from Saul in. But somewhere in the 150s BC, so 150 years before Jesus, there was a very tumultuous period of Jewish history that’s told—we know about this from a number of records: the books of the Maccabees o—Second Temple a—Jewish literature and also the historian Josephus. Uh, and he tells a time where the Jerusalem priesthood in the temple—the leadership of Jerusalem was a highly contested, fraught, political, religious cluster.

[Laughter]

Tim: And the high priesthood was essentially—became a symbolic position that was available to the highest bidder. People were buying and selling the most important leadership positions.

Jon: It—was this an era where they were not really being occupied? There was a, a bit of freedom? Or was—

Tim: Yeah. It was in this small window of Jewish independence in Jerusalem that was won by the Maccabees in the Maccabean Revolt.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yep. In—

Jon: So before Rome came—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But pr—but it was the Persians who were then—kicked out—

Tim: Well, it went Babylon then Persia—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And Persia was around for a while until Alexander the Great swept—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: The ancient world—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In the mid-300s.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And then he divided up his kingdoms—huge kingdom, in what we call Asia and the Middle East today, to all kinds of different regional rulers. And those handoffs were to a bunch of rulers in Syria, which is north of Jerusalem.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And then to some Egyptian rulers in the south.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: And the Syrians and the Egyptians were constantly fighting each other. And Jerusalem was the contested middle ground—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: In between them. So Jerusalem got taken over multiple times.

[Laughter]

Jon: Oh.

Tim: And so the Maccabean Revolt was like, “Enough.”

[Laughter]

Tim: “This is our ancestral city.”

Jon: Yeah. “You both stay out.”

Tim: And the Maccabeans kicked out the Syrians.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And so it was, yeah, about 100-ish years of Jewish independence.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And in that time, the high priesthood became like a puppet role that people were buying and selling.

Jon: What people?

Tim: Oh, Israelites. But you also had Israelites who were like pro-Greek culture, pro-polytheism, or maybe they were pro God of Israel, but—“Let’s—you know, let’s build some Greek gymnasiums, and some hot baths—”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: “And have some games in Jerusalem like the Olympic Games. And maybe—”

Jon: These are—and these—

Tim: “Jews don’t really need to eat kosher and—”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: “Be circumcised.” S—

Jon: And these are what? Are they leaders? A—

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: In they—in what sense are they leaders?

Tim: Yeah. So you have rival factions within the Israelite leadership in this time, some of whom are pro-Greek culture. It’s the new—it’s what the kids are doing.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “This is our future among the nations.” And then you have the more traditional conservatives who are like—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “No, we’re Israelites. And let’s—”

Jon: So what was the political system at that time like?

Tim: Oh, it was like a monarchy.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And so both the kingship and the high priesthood were often mixed together—

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: In this period. And so—

Jon: The king would also be the high priest?

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: And in what—so w—

[Laughter]

Jon: Sorry.

Tim: Mmm.

Jon: In what sense—

Tim: It's okay.

Jon: Were people buying that off? Who was—

Tim: Ah—

Jon: If you're the king and the high priest, you're the one in charge. Who—whose money do you need?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. So it's a very complicated—things were changing by the year.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And you'd have people be a king and try and declare that they're also the high priest, and then people would rebel—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And then you'd have a king who would say, "All right, I'll have a right-hand person that's the high priest." But Israel is reinventing itself—

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Every few years, and there were assassinations and political coups. It's fascinating. This is the story told in the Maccabees—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Books of the Maccabees. So during that period, there was a community of priests who traced their ancestry to the Zadokites, and they believed the whole thing was so corrupt that they withdrew into the very region where John is, named in Matthew. And they started this community, and they took a whole bunch of biblical scrolls with them. And then they also wrote a lot of their own literature. And one of the pieces of literature that was first discovered when the Dead Sea Scrolls surfaced is called the Serekh ha-Yakhad, the Rule of the Community. It's a handbook for this community. And it tells a brief history of who they are, why they did what they did, why they went where they went, and then what you have to do to be a part of the community. It's super interesting. And this is a whole rabbit hole of, like, New Testament studies. But what is really interesting is if you read the opening paragraph to this founding document—here, so I'm just going to sample the first paragraph. Okay. So now I'm kind of sticking my head in the rabbit hole—

Jon: Yep.

Tim: That I said we're not going to go down.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But—

Jon: Just—just a peek.

[Laughter]

Tim: All right. So this start is talking about the leadership structure of this formerly priestly community.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And they say, "In this community, there will be a council of twelve."

Jon: Yeah. Makes sense.

Tim: So they're in an alternative Israel—

Jon: Yep.

Tim: Down there in the wilderness. And then three priests—

Jon: All right.

Tim: “That are to be perfect.” That is—

Jon: Complete?

Tim: Complete. It’s the word *tamim* in Hebrew—

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: Or *teleios*. “Perfect in everything that has been revealed from all of the Torah.”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: “So we are—”

Jon: “We are going to do it right.”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: They’re starting a, a faithful Israel out in the wilderness.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: “We are going to carry out truth and justice, judgment and compassionate love, humble behavior towards each other. We will preserve faithfulness in the land with a firm purpose and a spirit of repentance.” Think of John.

Jon: Hmm. Hmm.

Tim: “In order to atone for sin by doing what is just and undergoing many tests.” So you’re like: Wow, this sounds like John the Baptist. Doesn’t it?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “We’re going to retreat to the wilderness, restart a faithful Israel that’s repentant, and maybe we can be faithful to God in a way that will atone for the sins of Israel.”

Jon: Okay. So you’re saying the rabbit hole might lead to: John might have been in this tradition?

Tim: Okay. Wait for it.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So later in the, in the paragraph, “When this has been established, the foundation of the community, and someone has two years of perfect behavior—”

Jon: Mmm. Okay.

Tim: So there's a two-year initiation period for anybody who wants to join the community.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "Then that one will be separated like a holy one in the midst of the council of the men of the community." And then, down in line 13, "They are to be separated from within the dwelling of the men of sin—"so they're separating themselves from sinful Israel to join this community—"To walk into the desert in order to open up there his path. Whose path? As it is written: 'In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord and straighten in the desert a roadway for our God.' This is the study of the Torah that has been commanded through the hand of Moses."

Jon: Hmm. Okay.

Tim: So—

Jon: So that was the text that they—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Were holding up to.

Tim: So Isaiah 40 stood there like a script waiting to be performed, for a generation of Israel to go out into the desert and, like, reform a purified Israel that will—

Jon: To be a voice in the wilderness means to be the kind of Israelite who can go out into the wilderness and pass the test—

Tim: Yes—

Jon: In a way.

Tim: Exactly. "To do what our ancestors failed to do."

Jon: And in that way, you're preparing the way.

Tim: Yeah. So, "We're going to be a wilderness people like the wilderness generation where God came to live among them in the tabernacle—"

Jon: Hmm. Okay.

Tim: Because God favored the tabernacle before he ever chose the temple in Jerusalem. Yeah. So my point is in New Testament scholarship, Dead Sea Scroll scholarship, there's been a long discussion about John the Baptist's relationship to this group.

Jon: Yeah, that makes sense.

Tim: Because this group was also really into water baptism as a symbol of purification.

Jon: Okay. I was going to—I was wondering that.

Tim: Yep. This group was committed to celibacy, as were John and Jesus.

Jon: How do they—it's no kids?

Tim: Well, what seems like—is that you had this community that was almost like what would later become a—monasteries in Christian tradition.

Jon: Oh, uh-huh.

Tim: But then the documents of the community also mentioned that there are lots of people in the community who live in towns and cities. So it was—

Jon: They're still attached to the community?

Tim: It seemed like it was a broader movement—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That was like a sectarian—

Jon: I see.

Tim: Movement.

Jon: You can go and live there, be the monk essentially—

Tim: Yeah, or the priests.

Jon: Or the priests, but you could also be kind of attached to the community, but go live in the town and cities.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah. So it was a broader renewal movement—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: That they're a part of.

Jon: I see.

Tim: But then, like, the hyper—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Devout ones are living in the wilderness. So what we don't know—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: John the Baptist and Jesus are never mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But it seems very likely—they're miles from each other—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It seems very likely that John certainly would have known about—been relationally connected in some way to this community.

Jon: Why doesn't this community ever show up in any way in other than Jesus' ministry as he's traveling around? It doesn't feel like he's interfacing at all with this—

Tim: Yeah, this—

Jon: Uhm—

Tim: Group.

Jon: This group.

Tim: That's a great question. So what we know about this group is they were not the ones in power. And so Pharisees and Sadducees, that is, Zadokites, who are in power in Jerusalem, are the main people named—

Jon: That Jesus interacts with?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But then also the poor and the people all over.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And there's—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Never a sense of, like, any hints of this community—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Or people—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Are part of this community, or Jesus is connected to this community.

Tim: But you could say the same—we know there were freedom-fighter movements, and Jesus never interacts with any of them except to recruit one—

Jon: Right.

Tim: To his disciples, Simon the Zealot. But there's no story of Jesus interacting with the zealot leaders—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Because they were super withdrawn, and so was this community.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So maybe—

Jon: How interesting would it be if there was a story of one of the disciples coming from this group?

Tim: Yeah. Well, there is that story of the disciples of John—come and ask Jesus, “Why don't you fast?”

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Which, the Qumran community, again, from this rule, had really dedicated fasting practices. So it's not hard to imagine the disciples of John—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Also having a connection to this community. But it's—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: We don't know what we don't know.

Jon: We don't know what we don't know.

Tim: But there's such close family alignment and alignment of ideals and language. And Isaiah 40 was a big deal to both. So we could, and maybe we should, do more on this in the future.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: There's so much to explore. It also explains why John has the reaction that he does when the next thing happens, which is Matthew chapter three, verse seven.

“When he saw many of the Pharisees and the Sadducees coming out to his baptism, he said to them—”

[Laughter]

Tim: “You are seed of the snake.”

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah. There’s a backstory here that we don’t have.

Tim: Yeah, clearly—

[Laughter]

Tim: He has—

Jon: There’s some animosity.

Tim: Reason to dislike these people. But this is exactly the type of language that the Dead-Sea-Scroll people—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Use to describe the priests running—

Jon: The compromised—

Tim: The sh—

Jon: Priests.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yes. Yeah. They call them, “The men of wickedness,” and “the men of evil counsel,” and “the wicked priests.” That’s what they’re called in the Qumran liter—

literature. So this—Pharisees are not an institutional power, but they are like a populist, religious movement.

Jon: And, and the Qumran community thinks they are not going far enough?

Tim: Correct.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah, that they're not devout enough.

Jon: They're still compromised—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: But not as much as the Sadducees—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Who are fully compromised.

Tim: That's right. Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. Think of the fragmented nature of Christian—

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Communities—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In, in North American—

Jon: I don't know—

Tim: Culture right now.

Jon: I don't know what you're talking about.

[Laughter]

Tim: It's a very similar type of power games here. "The Sadducees" is how we pronounce, well, what in Greek is "*Saddoukaios*," which is the Greek—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Pronunciation of the descendants of Zadok—

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Which is a priestly lineage that goes back to David's time. So there were Zadokites among the Qumran community that had peeled off, and then there were Zadokites still participating in the powers of Jerusalem. So the point is these are investigators that come out to John to check out his immersion. And he calls them seed of the snake. And so he says, "Listen, who directed you to flee from the coming anger?" He's borrowing language from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, here. There's another way of justice coming. "So then, produce fruit worthy of repentance," of a change in direction. "Don't think that you can say to yourselves: 'Wha—we have Abraham as our father.' Nah, God can raise up from these stones children from Abraham. The axe is at the root of the tree. We're reaching the point of no return, and every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is going to be cut down and tossed into the fire. But I have immersed y'all in water for a change of direction. But there is one coming after me. He is mightier than me. In fact, I'm not even worthy to carry his sandal. And he will immerse you not in water but in the Holy Spirit and fire." Whoa.

Jon: This has always been so confusing for me.

[Laughter]

Jon: But it's starting to, like, have new categories that are interesting.

Tim: There's coming a test.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: A great test is going to come upon Israel.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: This generation—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: “You’re about to face one of your greatest tests. And how you respond to the test before you will determine whether Israel will go through another cycle of being handed over to destruction.”

Jon: So I’m out here in the wilderness, and I’m trying to get Israel to stop being compromised—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: To live faithfully by the Torah, and we’re going to these extreme measures. “We’re going to do it.”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And I’m getting people. This is a revival movement.

Tim: Yep. Because God’s heavenly rule, his Kingdom—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It’s come—

Jon: The Kingdom of the skies has come.

Tim: It’s come near. Yeah.

Jon: And this is drawing enough attention and getting enough people interested that the Sadducees and Pharisees come to check it out.

Tim: And he’s talking to them.

Jon: These—

Tim: All these words are directed at them.

Jon: So he says to them, “Look,” like, “You’ve got to change direction, too.” Like, “You’ve got to get in on this. And this is going down.” Like, “There’s something happening here. The axe is at the base of the tree.”

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Like, “It’s about to happen—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “And you’re interested and worried about me, what I’m doing with this water baptism thing?” Like, “There’s someone else coming that you should really be paying attention to.”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “And this water baptism thing is important, but there is, like, a different type of immersion that’s going to happen,” which he calls the Holy Spirit and fire.

Tim: Yeah. An immersion in God’s holy breath and fire. So holy breath is associated with God’s holy presence—

Jon: Which is life.

Tim: That brings life—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And fire—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Which is all about testing and purification. So you can pass through the water. You can pass through the wilderness.

[Laughter]

Tim: And then a—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Yet another image in the Prophets—

Jon: Is passing through the fire.

Tim: Is passing through the fire—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Which is an image of purification. It burns away what is frail so that what is enduring can pass through the flame. This is really important for the book of Isaiah.

Jon: Mmm. So being thrown into the fire here is going through the wilderness?

Tim: Going through the water, going through the wilderness, and going through the fire —

Jon: Because going through the—

Tim: Are now—

Jon: Fire was always a category, for me, of, like, final judgment.

Tim: Mmm. It is an image of purging.

Jon: Yeah. But—

Tim: Uhm—

Jon: If it's an image of purging, then it's—but it's more like wilderness—

Tim: Mhm. That's right.

Jon: Than—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: A sense—

Tim: In the Prophets—

Jon: Of, like, final judgment.

Tim: In the Prophets, God burning Israel to purify them is among—so the flood, or the fire, or the wilderness are all images in the Prophets to talk about a purification process so that Israel can become the faithful representative and partner.

Jon: Yeah. This holy breath and this fire.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

[Musical Break (37:33—38:03)]

[Why Jesus Participates in a Baptism of Repentance (38:03—44:47)]

Tim: John is the voice preparing the way of Yahweh to come in the wilderness. John comes in the wilderness. He prepares the people. And then, verse 13 of Matthew three, "Then Jesus came." And you're, like, "Wait, I thought Yahweh was coming. 'Prepare the way—'"

Jon: Oh, yeah.

Tim: “For Yahweh to come.”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And then Matthew says, “And then Jesus came.”

[Laughter]

Tim: You can—even just that little, subtle—he’s putting Jesus’ arrival in the slot of the story in Isaiah 40, which is about Yahweh coming. “So there, Jesus arrived from up north in Galilee down at the Jordan to John to be baptized by him.” And you’re like, “Wait a minute. I thought you’re being baptized for a symbol of repentance.”

Jon: And purification.

Tim: Yeah. “For Israel to be purified and say we’re sorry for all the histories of idolatry and unfaithfulness.”

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And so verse 14 begins a moment that’s only found in Matthew’s version of the baptism of Jesus. John tried to stop him.

Jon: Hmm. “You don’t need this.”

Tim: Saying, “No, no, no, no, no. I’m a part of sinful Israel. I need to be imm—baptized by you. Why are you coming to me?”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So John already has some understanding of Jesus, of who he is, but he already said that. “There’s somebody coming—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “That,” you know, “that’s more powerful.” But Jesus responded by saying, “No, allow it. Allow this right now. This is appropriate for us in order to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Or maybe in my translation paraphrase, “In order to fill full all doing right. And then John allowed him and baptized him.”

[Laughter]

Tim: Why would Jesus need to be identified and participate in a symbol of repentance for Israel's sins? That's the, the puzzle of this little scene right here.

Jon: Right. And this is where we started the conversation is: If Jesus is this faithful Israelite—

Tim: And again, this is Matthew. So we know from the genealogy he's the son of David, son of Abraham. He's the son of God through the Holy Spirit. We know that from the birth stories. Why would he—

Jon: Yeah, he could learn to live by the voice of God in the garden.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: He doesn't need to go to the wilderness.

Tim: Exactly. Yes.

Jon: And so this is John basically telling him that. Like, "Look, you're good. You don't need to be out here in the wilderness with us. You don't need to—baptism—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "Of repentance."

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Like—

Tim: "I wa—"

Jon: "If anything—"

Tim: "I watched you grow up."

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah. "If anything, like, you should be doing it for us—for me and for all of us." And then Jesus says, "Actually, no, it's appropriate—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "For me to get baptized—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “In this same symbol of repentance.”

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: “And that, by me doing it, fills up righteousness.”

Tim: Yeah. So righteousness in Matthew primarily means doing right by God and doing right by God’s images, that is, my neighbor. And that’s what Israel was called to do in the covenant. That’s what Israel has failed to do.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And so—

Jon: Left empty.

Tim: Left empty. Yes. Israel’s righteousness is empty. But what if the one coming who will immerse you in God’s breath and purifying fire—what if that one were to join Israel in the wilderness and repent on Israel’s behalf, identify himself with the sins of his people? That would be an amazing act of generosity. We’re already seeing here a pattern that begins here of Jesus identifying with the weakness, and frailty, and suffering, and sin of his people.

Jon: This is Jesus entering the wilderness with them.

Tim: Yeah. So he goes into the wilderness, and then he goes into the waters in the wilderness—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Which is all about a passage through the dangerous disorder.

Jon: And to be in the wilderness means you did something wrong.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And to—

Tim: Oh, good. That’s right.

Jon: To go through the wilderness and then some sort of baptism means you’re repenting of that wrong thing.

Tim: Mhm. Yes.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's right. The wilderness is what purifies you to be ready to inherit the garden land. Yeah. That's right. So we're seeing a pattern that will replay itself in the next story, which—of Jesus voluntarily giving up his divine dignity, and power, and honor to bow low, so to speak, and identify with unfaithful people.

Jon: You're talking about—so the next set of stories where he gets tested in the wilderness?

Tim: Yeah. But even the idea begins here—

Jon: But the idea begins here.

Tim: In the baptism.

Jon: I see—yeah. That's interesting.

Tim: Why do you need to be baptized? As a symbol of purification and as a symbol of repentance, to say we're sorry for not being your faithful covenant partners. Jesus has nothing to repent of—

Jon: You know—

Tim: In the presentation of the story.

Jon: Yeah. I think it's interesting that, uhm, to go through the waters of repentance for John and his crew is a symbol of re-entering the land—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Repentance to re-enter the land. And Jesus comes and he says, "I'm going to do this thing with you because actually, like, I'm kind of the—"I mean, this is subtext, I guess, or like—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: The im—us applying some meaning here—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: "You guys actually can't do this."

Tim: That's right. In the frame of the whole biblical story—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And the way we'll probably think about the video—

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. "I'm here to do the thing that you can't—"

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "Seem to do."

Jon: And, "You're doing it so that you can re-enter the land, but I'm going to do it—"

Tim: Oh, yeah.

Jon: "And I'm going to do it to enter into the wilderness—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And show you what it looks like to—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "Pass the test in the wilderness—"

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: "And be the kind of person that God can work with in the wilderness."

Tim: Mhm. Yeah. John is replaying a Joshua moment. "Let's go back—re-enter the land."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And it's almost like Jesus is saying, "No, we're going to replay—"

Jon: "We're going to do a Moses moment."

Tim: "A Moses moment—"

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "Of going through the waters—"

Jon: "We're going to go into the wilderness."

Tim: "Of the Red Sea, the waters of death." Because there's another wilderness on the other side of these waters for Jesus.

[Musical Break (44:42—44:47)]

[The Heavenly Announcement After Jesus' Baptism (44:47—51:33)]

Tim: So the next moment in the story is: After being baptized, Jesus comes up out of the water. We've meditated on this moment many, many times over the years. This is a very, very important story. The skies are opened up, and you're like, "Oh, the skies are the source of God's Kingdom that has come down. Now, the skies are the source of God's Spirit coming down." And you're like, "Wait, that's the Holy Spirit that this guy's going to bring." So we're kind of—now we're watching Jesus have a special moment connected with the Spirit. And you're like, "Oh, this is what John said was going to happen." "The Spirit of God came down like a dove."

[Laughter]

Jon: Like a bird.

Tim: Yeah. Which has echoes of Genesis one, verse two, the s—the hovering, the Spirit hovering like a bird, and, of after the flood, Noah sending out the dove to hover over the waters and look for dry land. So as the Spirit coming down on him—is coordinated with a voice coming down speaking from the skies that announces three things about the identity of Jesus. One is, "This is my son—" That's a line from Psalm two. "The beloved one—" that phrase is from Genesis 22, speaking about Abraham's beloved son, Isaac—"In whom I have delight." And that's a line from Isaiah 42 about the figure called the servant in the poetry of Isaiah. And actually, the—I'm just going to highlight the Isaiah servant image. The whole point of the servant in Isaiah 40 to 55, especially, is about replaying the stories of Israel's failure. And Isaiah, even in 41 and 42, highlights Israel's failure in the wilderness. But God will raise up a servant who, uhm, will be a humble, trusting, obedient leader for the people of Israel to do for Israel or for his people what they can't do for themselves, which leads to, in the famous suffering servant poems, him suffering and identifying so much with the sins of his people that he'll die their death on their behalf. And you can already begin to see that portrait of Jesus right here, that

he's identifying with them in their weakness, in their unfaithfulness, and in their sins. But yet he is also the king from the line of David, Psalm two.

Jon: That's the son?

Tim: Yep. "This is my son."

Jon: The—

Tim: And s—

Jon: Beloved one's about being the son—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Who's—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Sacrificed.

Tim: Yeah, who's offered up for the sins of his father, in this case, for the sins of their ancestor, whereas, Isaac—

Jon: Yeah. Genesis 22 with Isaac and—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Abraham.

Tim: Isaac dying for the sins of his, his father. Yeah. But then God provides a ram—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: As a substitute. So the point is is that this little voice from God is identifying Jesus as a royal son of David who will bring the promises of Abraham to their fulfillment by identifying and suffering for his people. And already you can see that hinted at in the exchange. So he just passed through the waters. And we know that he's going to bring a passage through wind and fire. That's what John said.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But another coordinated image from Genesis is passing through the wilderness. And we're going to find out that passing through the fire for Jesus is a reference forward to the ordeal that we call the passion.

Jon: Oh, that's his fire.

Tim: Mhm. And uh—

Jon: That's the fire he brings is the fire he goes through.

Tim: Yes, yeah. Totally.

Jon: Oh.

Tim: That's right. And what he's going to do in the very next story is go through the wilderness on Israel's behalf. So we should look at that story next.

Jon: Deal.

[Musical Break (48:58—49:01)]

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of BibleProject podcast. Next week, we'll look at three tests that Jesus undergoes in the wilderness.

Tim: Jesus trusts that God will provide for his daily needs. He also chooses not to force his Father's hand or make the Father prove that he's going to protect his life. He also trusts that God will fulfill his destiny as the divine Son to become the ruler of the world.

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Chloe: My name is Chloe, and I'm from Portland.

Oliver: My name is Oliver, and I'm from Portland. I first heard about BibleProject from my parents.

Chloe: I first heard about BibleProject from a friend, and I use BibleProject to understand God's word better.

Oliver: I use BibleProject to learn about Jesus. My favorite part about BibleProject is to do the shows and to be with Sam, and Packer, and all the dogs.

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Oliver: Thank you.