

6.13

John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew

The Ministry of John the Baptist Is Reported (3:1–12)

His peculiar dress summons images of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8).

His diet marks him as one who relies completely on God for sustenance (cf. Matt. 6:26).

His preaching of the kingdom parallels that of Jesus (Matt. 4:17) and the disciples (10:7); he also cites other themes that will be picked up later by Jesus: polemic against religious leaders (12:34; 23:33); metaphor of a fruitless tree (7:16–20); description of judgment (9:37–38; 13:37–42).

He prophesies that Jesus (“the coming one”) will bring judgment on the earth.

John Baptizes Jesus (3:13–17)

John initially objects to this baptism, but Jesus responds that it is “necessary to fulfill all righteousness.”

John’s Disciples Ask Why the Disciples of Jesus Don’t Fast (9:14–15)

Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom and the current situation to “a wedding feast.”

***John Questions Jesus's Identity and Jesus Speaks of
John's Role (11:2–15)***

The question is delivered by John's disciples from prison: "Are you the one who is to come?" (Earlier John had seemed to identify Jesus as "the coming one," but had indicated that this "coming one" would bring judgment on the earth.)

Jesus's response alludes to Isaiah 29:18–19 and identifies the present day as the dawn of the messianic age; as before (Matt. 9:14–15), what John's disciples take to be an anomaly results from their failure to recognize that God's gift of salvation precedes judgment.

Jesus tells the crowd that John is the greatest man ever born and that he has fulfilled the prophecy of the return of Elijah (Mal. 4:5), although no earthly glory can compare to that which awaits even "the least" in the kingdom of heaven.

John Is Murdered by Herod (14:1–12)

Herod is an exemplar of the self-absorbed tyrants whom Jesus describes in 20:25. He divorces his own wife to marry his half-sister, who is already married to his half-brother. He lusts after his own stepdaughter and makes the sort of foolish oaths that Jesus forbids in 5:33–37. Matthew presents him as wicked, but also as a buffoon.

Herod's every act is motivated by fear: he keeps John alive because he fears the populace, then has him killed because he fears the

opinions of his dinner guests even more. In the end, he fears that John has returned to haunt him. Thus he illustrates those who fear people and not God (10:28).

By killing John, Herod violently assaults the kingdom of heaven itself, robbing the earth of one of heaven's great treasures (cf. 11:12).

Jesus Speaks about John after the Transfiguration (17:10–13)

Jesus's disciples are given to understand that John's life and death somehow fulfilled the prophecy that Elijah would return (Mal. 4:5).

Jesus Refers to John When His Own Authority Is Questioned (21:23–27)

The religious leaders refuse to acknowledge John's status as a prophet, but neither will they outright deny it, for, like Herod, they are driven by "fear of people" rather than by fear of God.

Jesus indicates that "tax collectors and prostitutes" who listened to John will enter the kingdom of heaven ahead of the religious leaders who did not.