

Advent III: Matthew 11:2-11: Jesus and John the Baptist

1. This passage is paralleled only at Lk. 7:18-28. With reference to Lk. 7:17-18 Stoeckhardt says: "The fame of the great deeds of Christ had spread over all Judea and the surrounding regions, reaching into the mountain castle of Machaerus on the other side of the Dead Sea where John sat imprisoned." Note that Lk. 7:21 gives us additional information as to what Jesus was doing when the disciples of the Baptist arrived to ask Jesus. Evidently this account in Luke fits into the chronological order of events, not Matthew. Fahling says the order of events in Mt. 11:2-12 is transposed.
2. Since this account is not found in Mark, higher critics claim that Matthew and Luke found this account in the Q source. In the first place, no Q document has ever been found, and secondly, from the order of events in Luke it seems that the disciples of Jesus were with him. Matthew very likely witnessed this.
3. Vs. 2: From vs. 11 we know that this was the Baptist and from vs. 2 we know that he was in prison. ἀκούσας: from Lk. 7:18 we know that John heard it from his disciples. τὰ ἔργα includes both miracles and preaching. That is clear from vs. 5. LB wrongly reads "the miracles". KJV and NKJV "the works", RSV "the deeds", NIV, JB and NEB "what Christ was doing". διὰ denotes agency. Luke has δύο, "two".
4. Vs. 3: Note emphatic Σὺ, placed prominently forward. ὁ ἐρχόμενος: Lenski says: "Undoubtedly signifies the Messiah and is used in that specific sense especially also by the Baptist, 3:11, Mk. 1:7; Lk. 3:16 etc.; Jn. 1:27." NASB and NKJV translate: "the Coming One". That is preferable, we think, to KJV "he that should come", LB "the one we are waiting for", TEV "the one John said was going to come", and all the rest "he who is to come". But we won't argue about it. ἕτερον can mean either "of a different kind" or simply "another". At this point Luke has ἄλλον, simply "another". προσδοκῶμεν can be either indicative or deliberative subjunctive. If the former, they are merely asking for information. If the latter, it denotes doubt and deliberation. The second is preferable.
5. At this point we must stop and consider the question: "Was John in doubt or was it his disciples?" Modern interpreters, including Lenski, Hendriksen and many others, think John was in doubt. But Jerome, Chrysostom, Luther and his contemporaries, Ylvisaker, Fahling, Stoeckhardt and Kretzmann think that John's disciples were in doubt. By the way, Ylvisaker (pp. 301-306) is highly recommended on this passage in Matthew and Luke. He summarizes thoroughly both viewpoints and gives good reasons for espousing the idea that John's disciples, not John, were in doubt. Lenski and Hendriksen are not recommended on this point. When all is said and done, there is far more information elsewhere in the Gospels to cause one to think that it was John's disciples who were in doubt. Read John 3:25-30. The Baptist's disciples were jealous of Jesus and His disciples but the Baptist shows them how wrong they were. Furthermore, the other evangelists clearly state that the disciples of John made common cause against Jesus Himself (Mt. 9:14; Mk. 2:18; Lk. 5:33). And, finally, John's way of life was quite different from that of Jesus (cf. Mt. 11:18,19). Perhaps John's disciples, out of loyalty for John, and disdain for Jesus because of His freer way of life, just could not accept the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. On the other hand, read Jn. 1:24-40 where we are told of the Baptist's testimony to Jesus and that he even gave some his disciples to Jesus. By the way, it must have been a great grief to John that, though he brought many to Christ through preaching and baptism, his own disciples were in doubt as to the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. But, on with the text.
6. Vs. 4: ἀποκριθεὶς always denotes a response, here an answer. πορευθέντες, a circumstantial participle, before an imperative, is also imperatival. ἀπαγγεῖλατε, not just "tell" but "announce".

They served as messengers. "Those things which you are hearing and seeing." Read Lk. 7:21 at this point. They witnessed what Jesus said and did. Mt. has "hear and see". Lk. has: "have seen and heard". The point we are making is that they also heard Jesus preach the Gospel. That becomes clear in the next vs.

7. Vs. 5: The disciples of John must have recognized immediately that Jesus was referring to Is. 35:5,6 and 61:1. These are prophecies of the Messiah. Jesus directs people to Himself by referring them to Scripture. He simply testifies to prophecy and fulfillment. He does not criticize them. All He does is to give proof from prophecy and fulfillment. Notice the alternation between active and passive verbs in this verse. The word *πτῶχοι* means "beggars" not just "poor". He is not speaking about people who are poor in earthly goods but those who are beggars in spirit, the repentant. *εὐαγγελίζονται* is plainly passive and its meaning is very obvious.
8. Vs. 6: Bengel says that vss. 5-6 contain seven proofs. There are six in vs. 5. He means that vs. 6 is an additional proof, the proof of the blessed estate of the believer. It always means this in NT. *σκανδαλίζω* means to "entrap". The translations are interesting: NIV: "who does not fall away on account of me." NEB: "who does not find me a stumbling-block." AAT: "who doesn't turn against me." The following are not recommended: LB: "who don't doubt this message." TEV: "who has no doubts about me!" We all have our doubts at one time or another. It's much more than that. *σκανδαλίζω* means "to entrap in sin". *ἐν ἑμοί* is causal. How awful to be entrapped fatally in sin because of Christ! That means to deny utterly what Christ says of Himself. Read I Cor. 1:23. The Jews are scandalized by Christ to this day.
9. Vs. 7: The first three words constitute a genitive absolute. *ἤρξατο* denotes a different situation. *λέγειν* is its object. Vss. 7-9 involve a punctuation problem. If one places the question marks after the three infinitives, *τί* means "what". But if one places the question marks immediately before the infinitives, *τί* means "why". In either case, the infinitives denote purpose. All our translations take all three as "what" with question mark after infinitive, except that RSV reads the questions in 8 and 9 as "why" and NEB reads that in 9 as "why". Some commentators maintain that the people had changed their minds about John the Baptist since they had first heard him and were baptized by him. But there is no proof for that. It is clear from vss. 16-19 that many had the wrong attitude toward both John and Jesus but that does not prove that they had changed their minds since they first heard him. In vss. 7-10 Jesus is pointing out two things: 1) People want a preacher who suits their own fancies, a fickle man who will not preach the Law to them; 2) The Baptist was quite other than what the flesh desires, in fact he was the greatest prophet, one who was himself prophesied. It is remarkable that both Luke and Matthew read *θεάσασθαι* for the first infinitive. RSV has "to behold". NASB "to look at". NEB: "What was the spectacle that drew you to the wilderness?" A spectacle entertains. That's all. Ylvisaker says, with reference to the attitudes of the people: "They might reason as follows: 'The misgivings of the Baptist are either reasonable or unreasonable; if reasonable, how may Jesus then be the Messiah He claims to be? If his doubts are unreasonable, how can John be the Forerunner.'" Jesus answers both possibilities. A reed swayed this way and that pictures a person who has no convictions.
10. Vs. 8: What does *ἀλλὰ* mean? NIV has "if not. . ." Lenski suggests "well now. . .", meaning "if it wasn't that, how about this one?" By the way, even IB says on vs. 7: "The evangelists no doubt take this to mean also that John, despite his question in vs. 3, cannot really doubt Jesus." Well said. John was firm in his convictions. *ἠμφιεσμένον* is a perf. pass. participle, punctiliar-durative, lastingly dressed thus. Fahling explains thus: "A well-fed and well-clothed, man-serving court preacher." That was quite the opposite of what the Baptist was, of course. By "man-serving court preacher" Fahling

means that Jesus is stressing the fact that John is lying in a dungeon because of his testimony, not a court preacher before Herod. From what follows in the latter part of vs. 8, that may be just the point. Herod wore soft clothing and lived in a palace. John was wearing his coat of camels-hair and was lying in a dungeon. By the way, ἴδοῦ means something like "look here".

11. Vs. 9: ἀλλὰ is like that in vs. 8: "If not, then. . . ." If John wasn't a fickle, soft-living, man-pleaser, then there was only one other possibility. Jesus arrives at the true answer by the process of elimination. And even that isn't enough. ναὶ λέγω ὑμῖν is very strong. ναὶ is the emphatic "yes!" And λέγω ὑμῖν always denotes the divine authority of Jesus. καὶ means "even". προφήτου is genitive of comparison.
12. Vs. 10: In vs. 5, Jesus had pointed to prophecy to identify Himself. Now he quotes prophecy to prove that John was more than any other prophet. He was the only prophet who was prophesied and that right at the end of the OT, from the last OT prophet. γέγραπται "it stands written" is punctiliar-durative. ἴδοῦ is important. It means "look here". ἐγὼ is emphatic. God Himself is speaking. ἀποστέλλω means to send with a definite commission. He is God's messenger. For the word σου, the Massoretic Text has "my" and the LXX has μου. Jesus changes this to σου, which, of course refers to Jesus, thus identifying Jesus with God. πρὸ προσώπου σου means "immediately before you". The OT prophets prophesied at a distance. John's foretelling of Christ was immediately before Christ came. ὅς, though introducing a relative clause, is really a purpose clause "to prepare. . . ." The two σου in the second line refer to Christ. Mal. 3:1 ought be read, at least in English.
13. Vs. 11: ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν is another divine asseveration. (cf. vs. 9). ἐγγήγερται, perf. pass., denotes the office of John. God is the agent. "Among those born of women" doesn't simply mean "of all those ever born" because that would include Christ. It emphasizes the sinfulness and mortality of men born in the natural way. Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4; Ps. 51:5. Among sinful mortals, John was the greatest prophet. Bengel says: "An expression of universal extent. Thus, ἐν γυναιξίν of the blessedness of Mary, Lk. 1:28."(sic) The correct reference is Lk. 1:42. Well said. Mary was the most blessed among women. None greater, in his office, than John the Baptist. By the way, this is the only place in which we find the expression: "John, the Baptist." He was greater than Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah. The latter part of this vs. does not mean that Christ is the least, despite Chrysostom, Luther, Melanchthon and Calov. Ylvisaker, following Leyser and J. Gerhard, says: "The lesser refers to the disciples in the New Covenant Church. . . . He belongs in the era of the fulfillment and he may, therefore, have a more unclouded understanding of Jesus." This does not mean that we are greater as to our person, but implies that the greatest thing that has happened to us is that Jesus fulfilled all the OT Messianic prophecies.
14. Worthwhile quotes: "The state of John is described with reference to men (a reed), to himself (soft clothing), and to God (more than a prophet)." Well said. With reference to vs. 10, Lenski aptly says: "This prophecy was fulfilled in John and Jesus. And thus the greatness of John is also revealed."
15. Not to be overlooked is the marvelous, pastoral, evangelical attitude of both the Baptist and Jesus. When his disciples were prone to reject Jesus, John sent them to Jesus Himself. When they came to Jesus, He pointed to prophecy and fulfillment with reference to His miracles and preaching. When they left, Jesus, by a series of questions, pointed out the greatness of the Baptist, both in prophecy and fulfillment. That's the way to deal with wavering Christians.
16. Mary was the most blessed among women. The Baptist was the greatest of the prophets. The least of Christians is greater than the Baptist. In each case it's not because of their person but because of

the person and work of Jesus Christ.