

# Matthew 11:11-14 – John the Baptist, Greatness, and the Kingdom of Heaven

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The general populace in Jesus' day was convinced that John the Baptist was a prophet (Mat. 14:5, 21:26; Mk. 11:32; Lk. 20:6). In Mat. 11:9 and Lk. 7:26, Jesus affirms John's status as a prophet and then declares that he was "more than a prophet." He was more than a prophet in that he not only prophesied but was himself the subject of prophecy, the one of whom it was foretold in Mal. 3:1, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."<sup>1</sup>

John was the Elijah who was prophesied to come (Mal. 4:5; Mat. 11:14, 17:10-13; Mk. 9:11-13), but he was not *literally* Elijah, not Elijah returned to earth in bodily form, which is how most Jews mistakenly understood the prophecy.<sup>2</sup> That is why John denied being Elijah when the priests and Levites asked him (Jn. 1:21); their question assumed the mistaken understanding.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he was the *prophesied* Elijah, meaning the one who would go before Jesus *in the spirit and power of Elijah* to prepare the people for his appearing (Lk. 1:17). As David Wenham puts it: "The distinction between John and Jesus is the difference between the police outrider in a procession and the royal or other dignitary following in his or her official car or carriage. In other words, John was a prophet looking forward, the last in the line in fact; Jesus was the one looked forward to, the fulfillment of the prophetic hopes."<sup>4</sup>

After noting that John was the subject of prophecy, the figure foretold in Mal. 3:1, Jesus states in Mat. 11:11a (par. Lk. 7:28a), "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist."<sup>5</sup> Though some insist that Jesus includes himself among those who do not surpass John in greatness, noting that Jesus is said to be "born of a woman" in Gal. 4:4,<sup>6</sup> that seems most unlikely given the incomparable glory of Jesus' nature, character, and mission and the magnitude of his effect. His greatness is unparalleled by any measure, as indicated by John's confession that he was not worthy to carry or untie Jesus' sandals (Mat. 3:11; Mk. 1:7; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:27).

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<sup>1</sup> The scripture reference in Mk. 1:2-3 combines Ex. 23:20a, Mal. 3:1, and Isa. 40:3 (LXX). Mark probably focuses on the Isaianic contribution because he is identifying Christ's work, and therefore his own, with Isaiah's grand vision of restoration and renewal. There also is Jewish precedent for naming only the most important source for composite quotes (Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 42-43), and Mark only develops the portion of the citation dealing with the wilderness, which is the portion from Isaiah.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 118-119.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 76, J. H. Bernard states: "In a sense, John the Baptist was the Elijah of Jewish expectation, and so Jesus declares (Matt. 11:14; cf. Luke 1:17), but in the sense in which the Jewish emissaries put the question, 'Art thou Elijah?' the true answer was *No*; for, while the Baptist fulfilled the preliminary ministry of which Malachi had spoken, he was not Elijah returned to earth in bodily form."

<sup>4</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 124.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 7:28a simply says "none is greater than John."

<sup>6</sup> Though in Gal. 4:4, the relevant phrase is *γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός* rather than *ἐν γεννητοῖς γυναικῶν* as in Mat. 11:11 and Lk. 7:28.

Indeed, the greatness of John that Jesus acknowledges derives from Jesus' surpassing greatness. John was as great as any human in history because he was given the extreme privilege of serving as the Lord's forerunner and herald. In other words, Jesus is so great, so significant in the plan and purpose of God, that having a role in launching his public ministry made John second to none in greatness. Of course, since John's greatness depends on the superior greatness of Jesus, Jesus was not including himself in the comparison. Yes, Jesus was "born of a woman" in the sense he came from Mary's womb and has a human nature, but that idiom was flexible enough that Jesus could use it more specifically for ordinary human beings, those without his preexistence and divine nature.

Matthew and Luke assume that Jesus intended the phrase in that narrower sense, which is why they saw no need to address how John could be as great as Jesus after having made clear that Jesus is without peer. Robert Stein comments, "Luke assumed that Jesus was excluded from this comparison. The greater quality of Jesus over John the Baptist has been a recurring theme in Luke 1-2 (see 1:26-38, 'The Lukan Message'), and Luke's readers know that Jesus was greater than John. The comparison here was between John and other humans."<sup>7</sup> The same goes for Matthew, who leaves no doubt about Jesus' preeminence, including John's confession of Jesus' superiority (3:11-14).

As great as John was for being the forerunner and herald of the Lord, Jesus says in Mat. 11:11b (par. Lk. 7:28b), "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."<sup>8</sup> In other words, everyone in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. The question is how or in what sense that is true.

John prepared the Jews to receive Jesus by calling them to repentance (Mat. 3:1-2; Lk. 1:16-17, 3:1-3), identified Jesus as the one who would usher in the kingdom of heaven (Mat. 3:1-2; Jn. 1:6-9, 19-34; Jn. 3:27-30), and formally launched Jesus' public ministry by baptizing him (Mat. 3:13-15; Mk. 1:9; Lk. 3:21). The means by which Jesus brought the kingdom, the way in which he established it as a reality in this present age, included his death, resurrection, and ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Stephen Wellum remarks, "The NT announces that in Christ, the promised age is now here ('already') since he, in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension and in Pentecost, has inaugurated God's kingdom through the new covenant. Yet, the full consummation of what the OT prophets anticipated and predicted is 'not yet' here in its fullness."<sup>9</sup>

Since John was dead before any of those events occurred, he was not a participant in the kingdom. Rather, he was a transitional figure. He died on the cusp of the kingdom's arrival, after putting in motion the process of kingdom inauguration. D. A. Carson notes, "The Baptist belongs to the last stage of the divine economy before the inauguration of the kingdom (as in Lk.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 230.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 7:28 has "kingdom of God." The phrases are interchangeable.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology Volume One* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 473. For detailed discussion of "inaugurated eschatology," see, e.g., Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 41-116.

16:16).<sup>10</sup> It is disciples from Pentecost onward who participate in the fully inaugurated kingdom, the kingdom that will be consummated at Christ's return.

As John's greatness was due to the incomparable greatness of the one he was privileged to serve, the one for whom he prepared others and to whom he pointed, the same goes for participants in the kingdom of heaven. Their greatness exceeds that of John in the sense that Jesus' intrinsic greatness was manifested more fully in the days following John's death as Jesus accomplished the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven. He endured the cross for the sake of his enemies, was raised from the dead as the firstfruits of immortal resurrection life, ascended to heaven as Lord of all, and sent the Holy Spirit to comfort and transform his people, all of which was done publicly. The Jesus with whom kingdom participants identify and to whom they thereby point others is greater than the Jesus preached by John, not intrinsically, of course, but in the sense that more of his greatness has been made known. We thus bear witness to a greater Jesus than did John, and in that way, we can be said to be greater than John.

Jesus continues with the enigmatic statement in Mat. 11:12. There are several translation issues in this verse involving the words βιάζεται, βιασταί, and ἀρπάζουσιν, but the sentence may properly be rendered, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people are attacking it."<sup>11</sup> The meaning is that from the time Jesus' public ministry was launched at his baptism by John, his work of inaugurating the kingdom, ushering that kingdom into the present age, has proceeded apace. By that work, the incipient kingdom was advancing vigorously or powerfully toward full inauguration, but at the same time, there were violent people who, though ignorant of the Lord's mission, were set against him and bent on forcing him and his disciples to serve their purposes. D. A. Carson states:

The best solution is to take the verb [βιάζεται] in its most likely voice, middle deponent, and the noun [βιασταί] and verb [ἀρπάζουσιν] of the last clause with their normal evil connotations: namely, from the time of John the Baptist . . . until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing; and violent or rapacious men have been trying (conative present) to plunder it. . . .

The argument up to v. 11 has established John the Baptist's greatness, grounded in his ministry of preparing for and pointing out Christ; it has anticipated the witness of those in the kingdom who are even greater than John because the least of them testifies to Christ yet more clearly. Now, Jesus goes on to say, from the days of the Baptist – i.e., from the beginning of Jesus' ministry –

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<sup>10</sup> D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *Matthew & Mark, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 311.

<sup>11</sup> This is how it is rendered in the NLT. The ISV reads in relevant part, "the kingdom from heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people have been attacking it." The NIV recognizes in a footnote that has "been forcefully advancing" is a possible rendering and concludes the verse with "and violent people have been raiding it." Murray J. Harris, a renowned expert of biblical Greek, offers the following translation in *The Inner Story of the New International Version* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 58, "the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people have been trying to raid it." See also, E. Allen Sorum, "Exegetical Brief: Matthew 11:12 - Heaven's Forceful Kingdom and Earth's Violent Men," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 110, No.2 (Spring 2013), 133-140.

the kingdom has been forcefully advancing (the point made also in Lk. 16:16). But it has not swept all opposition away, as John expected.

Simultaneous with the kingdom's advance have been the attacks of violent men on it. That is the very point John could not grasp. Now Jesus expressly affirms it. The statement is general because it does not refer to just one kind of opposition. It includes Herod's imprisonment of John (cf. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies*, 44-45), the attacks by Jewish leaders now intensifying (9:34; 12:22-24), the materialism that craved a political Messiah and the prosperity he would bring but not his righteousness (11:20-24). Already Jesus has warned his disciples of persecution and suffering (10:16-42); the opposition was rising and getting worse.<sup>12</sup>

In the final clause of Lk. 16:16, Jesus says of the kingdom that "everyone βιάζεται into it." Here it seems best to take the verb with a passive rather than a middle sense, as does the NET: "and everyone is urged to enter it." The NET note states:

Many translations have "entereth violently into it" (ASV) or "is forcing his way into it" (NASB, NIV). This is not true of everyone. It is better to read the verb here as passive rather than middle, and in a softened sense of "be urged." See Gen 33:11; Judg 13:15-16; 19:7; 2 Sam 3:25, 27 in the LXX. This fits the context well because it agrees with Jesus' attempt to persuade his opponents to respond morally. For further discussion and details, see D. L. Bock, *Luke* (BECNT), 2:1352-53.

The statement in Mat. 11:13 – "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John" – is simply a way of indicating that John is a transitional figure, the last in the line of prophets under the old covenant who were looking forward to the Christ. Carson comments:

In view of the preceding, "until John" means up to and including John. . . . The Baptist belongs to the last stage of the divine economy before the inauguration of the kingdom (as in Lk. 16:16). . . . Here the point is to set out the redemptive-historical turning point that has brought about the transformation of perspectives explained in vv. 11-12. The two anomalies in the verse are (1) "the Prophets" precedes "the Law," and unusual order (cf. 5:17; 7:12), and (2) both "Prophets" and "Law" prophesy. Both anomalies serve the same purpose – a powerful way of saying that the entire OT has a prophetic function, a function it maintained up until and including, John the Baptist.

In the twin settings of Matthew's "fulfillment" theme . . . and the role of John the Baptist (11:10), it is understood that now, after John the Baptist, that which Prophets and Law prophesied has come to pass – the kingdom has dawned and Messiah has come. This establishes the primary function of the OT in Matthew's gospel: it points to Jesus and the kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Carson (2010), 310.

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As confirmation, Jesus declares in 11:14, "and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." In other words, John was the long-awaited forerunner of the Messiah, the one mentioned in Mal. 4:5.