

Yochanan

Prophet of Fire

A Study of the Life and Ministry of John the Baptist

PART III

THE PHARISEES & JOHN'S PREACHING



THE SANHEDRIN'S INVESTIGATION OF MESSIANIC REPORTS

Yochanan came proclaiming the coming of a king and a kingdom with preaching that had obvious and pointed Messianic overtones. According to Matthew 3:5-7 he caused quite a stir and attracted the attention of the Pharisees and Sadducees;

"Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. 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?"

The Sanhedrin had a policy that they followed whenever there arose a movement within Israel which was Messianic in nature or claim. The policy directed that two stages of investigation should take place.

Silent Observation

The first stage was to send out a delegation to silently observe what was being said and done, but the members of the delegation were not to speak or make any direct challenges or raise objections. All they were permitted to do was observe and then report back to the Sanhedrin members in Jerusalem whether or not this was to be taken seriously. If they declared the movement insignificant, the matter would simply be dropped.

Verbal Challenges and objections

If, however, the Sanhedrin members were convinced that the movement under investigation was significant, they would then empower the delegation to return to make verbal challenges and objections.

As one reads the gospel accounts of the ministry and public life of Yeshua, we indeed note the progression amongst the Pharisees and Sadducees from silent observation to verbal interaction

JOHN'S DENUNCIATION & WARNING TO THE SANHEDRIN

John emerged from the Judean wilderness, dressed in a camel hair tunic and his food was locusts and honey. He was a wild, rugged, no-nonsense man with a no-nonsense message of repentance to make way for the soon coming of the Messiah, his cousin Yeshua.

People came, they came from all over Israel to repent, confess their sins, be baptized by John and wait for John to identify Him. The Pharisees and Sadducees also came out to observe this wild man preaching about repentance and a soon coming Messiah. The language should be carefully noted; the people **came out** to be baptized by John, the Pharisees and Sadducees on the other hand **came to** his baptism, not to be baptized but to observe. Here is Matthew's account:

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? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: 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. 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. 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 Spirit and with fire: 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. (Matthew 3.7-12)

John's denunciation of these religious leaders could not be more plain. He called them out as the offspring of vipers (snakes) and demanded they bring forth fruits of repentance, an obvious parallel to the common people coming to him to be baptized. These words from the baptizer shows clearly that there was no repentance on the part of the religious leaders, a prerequisite for being baptized by John. The phrase "the wrath to come" refers to the common teaching of the time on the "Day of the Lord."

John went on further to warn the Pharisees and Sadducees against the common error of claiming they would be protected from divine punishment because of their genealogical connection to Abraham. This was a theological concept of the times known as "zekhut avot" literally meaning "the merits of the fathers." The theology of zekhut avot taught that any descendant of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would automatically be protected from divine judgement because of the merits of the fathers.

John cancels the obnoxious arrogance of the Pharisees and Sadducees by comparing them to nothing more than the useless chaff left over from a harvest which will be burned with unquenchable fire – a clear threat of eternity in hell

JOHN'S COMPARISON OF HIMSELF TO JESUS

John clearly and pointedly distinguished himself from Yeshua. Indeed, he considered himself unworthy to even so much as carry Yeshua's sandals for Him.

"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:" (Matthew 3.11)

This statement about John's unworthiness has great significance to the Jewish mind. According to the Talmud (*the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law*) a slave was required to take the masters sandals off when he came home and to carry them to the bath house. Taking off the masters shoes was a task never to be performed by a Jewish person, but only by non-Jewish slaves. In comparing himself to Yeshua, John humbly declares that he is unworthy to perform even the most humiliating task of a slave.

THE BAPTISM OF JOHN & THE BAPTISM OF YESHUA

John states that his baptism is in water and is given in response to an act of faith in confession and repentance. Those who come to John repenting of their sins and submitting to public baptism are described as wheat and are gathered into Messiah's garner (barn) which, in the context of John's preaching to Israel is representative of the gathering of believers into the millennial kingdom at the Day of the Lord.

By comparison, the baptism of Yeshua will not be in water, but in the Holy Spirit and fire. According to John, believers will be baptized by Yeshua in the Holy Spirit, that is, they will be permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, a concept totally foreign to the Jewish mind by elucidated by Paul:

"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

Every believer is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Messiah, "*kehilla*" in Hebrew meaning congregation and "*ekklesia*" in Greek for church meaning a called out assembly.

Unbelievers on the other hand are said by John to be baptized with fire. Unbelievers may be defined as those who have rejected or ignored the message of the kingdom and this baptism with fire is in context a picture of the eternal lake of fire where they will be burned with unextinguished and inextinguishable fire. A place of eternal judgement.

CORRECTING A COMMON THEOLOGICAL ERROR

The baptism with fire of which John eludes to is not a reference to the tongues of fire that accompanied the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the upper room at Pentecost as the Holy Spirit would certainly not baptize Messiah rejecting unbelievers into the body of Christ