

The Threshold of the Kingdom – John the Baptist

I. Introduction

1. The opening chapters of Genesis show God's intent for His creation and how that intent was thwarted by man's insistence on autonomy. The creation was to be *sacred space*, with man, the image-son, mediating God's presence and lordship. Thus human autonomy brought death and disintegration to the creation, which God determined to remedy through a human.
2. The history of the world is the process of accomplishing that end, and this is the story the Scriptures tell: *creation, fall, Israel, redemption in the Messiah, renewal, consummation*. The middle part of this process – *Israel* – is often omitted, but Israel is the key to understanding God's purpose and work that culminates with Messiah Jesus fulfilling all the Scriptures.
3. Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh depicted His design for His creation with man at the center (*sacred space*): ***redemption, reconciliation, mutual inhabitation, and the expansion of God's presence and rule to encompass the entire earth and all of its families.***
 - a. The Lord disclosed and pledged this scheme in His covenant with Abraham, and He accomplished it in its natural (Israelite) form in David's reign and kingdom.
 - b. But God's covenant with David (situated within the Sinai covenant) underscored that the Abrahamic promises – which David's kingdom and kingship presupposed and served – would not be fulfilled except in connection with a regal and priestly *son* from his line.
 - c. David's kingdom, so far from restoring sacred space, only yielded further alienation and disintegration until nothing of it remained. *The creation's exile had come to a climactic and agonizing manifestation in the exile of the very people chosen to end exile.*
4. But above all of this failure and desolation, the Lord remained adamant that His design for His creation, bound up by covenant in Abraham and his descendents, would yet be realized. *He would arise at the appointed time and cause Israel to be Israel, so that, by His power, Israel would fulfill its election and calling on behalf of the earth and its inhabitants.*
5. And in His mercy, Yahweh gave to Israel a signpost that would let them know when His ordained day was at hand: *He would send a forerunner to His people to announce His return to Zion and prepare them to receive Him and enter His renewed kingdom.* * Isa. 40:1-11

II. The Threshold of the Kingdom

Isaiah promised an ambassador whose presence in Israel would signal Yahweh's return to Zion to end His people's exile and establish the kingdom He'd pledged to Abraham and David. Thus the gospel writers begin their accounts by introducing *John the Baptist* as this individual, thereby setting the stage for the "good news" of the kingdom – the *gospel* – going out to all Israel (cf. Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-15; Luke 3:1-17; John 1:19-28).

John stood at the threshold of the inbreaking kingdom as the last of Israel's prophets (Mat. 11:1-15), and the gospels describe him and his ministration in terms of two key dimensions: He was the *forerunner* pledged by Isaiah, but also the *prophet who embodied Elijah's return*, which was the Lord's final promise to Israel (Mal. 4:5-6). Both of these phenomena signaled the *Day of Yahweh* – ***the day of Yahweh's return to judge and purge the earth and initiate its renewal.***

A. The Isaianic Forerunner

1. The Forerunner in Isaiah's Prophecy

- a. The forerunner passage opens the last section of Isaiah's prophecy (40-66), which brings to a climactic articulation the Lord's pledge to return to Zion, liberate and restore His covenant household, renew the creation and establish His everlasting kingdom. In doing so, this section spotlights four *servant songs* that identify a particular servant of Yahweh who is at the very center of His theophany and triumphal work.
- b. Isaiah introduced this forerunner as announcing to Jerusalem that her long-awaited day of consolation and restoration was at hand. He had come to prepare the way for Yahweh's return to Zion to put all things right and take up His reign. He was bringing a message of sure hope grounded in Yahweh's faithfulness, and thus Jerusalem was to proclaim this good news to the other cities of Judah.

2. Yahweh's Return and the Servant Motif

Yahweh's return is the focus of Isaiah 40-66, and the *servant* motif is key to understanding it.

- a. Isaiah first identifies *Israel* as Yahweh's servant, but a servant that has failed in its vocation as a disciple and witness on behalf of the nations (41:8-9, 42:18-25, 43:8-13). This leads into the *first servant song* (42:1-7) which introduces an anointed "servant" – a Spirit-filled "Israel" – who would prove faithful to the covenant and its obligations.
- b. This servant represented a faithful Israel, which implied Israel's *renewal*. With an eye toward this, Isaiah announced the Lord's intent to raise up the Persian king Cyrus to fulfill the messianic mission of defeating the subjugating power (Babylon), liberating and recovering the Israelite exiles, and rebuilding Jerusalem and its sanctuary. * 43:1-48:15
- c. Yahweh had determined to appoint the greatest of the ancient near-eastern kings to be His servant-deliverer on behalf of His covenant people, and He called Isaiah to record that decree as a compelling depiction of the messianic servant of whom Cyrus was a type (48:16). Thus Isaiah's treatment of Cyrus flowed into the *second servant song* (49:1-7), which reflected and built on its predecessor: *The coming servant-deliverer whom Cyrus prefigured would restore Yahweh's covenant household and kingdom, but as fulfilling Israel's failed servanthood*. This servant would restore Israel in Himself, so that Israel could at last fulfill its role on behalf of mankind and the human vocation.
- d. The *third servant song* follows in chapter 50 (vv. 4-9), and it introduces the theme of unjust suffering as the recompense of the servant's faithful discipleship. This servant would emerge in Israel as a fellow Israelite, but a faithful one. *He would be the servant that Israel had failed to be; a true covenant son who represented Israel's God as a devoted, well-taught disciple*. Ironically, however, his faithfulness would not be met with praise and grateful embrace, but scorn, rejection and open opposition, underscoring the depth and hardness of Israel's alienation from her covenant God and Father.
- e. This depiction points to the fourth servant song, which elaborates on the servant's unjust suffering; *he would suffer at Israel's hand as bearing their iniquity and guilt* (52:13-53:12). This, then, was how Yahweh intended to restore Israel and renew the covenant relationship: His servant would embody Israel as both faithful son and guilty rebel.

- f. The messianic servant would deliver and heal Israel by bearing the nation's guilt and sickness in himself. In this way, Zion would be restored to again bear children for Yahweh – children who would prove faithful. And faithful children meant faithfulness in vocation; Zion's sons would at last fulfill their calling to be the light of the nations, resulting in their "mother" gathering to herself children from every tribe, tongue, nation and people (54:1-55:13). *Yahweh would be satisfied in the servant's triumphal travail, for by it He would at last achieve His intent to be the Father of a global family of image-children through whom His presence and glory would flood an earth set free from the curse.* * ref. also Isa. 11:1-12, 65:1-25, 66:5:24; cf. Haggai 2:1-9

3. John as the Isaianic Forerunner

All of the gospel writers introduce their accounts with John the baptizer, explicitly showing him to be Isaiah's promised forerunner. *As such, John's mission was to prepare the covenant household for Yahweh's return to remedy Israel's plight and inaugurate His kingdom.*

- a. Thus John's work was to call Israel to *repentance* – not merely a change in their conduct, but a reorienting of their minds and hearts back to their God. The sons of Israel needed to *rethink* their relationship with Yahweh and what it meant for Him to restore the covenant relationship and establish the kingdom He'd pledged to Abraham and David.
- b. Unbelief and unfaithfulness (waywardness of heart and mind) was the essential "sin" from which Israel needed cleansing, and John's baptism spoke to this, even as he baptized in the Jordan river out in the Judean wilderness: *His baptism signified for Israel a new passage through the Jordan to dwell with Yahweh as faithful sons. Ending Israel's exile demanded a new exodus – a new redemption from captivity, a new covenant relationship, and a new entrance into Yahweh's sanctuary land.* * ref. Isa. 35, 51-52
- c. John was effectively confronting the sons of Israel with their obligation to become Israel *indeed*. In this way they would be prepared and suited to receive their God when He returned to them to establish His kingdom. For centuries their forefathers had longed for this day, and now it had dawned on them; would they recognize and be ready for Yahweh's visitation? Would they heed the prophet's warning to them? * Mal. 3:1-2

B. The Coming Elijah

John confronted his countrymen with their need of repentance (redirected thinking) if they were to embrace Yahweh at His return. *Put simply, the people of Israel stood at a crisis point that would determine their future fate, and this is the sense in which John represented the return of Elijah* (cf. Mal. 4:4-6; Mat. 11:1-19, 17:1-13). Yahweh had promised Elijah's return as part of His final plea to Israel, His intent being that it would reunite the hearts of the patriarchs with their children, rendering them faithful covenant sons and daughters. But as with Israel's previous crisis point (1 Kings 17-18), this second Elijah might also fail in his mission, leaving impenitent Israel to endure the curse Yahweh warned would come upon their land. * ref. esp. Mat. 17:1-13

As Yahweh's forerunner, John was commissioned to prepare an unencumbered pathway for His return to Zion. This would involve preparing His people to be ready and fit to receive Him as they ought. And they would be a prepared people when they were reunited with their patriarchal fathers who had walked faithfully with their covenant God, believing Him for all that He had promised. John's presence signaled the day of Yahweh's visitation, and his baptism challenged them to their own inescapable obligation of decision. * cf. Luke 1:5-17, 3:1-9, 19:28-44