



THE SOUTHERN LEVANT IN THE TIME OF JESUS

We will not review the many and varied solutions that have been proposed. We venture here only two observations about the language of the verse that may assist towards narrowing Matthew's possible intent. First, the "o" in the second syllable of *nazoraïos* indicates that the Hebrew word behind our Greek term was *natzor*, i.e. one kept, protected, and not *netzer* (branch) or *nazir* (Nazirite). Second, translators of our verse rarely take note that the passive Greek verb can be intended to communicate a divine passive in which God is assumed to be acting. The verse may thus be rendered, "The one whom I have kept (i.e. *natzori*) shall be called (i.e. by God)." Accordingly, Matthew's elliptical allusion is to a prophetic passage that describes one who has been kept, protected and whom the Lord has called.

Scholarship on this verse has focused most of its attention on trying to explain the significance of the collocation of *nazoraïos* and *nazaret*. Yet, nowhere else in the New Testament do these terms appear alongside each other. Could it be that Matthew has brought the elliptical Old Testament prophecy, not because of the name of the Galilean village, but because of the angelic warning and protective actions of Joseph

were reminiscent of an ancient prophecy?

A cruel son of Herod remained in power in Jerusalem, and it was not yet safe to return there. At the angelic warning, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Nazareth out of concern for their continued safety. Their relocation to the security of this remote Galilean village, where Jesus could grow to adulthood, reminded Matthew of a verse concerning the Isaianic Servant of the Lord:

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the nations. (Isa 42:6)

So, Matthew concludes his abbreviated description of Jesus' infancy with a report that Jesus was taken to a remote village in the Galilee and preserved there by the Lord, until the appointed time for the beginning of his prophetic ministry. We witness a similar literary device by Luke to summarize and conclude his report concerning the childhood of John the Baptist: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Lk 1:80).

Of additional value for Matthew, however, the Evangelist uses Isaiah 42:6 to anticipate the next episode in his record of Jesus' life—the heavenly call at his baptism (Mt 3:16–17). Scholars have already demonstrated that according to the Evangelists the heavenly voice drew from the same block of scripture in Isaiah 42 to proclaim the prophetic significance of Jesus' baptism: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him" (Isa 42:1).

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN AND THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Geographical Setting. In all of the Gospels the ministry of Jesus begins with his participation in the baptism of John. The geographical setting for John's ministry varies in the four Gospel accounts. In both Christian tradition and modern scholarship this has resulted in uncertainty regarding the location of John. All of the accounts cite Isaiah 40:3 to introduce the reason for the Baptist's presence in the wilderness. "A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." Like the Qumran Congregation (IQS 8:13–14), John believed that preparation for the Lord should take place in the wilderness.

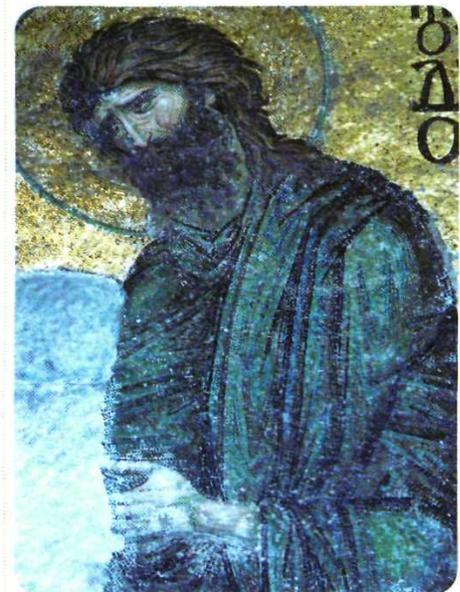
Mark reports that John was "in the wilderness" (Mk 1:4) without any specification where that wilderness lay. The Greek term, similar to its Hebrew counterpart, need not indicate an arid, uninhabitable place, i.e. desert. It may also describe unpopulated, pasturing areas belonging to residents of a nearby city (cf. Lk 8:29). So, we hear of a "wilderness" near Bethsaida (Lk 9:10–12), where Mark describes green grass (Mk 6:39). We find

a similar breadth of usage for the Hebrew term in the Old Testament (Gen 21:14; Joel 2:22; Isa 42:11).

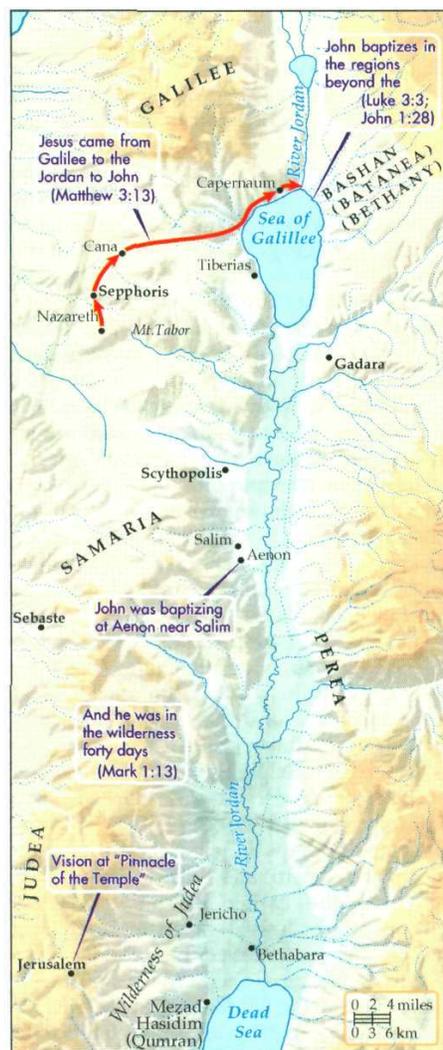
Mark does record that crowds came to John from "all Judea and Jerusalem" (Mk 1:5; cf. Mt 3:5; Jn 1:19), which may or may not imply proximity to the arid regions in the lower Jordan Valley. It is difficult to know how much weight Mark intends for us to give to these geographical details about the crowds. Are they instead the Evangelist's periphrastic style of emphasizing John's role as the Voice of Isaiah 40:3? In the Isaiah passage the Voice is to speak to Jerusalem and the cities of Judea (Isa 40:9).

If Mark is employing here a technique of verbal allusion, it would not be uncommon. For example, elsewhere he omits explicit testimony to the popular notion that the Baptist was Elijah *redivivus* (cf. Mal 4:5 [HMT 3:23]; Mt 11:14; Lk 1:17). Yet, Mark was certainly aware of this opinion, because he describes John's clothing with clear intent to present John in Elijah's attire (Mk 1:6; Mt 3:4; 2 Kgs 1:8). On that occasion, Markan detail is not intended to merely describe John's clothing but to signal to his readers the eschatological importance of John's prophetic role. The challenge for the modern reader remains how to read these Markan details. Matthew on both of these occasions shares Mark's features, but he alone of the Synoptic Gospels—perhaps anticipating the mention of the Jerusalem and Judean crowds or reflecting the earlier Judean wilderness setting of Isaiah 40:3—specifies that John was in "the wilderness of Judea" (Mt 3:1).

While Luke agrees with Mark's portrayal that John is in the wilderness, he lacks Mark and Matthew's geographical reference to Judean and Jerusalem crowds. Instead, Luke notes only, "[John] went into all the region about the Jordan" (Lk 3:3). The Fourth Gospel contributes unique geographical



John the Baptist, from the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.



THE BAPTISM OF JESUS AND THE SOJOURN IN THE WILDERNESS

details about the location of John's ministry, before and after its description of John's baptism of Jesus. At points the Evangelist parallels the Synoptic Gospels, and at other points he presents independent traditions. Of the setting prior to Jesus' baptism, John's Gospel records that the Baptist was at "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (Jn 1:28). Sometime later he is reported at "Aenon near Salim" (Jn 3:23). So, in apparent agreement, John and Luke present the Baptist moving between different venues and not limited to any single location.

The site of Bethany in the Transjordan finds no mention in early literature outside of John's singular reference. Origen reports in c. 200 CE that no such place exists (Orig. *Comm. John VI.24*). In spite of his admission that "[Bethany] is found in almost all of the copies [of John's Gospel]," he proposed a textual emendation for the verse to read Bethabara. Eusebius' *Onomasticon* (58:18) a century later describes Bethabara: "Where John was baptizing, beyond the Jordan.

The place is shown where even today many of the brothers still endeavor to receive a bath." Eusebius embraced this textual solution first heard from Origen, because he makes no mention of Bethany in connection with John's baptism. While these early Christian conjectures exchanged the known for the unknown, manuscript support for Bethabara prior to Origen is nonexistent. Bethany appears in our earliest and best manuscripts of John's Gospel. Confusion in the later Byzantine period is compounded by the Medeba Map, which preserves "Bethabara, the sanctuary of Saint John the Baptist" on the western bank of the Jordan River, not as the New Testament describes Bethany, "beyond (i.e. east of) the Jordan."

John's reference to Aenon shares Bethany's absence in the early sources. The Medeba Map describes an Aenon in the Transjordan and identifies it with the site of Sapsaphas. A second "Aenon near Salim" is depicted on the west side of the Jordan River not too distant from Scythopolis (i.e. Beth-shean). This latter site is attested also in Eusebius' *Onomasticon* 40:1–4 and Egeria's *Travels* 15:1–4. A third suggestion for Aenon, perhaps owing to the fact that mention of Aenon occurs within the Fourth Gospel's narrative about Jesus in Samaria, identifies the Baptist in the interior of the hill country of Samaria. Its location is remembered near the modern-day Arab village of Salim (Jdt 4:4). While the toponymic challenge of springs (=Aenon) near Salim may be resolved, it is difficult to understand how the interior of Samaria served as the venue for John's ministry to call Jews to repentance and ritual immersion. Identification of an early Roman location for the springs of Aenon remains uncertain.

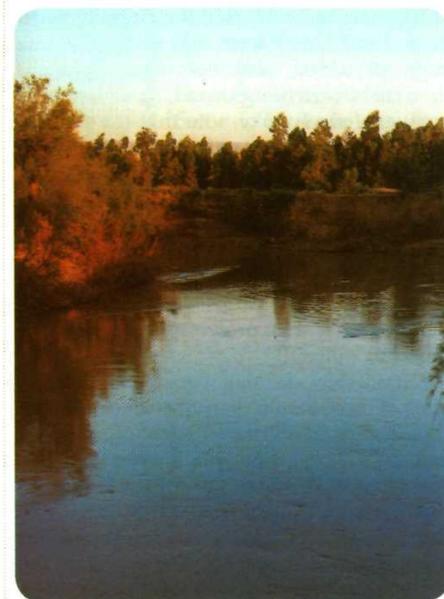
Returning to Bethany, it is suggested that the reference in John 1:28 is not to a village, but to the region of Bashan in the Transjordan. Designation of the region of biblical Bashan—extending from Mount Hermon in the north to the southern boundaries of the Lower Golan—with the term Batanea is also heard by Greek writers from Josephus (*Life* 54; *Ant.* 9:159) to Eusebius (*Onom.* 44:9–11). Additionally, according to the Septuagint the region of Bashan is demarcated like Bethany, "beyond the Jordan" (*Deut* 4:47; *Josh* 9:10).

If "Bethany beyond the Jordan" does signal the region of ancient Bashan (Batanea), then it indicates that John's ministry reached regions northeast of the Sea of Galilee. A northern setting for John better suits the description that two of his disciples, Andrew and Peter, together with Philip came out from Bethsaida to follow Jesus the day following his baptism (Jn 1:44). The location of John's disciples at Bethsaida on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee is not easily reconciled with the traditional location of Jesus' baptism in the lower Jordan Valley near Jericho.

It may be of some significance that in rabbinic opinion, the waters of the Jordan River above the Sea of Galilee were preferable for ritual immersion. The waters of the Yarmuk and lower Jordan rivers were reckoned unsuitable, since they included "mixed waters" (m. *Para* 8:10). In other words, these rivers south of the Sea of Galilee received tributaries of questionable purity. The rabbinic estimation accords with the lack of any allusion to the practice of Jewish ritual immersion in the lower Jordan River in the days of the Second Temple.

John's ministry in the north seems a more fitting setting for his critique of actions involving the Herodian families, who resided in the Galilee and the north. John's popularity and outspoken critique resulted in his imprisonment by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee. Josephus' parenthetical remarks concerning the fortress of Macherus indicated that the historian did not know where John was executed. Mark's description that "leading officials of Galilee" (Mk 6:21) were present during the banquet when John was condemned strengthens the contention that John was imprisoned and executed in Antipas' Galilean palace in Tiberias.

John's calling to the crowds to repent and ritually immerse in the regions of the Jordan above the Sea of Galilee may also explain the large crowds (*Ant.* 18:118) that Jesus encountered on the plains near Bethsaida, where he withdrew upon hearing of the Baptist's death (Mt 14:13). According to Mark, when Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6:34). With these words the Evangelist hints both to the relationship of the crowds with the recently deceased John, and the popular



The River Jordan—traditional site of Jesus' baptism.

notion among some that John was the anticipated prophet-like Moses (Deut 18:18; Jn 1:25; cf. 4Q175 1:5–8). Mark's creative use of the phrase—"sheep without a shepherd"—is intended to echo the same words spoken by the Lord to Moses in Numbers 27:17 to emphasize the need for new leadership after his death.

What we witness, then, with the topographical setting for the Feeding of the Multitudes in the Synoptic Gospels (Lk 9: 10–17 *parr.*) is not unlike the Fourth Gospel's fragmented description of Jesus' return beyond the Jordan.

Then Jesus returned beyond the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days (i.e. Batanea/Bashan; Jn 1:28). Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true." And in that place many believed in Jesus. (Jn 10:40–42)

THE TRAVELS OF JESUS

From Nazareth to Capernaum.

Prominent east-west valleys (Beth-haccerem, Hannathon, Bêt Neţôfa, Turân) that traverse the lower region are one of the topographical features that distinguishes Lower Galilee from Upper Galilee (War 3: 35). The valleys of the Lower Galilee are the result of prehistoric tectonic activity. These geological striations extend from the Mediterranean coast north of Mount Carmel and reach inland to the Sea of Galilee and the upper Jordan Valley.

By contrast the Upper Galilee region lacks the open valley systems that mark the Lower Galilee, and so was not easily traversed. In addition, its mountainous terrain reaches heights that double those of the mountains of the Lower Galilee. The contrasting degree of accessibility left its mark on human settlement and movement in both regions. Archaeological surveys in the Lower Galilee indicate a greater degree of outside contact that is evidenced in the material culture of the populations residing there. In addition, while Josephus attests to the establishment of new urban centers (Sepphoris, Tiberias, Gabara: *Life* 188) in the Lower Galilee during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, there is no similar evidence for urban centers in the Upper Galilee.

The topographical delineation between Upper and Lower Galilee is the esh-Shaghûr fault that is marked by the Beth-haccerem Valley, the northernmost of the transversal valleys in the Lower Galilee. The accessibility of the Lower Galilee region caused by these valleys had its impact on social development. There was sparse settlement in the interior of the Upper Galilee, while the early capital of the Galilee was Sepphoris, positioned in the Bêt Neţôfa Valley (Sahl el-Baţţôf). Its importance was accentuated by its location at the crossroads



FROM NAZARETH TO CANA AND CAPERNAUM

of the Ptolemais–Taricheae (Magdala) trunk road and the secondary north-south route by way of Simonias to the Jezreel Valley and the international coastal highway.

In Matthew 4:13 the Evangelist reports that Jesus traveled from Nazareth to Capernaum. The journey north from Nazareth and east may pass through either the Bêt Neţôfa Valley or the Turân Basin to descend from Nazareth's chalk ridge overlooking the Jezreel Valley to villages along the Sea of Galilee. However, indications of Jesus' presence in the Bêt Neţôfa Valley suggest that he used the Ptolemais–Taricheae trunk road in his movement between his boyhood home and the Sea of Galilee.

In the beginnings of the Fourth Gospel Jesus' first miracle is recorded at Cana (Jn 2:1–11). Immediately following the miracle Jesus is reported to descend to Capernaum (Jn 2:12). According to John, on another occasion Cana and Capernaum are likewise juxtaposed in mention of Jesus' activity (Jn 4:46). It should also be remembered that Cana was the home of one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Nathana-el (Jn 1:45–49, 21: 2). Together these verses suggest Jesus' presence in Cana on more than one occasion

and that the village may have been a regular waystation on his route from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee.

The New Testament site for Cana of the Galilee is likely Khirbet Qanah in the Bêt Neţôfa Valley. It guarded the ascent to Jotapata, the city of Josephus, who reports staying in Cana (*Life* 86). The fortified village lay on the road from Ptolemais to Taricheae (Magdala). The Hellenistic-Roman site is currently under excavation and should be distinguished from the medieval Christian pilgrimage site of Kafr Kana that from the time of Quaresmius (1620 CE) has been identified as New Testament Cana.

Eusebius (*Eus. Onom.* 116:4) identifies the New Testament village with the Old Testament Kanah of Joshua 19:28. However, this is merely a result of the similarity of the Septuagint's Greek rendering of the Hebrew name for the Old Testament village rather than a clear identification. The lack of any topographical information by Eusebius other than his biblical citation is patent for sites unknown to him. His knowledge of the Galilee was limited in any event. However, it seems that by the late Roman period the identity of either Old Testament Kanah or New Testament Cana was unknown.