

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (January 12, 2025)

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire".

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:15-16 & 21-22 – NRSV)

Introductory notes

General

"With the baptism preached by John, Luke's narrative begins to follow his main written source, the Gospel of Mark. However important John's own message, Luke follows Mark in defining John's role primarily as the precursor to the Messiah. Luke has him explicitly eschew that designation for himself, and point to a stronger than himself whose baptism would be in spirit and fire (3:16), a literary prophecy that will reach fulfillment only in Luke's account of Pentecost. John describes himself as an unworthy servant of the one to come (3:16). Most of all, by having John imprisoned before Jesus' public emergence, Luke establishes a sequence between the prophets. Jesus' anointing with the Spirit is perceived by the reader as following after John's ministry rather than overlapping it" (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Liturgical Press, 1991, 66-67).

Specific

the Messiah: "Luke's comment implies that there were Palestinian Jews who awaited the coming of a messiah, i.e. an "anointed" agent of Yahweh sent for the restoration of Israel and the triumph of God's power and dominion (see p. 197 above). From at least the beginning of the second century B.C. there had crystallized in Palestinian Judaism such an expectation. It developed out of the David-tradition in Israel, especially as this was presented in the Deuteronomist: David as the zealous worshiper of Yahweh, "chosen" by him to rule over Israel in place of Saul (2 Sam 6:21) and favored not for himself alone, but insofar as his kingly role would affect all Israel. The oracle of Nathan (2 Sam 7:14-17) and the "last words of David" (2 Sam 23:1-17) reveal Yahweh's promise of a dynasty and explicitly refer to the historical David as "the anointed" (*māšîah*) of the God of Jacob. That title of David is repeated in the Psalms (18:50; 89:39, 52; 132:10, 17).

"Jeremiah, who confronted the last of the Davidic kings before Nebuchadnezzar's invasion, announced that Jehoiakim would "have none (i.e. no heir) to sit upon the throne of David" (36:30); but he was also the prophet who uttered the promise of a "new covenant" (31:31) and proclaimed the divine assurance that the people of Israel would "serve Yahweh their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them" (30:9). This "David" was no longer the historical David, but a future occupant of the throne to be raised up by Yahweh. This ideal king will be a "David" (Jer 33:15; Ezek 37:23-24). But in all these promises of a future,

ideal “David,” the title *māšîaḥ* is strikingly absent. The title occurs but twice in all the prophetic books: once applied to Cyrus, the Persian monarch (Isa 45:1); once to the reigning king of Israel, or perhaps to Israel itself (Hab 3:13). Though reference be made to the oracle of Nathan, “the coming of a messiah” is never the phraseology used to announce the hope of a restored kingdom of David. The same absence is noted in the postexilic rewriting of the David story (compare 2 Sam 7:12, 16 and 1 Chr 17:11, 14).

“The first clear mention of *māšîaḥ* in the sense of a *future* anointed agent of Yahweh in the Davidic line is found in Dan 9:25, “from the going forth of the Word to restore and build Jerusalem to (the coming of) an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks.” (We prescind here from the problems of interpretation—to whom this would refer; we note only the implied future context in which the title appears.) This Danielic usage, along with various references to “anointed figures” in Qumran literature (1QS 9:11; 1QSa 2:14, 20; CD 20:1; 4QP Bless 2:4; 4QFlor 1:11–13; 4QPIsa^a 8–10:11–17), which attest the Essene expectation of Messiahs of Israel and Aaron, and the (probably Pharisaic) *Psalms of Solomon* (17:23, 36; 18:6, 8) reveal a clear Jewish expectation of the coming of a messiah (or messiahs) in the period prior to the emergence of Christianity. See further J. A. Fitzmyer, *Concilium* 20 (1967) 75–87; *ESBNT*, 115–121. This evidence indicates how the OT theme of a coming David as an anointed agent of Yahweh developed into an explicit expectation of a Messiah (with a capital M), or of several of them” (Joseph A Fitzmyer SJ, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX: introduction, translation, and notes* (Vol. 28), Yale University Press, 2008, 471–472).

I baptize ... : The Greek verb *baptein* means “to immerse or wash”. Both notions – immersion and washing – are present in the Christian understanding of baptism, though with very specific intent.

“Many religions in antiquity practised different washings and baths. This holds true for the mysteries of Eleusis, of Mithras, and of Isis; the OT prescribed several ablutions to be performed, rules which were observed by Jews also in NT times (John 2:6); the Qumran community laid a particular stress on them, and Bannus (Joseph. *Life*. 10) and John the Baptist were not alone in practising baptisms outside of mainstream Judaism; other baptismal movements also appeared in the Transjordanian/Syrian area. Sometime during the 1st century C.E. proselyte baptism was introduced in Judaism, and when baptism received a central place in Mandeism, the rite as such was certainly no novelty, regardless of whether it should be regarded as pre-Christian or not. One should beware of assigning the same or even similar meanings to these rites. As rites they are open to several interpretations; in each case it is to be expected that the meaning of the rite is provided by the ritual context or otherwise through instruction or tradition.” (L Hartman, “Baptism,” in D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, Volume 1*, Doubleday, 1992, 583.)

Scholars tell us that the descriptions of John the Baptist and his preaching in the Gospels echo the prophet Malachi 3:1: “.... this means adducing a text which illustrates the spiritual climate in which John appeared. There, in the perspective of the coming Day of Yahweh, we encounter the following motifs: a messenger sent before God (3:1), God’s coming (3:1–2, 5), the coming of the Day (3:2; 3:19, 23), purification through fire (3:2–4), burning (3:19),

returning to God (3:7) from sins against fellowmen (3:5) and against God (3:8–9, 13–15), the sending of Elisha before the Day comes (3:23).” (Op cit, 584.)

Jesus’ baptism by John is certain. And it contains a subtle but profound significance. Given that John is preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sin, and that this is symbolised in the baptism he offers, we must ask why does Jesus – the sinless one – allow John to baptize him? The answer lies in the identity of Jesus as “the suffering servant” – see Isaiah 42:1-4 & 53:1-12. Matthew’s Gospel reminds us: “He took our sicknesses away and carried our diseases for us”. Matthew is citing Isaiah 53:4. John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus “is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” – see John 1:29 & 36. With this in mind we can understand a little better the words spoken by Jesus later in Luke’s Gospel: “There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress until it is over” – Luke 12:50.

Thus St Paul says starkly: “For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God” (2Corinthians 5:21). *Jesus heals the broken world from within*. In his life, death and resurrection Jesus gives us the victory over sin and death. We are “baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3). Our baptism is an immersion in Christ – we become one with him – and it is a purification and healing – we share in his victory over sin and death.