

The Baptism of Jesus

Mark 1.9-11; Matt 3.13-17; Luke 3.21-22

The story of Jesus' baptism is found in each of the three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The baptism of Jesus is not directly narrated in John's Gospel, but it is evoked in the testimony of John the Baptist in John 1.29-34 ('I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him', v. 32). In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' baptism follows an account of the ministry of John the Baptist (Mark 1.2-8; Matt 3.1-12; Luke 3.1-18). The baptism is immediately followed in Mark and Matthew by the temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1.12-13; Matt 4.1-11); in Luke, the genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3.23-38) comes between the baptism and the temptation (Luke 4.1-13).

The Shared Story

It is easy to detect a common story across the three passages.

- Jesus undergoes baptism;
- the heavens open or split apart;
- God's Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove;
- a heavenly voice identifies Jesus as God's beloved Son with whom he is well pleased.

The shared story gives little prominence to the actual baptism of Jesus; emphasis rather falls on what happens after Jesus is baptized. The declaration of Jesus' divine sonship by the voice from heaven is the high point of the story. The words from heaven echo Ps 2.7 (*You are my son*) and Isa 42.1 (*in whom my soul delights*). Each Gospel writer gives his own emphasis to the central story in particular ways in the narrative he writes.

Mark

Mark introduces the story with the words, *in those days* (v. 9), which is a characteristic Old Testament phrase (e.g. Judg. 17.6; 18.1). Mark uses it several times in his discourse on the end times (Mark 13.17, 19, 24), which might suggest that he is using it here to signal that with Jesus' appearance, the kingdom is near (cf. Mark 1.15).

Mark's *he saw* (v. 10) seems to indicate that what follows is the individual experience of Jesus: *he saw* the heavens split open and the Spirit descend like a dove. Neither Matthew nor Luke limits the opening of heaven to Jesus' vision (though Matthew states that *he saw* the Spirit descending like a dove), and so it is natural to infer from their accounts that the heavenly disturbance is a public and objective occurrence. That Jesus in Mark is addressed directly by the heavenly voice *you are* (v. 11; as also in Luke) similarly places the emphasis on Jesus' individual exposure to the event. Mark does not go as far as to say that Jesus *alone* sees and hears these things (and neither Matthew nor Luke explicitly refers to a crowd watching and listening). Yet, he does convey the impression of a private



experience, which might fit with his stress on Jesus' true identity being kept secret (1.34; 3.11-12; 8.26-30) until the right moment (14.61-62; 15.39).

In Mark's telling of the story we read of the heavens being *torn apart* (v. 10). Matthew and Luke speak more reservedly of heaven being *opened*. Mark's language is typically more vivid (e.g. 2.2, 4; 5.4), and also alludes to Isa 64:1, which has to do with the dramatic coming of God, and thus seems to signal an 'apocalyptic' intervention. Elsewhere in Mark the word for *tear apart*, is used only once - 15.38, with reference to the tearing apart of the temple curtain at the moment of Jesus' death. These two instances of the word form an 'envelope' and link Jesus' baptism and the crucifixion. Both episodes climax in an attestation of Jesus' status as God's Son. A connection between Jesus' baptism and his crucifixion is clearly posited in Mark 10.38-39, where Jesus speaks of his upcoming death as 'the baptism with which I am baptized'.

Matthew

Matthew states that Jesus came to John *to be baptized* (v. 13) by him, drawing attention to Jesus' express purpose. Uniquely in Matthew, there is a conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus (vv. 14-15). The dialogue opens up the question of why Jesus humbles himself before John, a problem that Mark in his account does not appear to sense. John's question to Jesus makes clear the latter's superiority. The answer given is that this is a temporary situation for the fulfillment of God's purposes. The phrase *to fulfil all righteousness* in v. 15 brings together two of Matthew's favourite words: *fulfil* (mainly used in connection with Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament scriptures, e.g. 1.22-23; 2.15, 17-18) and *righteousness*.

In Matthew, the voice from heaven declares, *this is my beloved Son...*(in contrast to *you are* in Mark and Luke). The wording in Matthew thus agrees exactly with God's announcement at Jesus' transfiguration (with the difference that the latter has additionally, 'listen to him': see notes on The Transfiguration).

Luke

Luke's version of the baptism is short but stylish. It is one long sentence in the original, reflecting his excellent facility in the Greek language. But the brevity means that the narrative is quite compressed. Strikingly, in Luke, we do not read of John the Baptist's role in Jesus' baptism. This is because Luke has just narrated John's imprisonment (vv. 18-20). However, the passive clause, *when Jesus also had been baptized* (v. 21), makes clear that Jesus is not baptizing himself. Thus, we are probably meant to deduce that John is doing the baptizing. By keeping John the Baptist out of the picture, though, Luke does not have Jesus explicitly humbling himself before John.

Luke has Jesus as associating himself with *all the people* (v. 21), which may hint at a reason for Jesus' submission to John's baptism of repentance: he undergoes baptism to identify with Jewish people in an act of national repentance. While Mark speaks of *the*



Spirit (Mark)

1.10) and Matthew of *the Spirit of God* (Matt 3.16), Luke refers to the *Holy Spirit* (Luke 3.22). This is Luke's preferred way of speaking of the divine Spirit (e.g. 1.15, 35, 41).

In Luke's version, the dramatic events take place while Jesus prays (3.21), in line with his emphasis on Jesus' habit of praying (5.16; 6.12; etc.). Luke has the Spirit descending on Jesus *in bodily form like a dove* (v. 22), reflecting his tendency to concretize the supernatural (cf. 24.39-43).

In his account of the preaching at Nazareth (4.16-30), Luke brings out the significance of the Spirit's descent upon Jesus. It marks Jesus' anointing and empowerment for ministry (4.18; cf. Acts 10.38). After his Spirit-anointing at his baptism, Jesus goes *full of Holy Spirit* into the wilderness to face his testing (Luke 4.1).

Summary

A shared story of Jesus' baptism and its immediate aftermath can be distilled from Mark, Matthew and Luke. Each evangelist tells that story with his own emphasis. Mark subtly links Jesus' baptism with his forthcoming death. Matthew finds in Jesus' submission to baptism the 'fulfilment' of the divine purpose. Luke emphasises Jesus' prayerfulness, and further on in his Gospel he interprets the descent of the Spirit as Jesus' Spirit-empowerment for mission.

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