

THE BAPTISM AND ANOINTING OF JESUS

—LUKE 3—

A Voice in the Wilderness

In order to be baptized by John the Baptist, the people of Jerusalem had to take a long, hot hike through the wilderness. Wouldn't it have made more sense for the prophet to preach in Jerusalem? For that matter, wouldn't the Temple in Jerusalem have been a better place for the ritual washing of repentance? Wandering out to the wilderness, some may have wondered why John made the barren, rocky terrain his base of operations, and the Jordan River the place of his baptizing. So why did this holy man and prophet call Jerusalem to journey out to the Jordan and wander in the wilderness?

The explanation may be found in the Old Testament. Luke illustrates the prophetic purpose of John's preaching in the wilderness by quoting from Isaiah. "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Lk. 3:4). Isaiah had foretold that the wilderness would be the place of origin for Israel's new exodus, which would be announced by a voice crying out. This announcement comes at the beginning of the second half of Isaiah. Why is this important?

The context is the key, for Isaiah has two very distinct parts, so much so that some scholars believe that there must have been at least two different authors of Isaiah. The first part of Isaiah (1-39), which could be called the Book of Woes, is about the bad news that Israel will end up exiled for her sins. The second half of Isaiah (40-66) is known as the Book of Consolation,

because of the soothing words it imparts in contrast to the ominous and heart-wrenching warning of the first half. The Book of Consolation gave hope to the Jewish exiles that, despite their travails, one day Yahweh would pardon their sins and liberate them from their captivity.

This is what the Jews of John the Baptist's day longed for—the fulfillment of the second half of Isaiah. The first half of Isaiah had already come true. The Jews were conquered by the Babylonians, who deported them out of the Holy Land. Even though many of the Jews had returned to the Promised Land by Jesus' day, they still lived in virtual exile.¹ Although the Babylonians did not rule them, the Romans did. All the Jews of John's day knew that the first half of Isaiah had tragically taken place, so they were all patiently waiting for the good news of the second half to unfold. This, according to Luke, is exactly what is happening with John's mission in the wilderness. By citing the opening verses of Isaiah 40, Luke is claiming that John the Baptist marks the beginning of the good news. The Lord of History had finally opened up the Book of Consolation, the book that told the story of Israel's new exodus, of her return from exile. Now the fullness of prophetic time had come.

¹ While many Jews had returned from Babylon by Jesus' day, the exile had by no means ended. Nehemiah, who was one of the leaders of the Jews who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, recognized that the remnant of Israel were in a paradoxical situation: the exiles had returned, but the exilic condition of captivity continued. As Nehemiah declared after returning to Jerusalem from Babylon:

Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that thou gavest to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom thou hast set

Why go out to the wilderness? Because according to Isaiah the wilderness was to be the stage where the new exodus would spring up. And now that Isaiah's prophetic voice had taken shape in John the Baptist, it became clear that the time had come for Israel to follow in the sandals of her forbears and make an exodus through the wilderness and across the Jordan. John stirred up more than the waters of the Jordan with his baptizing: He had stirred up the people's hope of a new exodus—this time not from Pharaoh, or even Caesar, but from Satan.

Why Wash in the Jordan?

Why did John make Israel wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan? Why is it that this new story starts with Jews jumping into the Jordan in order to be baptized?

John was a prophet, and prophets were known for performing symbolic actions with rich, prophetic meanings. For example, the prophet Jeremiah smashed a pot to symbolize the destruction of the Temple, Hosea took a prostitute as a wife to signify how Israel was an unfaithful bride to Yahweh, and Ezekiel shaved with a sword, not for a closer shave, but to signify the impending invasion of Jerusalem.

over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our cattle at their pleasure, and we are in great distress (Neh. 9:36-37).

N.T. Wright, one of the most brilliant scholars on the historical Jesus today (and the most articulate voice against the so-called "Jesus Seminar"), has developed the motifs of exile and exodus in his outstanding historical study on Jesus, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). For a less academic and more popular work, see Wright's *The Original Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Berdmans, 1996).

Prophets performed provocative acts, acts that were aimed at making a mark in the memory and bringing about a change of heart in their audience. John's directing the people of Jerusalem and Judah into the Jordan was an action pregnant with meaning.

The Jordan was a religious and national symbol for the Jews. At the climax of the first exodus, when Israel escaped from Egypt, Joshua led Israel through the Jordan and into the Promised Land. Crossing the Jordan long ago marked Israel's release from Egyptian captivity and the beginning of Israel's possession of the Promised Land. Now John was calling Israel to come back to the Jordan and reenter the Promised Land. Like their ancestors before them, Israel was to go out to the wilderness and then reenter into the Promised Land. John was offering Israel a fresh start, a new beginning. The crowds grew in anticipation and excitement, for it looked like John was beginning the new exodus, the fulfillment of the prophetic promises made by Isaiah.

Many wondered whether John might be the Messiah, the one to lead Israel through a new exodus and redemption. John, however, was not the new Joshua. He made it clear that he was simply preparing the way, saying,

I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Lk. 3:16).

The mark of the true Messiah would be the Holy Spirit, and John announced that He was coming soon.

If John is no Joshua, he does have other sandals

to fill. Luke gives his reader an important clue that John is the prophetic protégé of the prophet Elijah. When the angel Gabriel announced to John's father, Zechariah, that he would have a son who would do great things for God, he said that John would have "the spirit and power of Elijah" (Lk. 1:17).

What is so significant about John's being a new Elijah? It just so happens that the final words of Malachi, the last prophet sent to Israel, predict that Elijah will return before the Messiah comes (cf. Mal. 4:5). If one saw John as a type of Elijah, then clearly the time for the Messiah was at hand. It is worth noting that the last place Elijah goes to is the Jordan River. At the Jordan, as the heavens open to take Elijah up in a chariot of fire, he passes on a double portion of his share of the Spirit of God to his successor, Elisha. If John is playing the role of Elijah, the expectation mounts that one is soon coming who will take the reigns from John and possess a greater share of the power of the Spirit. And there is no better place to pass the baton to John's successor than at the Jordan.

Jesus at the Jordan

John summoned all of Israel to come out to the Jordan for baptism. Along with the rest of Israel, Jesus also came to the Jordan in the midst of the Judean wilderness. "Jesus went to be baptized, then, not for private reasons, but as a man with a public calling."² He came not as a sinner in need of repentance, but as an Israelite faithful to the prophetic summons.

² G.B. Caird, *Saint Luke: The Pelican New Testament Commentaries* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 77.

Jesus did not need the baptism that John offered, but He submitted in order to take on the role of the suffering servant, the one whom Isaiah prophesied would be innocent and yet “numbered with the transgressors” (Is. 53:12), in order to “bear their iniquities” (Is. 53:11).

Jesus’ humble act of accepting baptism drew an immediate response from heaven:

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, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (Lk. 3:21-22).

The Father’s words to His beloved Son, Jesus, echo the ancient words spoken by God to the suffering servant in Isaiah in what is known as the first servant song (Is. 42:1-9), at the beginning of the servant’s mission:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; *I have put my Spirit upon him*, he will bring forth justice to the nations (Is. 42:1).

As John noted, the Spirit identifies the Messiah, the servant of the Lord. With the outpouring of the Spirit, Jesus plays Elisha to John’s Elijah.

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus is a turning point in Israel’s story, a turning as dramatic as moving from Isaiah’s Book of Woes to his Book of Consolation. Just as at the Jordan the torch was passed from Elijah to Elisha, so it is with John and

Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus and anoints Him in the Jordan River.

Yet how can we be sure that Jesus was anointed by the Spirit when the word “anoint” is not found in the baptismal account? The answer comes in the very next chapter of Luke, when Jesus takes the scroll of Isaiah and reads the words of the servant of Isaiah as His own, declaring, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because *the LORD has anointed me*” (Is. 61:1; cf. Lk. 4:18). Jesus understands that at His baptism the Father anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. In the sequel to his Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records how Peter referred to Jesus’ baptism as the time when “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

With the anointing of the Spirit, Jesus can now be called the Messiah, for in Hebrew “Messiah” literally means “anointed one.” Jesus is called the Christ, the Greek word for Messiah, because He was anointed in the power of the Holy Spirit at His baptism in the Jordan. Therefore, “Christ” is not originally a name, but a title. From the moment that Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan, He is the Christ, the Messiah. Not without reason is He named Jesus, which is the Greek for Joshua, which itself is Hebrew for “Yahweh saves.” The new Joshua has come to lead Israel through the Jordan and to the new Promised Land.

The Royal Meaning of Messiah

The Messiah was the one whom the prophets foretold would redeem Israel and bring about the new exodus. It was known that the Messiah would be a

king, because “the Lord’s anointed” (Messiah) was a title for the king of Israel. After the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as king of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 10:1), he told him that one of the signs that the Lord had truly anointed Saul king over Israel was that “the spirit of the LORD will come mightily upon you” (1 Sam. 10:6). This is the same sign that marks Jesus as the Messiah, for the Spirit comes upon Him at His baptism, and Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit” (Lk. 4:1). “And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee” (Lk. 4:14). Jesus is the Christ, because the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him.

Immediately after Jesus’ baptism and anointing in the Spirit, Luke gives us Jesus’ genealogy (cf. Lk. 3:23-28). One of the key aspects of the genealogy is that it proves that Jesus is of the royal line of David. Why give the genealogy at this point in the story, and not earlier during the infancy narrative? Luke places the genealogy here to highlight Jesus’ royal status as an heir of David. He can truly be the Messiah, the king of Israel. And by juxtaposing the baptismal scene with the genealogy, Luke can underscore the parallel between Jesus and David, who was anointed in the power of the Spirit when he became king:

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward (1 Sam. 16:13).

Jesus is the son of David (cf. Lk. 3:31), the anointed heir and therefore the Messiah, the king of Israel. Not only that, but by tracing Jesus’ genealogy all the

way back to Adam, Luke implies that Jesus' reign will extend not only over the family of Abraham, but over all humanity. All of Adam's family will be redeemed through the mission of the Messiah. Isaiah's good news has come in the Person of Jesus, and through His ministry consolation and comfort will be given to all who heed His voice.

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. **(a)** Have you ever picked up a book, or started watching a movie, in the middle or towards the end, and had difficulty understanding the plot? **(b)** How is that comparable to reading the Gospels without any knowledge of the Old Testament? **(c)** What did you learn about the baptism of Jesus, from the light of the Old Testament, that you did not know before?

2. **(a)** George Frideric Handel began his musical masterpiece *Messiah* (1742), which tells the story of Jesus from a wide selection of Scripture passages, with the first five verses of Isaiah's fortieth chapter. Given what you have learned about Isaiah, why do you think Handel chose to begin his musical story of the Messiah with those particular verses? **(b)** According to Isaiah 40:1-9, what exactly is the voice in the wil-

derness supposed to cry out? **(c)** Why do you think Isaiah began with the bad news before announcing the good news?

3. (a) Prophets were known for performing symbolic actions. Can you think of any examples of symbolic actions made in the Old Testament? **(b)** Can you think of any actions, from your cultural and national history, that are remembered as being symbolic (for example, dumping tea into Boston Harbor)? **(c)** What are some of the actions that Jesus performed that might have been symbolic in the manner of the prophets? For example, what would Jesus' baptism have symbolized? (see Catechism, no. 537).

4. (a) If Jesus is called "Christ" because He is anointed by the Holy Spirit, why do you think we are called Christians? **(b)** What difference does it make for Christian identity that we are not just followers of Christ, but anointed in the Spirit like Jesus (that is, that we are "anointed ones")? **(c)** How should the fact that we are anointed with the Spirit affect the way we think and behave? **(d)** Did you know that we are anointed with the Spirit at Baptism, and that the

Sacrament of Confirmation is the confirming of that anointing? (see Catechism, no. 1285).
