

A Comparison of the Gospels Jesus' Baptism

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
ESV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

I finished my professional career in 2010 by doing some business in Israel. I had arranged my travel so that I was able to spend a couple of days afterwards sightseeing, which I did with an Israeli tour company from Tel Aviv. My first tour was to northern Israel, which took in Nazareth and various locations around the Sea of Galilee. The coach tour was designed to attract Christian pilgrims, and there were a lot of them because Easter was the next week. We visited the supposed sites of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth and Peter's house in Capernaum. And we enjoyed a Peter's fish lunch in Tiberias, after which the coach went on to Yardenit, the Baptismal Site on the River Jordan, located nearby Kibbutz Kinneret at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee. *On the coach there were a few Christian pilgrims, who had especially come to be baptised in the river Jordan because that's where their Saviour and Lord had himself been baptised. As you can imagine they were excited on the way to Yardenit and overjoyed on the return journey back to Tel Aviv. I witnessed the same joy also in Yardenit, where there were several large groups of believers who experienced the same emotions when they were also baptised. The whole atmosphere was filled with hymns of thanksgiving and worship.* However, for me the most moving and therefore my greatest memory of that day was in the large car and coach park. It was the sight that all visitors to Yardenit are greeted with, Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus on the Wall of New Life around the car park:

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (1:9-11).

These verses are depicted on hand-painted tiles *by the Armenian artist Hagop Antreassian* in over 80 languages and dialects. What an amazing sight it is and an abiding testimony to our Lord Jesus Christ! You can see for yourself the Wall of Life on the Yardenit website.

The Gospels' record

Now before I say anything about the Lord's baptism in this comparative study, I will read the records of this event in the other two synoptic Gospels, from the ESV.

Matthew 3:13-17:

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up

from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.””

Luke 3:21-22:

“Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.””

A Comparison of the Gospels’ record of Jesus’ Baptism

Mark 1:9-11	Matthew 3:13-17	Luke 3:21-22
In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.	Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptised by [John]	Now when all the people were baptised and when Jesus also had been baptised
	John would have prevented [Jesus], saying, “I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered [John] , “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Then [John] consented.	
And when [Jesus] came up out of the water, immediately [John] saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on [Jesus] like a dove.	And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and [John] saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on [Jesus]	and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on [Jesus] in bodily form , like a dove
And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”	and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”	and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”

In last week’s talk, Yannick Ford explained that this series, ‘A Comparison of the Gospels’, will compare what each of the four Gospel writers have recorded about the seven special events in the life of the Lord Jesus by using their unique emphasis of Him - that He is:

- Israel’s King (Matthew).
- God’s Servant (Mark).
- The Perfect Man (Luke).
- The Son of God (John).

So I will now briefly do this comparison for the Lord's Baptism before considering the event in detail. Both Mark's and Luke's records of Jesus' baptism are quite succinct when compared with Matthew's account, because it also includes the discussion between Jesus and John the Baptist in Matthew 3:14 & 15. An analysis of these three accounts of Jesus' baptism shows that:

1. Matthew 3:13 and Mark 1:9 both record **where** Jesus came from - His home district of Galilee to the River Jordan to be baptised - with Mark adding that it was from His hometown of Nazareth. As we shall see, that is important in the Gospel which presents Jesus as Israel's King.
2. Luke concentrated on **when** it was that Jesus was baptised.
3. All three synoptic Gospels state **what** happened when Jesus was baptised that:
 - α. Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist.
 - β. The heavens were opened.
 - γ. The Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus.
 - δ. God the Father's voice came from heaven to declare that Jesus is His beloved Son and expressing His pleasure in Him.
4. Some extra details are:
 - α. That Mark 1:10 states that the heavens were torn open, whilst
 - β. Luke 3 says:
 - i. That Jesus was praying (v.21), and
 - ii. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form (v.22).

Jesus' Baptism

Let's now consider this special event in the earthly life of Jesus using Matthew's account of it in ch.3:13-17. Vv.1-12 of Matthew 3 describe John the Baptist's ministry to Israel. John was the God-appointed forerunner to Messiah:

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"" (vv.1-2).

In v.3, Matthew identifies John as the person who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"

In chs.1&2, Matthew had recorded the way that the Lord came to Israel as their King and that it fulfilled what some of the Old Testament prophets had written about the coming Messiah. John's task was to spiritually prepare the people to receive their King. They flocked to him from Jerusalem, all Judea, and the entire region along the Jordan and were baptised by him in the River Jordan, making full confessions of their sins (vv.5-6). Thereby they became the believing remnant of Israel, and they were those from Israel who, when the people later heard Jesus' testimony to John, declared God to be just. However, the Pharisees and the Sadducees by refusing John's baptism had rejected God's counsel for themselves (see Luke 7:24-30). It was while John's ministry was in full swing that Jesus arrived at the banks of the Jordan to be baptised by John. I have already drawn your attention to the fact that Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan. And that Mark 1:9 includes that He came from His hometown of Nazareth - a fact, which can be easily overlooked, but is significant in the Gospel which presents Jesus as the lowly Servant. Matthew 2:23 states that Jesus lived out His boyhood in Nazareth in order to fulfil what the prophets had spoken about Him:

"He will be called a Nazarene" (ISV).

This is not an exact or definite prophecy, rather it is a general reference to what many Old Testament prophets said about Messiah. J. Heading¹ states that spiritually this name associates Christ with a number of prophets, who speak of Israel's King as the Branch, such as Isaiah 11:1 because the word 'Nazareth' may derive from the Hebrew word for 'branch.' The Jews knew that the Christ would be born and come from Bethlehem (Matthew 2:5-6). The fact that He was "Jesus of Nazareth" baffled them (John 7:42). Matthew shows how both, as to Jesus' family origins, were true. Overall, the fact that He emerged from Nazareth was a stumbling block for them. Even the godly Nathaniel initially was confused, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Perhaps they didn't grasp that the Branch is not only the 'Branch of David' (Isaiah 11:1), but also 'Jehovah's Servant, the Branch' (Zechariah 3:8)?

Let's now continue with the dialogue John the Baptist had with Jesus in Matthew 3:14-15. At first John was reluctant to baptise Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered John that it was the proper action for them both to take to fulfil all righteousness. John knew of the moral excellence of Jesus, which contrasted with that of all those who he had baptised. They had confessed and repented of their sins. Jesus was sinless and didn't need to repent. John had already stated his own inferiority to Jesus:

"I baptise...with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:11).

To John it was obvious, it surely was the other way around: Jesus should have been baptising him! Jesus' reply clearly satisfied John and therefore he proceeded to baptise Jesus. Those who received John's baptism were publicly marked out as Israel's remnant, the true people of God. To fulfil His mission, Jesus the true Israelite, must be fully identified with them, and He publicly did so when He was baptised by John. Otherwise the situation would have been very confusing to say the least. Who were right in God's sight: the arrogant, self-righteous religious leaders, who refused John's baptism or those who underwent John's baptism? However, nowhere in Scripture is this righteous action of Jesus in being baptised by Messiah's forerunner directly explained. To me, one of the more convincing explanations I have read is that Jesus was Jehovah's righteous Servant and His statement that He must fulfil all righteousness was essentially His public commitment to the baptised believing remnant that their sins, which they confessed and repented of by being baptised by John, necessitated Jesus to suffer for them. Isaiah 53:11 & 12 prophesied:

"Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ...He poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors."

I now come to vv.16 & 17 of Matthew 3, which describe what happened when Jesus was baptised. First, I want to comment on Luke's additional note in 3:21 that Jesus was praying when the heavens were opened. By this, Luke draws attention to Jesus as the perfect Son of Man, who was ever dependent on God His Father. This is the first of seven occasions mentioned in Luke's Gospel in which Jesus is said to be praying; and in an eighth He himself stated He had prayed for backsliding Peter (22:32). [Each of the seven occasions was a significant event in Jesus' life:](#)

1. [He prayed here at His baptism, which was the start of His public ministry, and which was preparation for His temptation in the wilderness, which immediately followed \(4:1-13\).](#)
2. [He prayed when He became famous and crowds of people followed Him \(5:16\).](#)
3. [He spent a whole night in prayer before choosing the twelve apostles from among His disciples \(6:12-13\).](#)

4. He prayed at Caesarea Philippi prior to extracting Peter's confession of Him as the Christ (9:18), which led on to His Transfiguration (9:27-36).
5. He prayed on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:28).
6. He prayed in the presence of His disciples, which led to the so-called Lord's Prayer and a discourse on prayer for Christians (11:1-13).
7. He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (22:41-44).

I now want to speak about the three things that happened at Jesus' baptism. They were:

1. The heavens were opened.
2. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus.
3. God the Father's voice came from heaven.

First, the heavens were opened. Mark records that they were in fact torn open, perhaps indicating that the Spirit and God the Father had anticipated this moment in time for thirty or so years. The heavens are the dwelling place of God. The opening of the skies is Old Testament language for God communicating with His people, for example, Ezekiel 1:1. And sometimes Him doing so by coming down to be present on earth as the Angel of the LORD, for example, with Moses at the burning bush.

Second, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. Both Matthew and Mark state that the Spirit was seen to be "like a dove." Luke 3:22 records that His bodily form was like a dove. Perhaps this is in keeping with Luke's Gospel of the Son of Man, who himself had to have a body to be seen and heard by men. But the main point here is that Jesus was anointed by the Spirit for His public ministry, which was carried out in the power of the Spirit. And Jesus Christ's ministry was characterised by that very same dove-like nature. The dove symbolises peace, purity, harmlessness, and innocence. This is somewhat remarkable when we consider that John the Baptist had been preaching to the Pharisees and the Sadducees that the Coming One after him was mightier than him; and had warned them that Jesus was going to baptise with the Holy Spirit and with purging, unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:11-13 & Luke 3:16-17).

Matthew 3:16 adds a further comment, that the Spirit came to rest on Jesus. Perhaps this is an indication that Jesus was Jehovah's humble servant:

"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. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isaiah 42:1-9).

However, I will return to this idea of the Spirit resting upon Jesus later in my talk.

The fact that the Spirit's descent upon Jesus was visible to human eyes was to show His anointing. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb (see Luke 1:15), but His anointing at His baptism was for His public work:

- First as Messiah, the King (see Isaiah 11:1-5).
- Second as the Prophet: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19, when Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2a), and
- Third as the elect Servant of the LORD, who would not fail in His mission (see Isaiah 32:1 with 42:1-7).

The third thing that happened at Jesus' baptism was that God the Father's voice came from heaven. **Three times during the life of Jesus the Father's voice was heard from heaven:**

- 1) **At His transfiguration, when the Father's voice came out of the cloud (Matthew 17:5).**
- 2) **When the Greeks sought to see Him in the week leading up to His death (John 12:28-29).**
- 3) **Here at His baptism.**

In Matthew 3:17, the Father draws everyone's attention to Jesus:

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

But both Mark and Luke state that the Father spoke directly and exclusively to Jesus:

"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11 & Luke 3:22).

Most importantly, all three writers record that the Father declared His pleasure in His beloved Son. The literal translation for "my beloved Son" is "My Son, the Beloved." So comparing these three records, I would say that in Matthew notices in his Gospel (which is primarily to Israel) that the Father is drawing attention to the fact that their promised Messiah and Jehovah's Servant are one and the same Person; whilst Mark and Luke record that Jesus is not only a Man and God's Servant, but He is also God's Son. Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5 both quote Ps.2:7 to draw attention to the fact that when Jesus came into the world, God said to Him at His birth, "You are my Son" to stress that Jesus' sonship is eternal. But Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5 both complete the quotation from Ps.2:7 with the phrase "today I have begotten you" to show that God's eternal love for His eternal Son continued into and throughout Jesus' life upon earth. And the Son's obedience to the Father during His first 30 years in obscurity enabled the Father to exclaim that He was well pleased with His Son. To us, that is a reminder again of Isaiah 42:1,

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

These considerations of what God the Father said to His Son at His Son's baptism enable me to come to the reason why there is no record to Jesus' baptism in John's Gospel, except in an indirect way. John wrote his Gospel to show that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God as he states in 20:31. Initially, John was a disciple of John the Baptist (1:35), but he left following him to follow Jesus (1:37) at the point when John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God (1:29 & 35). John the Baptist's testimony to Jesus being the Son of God was the outcome of the fact that he saw the Spirit descending and remaining on Jesus at His baptism (1:33-34). For context, I'll read John 1:29-34:

“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptising with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptise with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptises with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.””

To finish, notice that the Trinity, the one God consisting of three Persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - is manifested for the first time at this important event in the life of the Lord Jesus.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on ‘Jesus’ Baptism’ in our series ‘A Comparative Study of the Gospels’, talk No. T1372.

Endnotes:

1. J Heading, Matthew, p.55, *What the Bible Teaches* Volume 2, John Ritchie Ltd, Kilmarnock 1984.

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