

The Meaning of the Baptism of Jesus

Men's Table Talk

(Matthew 3:1-12 ; Mark 1:2-11 ; Luke 3:1-23 ; John 1:19- 34)

(Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:7-11; Luke 3:21-23; John 1:32-34)

The Gospel of Mark introduces John as a fulfillment of a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah (*Instead of "in Isaiah the prophet" the majority of ancient texts read "in the prophets"*) about a messenger being sent ahead, and a voice crying out in the wilderness. John is described as wearing clothes of camel's hair, living on locusts and wild honey. John proclaims baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and proclaims that another will come after him who will not baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit. He was known familiarly as "the Baptist" (bearing no relation to the modern sect), which simply means "an immerser, one who administers the rite of immersion" (see Mt. 3:1; 11:11; etc.). The Jewish historian Josephus even refers to John by this same designation (*Antiquities 18.5.2*) *'Console my people, console them,' says your God. 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and cry to her that her period of service is ended, that her guilt has been atoned for, that, from the hand of Yahweh, she has received double punishment for all her sins.'*² *A voice cries, 'Prepare in the desert a way for Yahweh. Make a straight highway for our God across the wastelands. Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be levelled, every cliff become a plateau, every escarpment a plain;'*³ *then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed and all humanity will see it together, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.'* (Isa 40:1-5 NJB) As the prophet began to generate attention, certain Jews in Jerusalem dispatched to him a delegation of priests and Levites in order to ascertain his identity. John emphatically stated that he was not the promised Messiah, nor was he a literally reincarnated Elijah. Rather, he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, the voice of preparation for the arrival of God in the flesh (Jn. 1:19-23).

Jesus comes to John and is baptized by him in the river Jordan. The account describes how; as he emerges from the water, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on him 'like a dove'. A voice from heaven then says, "You are my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with you." John never describes the baptism itself - he focuses upon what John prophesized concerning Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God. John provided excellent witness to the nature of the Messiah's mission and Israel's expectancy. The declaration of John that he was unworthy to either carry Jesus' sandals or to unloose the thongs thereof (Mt. 3:11; Jn. 1:27) was stunning testimony indeed - with obvious implications. John characterized the Lord as "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29).

In these remarks, the Baptizer:

- identifies Christ as fulfillment of the Passover
- asserts the nature of Jesus' impending death
- affirms the universality of the Messiah/Reconciler's accomplishment

Moreover, though John was chronologically older than Jesus, he declared that Christ "was before" him (Jn. 1:15, 30). The imperfect tense form stresses the eternity of the pre-incarnate Word (Jn. 1:1) - the Lord's divine essence