



The Significance of the Baptism of Jesus For the Person of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels

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The account of Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:9-11) is legend, certain though it is that the legend started from the historical fact of Jesus' baptism by John. It was told in the interest not of biography, but of faith and it reports Jesus' consecration as Messiah.(1) - *Rudolf Bultmann*

No significant modern scholar would today endorse Bultmann's statement that the Baptism of Jesus is simply a 'faith-legend', bringing out the significance of Jesus and "providing a pattern for Christian baptism".(2) But the rejection of this view has not led to a consensus among scholars on the subject. Indeed, such is the complexity of the subject that it pierces right back to the fundamental presuppositions of scholars regarding his Person. G.R. Beasley-Murray notes that the Gospel passages (Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; Matt. 3:13-17) produce "an element of perplexed embarrassment... in discussion."(3)

Major, Manson & Wright, faced with the account of Jesus submitting himself to a baptism of repentance, put the event down to Jesus' consciousness of his own sin. Mark, the earliest Gospel writer (according to them), simply did not realise that the event as he recorded it implied that Jesus was a sinner. Matthew, inheriting the Markan tradition, added vs.14-15 (in Matt. 3) in his Gospel as an editorial comment for his readers.(4) Such scholars see such scriptures as Acts 3:14, 2 Cor. 5:21, Heb.4:15 and 1 Peter 2:22 (which speak of the sinlessness of Jesus) as a later dogma which was read back into the Gospel traditions.(5) They find support for this in the Second Century *Gospel of the Nazareans*, wherein Jesus refuses his mother's invitation to be baptised by John with the retort "Wherein have I sinned that I should go and be baptised by him?"(6) Such a view provides a apparently simple solution - Jesus was baptised because he was a sinner in need of repentance - but it is understandably unpopular due to its low regard for other New Testament Scriptures and its denigration of the integrity of Christ.(7)

A second explanation was put forward by Rudolf Bultmann. He states that according to Mark's Gospel "Jesus becomes the Son of God by the Spirit conferred upon him at the baptism."(8) Dibelius argues that that was the original thrust of the Q saying.(9) Marshall points out, however, that the descent of the Spirit is not seen as "a divine begetting of Jesus (Psalm 2:7). but rather as equipping for his task."(10) The whole argument that the early church saw the baptism as an act of adoption lies on the presupposition that Jesus' life "was not understood in messianic terms; only later was it found necessary to read back a messianic character into it"(11), which is incorrect. Allen,(12) Cranfield,(13) Filson,(14) and Lane(15) likewise reject the adoptionist theory.

Did Jesus see his baptism in terms of a priestly washing suited to his calling as both a Kingly and Priestly Messiah? The *Testament of Levi* certainly contains a passage that links the Messiah with the High Priest of the end time, the anti-type "of Isaac who offers himself, for in the LXX Isaac is designated as an only "beloved" (Gen. 22:2, 12.16)."(16) Schweizer shows up two fatal errors in this view: Jesus is not called High Priest until the relatively late New Testament book

of Hebrews, and the Testament of Levi could possibly have been written as late as 200 AD, leaving the strong probability that the author had been influenced by the account of Jesus' baptism and not vice-versa.(17)

John A.T. Robinson,(18) following Oscar Cullmann,(19) and C.E.B. Cranfield(20) connect Jesus' baptism by John with his statements in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50 where he links his 'baptism' with the cross. By this means they argue that the whole of Jesus' ministry was included in the term 'baptism'. Cullmann and Cranfield further link the passage with the Isaianic Servant Songs (Isa. 42:1f; 52:13 - 53:12). Cranfield writes: "Jesus' submission to John's baptism of repentance was his mature self-dedication to his mission of self-identification with sinners which in due course would involve the cross."(21) D.A. Carson points out that Cullmann reads back Paul's use of the word 'righteousness' into Matt. 3:15, a word that Matthew always used to mean 'conformity with God's will'. Also, in the same verse 'us' is not a royal "'us'; both Jesus and John must 'fulfil all righteousness', which renders doubtful and theory that ties the righteousness too closely with Jesus's death." (Italics in original).(22) Beasley-Murray in a longer discussion points out that Cullmann "overstresses the Servant concept in the baptism of Jesus (Isa. 42:1] to the detriment of the Messianic (Ps. 2:7)."(23) Cullmann also assumes that Jesus had "on the basis of His reading of the OT... a complete understanding of the way his ministry would develop, that he knew that it would end in rejection and death on the cross and that such was God's will for Him."(24) Beasley-Murray goes on to point out that while it is not clear how much Jesus understood of his mission (cf. Filson)(25) his perception of his future was undoubtedly clearer by the time of his statement recorded in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50. Certainly there are no grounds for reading these statements back into the accounts of John's baptism, especially as Mark links the figure of baptism to drinking a cup - a clear OT picture of God's wrath (Psalm 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22ff.; Jer. 49:12f; Lam. 4:21), with which the metaphorical use of 'baptism' was paralleled in contemporary writings.(26)

What then is the true significance of John's baptism for the person of Jesus? D.A. Carson states that the baptism had two foci: repentance and eschatology. In submitting to John's baptism Jesus demonstrated "his willingness to take on the servant's role, entailing his identification with the people."(27) Beasley-Murray continues to expound this same theme:

"Baptism is not a prescription of the Law, yet Jesus views it as a divinely imposed duty... because every strand of messianic teaching in the OT depicts the Messiah as inseparable from his people. He... begins his ministry identifying himself in their need."(28)

It was, in short, an act of obedience and identification.(29)

On its eschatological meaning Robert Guelich writes that the event is couched "in the language of visionary experiences that immediately followed the baptism (Mark 1:10-11)"(30) It is these events which betray Jesus's identity. The descent of the Spirit links him with the Old Testament hope integral to the age of salvation (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1, cf. 63:10 - 64:1) and the voice proclaims him to be both Messiah (Psalm 2:7) and the Suffering Servant (Isa. 42:1)(31) - a tension that continues throughout Mark's narrative.(32) The Baptism accounts therefore provide many valuable insights into the Person of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels.

References

- (1) Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1959), 27-28. Bultmann continues: "It originated in the time when Jesus' life was already regarded as having been messianic, whereas the transfiguration story. originally a resurrection account, dates his messiahship from the resurrection onward".
- (2) I. H. Marshall, "The Gospel of Luke," *New International Greek Testament Commentary*. (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), 151.
- (3) G.R. Beasley-Murray. *Baptism in the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1988), 45.
- (4) W.C. Allen, *International Critical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1977), 28; H.D.A. Major, T.W. Manson & C.J. Wright. *The Mission and Message of Jesus*. (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1940), 21.
- (5) Major, Manson & Wright, 22-23.
- (6) Major, Manson & Wright, 22; James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*. (London: SPCK, 1990), 15; M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 6.
- (7) Charlesworth (14-15) notes that the *Gospel of the Nazareans* edited the story of the baptism of Jesus to counter just such a claim.
- (8) Bultmann, 131.
- (9) Marshall, 151.
- (10) Marshall, 151.
- (11) Marshall, 151.
- (12) Allen, 28.
- (13) C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 51.
- (14) Floyd V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1987), 68.
- (15) William L Lane, "The Gospel According to Mark," *New International Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 58.
- (16) Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*. (London: SPCK, 1970), 38: "The heavens shall be opened. And from the Temple shall come upon him sanctification, With the Father's voice as from Abraham to Isaac. And the glory of the Most High shall be uttered over him. And the Spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him."

(17) Schweizer, 38.

(18) John A.T. Robinson, "The One Baptism," *Twelve New Testament Studies*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1984), 162.

(19) Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1950), 16-19.

(20) Cranfield, 52.

(21) Cranfield, 52.

(22) D.A. Carson, "Matthew," F.E. Gaebelin, Gen. Ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 8. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 107.

(23) Beasley-Murray, 50.

(24) Beasley-Murray, 52.

(25) Filson, 68: "Whether Jesus already foresaw the suffering of that servant is not clear, perhaps he did". p.69.

(26) Beasley-Murray, 54-55.

(27) Carson, 108.

(28) Beasley-Murray, 57.

(29) Beasley-Murray, 60.

(30) Robert A. Guelich, "Mark 1-8:26," *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 34A. (Texas: Word Books, 1989), 35.

(31) Carson, 109; Filson, 69.

(32) Guelich, 35.