

The Baptism of Jesus

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The baptism of Christ, as presented in the synoptic Gospels, paints a fascinating picture. But what does it all mean? And why did God choose to reveal His Son in this manner? Though I do not claim to have all the answers, I would like to challenge some of the traditional approaches to the baptismal narrative and offer an alternative position. In order to explain what the baptismal scene does mean, we must first begin with what it does not mean. To this end we now turn.

Was the baptism of Jesus typical of New Testament baptism?

A common position held by many scholars and brethren is that Jesus' baptism was representative of Christian baptism in at least two aspects. First, it is argued that Jesus' baptism was merely an act of obedience. Just as sinners must obey the command to be baptized, so must Christ. Second, it was after Jesus was baptized that He was declared to be the Son of God, just as Christians are declared children of God following baptism (Galatians 3:26-27).

Though it is undeniable that Jesus' baptism was an act of obedience, the question is whether or not the lesson taught in Jesus' baptism is the same as the one taught in Christian baptism, thus making the two parallel? The answer to this question is no. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4) as is Christian baptism (Acts 2:38). In order for Jesus' baptism to be parallel with Christian baptism, it too must have been for the remission of sins. Yet we know, as did John, that Jesus was without sin. In fact, John resisted baptizing Jesus because, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" (Matthew 3:14). Jesus' baptism was therefore not representative of Christian baptism, but rather an exception to the normal reason for baptism. What is exceptional cannot be representative.

John's objection to Jesus' baptism raises a point of support for the Scriptural position that baptism is for the remission of sins and always has been (Mark 1:4 and Acts 2:38). If baptism is merely an act of obedience to be performed by saved individuals (as some allege), why would John object to baptizing Jesus? Would Jesus not be a prime candidate for such baptism? Yet John's refusal to baptize Jesus indicates baptism was not designed for saved people, but rather a requirement to obtain salvation.

When Jesus answered, "Permit it to be so now" (Matthew 3:15), He invoked an exception to the normal purpose of baptism. Again, if Jesus invoked an exception, His baptism cannot be viewed as representative. Jesus went on to state the purpose of His baptism, "For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Whatever this expression means (and we shall discuss it further momentarily), the fulfillment of righteousness was not the ordinary purpose of baptism.

Again, if Jesus' baptism was representative of Christian baptism, why was Jesus not the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:29)? It would seem odd for many to be added to the prepared kingdom before the king himself. Furthermore, though Jesus was declared the Son of God at His baptism, He was the Son of God before His baptism, unlike Christians (Galatians 3:26-27). Being declared a son and becoming a son are not parallel events.

If the purpose of Jesus' baptism was not to represent Christian baptism, nor to identify with His people, what was its purpose?

The Fulfillment of All Righteousness

The word "fulfill" and its variants appear thirteen other times in Matthew's Gospel (1:22-23; 2:5, 12, 15, 17-18; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:14, 35; 21:4-5; 26: 54, 56; 27:9-10) and always refer to a completion of an Old Testament prophecy or type. Either the use of "fulfill" in Matthew 3:15 is in line with its other uses, or it stands as an exception to Matthew's general rule. Could Matthew's usage of "fulfill" in 3:15 harmonize with its other usages and provide a key for understanding the purpose of the baptismal scene?

Righteousness is an action either performed or appointed by God. The baptism of Christ is thus viewed as the completion of a previous act of God, an act appointed by Him, or both. I believe it should be viewed as both. The baptism of Jesus was the fulfillment of the acts and appointments of God as prophesied and typified in the Old Testament. It was one of the major events that signaled the "fullness of time" (Acts 4:4-5) and the initiation of the mission of Christ.

Echoes, Types, and Prophecies:

Within the narrative of Jesus' baptism there are at least six echoes of the Old Testament. An echo is an allusion to an Old Testament passage or narrative not given as a direct quotation or accompanied by a quotation formula, yet understood through literary or thematic ties.

A great example of an echo is found in John 8:57-59 where by applying the title "I Am" to himself Jesus angered the Jews and raised cries of blasphemy. Though Jesus does not state a reference, or use a quotation formula, His audience clearly understood His allusion to Exodus 3:14 and His application of God's self-imposed title to himself.

By recognizing Old Testament echoes, many New Testament passages gain a richer context and meaning. Such is the case with the narrative of Christ's baptism.¹

¹ For further study on Echoes see: Beale, G. K. Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, MI. 2012. p. 29-40. See also: Rodgers, Peter R. Exploring the Old Testament in the New. Resource Publications. Eugene, OR. 2012. p. 13-20.

Echo #1: The Calling Of A Prophet

Many may not recognize the connection at first, but Matthew echoes Ezekiel both linguistically and thematically in his depiction of Christ's baptism.²

The calling of Ezekiel found in the first verse of his book is nearly identical in both Greek and English to the opening line of Matthew 3:16.

Ezekiel: ἤνοιχθησαν οἱ οὐρανοί, καὶ εἶδον ὀράσεις θεοῦ
Matthew: ἠνεώχθησαν οἱ οὐρανοί, καὶ εἶδεν πνεῦμα θεοῦ

Ezekiel 1:1	Matthew 3:16
<i>"Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that <u>the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.</u>"</i>	<i><u>"and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God"</u></i>

The geographical and political settings of both callings are similar. Both callings occurred by a river and during a period when Israel is without a king sitting on the throne of David. Both Ezekiel and Jesus saw the heavens open and God appear. Following each appearance, God gave a message. Notice the message given to Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 2:1-5

And He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you."² Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me.³ And He said to me: "Son of man, I am sending you to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day.⁴ For *they are* impudent and stubborn children. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.'⁵ As for them, whether they hear or whether they refuse—for they *are* a rebellious house—yet they will know that a prophet has been among them.

In addressing Ezekiel, God used Jesus' favorite personal title "Son of man" indicating a possible tie. Accompanying God's message was the anointing of the Spirit and a commission to take a

² Capes, D. B. Intertextual Echoes in the Matthean Baptismal Narrative. Bulletin for Biblical Research. Institute of Biblical Research. Vol. 9 (1999): 41-43.

message of repentance to the “House of Israel”. The same two events are also found in and following Matthew’s baptismal scene, (Matthew 4:17; 10:16).³

The tie between the two passages is thus strengthened and appear to be more than coincidental. The commissioning of Ezekiel appears to typify the commissioning of Christ and places the Lord’s mission in the context of a prophet’s work. In other words, Jesus did not begin His mission of restoration as “The Prophet” until God gave the signal to commence.

Echo #2: A New Exodus

The second echo comes to us from Isaiah 63:7-64:12 which is divided into two parts. Isaiah 63:7-14 presents a psalm of praise while Isaiah 63:15-64:12 presents a prayer of pleading.

The psalm of praise glorifies God for His salvific power with a special emphasis on the Egyptian exodus.

Isaiah 63:8-9

For He said, “Surely they *are* My people,
Children *who* will not lie.”

So He became their Savior.

⁹ In all their affliction He was afflicted,
And the Angel of His Presence saved them;
In His love and in His pity He redeemed them;
And He bore them and carried them
All the days of old.

Isaiah recognized God’s power alone as Israel’s source of salvation from slavery. Israel’s salvation was provided through the Angel of His Presence – the pre-incarnate Christ.

Isaiah 63:11-13

Then he remembered the days of old,
Moses *and* his people, *saying*:
“Where *is* He who brought them up out of the sea
With the shepherd of His flock?
Where *is* He who put His Holy Spirit within them,
¹² Who led *them* by the right hand of Moses,
With His glorious arm,
Dividing the water before them

³ For further reading on this parallel see Capes, D. B. Intertextual Echoes in the Matthean Baptismal Narrative. Bulletin for Biblical Research. Institute of Biblical Research. Vol. 9 (1999): 41-43. See also Craig A. Evans Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge University Press. New York. 2012. p. 78.

To make for Himself an everlasting name,
¹³ Who led them through the deep,
As a horse in the wilderness,
That they might not stumble?"

Isaiah continued his praise of God's mighty acts of deliverance, and at the same time noted that God's presence had left His people. Of particular interest for our study is the fact that Isaiah noted the giving of the Spirit of God at Israel's crossing of the Red Sea – what Paul refers to as a typification of baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

The psalm of praise now turned to a prayer of pleading:

Isaiah 63:15-19

Look down from heaven,
And see from Your habitation, holy and glorious.
Where *are* Your zeal and Your strength,
The yearning of Your heart and Your mercies toward me?
Are they restrained?
¹⁶ Doubtless You *are* our Father,
Though Abraham was ignorant of us,
And Israel does not acknowledge us.
You, O LORD, *are* our Father;
Our Redeemer from Everlasting *is* Your name.
¹⁷ O LORD, why have You made us stray from Your ways,
And hardened our heart from Your fear?
Return for Your servants' sake,
The tribes of Your inheritance.
¹⁸ Your holy people have possessed *it* but a little while;
Our adversaries have trodden down Your sanctuary.
¹⁹ We have become *like* those of old, over whom You never ruled,
Those who were never called by Your name.

Isaiah lamented the forsaken state of God's people and begged Him to come back and restore the glory of Israel through His presence.

The pleading continued on through the end of chapter 64:

Isaiah 64:8-12

But now, O LORD,
You *are* our Father;
We *are* the clay, and You our potter;
And all we *are* the work of Your hand.
⁹ Do not be furious, O LORD,

Nor remember iniquity forever;
Indeed, please look—we all *are* Your people!
¹⁰ Your holy cities are a wilderness,
Zion is a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
¹¹ Our holy and beautiful temple,
Where our fathers praised You,
Is burned up with fire;
And all our pleasant things are laid waste.
¹² Will You restrain Yourself because of these *things*, O LORD?
Will You hold Your peace, and afflict us very severely?

Isaiah's begged, "Father have mercy on us! Zion is desolate! Jerusalem is laid waste! The temple is destroyed! When are you coming back? Forgive us God and come back!"

The key verse to the whole scene is verse one of chapter sixty-four:

Isaiah 64:1

Oh, that You would rend the heavens!
That You would come down!
That the mountains might shake at Your presence—

The parallels to the baptismal narrative are striking: "Rend the heavens!" (Matthew 3:16) and "Come down!" (Matthew 3:16). Isaiah wanted God to make His presence known once more among Israel (Matthew 3:17), while bringing redemption. A better depiction could not be given of the baptismal scene of Christ.

To further solidify the connection between Isaiah 63-64 and Matthew 3, Paul quotes Isaiah 64:4 as containing the mystery of God's wisdom in the sending of His son to redeem mankind. Paul's divine commentary interprets Isaiah's pleading as a prophecy envisioning the arrival of Christ.

By combining the prophecy of Isaiah with the interpretation of Paul, we can now recognize the Egyptian Exodus as typical of the salvation wrought by Christ – the New Exodus. How appropriate that the triumph of Christ is later referred to as His exodus by Luke,

"And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His exodus which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:30-31)

The depiction of beginning of the New Exodus at the baptismal scene fits contextually within Matthew's first narrative block as well.⁴ In Matthew 2:14-15 Jesus fled with his parents into Egypt so that he might fulfill the prophecy "Out of Egypt I have called My Son." The first exodus is hereby called to mind and a parallel is drawn to the life of Christ. In Matthew 2:16-18 Jesus' birth was followed by the slaughter of infants and thus paralleled the birth of Moses. This parallel was meant to depict Jesus as the New Moses. Thus the events in and during the infant years were meant to prepare readers for the arrival of the New Moses and the New Exodus.

Following the baptism of Christ, Matthew 4:1-11 builds a type antitype parallel between the newly declared Son of God and the Sons of God in the wilderness. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to endure and triumph over the same temptations Israel faced during the forty years of wondering (see the tie between Matthew 4:4, 7, 10 and Deuteronomy 8:3 and 6:16, 13). Within this scene, Jesus was also connected to Moses through his fasting forty days and forty nights (see Exodus 34:28).⁵ Following the testing in the wilderness, Jesus quickly ascended the mountain to outshine Moses by going not to receive the New Law, but to deliver it as God incarnate.⁶

The baptismal scene is clearly surrounded by Mosaic and exodus typology. We should therefore not be surprised to find the baptism of Jesus tied with these themes. Praise be to God for rending the heavens, coming down, making His presence known, and redeeming His people through the Great Exodus of the Anointed Son (Isaiah 63-64).^{7,8}

Echo #3: The Anointed Son

One of the key features of the baptism of Christ is the anointment of the Spirit (Luke 3:22 and Acts 10:38). The anointing of the Spirit was an event that occurred in the Old Testament to special leaders of Israel including Moses and the seventy elders (Numbers 11:24-25), Joshua

⁴ Matthew chapters 1-4 are to be viewed as a single narrative block of material made up of smaller narrative. See Allison's material on the structure of Matthew: Allison Jr. Dale C. Studies in Matthew. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, MI. 2005. p. 135-156.

⁵ For further study see: France, R. T. The Gospel of Matthew: New International Commentary of the New Testament. Eerdmans. Grand Rapids, MI. 2007. p. 124-136.

⁶ For further study see: Allison Jr. Dale C. The New Moses. Wipf & Stock. Eugene, OR. 2013. p. 172-194.

⁷ Davies sums up the scene aptly: "Israel was adopted and became God's "Son" at the exodus from Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and some scholars have found a new exodus motif in the story of Jesus' baptism: When Jesus comes out of the waters, new Israel is born."⁷

⁸ For further reading on this parallel see Capes, D. B. Intertextual Echoes in the Matthean Baptismal Narrative. Bulletin for Biblical Research. Institute of Biblical Research. Vol. 9 (1999): 43-45.

(Numbers 27:18) some judges (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), some kings (1 Samuel 10:6; 16:12-13) and prophets (Zechariah 7:12).⁹

The anointing of Christ was prophesied in Isaiah and connected to His coming as Servant and King (Isaiah 11: 1-5; 42:1; 61:1-3). The name “Christ” literally means “the Anointed One” and depicts Jesus as being God’s royal judge, king, prophet, and servant. All those anointed before Christ typified “The Anointed One” par excellence. Though the judges brought temporal deliverance, The Christ brought final deliverance and redemption (Colossians 1:13). Though kings ruled God’s people, The Christ established the throne of God forever (1 Peter 4:11) and defeated the foes of God (1 Corinthians 15:23-28). Though prophets spoke the Word of God, Christ was the word of God (John 1:1) and brought the completed word with all authority (Matthew 28:18-20).

To put it simply, Jesus became the Christ by the Spirit’s anointment. Prior to His baptism and anointment Jesus was the Son of God, but He was not yet the Christ.

Echo #4: The Symbol of the Dove.

The dove has become a Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit, yet ironically the symbol of the dove is only explicitly connected to the Holy Spirit during the baptismal scene. Why did God choose the mysterious symbol of the dove for the embodiment of the Spirit (Luke 3:22)?

The only other appearance of doves in the New Testament occurred at the cleansing of the temple and does not offer any insight to its symbolic use at Christ’s baptism. We must therefore look to the Old Testament for a possible explanation. We turn now to the creation account in Genesis 1.

Genesis 1:2

The earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Here at the point of creation we find the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in a scene of New Creation. We fast-forward several hundred years to Genesis 8 and find a similar scene. Noah and his family had survived the flood and the earth was once again covered in water. The eight souls on the ark awaited the appearance of land and the opportunity to begin a new life in a new world.

Over a period of 14 days Noah sent out a dove 3 times. The first time the dove left it hovered over the water, yet found no place to rest and returned to the ark. After seven days (the number of days it took to complete the first creation) a second trip caused the dove to return carrying an olive branch in its beak. The olive branch indicated vegetation had begun to

⁹ For further study see Christopher Wright, Christopher J. H. Knowing The Holy Spirit Through the Old Testament. Inter Varsity Press. Downers Grove, IL. 2006. p. 35-93.

reappear with the subsiding of the water as in the initial creation. When the dove was sent out the third time it never returned, indicating the earth was ready to be re-inhabited by both man and animal. God then issued the same command to Noah and his family He had issued to Adam and Eve following the completion of the first creation:

Genesis 9:1

So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.

The dove hovering over the water, followed by the appearance of land, plant life, the inhabitation of man and animal, the re-issuing of the command to multiply and fill the earth, and the repetitive “seven days” statements depict the aftermath of the flood as a new creation event parallel to the initial creation. As such, the dove is seen to symbolize the role of the Spirit in the initial creation.

Peter and Paul later take this scene of new creation and apply it as a type to baptism and the New Creation in Christ.

1 Peter 3:20-21

who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.²¹ There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a **new** creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become **new**.

Could it be that Matthew was painting a portrait of Christ as the New Adam – the Son of God empowered by the Spirit who embarks on the commission of filling the New Creation with his descendants?¹⁰ Such indeed seems to be the case.¹¹

¹⁰ For further study see: Beale, G. K. and Kim, Mitchell. *God Dwells Among Us*. Inter Varsity Press. Downers Grove, IL. 2014. p. 29-38.

¹¹ For further reading on this parallel see Capes, D. B. *Intertextual Echoes in the Matthean Baptismal Narrative*. *Bulletin for Biblical Research*. Institute of Biblical Research. Vol. 9 (1999): 43-45.

Echoes #5 & #6: God's Quotation

When God declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" it appears He echoed three Old Testament passages.

The first passage is Psalm 2:7.

"I will declare the decree:
The Lord has said to Me,
'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You."

The second Psalm is known as the "Enthronement Psalm" and depicts the appointment of Jesus as king. It was at His baptism that Christ began ascending the steps of the throne upon which He would sit once He completed His mission of bringing about the kingdom of heaven (Mark 16:19).

The second passage God echoed is Isaiah 42:1.

"Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,
My Elect One in whom My soul delights!
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles."

Not only does this passage declare the Servant (Christ) as the delight of God, but He is also recognized as the Savior of both Jews and Gentiles. God promised Abraham that "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 26:4), and He made good on that promise through the Christ.

The third passage echoed is Genesis 22:2 in which God commanded Abraham to,

"Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Christ, the beloved Son of God, came not only to establish the kingdom of heaven, but he also came to bring salvation by becoming the sin sacrifice for the world. From the very beginning of His ministry, the sacrificial role as the anointed lamb (John 1:29-31) was appointed for the Christ. It was for the revelation of this role that He was baptized by John (John 1:31).

Conclusion

There is more to the baptism of Christ than first meets the eye. Within this incredible scene we witness the beginning of the fulfillment of all righteousness as God introduced Christ. The public ministry of Christ began in a thunderous way with the anointment, declaration, and blessing of God. May we never forget that God was well pleased with His Son and all He accomplished. Praise be to God for giving us the Christ, rending the heavens, and coming down to earth to dwell among us.