

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

 <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.015-007>**Marcelo Henrique Silva de Santana¹****ABSTRACT**

This work examines Jesus' baptism in the Jordan as the inaugural milestone of his public ministry, articulating historical-ritual and theological-biblical dimensions. In light of Second Temple Judaism, John's baptism is compared with ritual baths (e.g., at Qumran) and with the baptism of proselytes, highlighting distinctions in frequency, audience, and meaning: while baths were repeated and linked to purity, and the baptism of proselytes to the incorporation of Gentiles into Judaism, John's rite calls Israel to repentance in view of the coming kingdom. Based mainly on Matthew 3:13–17 (and parallels in Mark 1, Luke 3, and John 1), it explores “fulfilling all righteousness,” Jesus’ vicarious representation on behalf of sinners, and the recapitulation of the history of Israel. The Trinitarian theophany (open heavens, Spirit, voice) and the intertexts of Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, which configure Jesus as the beloved Son and Servant, are highlighted. It is concluded that Jesus' baptism is not a rite of personal purification, but the public inauguration of his messianic mission, anticipating the cross and resurrection and offering keys to New Testament Christology and soteriology.

Keywords: Baptism of Jesus; John the Baptist; Second temple judaism; Qumran; Baptism of proselytes; Repentance; Theophany; Trinity.

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INTRODUCTION

The life and public ministry of Jesus contain many significant and, in some cases, extraordinary moments narrated throughout the four Synoptic Gospels. Miracles are perhaps the signs that most readily come to mind when we speak of the life of Jesus. We could mention some healings, such as that of the woman with the issue of blood (Luke 8:43–48) and that of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52). He cast out demons (Mark 5:15) and commanded them to enter a herd of pigs, which then hurled themselves off a cliff. Furthermore, among the extraordinary events of His ministry, Jesus Christ raised the dead, including His own friend Lazarus (John 11:1–29), and ultimately, not even death could hold Him, for on the third day Christ rose from the dead, proving that He died for the sins of those who believed in His name.

One of these moments, however, marks in a very striking way the beginning of all this and introduces us to important Christological concepts (such as Jesus Christ being the Messiah promised in the Old Testament), presents us with essential figures (John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus who would prepare His way in the wilderness), and compels us to return to the Old Testament to fully understand the event addressed in this paper. This moment is the baptism of Jesus Christ, administered by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.

THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

At that time—most likely in the year 27 or 28 A.D.²—there were certain rituals among the Jews that were similar to the one in which Jesus participated, which was administered by John the Baptist (about whom we will discuss further ahead). Examples include the *Qumran practice* and the *Baptism of Proselytes*, which were regularly performed among the Jewish people. However, these rituals had significant differences from the baptism administered by John, both in the manner in which they were practiced and in their ultimate meaning.

The *Qumran practice* functioned as a type of ritual washing associated with repentance and was repeated regularly among the Jews.³ The *Baptism of Proselytes* was exclusively for Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism. Along with circumcision and animal sacrifice, this baptism was part of the conversion experience for those who desired to become Jews and, in some way, be included among the chosen people.

In contrast, a striking figure drew the attention of the Jewish people as well as the local authorities. John the Baptist preached, warning the Jews not to boast about having ancestors who were patriarchs, kings, and part of God's plan for Israel. John's baptism was different from all other rituals of the time. He declared: "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I

² F. B. Meyer, *João Batista*. (HardPress), 2015) p.47

³ Robert H. Stein, *Jesus, o Messias: Um Panorama da Vida de Cristo*. (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois), 1996) p.90



tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matt. 3:9 – *Almeida Corrigida Fiel*).

Robert H. Stein, in his book *Jesus the Messiah*, concludes regarding the difference between John’s baptism and those practiced by the Jews at that time, stating:

“John the Baptist clearly rejected the notion that a person could enter the coming messianic kingdom simply because of their ancestry. Lineage would not be sufficient. Only the repentant of Israel would enter the kingdom of God.”⁴

WHO WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST?

Little is known about the life of John the Baptist before he began his ministry in the wilderness. According to the Gospel of Luke, it is believed that John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, both devout Jews who served God along with their family. Zechariah, for instance, was a priest who went to Jerusalem every two years to fulfill his duties. The birth of John, according to Jewish tradition, was a miracle because his mother Elizabeth was barren.⁵ It is possible that Elizabeth was either the sister or cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus, though this cannot be firmly established.

What we do know with certainty about this significant figure in the history of Jesus Christ is what the Holy Scriptures report in the four Gospels. We know, for example, that John the Baptist was in the wilderness, gathering crowds with a powerful message of repentance. His clothing and diet carried a messianic and prophetic tone. He wore “a garment of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist” (Mark 1:6), which was striking to the Jewish people because this was the same type of clothing worn by the prophet Elijah—about whom it had been prophesied that he would return (Mal. 4:5). The early Christians associated John the Baptist with Elijah, as the Gospels attest. In fact, in Mark 9, the author shows that the teachers of the law taught that Elijah would come to restore all things. In Malachi 4, it was prophesied that “Elijah would come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”

With all this evidence—including Jesus Himself calling John the greatest prophet who ever lived (Matt. 11:11)—it is not difficult to understand why John the Baptist attracted so many people. Many of these people even thought John was Elijah or the Messiah himself, although John never made such a claim; on the contrary, he consistently denied it and, when he saw Christ, recognized Him as the Son of Man.

In John the Baptist, we perceive the fulfillment of what God had said would happen. This prophetic figure, preaching repentance in the wilderness and announcing the day of the Lord, aligns perfectly with the prophecy in Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the

⁴ *Ibid.* P. 92

⁵ F. B. Meyer, *João Batista*. (HardPress), 2015) p.47



Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa. 40:3 – *Almeida Corrigida Fiel*). He is the one who came in the spirit of Elijah (not as Elijah resurrected) and who prepared the way for the Messiah, proclaiming His coming kingdom.

His preaching, according to the Gospel accounts, was centered on repentance, for, as John himself declared, the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. It was as if the eschatological wrath of the Lord was already upon Israel. The seriousness of John’s message is evident when he sees some religious leaders passing by and exclaims: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” It is possible to affirm, as Gordon Fee states in his book *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, that “the good news of Jesus begins with the announcement that the new Exodus of Isaiah has begun: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,’ says John the Baptist—the new Elijah (Mal. 4:5–6)—who introduces Jesus, the Messiah, to Israel.”⁶

Therefore, we can conclude that the life of John the Baptist can be divided into two missions: 1. To be the forerunner of the Messiah, proclaiming His message in the wilderness; and 2. To demonstrate how much greater Jesus Christ is in contrast to his own life.

No matter how “important” or “famous” John the Baptist was, the One who came after him was far greater than “the voice crying in the wilderness.”

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

The account of Jesus’ baptism appears in all the Gospels. The Gospel according to Matthew contains the most extensive description of the event (Matt. 3), and it is on this account that we will primarily focus, precisely because of its greater detail. Luke (Luke 3) and Mark (Mark 1) briefly mention the event, while John only alludes to it (John 1:29–34). This is one of the events recorded in all four Gospels, thereby reinforcing its historical reliability. Some historians have attempted to argue that Jesus’ baptism did not actually occur, but there is, in fact, very little evidence to support such a claim.

As previously noted in this paper, John the Baptist’s baptism was for the repentance of sins.⁷ Therefore, a question naturally arises when studying the baptism of Jesus: Why did Jesus need to submit to a baptism of repentance, given that He Himself committed no sin (1 Pet. 2:22)?

The narrative provided by Matthew offers several clues as to why this baptism was necessary in the ministerial life of Jesus Christ. After examining Matthew’s account, we will also consider the same episode in the other Gospels to provide a fuller understanding of the event under discussion.

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart, *Como Ler a Bíblia Livro a Livro* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan) 2002, P. 280

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, Benjamin Simpson – *Jesus de Acordo com as Escrituras: Restaurando os Acontecimentos dos Evangelhos* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002) Pg. 149



MATTHEW 3:13–17

At the beginning of this chapter, the author introduces us to the prophetic figure of John the Baptist. In verse 3, John himself references the prophecy of Isaiah that we examined earlier. The author describes what John did and how he did it, even mentioning his clothing and diet (Matt. 3:4), and emphasizes how popular this prophet was. Matthew makes it clear that all *Judea* went out to him. It is noteworthy that John was not in the city center, in synagogues, or in places where crowds could be easily drawn. On the contrary, John the Baptist was in the wilderness, which underscores the magnitude of his popularity, influence, and significance among the Jewish people of that time.

However, as John himself would later acknowledge, there was One coming who was greater than he,⁸ one who would not baptize merely with water (symbolizing death and resurrection) but with the Spirit and with fire (language of judgment). This One who was to come appears in the same chapter of Matthew, while John is baptizing people and confronting the religious leaders of the day. He was Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah, and according to Matthew's account, John seems to understand very well who he is dealing with. The first words exchanged between them come from John the Baptist, perhaps astonished to see the Messiah approaching to be baptized. John protests: "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). He knew that he needed to be baptized by the One who was greater—Jesus was greater than John.

The reason Jesus gives for why He must be baptized is: "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). In Matthew's Gospel, the term *righteousness* consistently denotes the will of God, or God's divine plan and intention. Therefore, we can conclude that it was God's will for Jesus' baptism to take place at that moment so that His divine purpose might be fulfilled. Two things occur in Christ's baptism, both of which were God's will.⁹

First, there is an anticipation of the cross of Calvary: Jesus stands in a place that does not belong to Him—He who is without sin—but to all those who have sinned. In baptism, it is sinners who should be in the waters of the Jordan River, yet Jesus takes the place of sinners and goes there to be baptized in their stead. Second, there is a recapitulation of Israel's history. John the Baptist is calling Israel to repentance, and there is the idea that Jesus is also taking Israel's place. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel failed to remain obedient to the Lord. They repeatedly disobeyed His commandments, regardless of how greatly they were blessed. Thus, we can conclude that it was God's will for Jesus—the sinless One—to take the place of those who had sinned. Jesus would now be the obedient Israel, since in the past, despite experiencing God's promises and blessings, Israel could not remain faithful to the end. It is also

⁸ Sung Wook Chung, *Christ: The One and Only* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005) Pg. 26

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, Benjamin Simpson, *Jesus de Acordo com as Escrituras: Restaurando os Acontecimentos dos Evangelhos* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002) Pg. 147



noteworthy, in this same typology of Israel, that in the following episode Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness, being led there by the Spirit—just as Israel was led by the Spirit through the Red Sea and into the wilderness.

Matthew narrates Jesus' baptism in an apocalyptic and Trinitarian manner: the heavens open, a heavenly voice alludes to Psalm 2 (a Davidic psalm with messianic overtones), a dove descends from heaven, and the Son is baptized. We see all three persons: God the Father in the voice, God the Son being baptized, and God the Holy Spirit descending from heaven in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:15–17).

Perhaps the most striking element of Jesus' baptism is the voice from heaven declaring: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). This statement alludes to two things: the Servant Song of Isaiah 42, which focuses on the suffering servant, and Psalm 2, which concludes with the coronation of David. Christologically, the baptism signifies that Jesus is the suffering servant, the triumphant Messiah, the beloved Son who assumes the place of sinners.

MARK 1:9–11, LUKE 3:21–22, AND JOHN 1:29–34

With fewer verses, Mark—historically recognized as the earliest Gospel and likely one of Matthew's sources—provides a very concise account of the baptism, consistent with his literary style.

Mark introduces John the Baptist much like Matthew does: a striking figure, clothed in camel's hair, eating locusts, living in the Judean wilderness, and baptizing those seeking repentance along the Jordan River. Mark, likely serving as the source (known as *Q*)¹⁰ for Matthew, does not differ significantly from Matthew in his description of Jesus' baptism and John's role.

The baptism of Jesus occurs in just three verses, and unlike Matthew's account, there is no dialogue between the two. Nevertheless, as Millard Erickson notes, the baptism is a *Trinitarian* event: the Son is baptized, the Father speaks from heaven, and the Spirit descends like a dove.¹¹

In Luke, Jesus' baptism is described in only two verses, yet the Gospel provides a more detailed portrayal of John the Baptist and his significance to the Jewish people of that time. Luke notes that the people regarded John with awe and curiosity, wondering if he might be the promised Christ. John consistently denied being the Messiah, often citing Isaiah's prophecy that he was merely a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the true Messiah who was to come.

In John's Gospel, the event is recounted only as a testimony given by John the Baptist about the day he baptized Jesus. Once again, he affirms to the people that he is not the promised Messiah, but that Jesus—the one whom he baptized—is truly the Son of God.

¹⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Teologia do Novo Testamento: A Teologia do Evangelho de Mateus* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) Pg. 7

¹¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Teologia Cristã* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998) Pg. 355



THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

There are at least two Old Testament passages that help us better understand the event of Jesus' baptism. These are biblical texts that either prophesy about the event itself or symbolically relate to what occurred at Christ's baptism. Given the significance of Jesus' baptism, there are many other passages in the New Testament that also contain symbolic connections to baptism; however, although they will be mentioned in this section, they will not be analyzed in depth.

THE VOICE OF THE LORD: PSALMS 2 AND ISAIAH 42

The voice that comes from heaven after the baptism of Jesus Christ is the voice of God the Father declaring who the Son truly is. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the voice says: "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased." In these cases, as Darrell Bock comments in his book *Jesus According to Scripture*, "the use of the second person singular (you) when addressing Christ supports the idea of a private and personal experience."¹² This voice recalls two Old Testament texts.

The first is Psalm 2:7, which "affiliates" the chosen king of the nation. This is a *Davidic psalm* of coronation for King David himself. This coronation language is present at the baptism and also at another pivotal moment in Jesus' life: the Transfiguration. The heavenly voice affirms the same truth in both events, though they signify different realities: at the baptism, we see the obedient One taking the place of sinners, symbolizing the cross; at the Transfiguration, we see the obedient One appearing alongside Elijah and Moses, symbolizing the resurrection. In both cases, the voice from heaven declares the same truth: Jesus is the new King whom the Jews had long awaited.

The other passage is found in Isaiah 42:1, which points us to the *Suffering Servant*, who would bring about a second Exodus for the people of Israel, causing them to forget the first. In this passage, Israel is still "blind" and "deaf." God, in His infinite mercy, will deliver them from their misery—all for His own glory, for He is the Redeemer of Israel.

CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing, we can conclude from all the evidence presented that the baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of the *good news* of salvation for humanity. The *Gospel* began there, on the banks of the Jordan River, when a man who preached repentance administered baptism to the One who had no need of repentance, but who submitted to it "to fulfill all righteousness" (in other words, to

¹² Darrell L. Bock, Benjamin Simpson – *Jesus de Acordo com as Escrituras: Restaurando os Acontecimentos dos Evangelhos* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2002) Pg. 159



accomplish the will and plan of God) and to take the place of sinners: the Messiah, God incarnate—Jesus Christ.



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