



The Baptism of Jesus

In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' baptism marks His inauguration as the servant Messiah and the dawning of the new age of the Spirit. The Spirit is the agent of a new beginning. The open heaven, the descending dove, and the confirming heavenly voice highlight the ultimate revelatory significance of the baptism. Jesus was anointed by the Spirit of God as the Messiah and the Servant of the Lord described centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah (Is. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1).

Mark's account of Jesus' baptism was open to several possible false interpretations. Readers of his Gospel might conclude (1) that Jesus was a repentant sinner (see Mark 1:4, 9), or (2) that He was inferior to John who baptized Him (1:9), or (3) that He became the Son of God at His baptism (1:10, 11).

The other evangelists denied such specu-

lations early in their Gospels. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke emphasize that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20), and even as a baby was the Christ (Luke 2:11). He was neither sinful nor inferior prior to His baptism. John's prologue makes it clear that Jesus did not become the Son of God through baptism, but had been such from eternity (John 1:1-18).

Each evangelist further reformulates the baptism story to preclude any confusion Mark's account might allow. Matthew introduces a dialogue between John and Jesus in which Jesus explained His true motive for receiving baptism ("to fulfill all righteousness," Matt. 3:15) and John acknowledged his inferiority to Jesus (3:14). Luke reports the imprisonment of John (Luke 3:19, 20) before describing Jesus' baptism. In his baptism narrative Luke nowhere refers to John and describes the Spirit as coming upon Jesus in response to His own prayer (3:21).

The Fourth Gospel stresses John's inferiority to Jesus (John 1:6-8, 19-37) and never mentions Jesus' baptism by John nor John's preaching of repentance. John served only as a witness to Jesus: (1) that Jesus received the abiding Spirit; (2) that He is the One who baptizes with the Spirit; and (3) that He is the Son of God (John 1:32-34).

- Matthew 3:13-17
- Mark 1:9-11
- Luke 3:21, 22
- John 1:29-34