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The Baptism of Jesus in River and Cross

*Here springs the fountain of life
In which the entire world is washed—
From Christ's wounds it takes its origin and source.*

Using water to welcome people into a community was not invented by Christians. Evidence from the first century indicates that Jews washed converts to Judaism and leaders of the mystery religions bathed people as a form of initiation. The gospels present us with the figure of John the Baptizer who washed Palestinian Jews in the waters of the Jordan River—not as a form of initiation into Judaism, but as a means of marking people who looked with hope for the coming of God in the midst of much economic, social, and political disarray. After all, the Roman Empire had occupied the land given by God to the chosen people for some sixty-five years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Conquered by the Roman general Pompey, Palestine became a client kingdom of the empire: occupied by the Roman army, indebted with imperial taxes, awash in the many gods of the Greeks and Romans, impoverished and humiliated. While the Romans allowed a measure of religious freedom,

any religious community which proclaimed that their god held their ultimate loyalty was in for trouble. To worship one god—the God of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam—was to question if not deny the ultimate power of the Roman emperor, a human who referred to himself as “Son of God,” “Lord of lords,” and “Savior of the world.” In that world then, how could one worship—give one’s body, mind, and spirit—to the kingdom of the emperor *and* the kingdom of God? How could one live with a divided heart? For in the imperial kingdom there was only one lord and savior: Caesar, a man who imposed “peace” through military violence.

In this highly-charged context, the evangelists narrate the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (Mark 1:9-11; Matt. 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34). That river, so small when one actually sees it, was filled with profound meaning for the Jews of Palestine. It was there that the people annually commemorated their ancient passing through the Red Sea, from servile oppression under another imperial ruler into the freedom which God made possible, into their formation as one people under God, their shepherd, their ruler. John practiced a baptism in the Jordan, a river filled with the meaning of the Exodus, as a crying out to God for a new deliverance, for a new passage in a time marked by chaos and despair. In Mark, the earliest gospel written, the evangelist narrates the first public appearance of Jesus:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness . . .

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is ful-

filled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:9-18)

A water-washed public servant

While the story of Jesus’ baptism is relatively short, it reveals a significant measure of surprising meanings. Jesus comes to John and is baptized by him. He does not baptize himself as if such a washing were simply a human activity announcing one’s status or personal commitments. Jesus enters the Jordan waters, filled with the memory of slavery and liberation, suffering and surprising release, food and drink in the desert, an eternal covenant, and the promise of a land flowing with God’s own milk and honey. He is washed in the great hope for God’s coming to a people who “dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.” He stands in solidarity with his Jewish brothers and sisters who followed John down to the water’s edge, all turned, as it were, toward the coming of God to God’s suffering people. With Roman cultural values and military control pouring in like many troubling waters, this baptism could be recognized as a singular calling out for God’s powerful presence: “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! . . . Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps. 80:1-3). As there had been redemption in ancient Egypt—so this Jordan washing seemed to proclaim—let there be deliverance in this present age.

Perhaps Mark’s account could have ended there: Jesus was baptized by John. And yet, notes the evangelist, there was more: the Spirit fell upon Jesus as the Spirit fell upon Israel’s priests, prophets, and

rulers, empowering Jesus, anointing him—that is, marking him—in public for a public purpose. Jesus was not baptized into a private, “spiritual” relationship with God, a relationship separate from Israel’s history, scripture, rituals, and community. Rather, he was baptized with others and publicly declared by an unnamed voice from heaven as the Son, the Beloved, a reference to the servant of the LORD in Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1). Not unlike the ancient prophet Elijah, Jesus too enters into the wilderness for forty days—a number significant in the Hebrew Scriptures: forty days in which a new creation emerged from the destructive flood (Gen. 6–8); Moses’ sojourn of forty days with God on the mountain (Exod. 24); the Hebrew wandering in the wilderness for forty years (Num. 14). In the desert, Jesus experiences what other prophets of God underwent: a forty-day period of testing. Note the movement of the narrative. From his washing in Jordan’s water, he enters into the formative experience of the wilderness. From the wilderness experience, he enters into public life with this message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). *Jesus is baptized, marked by Spirit and voice, for public life.* There is no getting around the trajectory of the narrative. This washing in the river Jordan did not initiate him into a private relationship with God, a human soul communing with divine being. Indeed, Jesus had no need to “accept God as his personal Lord and Savior.” Rather, from the waters of the Jordan he entered into public life with this purpose: the proclamation and enactment of the nearness of God’s reign. This may have been “bad” news for those who worshiped the reign of Caesar but, notes Mark, it was “good news” for those who longed to experience God’s merciful and life-giving presence, a gospel so different than the message proclaimed by the Roman emperor who thought he was a god worthy of worship.