

The Baptism of Jesus Luke 3:21-22 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

As we discuss the difficult questions of our time, we often hear the words, "The Bible says..." Usually this statement is given as proof that the speaker's opinion about the question at hand is also God's opinion. This attitude is based on a view that the Bible has one clear opinion on every issue and that every word was planned by God. Now some scriptures say they are this kind of dictation from angels on behalf of God, the Qu'ran and the Book of Mormon, being two examples of this. But the Judeo-Christian Scriptures do not ever indicate that God has written the scriptures. Oh, sometimes words spoken by God are written, but nowhere does the Bible itself suggest it is directly from God as a whole. In fact in one of the Paul's Letters it says that scripture is inspired by God. Inspiration is a far cry from dictation. In fact, inspiration from God assumes there is a human to be inspired and that human writes. And thus we acknowledge that the Bible is written fully by humans as a record of our interaction with the divine. And so we are not surprised when the Bible expresses different opinions about things.

This idea is supported right away in Genesis with two very different creation stories. The stories are not science lessons, nor are they history, but they are human stories about God that tell us who we are; frail, mortal, tending to do the wrong thing sometimes, and with responsibility to care for God's earth. Many who believe the Bible is an inerrant, scientific and historic statement from God have tried to reconcile these two stories into one account but they cannot, because they are not history or science

This tradition is carried on when we get to the Greek New Testament. The Christian Scriptures start with four very different inspiring accounts of Jesus of Nazareth. Again, they are not history, but works of faith and testimony. And when the Church leaders voted on which Books to include in the Bible (yes, they voted, and the Revelation of John just got in by the skin of its teeth). they chose these 4 among the many Gospels written. (Ask Fred Damianos about the Gospel of Mary Magdalene sometime). These Gospels are all built on the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But having been written in very different times and social/political situations,, they vary in some ways, and knowing that variation helps us honor and understand the scriptures in a much deeper way. And it lets us know that we can hold a range of belief as people of Faith, that we need not all agree on every issue.

To illustrate what I mean, we will now look at the four accounts of Jesus' baptism in the Gospels. Each of you has a copy of the parallel versions to look at while we discuss this, will you get

that out now. Just a note before we begin. The Gospels are shown left to right from the oldest (Mark) to the newest (John) which were written about 60 - 80 years apart.

1) Who baptized Jesus? In the Mark column go down past the first gap and find the italics. Here we read that Jesus came to be baptized by John the Baptist - in agreement with this is Matthew in the next column writes the same thing at the top again in italics, Jesus came to John at the Jordan to be baptized. The next two Gospels say something different. In Luke, John is already in prison, and it appears that Jesus is baptized by one of John's disciples. Hmm. In the Gospel of John (which is not John the Baptist, but John the Beloved Disciple) John the Baptist is there, but he never baptizes Jesus. Probably this is because the Gospel of John has a strong view that Jesus is more than human, and John as only human, does not have the right to baptize him. We will see more of this tendency later. Sop 2 Gospels say John the Baptist baptized Jesus, two say he didn't.

2) Who saw a dove/dovelike entity? again starting on the left with the Gospel according to Mark - looking at the underlined text - it says Jesus saw a dove descending on him - there is no indication that anyone else could see it. Again, Matthew agrees something descends and both say the Spirit was "like a dove." But Matthews says the Spirit alighted on Jesus - landed on him - and that makes me wonder if Matthew is suggesting that other people could see the Spirit literally landing on Jesus? And Luke, in the 3rd column, goes so far as to say the Spirit was bodily a dove - a literal dove - easily visible by others. In the 4th column, the Gospel according to John indicates that John the Baptist, and him alone, saw the Spirit like a dove descend on Jesus and stay with Jesus. So 1 Gospel suggests Jesus only could see the dove, one suggests John the Baptist could see the dove, and the other two hint that perhaps others could see the dove.

3) Who heard a voice and what did it declare about Jesus? All 3 of the synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) agree that a voice came from Heaven at Jesus baptism, but if we look at Mark and then Luke we read the voice talks directly to Jesus, and it appears he alone can hear it, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Matthew writes in a way that the voice seems to be for those around Jesus so they know who he is, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In the Gospel of John, since there is no baptism, there is no voice from above at all, but John the Baptist is the one who declares Jesus nature, "I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God." So again, the voice of declaration tells the people who Jesus is.

You can put away the handout now if you so desire. So what do these subtle differences point to for us today. Does it matter if John the Baptist actually baptized Jesus? I don't think it affects much,

but it reminds us that we are not dealing with histories, the writers don't worry about matching each other in detail to get the history right. This question of whether Jesus was baptized at all also hints that as time goes on, the theology of who Jesus is changes, so that by the time we get to the Gospel of John, the Baptist doesn't baptize Jesus because it is inappropriate.

What about the Dove, the Spirit of God and the Voice? Well, who can see the Spirit/Dove and hear the voice suggests two very different possibilities. If Jesus alone sees the Spirit and hears the voice as in Mark and Luke, then Jesus' Baptism becomes an inspirational start to Jesus' ministry. In fact, early in Christianity, many believed that at his baptism, Jesus is formally adopted as God's Son (like King David when he becomes King) and this is where Jesus gets his authority. This was called the adoptionist view of Jesus and was declared heretical early in Christendom, but in the rush to find unity of belief, they may have dismissed to early this possibility which is quite clear in these two Gospels. And this change is indicated by the words used to define Jesus. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, God calls Jesus, "my Son, the beloved" which again was a term used to signify David in Psalm 2 and all the people of Israel in Isaiah. - This is not necessarily a title of Divinity in his being, but rather a statement of relationship - close connection. John's Gospel goes forward to the more Greek/Roman notion of Jesus being the Divine Son of God. The Gospel of John also has Jesus refer to the Jews as if he, himself were not Jewish, This is because the church has become predominantly Gentile, and the church is competing with the Jewish faith, and followers of John the Baptist who are still around. This very different time after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD makes for a very different Gospel. By the way, the writer of John, puts the testimony of Jesus into the mouth of John the Baptist, to frankly, tweek the nose of the followers of John the Baptist.

So why the Bible lesson today? The realization that our Holy Scripture is a human document, not a God dictated one, allows us to live with knowing everything, and frees us to allow other people to believe as they wish. Now, this also means one would have a hard time justifying radical or violent actions based on scripture, precisely because it is not God-dictated. A true respect for the scriptures begins with the understanding that the Bible itself does not claim to be a unified statement from God, but a multiplicity of testimonies to the one Great God who remains a mystery, revealed a bit in the love given to the people. As we seek to offer the Gospel, good news to the world, let us remind ourselves, our sisters and brothers in faith, and all people, that God is greater than any human endeavor can ever fully reveal. AMEN