

Baptism of the Lord

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5 || Psalm 29 || Acts 19:1-7 || Mark 1:4-11

Introduction: The liturgical festival of Epiphany is upon us. It is a much older church festival than Christmas. It celebrates the process of revelation - the sudden realisation of the Divine Presence in the significance of a particular place or moment. These are not limited to the New Testament. The whole Bible is replete with accounts of epiphanies. Take, for example, Jacob's statement, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:16-17)

The Baptism of Jesus yet another epiphany as the descending Spirit and the voice from heaven bring insight and revelation to those who witnessed this scene. This will be the pattern throughout Jesus' ministry as individuals gain insight into his divine identity. And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41)

Common Theme: The voice of God that brought the heavens and the earth into being, proclaims Jesus as the Beloved Son as His baptism. In every aspect of God's relationship with humankind is the desire to draw us to Himself. At Jesus' baptism, we see the combination of Word (the voice from heaven) and Spirit (descending on Jesus) at the creation, at Sinai, and Pentecost.

Hebraic Perspective: The God of Israel is a relational God - He always has been. He reveals Himself and engages with humankind in many ways (Hebrews 1: covenant and faith. The many epiphanies in the pages of the Bible are evidence of the self-revelatory actions of the God of Israel.

Before Abraham had exercised the faith for which he became renowned, God called him. (Genesis 12:1) When Moses was tending sheep in Sinai, God met Him at the burning bush and revealed His Name to him. (Exodus 3:13-14) Before God gave the law and commandments at Sinai, He proposed a special relationship with the people of Israel, "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:7) Notice the grace of God in these moments of revelation.

Reading #1 - Genesis 1:1-5: The opening words of the creation account are majestic in their simplicity. In the beginning - בְּרֵשִׁית Bereshit - from which the book takes its Hebrew name. In the beginning of all things, there was God. There is no explanation, just the statement. He alone is God, there is none like Him, and He is the subject and focus of the creation account.

He is the God of creation, through His commanding Word, He brings the created order into being. He is Sovereign over all the aspects of creation, but He is clearly distinct from it.

God created - בָּרָא bara is a statement that links the spiritual realm with the material world. There is no antagonism between the two. The word created can be associated with the sudden bringing of existence. In the biblical context, this is what differentiates create from the activity of fashioning or molding, out of nothing ex nihilo merely by the spoken word.

Today some people speak of "declaring" as though the very fact that they have said something has the power to bring it into being. Some might call this the power of positive thinking but "speaking things into being" is the Creator's prerogative alone.

There are two Hebrew words that are translated as "formless" "and void." They are תֹהוּ - tohu and בֹהוּ - bohu. The similarity of the words makes for memorable reading. They

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describe a situation of chaos without definition or boundaries. It is the creating activity of God that brings order and separates it into boundaries. Look out for this in the various steps of creation.

On the other hand, the judgment of God is the withdrawal of order and the return of chaos. (cf. Jeremiah 4:23; Isaiah 34:11)

Reading #2 - Psalm 29: This is a Psalm of David, and it is a dramatic description of the Sovereignty and Power of God. The psalmist addresses even the heavenly host as he draws attention to these wonders. The Psalm is in three parts. The first (1-2) and the last portion (10-11) proclaim the Divine Kingship, while the middle portion lists seven instances of the voice of God that demonstrate the power and majesty of His reign.

The seven-fold use of the word לִקְוֹל qôl "voice" calls to mind the creation. The association between God's voice and thunder calls to mind the giving of the Torah at Sinai. (Exodus 19:16-20)

The sound of a voice proceeding from an invisible person was considered a heavenly voice. Notice the description of the revelation at Sinai. "Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. Deuteronomy 4:12-13

When the divine voice confronts Paul, the similarity is striking. "Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ...The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one." (Acts 9:3-4, & 7)

Like a storm, the voice of God is unsettling. It challenges us to see the world from a new perspective, to enter a deeper trust in God.

Reading #3 - Acts 19:1-7: Paul meets twelve disciples who are followers of John the Immerser. The passage is too brief to really analyse the reasons for their ignorance of the Holy Spirit or how they had somehow been excluded from Jesus' movement of their time. There are indications that the followers of John the Immerser were quite numerous. Some scholars suggest that they even outnumbered Jesus' followers. There are at least two indications in the Gospel accounts of John's influence and popularity. "And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Mark 1:5 (cf. Matthew 3:5)

Herod Antipas' (ruler of Galilee and Perea) interest in John, and his action against him, suggests that he feared his influence. Josephus confirms the Gospel's claim that John died at the hand of Herod. (Ant. 18.5.2) and Mark 6:20 (cf. Matthew 14:5)

Reading #4 - Mark 1:4-11: John is introduced in this chapter as a part of "The beginning (Ἀρχὴ Arche) of the gospel of Jesus Christ." (1:1) Reading the text this way is supported by descriptions of the Gospel elsewhere. (Acts 1:22; Matthew 11:12; Acts 10:37)

The composite quotation from the prophets refers primarily to John - not Jesus. It is taken from Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:20, and Isaiah 40:3. Combining the first two references reflects an ancient rabbinic practice of combining (Malachi 3:1) with the messenger of Exodus 23:20 and identifying him as Elijah. (cf. Exodus Rabbah 23:20)

Mark's description of John's ministry and Jesus' baptism fit well into the Jewish world of the time. The use of water as a sign of purification was ubiquitous, as the Herodian ruins in Jerusalem demonstrate. Miqwa'ot (ritual baths) are found everywhere.

Mark's description of Jesus' baptism is full of imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures and rabbinic literature. The ascent from the water calls to mind Moses leading the people out of

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the sea (Isaiah 63:11,14). The heavens being torn (schizō) open recalls Isaiah 64:1 and the Spirit's descent upon Jesus the anointed One (Isaiah 42:1; 61:1). The voice קוֹל qōl from heaven completes the scene, bringing to mind the rabbinic idea of the bat kol or "daughter of a voice."

Hebraic Context:

Both the baptism of John and Christian baptism are versions of the Jewish custom of immersion in a ritual bath. The many immersion baths evidence the popularity of this practice in the Second Temple Period in Jerusalem on Ascent and Qumran's pilgrim route. Since this period, Jews have continued to practice tevilah טְבִילָה, the immersion of the entire body in water to remove ritual impurity (ṭumah טומאה). Although the Torah has numerous injunctions to wash with water for the removal of various types of ritual impurity, the verb invariably used to prescribe such purificatory washings is the non-specific "rachatz" (רָחַץ, "wash"; e.g., Leviticus 15:5–8, 10–11). An examination of the use of the word rachatz in the Torah suggests that full immersion was not intended. The root word associated with full immersion is "ṭaval" טָבַל (see 2 Kings 5:14; Leviticus 4:6; 14:51). It seems that washings became immersions sometime during the Second Temple Period. Josephus refers to immersion as the standard way of purificatory washing in everyday existence (Antiquities 3:263) and even during wartime (Wars 4:205).

The Gospel of Mark reflects this practice using both forms. "For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash (νίπτω nipto) their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. (βαπτισῶνται baptisōntai) Mark 7:3-4. (cf. Luke 11:38)

During this period, the larger ritual baths often had steps with a division in the centre. This was so that the candidate entered and left by a different way. Ron Moseley points out that in rabbinic literature, the mikveh (ritual bath) was referred to as the womb of the world, and as a convert came out of the water, it was considered a new birth with a new identity. The convert was referred to as "a little child just born" or "a child of one day" (Yeb. 22a; 48b; 97b). We see the New Testament using similar Jewish terms as "born again," "new creation," and "born from above."

ACNA Lectionary Addendum

Isaiah 42:1-9: This is the first of four so-called "Servant Songs" found in Isaiah. The primary question is undoubtedly, "who is this servant?" The answer is not as simple as it may seem.

At one level, the Servant is the remnant of Israel, fulfilling its mission through faithfulness and suffering to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:3). However, when you read all four Servant Songs together, they give a strong impression of being about an individual.

Was this an individual at the time of writing or someone who had not yet appeared?

It is probably best to take a composite view. On the one hand, the Servant is Israel, who partially fulfills the Servant's role in Isaiah. On the other hand, there are aspects of the songs that only God Himself can accomplish, and this leads us to the complementary conclusion that Jesus most adequately fulfills the description.

The description of the servant "whom I uphold" אֲחַזְקֶנּוּ 'eṭ-make means to support. The same word is used of Aaron and Hur, who supported Moses' arms during the battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:12). The second statement is not redundant; not only does the Servant have his master's support, but he is pleasing or a delight to his master. This links

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with the two-fold commendation by the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism, "You are my beloved Son; with you, I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

This, the first servant song, emphasises the concept of **מִשְׁפָּט** *mišpaṭ* justice. In this case, justice is what God has pronounced and what the Servant accomplishes. It is not just for Israel but for the nations as well. The reference to the bruised reed and the faintly burning wick reflects the merciful character of justice.

Psalm 89 1-29: This Psalm is the last in the collection of the third book. Its final verse serves as an end to the book and concludes the Psalm hence its doxological character. The Psalm may be divided into three sections. The first section deals with the Lord's kingship (89:1–18). The second section recalls the covenant with David (89:19–37), and the third section is a lament over David's successors (89:38–51).

Steadfast love is the translation of the Hebrew word **יְדִדָּה** *chasdê*, lit. "acts of love." This parallels with "your faithfulness" (**אֱמֻנָה** *'emûnâh*). These two words occur seven times in this Psalm.

Further Reading:

Young, Brad. H. 1995. *Jesus The Jewish Theologian*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

Skarsaune, Oskar. 2008. *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.