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THE BAPTISM OF JESUS AND ITS PRESENT SIGNIFICANCE

by J. K. HOWARD

PREVIOUS New Testament studies by Dr. Howard have appeared in our pages, dealing with baptism for the dead and the Parousia in Mark's Gospel. The following study, emphasizing as it does among other things the eschatological reference of our Lord's baptism, is related to both these earlier themes.

IT has been an unfortunate characteristic of much of the recent discussion concerning Christian baptism that it has tended to become centred on what are largely peripheral issues and the central matters, upon which a correct understanding of the sacrament must inevitably depend, have been neglected. The vital thing about baptism is surely its relationship to personal experience, and our understanding of the sacrament can be measured, to some extent at least, by the type of answer we give to Vischer's question, "Can we really say that our Christian life springs from the sacrament of baptism and grows on that foundation?"¹ The New Testament makes it clear that baptism was not merely an integral part of the primitive evangel, but was also the basis of Christian experience, for like the Eucharist it was a symbolic enactment of something intensely real. Thus the early Christians saw the sacrament of baptism springing, not merely from the dominical commandment, but out of the whole life and experience of their Lord from His baptism by John in the Jordan, to the ultimate realization of its import in His death and resurrection. For the early Church to be baptized "into Christ" marked the beginning of the Christian way, it marked the beginning of a life of solidarity with Christ, the last Adam, as opposed to the old life of the solidarity of all men in the first Adam. Furthermore, as a result of their own union with Christ portrayed in the sacrament, they saw that the life and experience of Christ was also theirs. With this in mind it is our purpose to study the actual event of the baptism of Jesus and consider its relationship to our own baptism.

The baptism of John to which Jesus submitted is presented in the Gospels as primarily a preparatory rite in anticipation of the arrival of the Rule of God. It was a rite which prefigured the establishment of the New Covenant anticipated by the prophets,

¹ L. Vischer, *Ye are Baptised*, E.T., 2nd Edition (1964), p. 3.

who saw and recognized the powerlessness of the law and of the ritual observances of Israel's religion to effect any real and lasting relationship between man and God. There would, no doubt, have been many in the time of John who would have seen in his baptism a fulfilment of the words of Zechariah, "a fountain shall be opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and uncleanness" (Zech. 13: 1) and would have been reminded that Ezekiel had promised a time when God would sprinkle water upon them and they would be clean (Ezek. 36: 2f.). But now, with the coming of Jesus, the days were accomplished, the Kingdom of God had arrived (whatever shade of meaning we may care to give Mark's *ēngiken*). Jesus was, in Origen's words, the *autobasileia*, and thus the end of John's baptism, in so far as its significance was concerned, came with the baptism of Jesus. At first sight it is admittedly somewhat paradoxical that the one who is consistently presented as being completely righteous, the one who obeyed and submitted Himself at all times to the will of God, should have insisted on being baptized by John, whose baptism was designated as one of "repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1: 4). The event was clearly something of an embarrassment to the early Church as some apocryphal fragments indicate, and it is also clear from the synoptic narrative that this feeling of bewilderment was shared by John himself, for he was unable to comprehend the need for the baptism of the one he believed to be the Messiah (Matt. 3: 15). The answer which Jesus gave to John supplies the first clue to the whole significance of this event. His baptism, said Jesus, was "to fulfil all righteousness (*plērōsai pasan dikaiosunēn*).

The historicity of this conversation has been questioned by a number of writers. It does not appear in the Markan tradition nor in Q, but this does not give us any ground for concluding that Matthew was using sources less reliable or accurate than these, and we see no *valid* reason, no genuinely historical reason, to doubt the trustworthiness of the record. It has become fashionable in certain quarters to adopt a position of historical pessimism, although there is some evidence that the fashion is beginning to wear thin, but such an approach arises not so much from a genuine scientific criticism or feeling of history, but rather out of theological presuppositions. It is always important to bear in mind that there are no such things as uninterpreted facts; indeed, if history is correctly to fulfil its functions, then it must of necessity be interpretative. Further, to relegate such events to the category of "myth" is not merely to demonstrate a dependence upon sub-

jective judgments, but it is also destructive of the revelatory significance of the events themselves, for if revelation is to be valid at all then it must be grounded in historical objectivity. If the evangelists' interpretations are true, so also must be the events in which they are grounded. The real problem arises in that the justifying of the interpretations requires, as William Temple pointed out,² the use of categories of which history itself knows nothing.

The word *dikaïosunē* which our Lord uses has a wide range of meaning from the more definite idea of justice to a more general thought of moral integrity, but in this context the thought appears to be not merely "what is right" but also "what God requires". Although the records available to us supply no material for an attempt to analyse the development of the self-consciousness of Jesus and the growing awareness of the nature of His mission, and indeed all such attempts must remain in the field of speculation, He must nonetheless, from an early age, have been aware of the direction of His life from His reading of the Old Testament. This is borne out by Luke's story of Jesus in the temple at the age of twelve, when already He was possessed of a sense of mission and a realization that He must submit to the will of God wherever it might lead Him. In view of this, and also in view of the fact that we may trace throughout the Gospel narratives the self-identification of Jesus with the Servant of Yahweh portrayed in the latter half of Isaiah, it seems at least a possibility that our Lord, as He replied to the Baptist, had in mind the words of Isaiah 53: 11. In A. T. Hanson's words, the Servant of Yahweh was called upon to fulfil a mission which "comprised three things: he must obey, he must witness, he must suffer. By so doing he would be carrying out God's redemptive purpose for Israel and the world".³

Throughout the Isaiah poems the Servant is shown as one who would arise out of Israel, and at the same time embody the whole of what Israel should have been. He was, in fact, a portrayal of ideal Israel, the fulfilment of the concept of the faithful remnant. Beyond this, however, lies the inescapable fact that the mission of the Servant was only to be accomplished through suffering, and it is here that our Lord's mission becomes so readily identifiable with that of the Servant. The righteous Servant acts as a vicarious sin-bearer—"by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53: 11, R.S.V.)—and in the Johannine allusion

² W. Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (1961 edn.), p. xxvi.

³ A. T. Hanson, *The Church of the Servant* (1962), p. 27.

to the baptism the Baptist is depicted as linking Jesus with the Servant of the Lord and with paschal ideas as he declares Him to be the ultimate sin-bearer of the world (John 1: 29). Stauffer well remarks, "John has fused the picture of the bleeding Passover Lamb with that of the Suffering Servant . . . and conceived of the significance of the cross in the light of this synthesis".⁴ Like the Servant, then, Jesus stands identified fully with His people. There is no thought of any withdrawal, no thought of avoiding contamination; throughout His life Jesus is found with "publicans and sinners", and in the act of baptism He identifies Himself with their repentance. The baptism is thus the place where the full significance of the Incarnation is first expressed: Jesus is one with us, sharing in the solidarity of human need, of human suffering, of human mortality and of human sin. In company with the Servant, Jesus is to be numbered among the transgressors before seeing the fruit of His labours; He must be one with the race of the first Adam before He could be the last Adam, the progenitor of a new humanity, the one who would bring about a new deliverance for the people of God through His identity with them, a deliverance of both present and eschatological significance.

This vocation is confirmed by the voice from heaven; there is thus, in addition to His own subjective consciousness of His calling, an objective pronouncement. The extent to which this pronouncement was simply an awareness of God's approval of His self-giving, or a voice which could be heard by all, is not made altogether clear by the evangelists, although Matthew certainly objectifies the experience, making it more definitely public than Mark, and the Fourth Gospel states explicitly that the Baptist at least shared in the vision of the descent of the Spirit. It seems reasonable therefore to infer that the bystanders were aware of some supernormal phenomenon and it was not simply a visionary experience of Jesus in which He alone participated. In this respect it has to be remembered that for the Jew of the time God was "wholly other", the completely Transcendent One, and the prophetic consciousness of the immanence of God had been all but totally lost. When this attitude was taken in conjunction with the silence of the prophetic voice it meant essentially that God no longer communicated, He no longer had direct dealings with His people. The Jewish hope was that God's voice might be heard once again, that He would make Himself known, and this could well be expressed in the words, "O that thou wouldst rend the

⁴ E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, E.T. (1955), p. 132.

heavens and come down" (Isa. 64: 1). This feeling of emptiness and despair in the present turned men's thoughts to the future, and the coming of the End is portrayed in the apocalyptic literature as a time when the voice of God would be heard again, appointing His Champion to the task of deliverance. Two examples from the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs will suffice: "The heavens shall be opened . . . with the Father's voice as from Abraham to Isaac . . . and the Spirit of understanding shall rest upon him. . . . Sin shall come to an end . . . and Beliar shall be bound by him" (Test. Levi 18: 5-12), and again, "The heavens shall be opened to him, to pour out the Spirit, even the blessing of the Father" (Test. Judah 24: 2). The opening of the heavens at the baptism of Jesus was thus to be seen as the prelude to a divine pronouncement; but such an event would only occur at the Last Day, the day of Messianic deliverance, and thus the heavenly voice, coupled with the descent of the Spirit of God upon Jesus, could be interpreted only as an event which, at the very least, marked the beginning of the End.

The declaration that "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased" apparently echoes both Psalm 2: 7 and Isaiah 42: 1, and, if this interpretation is accepted, the pronouncement is seen to mark out Jesus as both Messianic Son and, at the same time, Suffering Servant. In this respect, however, we do well to note the words of Cranfield: "the voice does not proclaim Jesus' newly established status of sonship consequent upon his installation as Messiah; rather it confirms his already existing filial consciousness of being the Son of God, that is at the same time a confirmation of his Servant vocation".⁵ The suggestion that behind *ho huios mou* we can read an earlier and more ambiguous *ho pais mou*, a suggestion made by Cullmann⁶ among others, seems to be going beyond the evidence since the statement avowing the unique sonship of Jesus forms the basis of the temptation which follows on directly after the baptism, and, as Cranfield points out,⁷ the words of the temptation are most emphatic and must point back to some previous occasion on which a declaration of sonship had been made, clearly the baptism. The fact that the pronouncement of sonship in Mark's narrative does not follow the LXX order of words, as might be expected, seems to be accounted for by his

⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *St. Mark* (Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, 1963), p. 55.

⁶ O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1950), p. 17.

⁷ C. E. B. Cranfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 54f.

consistent tendency to veil the references to Jesus' Messiahship; the reference to the royal psalm is there for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

We have already pointed out that, even in late childhood, Jesus was aware of a special relationship between Himself and God. Now His destiny lay clearly before Him; the direction of His life had already been apparent, but now the seal of divine approval had been placed upon it. Further, in His anointing by the Holy Spirit Jesus had been endowed with that divine power in which alone His mission could be accomplished. Jesus thus sets forth upon His divinely appointed task with the conscious assurance that His path is marked by the authority, the approval, the commission and the power of God. But the descent of the Spirit also emphasizes the eschatological nature of this baptism. The pouring out of the Spirit of God was to be the mark of the last days (Joel 2: 28-32, etc.), but at this point in time the unction was only upon the One, the Representative Man, the founder of the new humanity, which, through a new solidarity with Christ the last Adam, would share in this unction following upon the ascension.⁸ In addition the voice from heaven confirms Jesus as King-Messiah by public pronouncement, a pronouncement based upon the words of the divine decree from the old royal ceremonial, as the apostles certainly recognized (cf. Acts 10: 38). But the pronouncement also points to that which was to hedge Him in until it was accomplished; it points the way of the Suffering Servant, the way of a humiliated Messiah, a fact which even the disciples failed to grasp. The baptism of Jesus by the banks of Jordan points on to the baptism which lay between Good Friday and Easter Day, and the ministry of Jesus, delineated in this act, only finds fulfilment in the ultimate baptism of the Passion, the supreme act of the divine drama (cf. Mark 10: 38, 39; Luke 10: 50).

Standing thus, our Lord is seen to be the true remnant of Israel, the embodiment and fulfilment of all that Israel should have been. In Himself He both fulfils and brings to an end the old Israel with its national structure and establishes in Himself the new Israel, a supranational body, uniting all men through the blood of the new, yet eternal covenant, which His baptism foreshadowed. The scene at Jordan is thus the setting for the whole Gospel story,

⁸ It may be noted here that the symbolism of the dove as representative of the Spirit of God was well established in late Judaism (see, for instance, Gen. *Rabba*, 2; Yalkut on Gen. 1: 2; also Targum on Cant. 2: 8; and Philo, *Quis rer. div. heres*, 25, 48).

but more, it is also the setting for Christian baptism, for the baptism of Jesus and the fulfilment of its significance in the events of Easter lays the foundation for the New Testament doctrine of baptism, the initiatory rite of the new covenant. The baptism of Jesus marks Him out to be the first of a new race, the new humanity established through His death and resurrection. In our baptism we enter into this event, we share in the baptism of His death and enter into His resurrection into a new life. Thus Paul can write, "we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6: 4).

Christian baptism thus "places us objectively in Christ, the second Adam; it thus removes us from the sphere of death of the first Adam to the *dikaiōsis zoēs* and divine sonship".⁹ This is an objective experience; no amount of exegetical gymnastics can alter the unmistakable evidence that New Testament baptism is rooted in the conscious personal committal to a life of self-identification with Christ. To be baptized means to be incorporated into Christ (Gal. 3: 27), and our baptism stands as a symbolic re-enactment of our conscious participation in the events of Easter by our union with the Representative Man (Gal. 2: 19f.; 6: 14, etc.).

The giving of the Holy Spirit at the baptism of Jesus prefigures the divine unction given to all believers. Our baptism marks the share of each Christian in the outpouring of the last day, our personal participation in the Church's Pentecost, by which we receive the power to live that new ethical life which union with Christ demands of us. The baptism of Jesus marked out His path of obedience to the will of God, and in the same way our baptism through which we have entered into a participation in Christ's life presupposes a path of obedience and submission to the will of our Lord and Head. Just as in the baptism of Jesus the act itself and the giving of the Holy Spirit were inseparable, so in our baptism the one is the necessary corollary of the other. As Macgregor well writes on John 3: 5, "The entrance into the kingdom of God is a spiritual act of which the outward rite is only the seal; a higher agency must co-operate with the material element".¹⁰ Baptism is thus a "sealing", so that Paul can write, "having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1: 13); and, as Lampe has pointed out,¹¹ this sealing may be viewed as both

⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel), E.T., Vol. I (1964), pp. 504f.

¹⁰ G. H. C. Macgregor, *The Gospel of John* (Moffatt New Testament Commentary, 1928), p. 72.

¹¹ G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (1951), pp. 3ff.

authentication and appropriation. Again, just as in the life of Jesus the sealing of the Spirit was related to His path of obedience which led ultimately to the cross, so in the life of the Christian the sealing of the Spirit and the obedience of faith are intimately related. In Christ we are freed from the old order, we have become identified with the totality of the great redemptive act which culminated in the death, resurrection and glorification of the Lord, but now we are called upon to accept the ethical demands which this identification imposes upon us.

The baptism of Jesus marked Him out as the last Adam; our baptism marks our incorporation into this new humanity established in Him. It marks our union with the Head of the new race and our share in the new life, the eschatological life of the kingdom of God, enjoyed in the here and now, which this union brings to us. The baptism of Jesus marked Him out as the righteous Servant who through the baptism of His death would make many righteous. Our baptism brings us into the sphere of the redemptive work of Christ; it is the symbolic mediation of justification and regeneration; it is the "washing of regeneration" (Titus 3: 5), a phrase which seems to echo the words of John 3: 5 with their implicit thought of baptism. Thus Paul may write, "you washed yourselves clean, you were consecrated, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6: 11, Moffatt).¹² The baptism of Jesus marked His anointing with the Holy Spirit, in which power, in His full identification with us, He went on to conquer and to be raised up as both Lord and Christ. In the same way our baptism marks our share in this Messianic gift, the source of the Church's life, and calls us to identification with Christ and the acceptance of His demands upon us. But the sealing of the Spirit is a sealing in hope; it is a sealing "unto the day of redemption" (Eph. 4: 30). The descent of the Spirit of God at His baptism did not only mark Jesus as the righteous Servant, but also as the King-Messiah. The baptism of Jesus was an eschatological event, and in the same way our baptism is an eschatological sacrament; it not only looks back to the finished work of Christ but forward to the ultimate fulfilment of that work when our Lord will be manifested in power and glory as both Judge and Saviour. It is then, and only then, that the baptism of Jesus, and our baptism into Him, will receive their full and final meaning.

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¹² Moffatt is virtually alone among translators in bringing out the force of the middle voice in this verse.