

Baptism of Jesus: A Brief Comparison

Today I am going to briefly compare the story of the Baptism of Jesus in the four gospels of the Christian Scripture and show the contradictions within these passages.

The Baptism of Jesus According to Matthew

Matthew 3:11-12: *I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*¹

According to Biblical scholars the Gospel of Matthew was written between 80 and 90 CE and is traditionally attributed to Matthew. According to this narrative, John the Baptizer admits that there will be one who is coming who is mightier than himself. John is acting humble but is acting less like a student (as presented in Mark) and more like a servant.

Matthew 3:13-15: *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.*¹

The exchange between John and Jesus is simple. John declares that he should be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around. However, Jesus insists upon being baptized. John recognized Jesus and he did recognize Jesus as the one about whom he was just speaking.

Matthew 3:16-17: *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*¹

Immediately after the baptism, the Spirit – in the form of a dove – descended, and speaking to someone other than Jesus, proclaimed that Jesus is God's beloved Son.

The Baptism of Jesus According to Mark

Mark 1:7-8: *And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*¹

According to Biblical scholars the Gospel of Mark was written between 60 and 70 CE and is traditionally attributed to Mark the Evangelist. According to this narrative, John the Baptizer admits that there will be one who is coming who is mightier than himself. He is acting humble as a student would before a great teacher.

Mark 1:9: *At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*¹

The entire narrative of the baptism of Jesus is summed up in one sentence without any interaction between John and Jesus. There is no indication as to whether John recognized Jesus or even recognized Jesus as the one about whom he was just speaking.

Mark 1:10-11: *As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*¹

Immediately after the baptism, the Spirit – in the form of a dove – descended and, speaking directly to Jesus, proclaimed that Jesus is God's beloved Son.

The Baptism of Jesus According to Luke

Luke 3:16-18: *John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.*¹

According to Biblical scholars the Gospel of Luke was written between 59 and 60 CE and is traditionally attributed to Luke. According to this narrative, John the Baptizer admits that there will be one that is coming who is mightier than himself. John is acting humble but is acting less like a student (as presented in Mark) and more like a servant.

Luke 3:19-21: *But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife. And all the other evil things he had done. Herod added this to them all; He locked John up in prison. When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened...*¹

There is no exchange between John and Jesus during a baptism. In fact, it is only implied that it was John who baptized Jesus. According to the Gospel of Matthew John was imprisoned after the baptism but this is not indicated in the Gospel of Luke. If John did indeed baptize Jesus, there is no indication as to whether John recognized Jesus or even recognized Jesus as the one about whom he was just speaking.

Luke 3:21-22: *When all the people were being baptized Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*¹

Immediately after the baptism while Jesus was praying, the Spirit – in the form of a dove – descended and, speaking directly to Jesus, proclaimed that Jesus is God's beloved Son. There is

no indication – as there is in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark – that this voice was heard by anyone other than Jesus.

The Baptism of Jesus According to John

John 1:26-27: *“I baptize you with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”*¹

According to Biblical scholars the Gospel of John was written between 90 and 100 CE and is traditionally attributed to John the Evangelist. According to this narrative, John the Baptizer admits that there will be one that is coming who is mightier than himself. He is acting humble as a student would before a great teacher at least in this instance. However, shortly after this he is acting more like a servant.

John 1:28-32: *This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.”*¹

There is no exchange between John and Jesus during a baptism. In fact, there is no implication that Jesus was even baptized! There is no indication as to whether John recognized Jesus at all.

John contradicts himself within this story. He states: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” indicating that he recognizes Jesus as the coming Messiah.

However, immediately after this statement John says: “I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” By this statement John is indicating that he did not know who the Messiah would be. So which is it?!

John 1:33-34: *“I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”*¹

The Spirit was going to descend upon Jesus but there is no indication as to when it descended. Unlike the other three gospels, there is no announcement from the Spirit about Jesus being the Son of God.

So, in summary:

Was there an actual exchange between John and Jesus before the baptism? If so, what was the tone of the exchange?

Was Jesus even baptized?

Did John recognize Jesus as the coming Messiah or not?

When did the Spirit descend upon Jesus and to whom was the announcement made that Jesus was the “Son of God”?

The gospels do not agree on any of these events. If they cannot agree then how can we believe that this story is true – or that the Christian scripture is even reliable?

¹Zondervan Corporation. *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1984.

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