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THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

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'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my Son, my Beloved; with thee I am well pleased".'

Mark i. 9-11, RSV margin.

IT IS PLAIN that the Evangelists attached great importance to our Lord's baptism, but they do not enlarge on its significance; they leave their readers to infer from the narrative the place which His baptism occupied in His life and thought. One thing is clear at the outset: His baptism marks His emergence from the thirty 'hidden years' of His earlier life at Nazareth to enter upon the three years of His public ministry. But why should this transition have been marked by such an act as baptism?

'In those days', says Mark, Jesus came to be baptized — that is to say, in the days when John the Baptist was engaged in his ministry of repentance. Since it was John who baptized Jesus in the course of that ministry, it is necessary to say something about the significance of John's baptism.

THE BAPTISM OF JOHN

John, the son of a pious Judean

priest, was brought up in the wilderness of Judaea; but when he was about thirty years old he suddenly embarked upon a prophetic ministry in the Jordan valley, calling upon his fellow-countrymen to repent quickly, because 'the Coming One' of whom the prophets had spoken was about to visit them. The Coming One would initiate a ministry of judgment; it was urgently necessary that the sons of Israel should turn from their sinful ways and be ready to greet the Coming One when He appeared. And not only did John urge his hearers to repent; he called on them to give evidence of their repentance by allowing him to baptize them in the Jordan. By their repentance and baptism they became 'a people prepared' for the advent of the Coming One.

Various kinds of ceremonial washing were practised in those days in the region where John preached, but his baptism cannot be classed with these. Its closest analogy is probably with the baptism of proselytes, one of the rites by

which Gentiles became full members of the Jewish community. John, however, did not call Gentiles, but true-born Jews, to accept baptism at his hands. It was as though he wished to emphasize that their Jewish birth could not avail them in this crisis; indeed, he told them plainly that it was useless for them to assert their descent from Abraham, as though that would somehow make them acceptable before God. A completely new beginning was called for; they must acknowledge that they had no anterior claim upon God, and enter into the elect community, the righteous remnant of the end-time, by a way which denied all merit on their own part and shut them up to God's mercy extended to repentant sinners. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but so powerful was John's preaching that great numbers were convicted by it and submitted to the 'baptism of repentance for the remission of sins' (Mark i. 4).

Among the crowds that flocked to receive John's baptism Jesus came one day and He too asked to be baptized. But why should He, of all people, wish John to baptize Him? Throughout the whole Gospel narrative there is an entire absence of any consciousness of sin or shortcoming on His part. John himself, according to one of the Evangelists, was surprised at Jesus' request and tried to remonstrate with Him: 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' (Matthew iii. 14). It is evident that Christians in early days also found it difficult to understand why Jesus, who had no need of repentance, should nevertheless undergo the baptism of repentance; we find a further grappling with the problem, for example, in the uncanonical 'Gospel according to the Hebrews'. But the canonical writings throw considerable light on the question, if we study them carefully.

What did the baptism of Jesus mean to John? To him it was the climax of his mission as forerunner of the Coming One. This is made plain by John's own

testimony recorded by the Fourth Evangelist. Previously John had spoken about the Coming One without being able to point to Him or give Him a name: now he knew that the Coming One was Jesus of Nazareth. The descent of the dove was to John a divinely-appointed sign that Jesus was the Messiah. 'I myself did not know him: but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God' (John i. 33 f.). John was but human, and Herod's dungeon brought its doubts later on — 'Are you really the Coming One, or have we to look for someone else?' (Luke vii. 19) — but Jesus was able to reassure him with a message which confirmed the conviction which had come to him by the Jordan when he saw the Spirit descend.

OUR LORD'S BAPTISM

More important still: *what did the baptism mean to Jesus Himself?*

First of all, we have His own words when He silenced John's remonstrance: 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness' (Matthew iii. 15). These words may express His constant readiness to do all His Father's will. But more particularly, the work which John was doing was a work of righteousness, and Jesus could not hold aloof from it. John was actively engaged in his life-work, 'to make ready for the Lord a people prepared' (Luke i. 17), and Jesus would identify Himself with this righteous remnant.

Secondly, Jesus' baptism was the occasion of His anointing for His messianic work. 'The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him', Isaiah had said of the promised 'shoot from the stump of Jesse' (Isaiah xi. 1 f.), and this was fulfilled to the letter when the Spirit, 'in bodily form, as a dove', alighted on

Jesus at His baptism. When Jesus, some weeks later, returned to Nazareth, it was because of what had happened at His baptism that He could say to His hearers in the synagogue: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me . . .' (Luke iv. 18, quoting Isaiah lxi. 1). And when Peter, several years later, reminded the household of Cornelius 'how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power' (Acts x. 38), it was to His baptism that he referred. The baptism was Jesus' public anointing as King of Israel; the very titles 'Messiah' and 'Christ', which mean 'the Anointed One', are bound up with the significance of this momentous event.

Thirdly, His baptism was the occasion above all others when Jesus saw and accepted the way in which His mission as the Lord's Anointed was to be fulfilled. 'Thou art my Son', He heard the voice from heaven say; and He recognized the language of Psalm ii. 7, in which the conquering Prince of the house of David is invested by God with his kingly office. To Jesus, indeed, the expression 'Son of God' was far from being a merely official title; it corresponded to the inmost assurance of His being — the unbroken sense of His personal, and indeed unique, relation as Son to God as His Father. But the words 'Thou art my Son' acclaimed Him unmistakably as the Messiah of David's line. Thus called to messianic power, how was He to wield it? The heavenly voice went on to tell Him. 'My Beloved, with thee I am well pleased' — these words are also a prophetic quotation; it is in this way that God in Isaiah xlii. 1 introduces the person whom He calls 'My Servant'. And the conjoining of these words at the baptism of Jesus with 'Thou art my Son' showed Him that, called as He was to be the Lord's Anointed, He was to accomplish His messianic task in terms of the mission

of the humble and obedient Servant of the Lord portrayed in various places between Isaiah xlii. 1 and liii. 12. Of the Servant as of the Messiah God says: 'I have put my spirit upon him' (Isaiah xlii. 1) — for the Servant is the Messiah. It is by patient service, suffering and death that Jesus fulfilled His mission in the world. But it was not under the compulsion of events in the course of His ministry, or with a sense of growing disillusionment, that He realized that this was the way in which His mission was to be fulfilled; it was revealed as the Father's will, and freely accepted as such by the Son, when He insisted on fulfilling all righteousness by being baptized in Jordan.

Fourthly, to Jesus His baptism was an anticipation of His death — and His self-dedication to that death. It is no accident that, more than once in the course of His ministry, He looked forward to His death as a baptism with which He had to be baptized (cf. Mark x. 38 f.; Luke xii. 50). His submission to the will of God in His baptism carried with it His submission to that same will in His death. He identified Himself with a repentant people in His baptism, but they were a repentant people because they were a sinful people. John might think it strange that He should wish to do so, but this foreshadowed that stranger and deeper identification of Himself with a sinful people which gives His death its blessed meaning for all believers. And if that earlier self-dedication to do His Father's will was followed by the rending of the heavens and a proclamation of the Father's delight in His Son, His emergence in resurrection from the baptism of death declared Him to be 'Son of God in power' and carried Him in exaltation to the Father's right hand where He bears, by divine decree, the name which is above every name (Romans i. 4; Philippians ii. 9).