

## “Baptized in Water”

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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To begin, I wish you all a happy and blessed *Timkat* season. *Timkat*, I should explain, is an important festival of the 40-million-strong Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. By common consent, it is one of the world's *most spectacular* religious festivals. A three-day celebration *literally* brings large areas of the country to a halt in a season dedicated to *elaborate rituals*, to *feasting* and *gift giving*, pageantry and mysticism. In vast pilgrimages and processions, individual churches parade their *tabots* —*symbols* of the Ark of the Covenant.

But what are Ethiopians celebrating so passionately?

*Timkat* comes 12 days after Christmas, which in the local calendar means that it falls on January 17 through 19. *Tourist guidebooks* vaguely relate it to *Epiphany*. But actually, the event commemorates the *baptism of Christ* in the Jordan (*Timkat* is the Amharic word for baptism). *Baptismal symbolism* dominates the rituals to the point that enthusiastic believers *plunge* into consecrated pools to renew their vows. The baptismal theme recalls some very early debates in the Christian church, controversies that were raging not long after apostolic times. *Timkat* is, in fact, a startling relic of ancient Christian beliefs.

You see, in the first three Christian centuries, *believers* had very different ideas about the *divinity* of Christ and whether there was a particular moment at which he gained that status. Yes, Christ came into the world—but when exactly did that divinity shine forth?

The mainstream church believed, of course, that the *baby* born in Bethlehem was God incarnate, but powerful voices held *rival* views. For many early Christians, Jesus was a good or holy man, conceived and born in the usual way, and *only at the moment of his baptism* was he suddenly overwhelmed by the power of divinity, the *Logos* or *Holy Spirit*.

Although most of the church's earliest records have been lost, we *know* that Ethiopian Christianity was flourishing by the fourth century and that it had a very

close relationship with the church in Egypt, especially Alexandria. Not surprisingly, then, Ethiopia *keeps alive* very early Egyptian interests and obsessions, even some that might have been forgotten in Egypt itself. Whatever the church's *official theology* says, Timkat recalls *a very old and somewhat unorthodox* interpretation of Christ's baptism and its significance.<sup>1</sup>

This, I think, is a helpful reminder that the church of Jesus Christ is very ancient, very large, and very diverse—and *we* are but a small part of it.

But it also highlights the fact that the *baptism* of Jesus has *not* just been a very big deal for the church (celebrated from the very beginnings of the ancient church)--it also *was* a very big deal for Jesus himself.

You see, at some point in Jesus's life, he must have become a *religious seeker* and embarked upon a *religious quest*. This is the most obvious explanation of one of the most certain facts we know about him: in his late twenties or around the age of thirty, he left Nazareth and became a follower of a *wilderness* prophet named John. We do not know whether this decision was the result of a gradual maturing or the product of a more sudden and dramatic religious experience. But something led him to leave *conventional life* behind and go out to the wilderness to become a follower of John the Baptizer.

We may further surmise that Jesus underwent what *William James* calls a "*conversion experience*." The conversion, of course, was not from *paganism* to *Judaism*, for he grew up Jewish. Rather, (as James defines it), *conversion* need not refer to changing from one religion to another, or from being *nonreligious* to being *religious*; it *may* also refer to a *process*, whether sudden or gradual, *whereby* religious impulses and energies become *central* to one's life. It is reasonable to suppose that Jesus experienced such an *internal transformation*, which led him to undertake the ministry that he did, and that this probably had something to do with John the Baptizer.<sup>2</sup>

This *internal transformation*, however, was lived out very *publicly, outwardly* by Jesus. And this is an aspect of Jesus's baptism that is often missed by contemporary Christians who were raised in the more *pietistic streams* of the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Three Days of Timkat*, The Christian Century, December 27, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper, San Francisco, p. 27

church—where the emphasis was primarily on *personal and individual* (private) religious experience and not on the *collective* or *public* aspects of it.

You see, through baptism, Jesus declares his *readiness* for the (political and religious) *revolution* represented by the *kingdom of heaven*.

We know this because, (in the synoptic Gospels), only Matthew presents this curious dialogue between Jesus and John prior to the baptism. Jesus is eager to submit to John's baptism, but John resists. Recognizing Jesus' superiority, John urges a *role reversal*, protesting that Jesus should baptize him. After some coaxing, John eventually relents and baptizes Jesus.

Many New Testament scholars contend that Matthew uses this dialogue to address a "*messianic embarrassment*" troubling some followers of Jesus. Certain persons may have asked, "*Why would Jesus, a sinless messiah, submit to John's baptism, which was for the repentance of sins?*"

According to Matthew, Jesus submits *not* because of any need to repent of sin but rather to "*fulfill all righteousness.*" The word "*righteousness*" carries numerous connotations. For many Christians, the word evokes thoughts of *personal piety* and the state of one's "*soul*" or "*conscience*" before God.

But righteousness also signifies *God's saving action in the world*. One might even translate the Greek word for righteousness (*dikaion*) as "*justice.*" According to Thomas Long, *righteousness encapsulates God's passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong.*

Thus Jesus' submission to John's baptism is no simple act of personal piety. On the contrary, Jesus discerns that John's baptism and fiery preaching constitute a *revolutionary declaration* about a *new world order* where God will set right all that the establishment (in Jerusalem and Rome—and elsewhere) has put awry. Jesus says, "*Through this baptism, I 'take up arms' with you, John, and join this revolution whereby God's justice will be manifest in the world.*" By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus declares, "*I am ready for the revolution!*"

Other textual clues indicate the *political and religious radicalism* of John and Jesus, as well. For example, John's baptismal activity occurs in the *wilderness*. In the first century C.E., the word "*wilderness*" held a *subversive* significance. In social protest movements around Judea, agitators led their followers into the

wilderness. Thus, John's choice of the wilderness and Jesus' willingness to join him there carried a *subversive symbolism*, especially given the popularity of John's movement. People joined through *repentance* and *baptism* and declared that God's true power would emerge on the *margins* of the society.

Still another indicator of the *revolutionary* commitment of John and Jesus is the centrality of *repentance* in their proclamation. Excessive, sentimental use has *blunted* the sharp edge of the word "*repentance*," which involves more than an admission of wrong. The Greek word *metanoia* connotes *a change of mind-set*. To repent is to adopt *a new mind-set* that causes one to turn around. It is an *apocalyptic* act, creating a *new* way of envisioning and thinking about the world. Only those with *new* mind-sets will be *fit* for the new kingdom.

Furthermore, the means by which John and Jesus meet their deaths should convince even the most hardened skeptics of the *revolutionary nature* of their ministries. Neither dies of "*old age*" or "*natural causes*."

Bart Ehrman addresses this point:

*"If, for example, Jesus had simply been a great moral teacher, a gentle rabbi who did nothing more than urge his devoted followers to love God . . . he would scarcely have been seen as a threat to the social order. . . . John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed because of his preaching. . . . Jesus was to fare no better."*<sup>3</sup>

The church would look different if we lived out the revolutionary implications of baptism. Maybe the next time we baptize someone, we should ask that person, "*Are you really ready for this revolution? It may just cost you your life!*"

And so, *remember*, that "*in baptism*," as Michael Rogness writes, "*we become part of a people*." Each January the lectionary offers us the *baptism of Christ* and invites us to remember the *network* we hold in common: a people who believe that when the heavens open in the beginning of Mark (or Matthew), God is doing something *new*. God already split the waters of the Red Sea with Moses and the Jordan River with Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha. But by splitting the heavens, God is going back earlier, to the *beginning* when the earth was separated into day and night, form and void, heavens punching out into the firmament above and the

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Braxton, *Ready for the Revolution*, The Christian Century, January 2, 2002

sea below, back to that *originality*—and *laying claim to Jesus* within that. In the rite of baptism, that same *elemental water* touches us and *initiates* us into the tribe of people who believe in Jesus' Messiahship.

Ask yourself: *what does it mean to be part of that confessional collective?*

It is a worthy question in any year but particularly in this one. In any given year people will have become parents or widowers or spouses or graduates or unemployed. But this year—an election year--many (within our larger confessional collective) will become (perhaps for the first time) protesters and canvassers and questioners.<sup>4</sup>

Friends, being a baptized people *in this moment* means we are invited to think of our *collective* confession—as *every age before us has done*, yet also *uniquely in this moment*.

Ask yourself: *What will our resolutions be for this year ahead as the tribe of the baptized, as those identifiable to one another as people who believe that God did a new thing in Jesus?*

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<sup>4</sup> Kat Banakis, *Baptism of the Lord*, The Christian Century, December 7, 2017