

Introductory

All three synoptic Gospels have an account of the Baptism of Jesus, and as is often the case, the three different authors often write the same or similar words, and they often add or omit information the others omit or add. This ought not to surprise us, since such is the very nature of any writing or speaking; you write what you write, and what you don't write, you don't write.

The Baptism of Jesus kicks off the Epiphany Season, a season of miracles beginning with this miracle, the one that using both audio and visual conclusively identifies Jesus of Nazareth for Whom He is. The sky parts, and a dove descends and lands on Jesus, and the voice from the sky proclaims Jesus to be His Son, and He is pleased with Him.

‘

The Apostate John Lennon was wrong when he said that his band was more popular than Jesus. They weren't, but John the Baptizer was. You can make the case that – at this point – John is more popular even than Jesus. Part of the reason for that is that John was first – in the marketplace of ideas, it's always best to be first – with the message that Messiah has come, and His name is Jesus.

We well know that hordes of people tramped out into the wilderness to hear John preach and to stand in line to be baptized by him, and that those crowds included some of the rich and powerful religious leaders. To be sure, the crowds often followed Jesus, and sought Him out, but that would be later, and as for the religious leaders, they gave Him a lot of grief.

Textual Notes

15. Of John, Luke says, “Προσδοκῶντος δὲ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ διαλογιζομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν περὶ τοῦ Ἰωάννου – the people were in a state of expectation, all in their hearts reasoning about John.” The opening verb occurs eighteen times in the NT, and it is a favorite of Luke, who uses it thirteen of those times, almost always to indicate expectation about the Messiah.

Including here, where Luke explicitly tells us that about John, they were wondering “μή ποτε αὐτὸς εἴη ὁ Χριστός – whether ever he should be the Christ.” The first verb, and the second,

διαλογιζομένων, are both present participles; this was an ongoing thought process in these people, much like trying to figure out any person is an ongoing process.

The phrase “διαλογιζομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις – all reasoning in their hearts” may have jumped out at you as odd, sounding more like Oprah or Delilah than the inspired writer. But upon further examination, Luke (9:47) uses essentially the same phrase in the context of the disciples thinking about Jesus paying attention to the little children.

Mark (2:6) also uses basically the same phrase to describe the thought process of the most thinking of all thinking persons; the Scribes. Here, at least, we ought to consider that the Bible thinks in a different way from those two and other purveyors of pop wisdom. It seems, in fact, to mean just the opposite; not being guided by feelings and emotion, but by cognitive reasoning.

Thinking is a part of life. It's the way we're built. It's one of the things that separates us from the animals. People think, and they think all the time, and on Sunday morning, you want them to be thinking about God, who is very interesting. Don't make Him sound boring. Christian Theology is engaged in using the brain and thinking, so think away, but don't overthink it.

Overthinking Christian Theology may lead to bad theology or even heresy. The Scholastics in many ways overthought it; they brought us the university and Transubstantiation. The Calvinists overthought it, and the history of the Protestant movement since has been a history of overthinking on top of overthinking, and the result is seen in American Protestantism.

When the Lutherans talk about the Descent into Hell, they basically say that this is what we know, and this is all that we know, and we don't know any more than this, and adding to what we know with things that we don't know is a bad idea. Our doctrine of Predestination is a classic case of saying what we know and we don't know more than that, and stop there.

16. At some point, as if often the case, the people must have verbalized their thoughts, because “ἀπεκρίνατο λέγων πᾶσιν ὁ Ἰωάννης – John answered all they were saying.” The verb ἀποκρίνομαι is very common in the NT, and it almost always is used to refer to the reply or answer given when another person or people have spoken or posited an inquiry.

By writing it the way he writes it, Luke tells us that the people thought about it long and hard and no doubt talked among themselves about the identity of John before they came up with a rather novel new method; let's ask John, shall we! For his part, John does what John consistently does; He directs attention away from self and towards Jesus.

He directs their attention to the thing for which he is known, the genesis of the moniker by which he is known, “Ἐγὼ μὲν ὕδατι βαπτίζω ὑμᾶς – I baptize you with water” which sounds redundant and repetitive, given that the verb “to baptize” means “to wash,” and you use water to do that. But he's going somewhere with this, juxtapositioning his baptism to that of Jesus.

Of Jesus and His Baptism, John declares, “αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν Πνεύματι Ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρί· - He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Exactly what does that mean, anyway? Grammatically, the preposition followed by two nouns in the dative case means that both the Holy Spirit and fire are there standing next to the water. Something is actually going on here.

The preposition *en* distinguishes between the mere instrumentality of the water, and the spiritual element whereby and wherein the child of the kingdom is baptized. This baptism by the Spirit had been foretold in Isaiah 44:3; Joel 2:28. Its first obvious fulfilment was at Pentecost (Acts 1:5; Acts 2:3) and subsequent outpourings after baptism (Acts 11:15-16). But it is fulfilled without visible supernatural signs to all Christians (1 Corinthians 6:11; “by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

and with fire] In its first and most literal sense the allusion is to the fiery tongues of Pentecost (Acts 2:3); but the secondary and metaphoric allusion is to the burning zeal and illuminating light of the Spirit. St Jerome sees a further allusion to fiery trials (Luke 12:49; Mark 9:49; 1 Peter 4:12) and to the fire of judgment (1 Corinthians 3:13); but these allusions cannot be regarded as certain.

Cambridge Study Bible (biblehub.com) thinks something is actually going on here. John’s baptism is expressly a baptism of “repentance” – which is standard for baptisms; they symbolize sorrow for sins, the symbolic washing of those sins, and a willingness to do better in the future. Lots of religions have washings and baptisms, but none of those actually do anything.

17. Both Matthew and Luke relate the “winnowing fork” metaphor, using almost exactly – there is a variation in one noun form, same noun, different form – the same words. The word “πτύον – winnowing fork” occurs two times in the NT, in those two accounts. The actual Bible scholars who think the word comes from a root “πτύ – to cleanse” may be on to something.

It would be well for you to explain that particular fork to your hearers, and in order to do that, you’ll have to know that particular fork. If you want to reference a pitch fork, your hearers may be familiar with the concept. According to the Internet, there are several different models that can be – and still are – used for the process known as “winnowing.”

Winnowing is best done on a breezy, but not a windy day. The cereal grain plant – wheat, barley, rye, oats, et al – have been cut and dried. You scoop the plant up with the fork and toss it into the air, where the breeze blows away the lighter chaff and the heavier grain falls to the ground. Repeat with that plant and with others, and you separate the useful grain from the waste chaff.

When I preached this text six years ago – The Corn Sheller Sermon – I talked about how in more modern times that separation of grain from chaff has been done by the corn sheller, and now it’s done by the combine. If you don’t know what a combine is, then you should probably seek to add that to things you know, especially if you are shepherding people who regularly use them.

18. That winnowing metaphor sounds a lot like the Law, and like the good Lutheran he is, John preached the Gospel; “Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἕτερα παρακαλῶν εὐηγγελίζετο τὸν λαόν – Indeed, many other things he was comforting them, preaching the Gospel to the people.” It means that John said a lot of things, like preachers do, and specifically he preached the Gospel.

The verb “παρακαλῶν - comforting” is a present participle, and the verb “εὐηγγελίζετο – preaching the Gospel” is an imperfect verb. Both indicate a habitual and continual, rather than a one-time act, and both are very much a part of whom John is as a person. The term “the people” is used by Luke many times here and other places to mean “the people of God.”

19 – 20. Matthew has the most extensive and complete information about the arrest, imprisonment, and execution of John. Here Luke mentions the imprisonment and the reason for it. In chapter seven, we see that John is still alive, and by chapter nine he is dead, as people speculate that maybe Jesus is John risen from the dead, and Herod is tormented by what he has done.

Luke gives us the information that John rebuked Herod’s famous sin with his brother’s wife and adds that John also rebuked Herod “περὶ πάντων ὧν ἐποίησεν πονηρῶν ὁ Ἡρώδης – about all the evil things Herod did.” That would have been a lengthy sermon, and it may have taken several of them. Review “all the evil things” Herod Antipas did on the Internet. Gill quotes David Gans,

and he was very wicked, and a destroying man: many of the wise men of Israel he slew with the sword; and he took the wife of his brother Philip, whilst he was alive, to himself for wife; and John, the high priest, because "he reproved him" for this, he slew him with the sword, with many of the wise men of Israel."

And John reproved him not only for this sin, but others:

and for all the evils which Herod had done; his revellings, debaucheries, murders, &c. all which John, in great faithfulness, and with much freedom, told him and rebuked him for: for Herod had had a particular respect for him, and often had him with him, and heard him gladly, when John had an opportunity of speaking personally to him. (x) Ganz. Tzemach David, par, 1. fol. 25. 2.

Luke is obviously writing to readers well after the fact. Clearly, what he says happened to John at the had of Herod had not yet come to pass. The other synoptics don’t mention it here but choose to deal with it differently. Matthew is writing to Jews in Damascus, who would be more interested in that, but not so much the Greeks who make up Luke’s audience.

When preaching, emulate the inspired writers of the NT. For starters, avoid preaching from the OT. The best way to do that is to preach from the Gospel every Sunday, like preachers have always done, except for the modern Lutheran American preachers, especially the ones who call themselves “confessional.” Some of them are in fact quite adamant about this new practice.

I used to talk a lot more about infant Baptism than I do now, but what was a burning issue in Bible Belt southeast Kansas is sort of a moot point in eastern Iowa, where the Lutherans and Catholics and even the Methodists do that as a matter of course. I do frequently address things like evolution and life issues, and nobody wants to hear your political rants from the pulpit.

21. Coming back to chronological base, Luke tells us that what happened next, “Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ βαπτισθῆναι ἅπαντα τὸν λαὸν καὶ Ἰησοῦ βαπτισθέντος – it came to pass when all the people had been baptized, and Jesus had been baptized.” As mentioned above, “the people” are “the people of God,” which means here that everybody who wanted to be baptized had been.

And it means that Jesus as well had been baptized, which Luke spends scant little time on, but now the aftermath of that Baptism of Jesus, “προσευχομένου ἀνερχθῆναι τὸν οὐρανὸν – while He was prayer, the sky opened.” John (John 1: 32,33) saw it, and maybe others. Exactly what did that look like? I don’t know, but the opening up paves the way for what happens next.

A quick, but thorough perusal at heaven opening In the Bible reveals that the phrase is a metaphor and quite possible an idiom. Heaven is often pictured as being closed or open. When it is closed, that means that God is rather turning His back on man, or denying Him good things, like rain or forgiveness, and when heaven is open, it means that He give the same.

On a very basic level, then, the opening of heaven means that God is about to give good things to man, which in fact He is. He is giving the best of good things; the Christ, our Savior from sin, the One who brings us eternal life. I don’t know exactly what that looked like, but the opening up paves the way for the very good thing that is happening and is about to happen.

22. Two things happen. First, the visible; “καὶ καταβῆναι τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον σωματικῶς εἶδει ὡς περιστερὰν ἐπ’ αὐτόν – and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him.” It means that if you looked up into the sky, you saw what looked like a dove, and that dove was the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

The phrase “σωματικῶς εἶδει – bodily form” make it clear that this was not a hologram or an illusion, but that an actual, physical bird came down from heaven and landed “ἐπ’ αὐτόν – upon Him,” a locative preposition followed by a noun in the accusative case, motion into Jesus. Clearly the bird did not enter into Jesus, but just as clearly the Spirit did.

The dove was then, as it still is today, often a symbol of peace. We make our first biblical acquaintance in connection with The Flood, where a dove is sent out to search for dry land. Doves are spoken of often in the OT, often used in metaphor, but the most vivid picture of the dove and peace for the first-century Hebrew would have been at Temple, where they were sacrificed.

There are two Hebrew words that often occur together in the OT, generally translated “turtledove” and “pigeon,” most often in the context of offering sacrifices in Temple. In fact, if you see those

words in the OT – beginning with the beginning of Leviticus – chances are it will be in the context of sacrificing that animal in Temple for any of a number of types of sacrifices.

So when these people saw the dove coming down from heaven, they would have thought of Temple sacrifices, probably the burnt offering whose purpose was “for general atonement of sin and expression of devotion to God” (<https://www.seedbed.com/5-offerings-old-testament/>). This was the first type of offering articulated by Leviticus, and which explicitly includes the bird option.

The first option was a cow, and if you couldn’t afford a cow, then a sheep or goat, and if you couldn’t afford a sheep or goat, then you could bring a bird instead. That Mary chose the bird option (2:24) indicates that she and Joseph could not afford the larger animals for their offering at the Rite of Purification, a fairly reliable marker of their lack of wealth.

In OT times, the dove could be a symbol of things other than peace, things like war, for example. It has probably been fixed as a symbol of peace only in Christian times, and mostly because of this dove. Probably. The symbolism here would be Jesus as an offering – a sin offering, a peace offering – a sacrifice to bring peace between God and man, which Jesus was.

In that regard, the dove may be seen as a continuation or an extension of the theme referenced by John when he first encountered Jesus and called Him “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” The dove may even be seen as God’s confirmation from above that John had it right when he said what he said about Jesus.

Next, and second, the audible; “καὶ φωνὴν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ γενέσθαι Σὺ εἶ ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα – and came the voice from heaven saying, ‘you are my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased.’” It means that the audible voice of the Father was heard by those who saw the dove, and the voice audibly identifies Jesus as the beloved Son of God.

Up to this point, Jesus was part of the crowd, including that He had just been baptized, identifying Himself with the sinners. After that, as the Son prayed to the Father, the Father sends the visible dove to show, and the spoken Word to tell that this man is not what you think He is. He is no less than the very Son of God, with whom the Father is pleased; He is not a sinner like the rest.