

DID JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACH A BAPTISM OF FIRE AND THE HOLY SPIRIT ?

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THE author of this study, whom we welcome as a new contributor to the *QUARTERLY*, is a graduate of the University of Manitoba, of the North American Baptist Seminary and of Princeton Theological Seminary, and is currently pursuing a doctoral programme at McMaster University. To the question with which he deals the Qumran texts have provided a background, especially in that passage in the Rule of the Community (IQS iv. 20 f.) which, as Dr. J. A. T. Robinson has pointed out in his valuable study of "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community", brings together "the characteristic themes of the Baptist's preaching—refining, cleansing, water and holy Spirit—all set in the context of the fire of judgment (iv. 13), the abolition of evil (iv. 19 f.), and 'the making of the new' (iv. 25)."

WITH the exception of Luke's Nativity Narrative, the reader of the Gospels is struck with the unexpected entrance of John the Baptist upon the Judaeian scene. Little warning or preparation is given to this enigmatic character who emerges from the wilderness in nomadic dress claiming to be a forerunner of the Messiah, preparing the nation for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. His message, we are told, is one of "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1: 4).

John was an immediate success (Matt. 3: 5; Mark 1: 5; Luke 3: 10). The people, whose hopes were high with Messianic expectation, readily accepted his teaching and baptism in spite of certain denunciations made against them and their religious leaders. The long awaited prophecy of Isaiah 40: 3-5 had come true, and now before their eyes they could see "the voice" preparing the way of the Lord.

Apparently John's message of repentance and baptism conveyed a certain meaning to the people. Repentance is turning to God, and any Jew familiar with the Prophetic Writings and their emphasis upon a return to God would know what John implied by calling the people to repentance. Those who repented were then baptized.

John's baptism did not convey the forgiveness of sins. It merely

the inclusion of a "spirit baptism" into the so-called original "fire baptism".

E. Best suggests that Q *originally* contained only John's reference to a fire baptism, but in time the reference to spirit baptism was added to it by the Christian Church.⁴ Mark probably had access to this later edition of Q but for some unknown reason omitted the original reference to "fire baptism" and only included the "Holy Spirit" baptism. It may also be possible that Mark represents a Christian interpretation independent of Q, of what John the Baptist said, and that this Marcan version "was then read back and added to the fire-baptism of Q thus producing Q's present two-fold reference."⁵ Regardless of how one wishes to explain this transition, the important fact in this interpretation is that the reference to the Holy Spirit baptism originally came from a community which experienced such a phenomenon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).⁶

Acts 19: 2-4 is used as further proof that John did not preach a Spirit baptism. According to this passage, there was a group of disciples in Ephesus who had been baptised εἰς τὸ ἵωάννου βάπτισμα, but had never heard of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Paul then baptizes them εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, and after he had laid his hands upon them, they received the Holy Spirit. Dibelius sees in this passage undeniable evidence that John only preached a baptism of fire:

... jedenfalls soll das Fehlen des heiligen Geistes, die Unkenntnis der "μαθηταί" in diesem Punkte als Charakteristikum der Johannesjünger dargestellt werden. Bei solchem Gegensatz in der späteren Zeit ist es nicht möglich, dass der Meister der Johannesjünger den Messias als einen Geistestäufer verkundet hat.⁷

If we deny John's message of a Spirit baptism we are led to con-

⁴ E. Best, "Spirit Baptism", *Novum Testamentum*, 4(1960), p. 239.

⁵ *Ibid.* It is difficult for any writer to be dogmatic at this point. Even F. C. Grant's reconstruction is, at its best, a "probability" (*The Interpreter's Bible*, 7[1951], p. 651). It is just as probable that the original version of Q contained a reference to a baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit.

⁶ Acts 1: 5 attributes the baptism of the Holy Spirit directly to the words of Jesus. The question here is whether Luke himself attributed the saying to Jesus or whether this was the tradition belonging to the church in Jerusalem. It is not unlikely that the tradition began in Jerusalem, says Best.

⁷ M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Überlieferung von Johannes dem Täufer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1911), p. 56. For a good explanation of Acts 19: 1-7 and its relationship to the message of John the Baptist see C. H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 73.

clude with Dibelius that John's Messiah is only a "Feuertäufer".⁸ This immediately limits John's conception of the Messiah as God's agent in judgment without any activity of the Spirit. It has been shown in a previous paragraph that the prophets linked the activity of the Spirit with the coming Messiah (Isa. 11: 1; 32: 15; 61: 1; Ezek. 39: 29; Joel 2: 28). There is, says Beasley-Murray, "no *a priori* reason why John should not have linked the ministry of the Messiah with that of the Spirit".⁹ John's reference to a baptism of fire and Holy Spirit should be taken as it stands in the text, and interpreted as the "dual task of the Messiah to redeem and judge mankind".¹⁰

A second interpretation claims that Q originally contained a reference to John's message in which he spoke of a baptism with fire and *wind* (πνεῦμα). According to Best:

... John's original statement with its double reference to wind-baptism and fire-baptism originally concerned the eschatological judgment in which the wind would separate the chaff from the grain and the chaff would be burned with fire. Coming into Christian hands new depth was seen in the *ruach/pneuma* concept and this was given its alternative meaning 'spirit', thus changing the meaning from one of judgment to one of redemption. To 'Spirit' the adjective 'holy' was now added.¹¹

No one is exactly sure when or by whom the change was made from "wind" to "spirit". Best suggests that Christ himself may have changed it in reply to the delegation of John's disciples. The reply of Jesus "was to the effect that whereas John says 'wind', i.e. destruction, the true Messiah says 'Spirit', i.e. redemption".¹² Kraeling interprets it in a somewhat different manner. He contends that John did speak of a spirit baptism, but spirit in a purgative and destructive sense. This saying was then taken over by the Christians and after the Pentecostal experience, "Spirit became the Holy Spirit and the baptism with the Holy Spirit was interpreted as endowment with the spiritual gift of glossolaly and with the power of witness."¹³

In the transmission of sources, Matthew and Luke composed their Gospels from the later version of Q which included the

⁸ Dibelius, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹ Best, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 242. Also R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (London: Methuen, 1931) pp. 275-80.

¹³ Carl H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1951), p. 62.

baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit. Mark mentions only a baptism of the Holy Spirit probably because he was influenced by the Pentecostal event which stresses the Holy Spirit, or because he emphasizes the *redemptive* and not judicial aspect of John's witness to Jesus.

A third interpretation is offered by Kraeling. He finds a solution to the problem in the "neglected connotation of the traditional Hebrew conception of Spirit"¹⁴ contending that too much emphasis has been given to the transforming and redemptive work of the Spirit to the expense of the purgative and destructive aspect.¹⁵ The distinction, claims Kraeling,

. . . is obscured for us by our English translations which usually substitute the word "breath" for Spirit in such contexts, but, of course, in the Hebrew and Aramaic there is no distinction between the words used. In eschatological contexts even of the New Testament Period the one word Spirit (*pneuma*) can refer to the destructive working of God's power quite as well as to its uplifting effects.¹⁶

References to a baptism of the Holy Spirit in John's message should, according to Kraeling, point to the purgative and destructive forces of the Messiah by which he will destroy with his fiery breath, those who refuse to repent at John's water baptism. So interpreted, "the word of John brings us face to face once more with the conception of the transcendent Messiah as the great agent of God's final judgment".¹⁷

Kraeling finds additional support for his theory in Isaiah 4: 4 where the Spirit of the Lord is depicted as an agent of God's cleansing in judgment: "When the LORD shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning." Such a passage, states Beasley-Murray, would "provide an excellent source for John's conception of the Messiah's appearing in might and majesty to baptize with Spirit and fire".¹⁸

The transmission of these references is explained by Kraeling in two steps. After Pentecost, the destructive aspect of the Spirit diminished in importance, and the reference came to be interpreted as a prophecy of the Christian rite of baptism which conferred the Holy Spirit. Then later, in order to safeguard against ecstatic religious experiences, the words "and fire" were added "to indicate

¹⁴ Kraeling, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Compare Matt. 12: 28; Mark 3: 23-30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 51-2.

¹⁷ Kraeling, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁸ Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

that it is the 'fiery' Spirit about which John was speaking".¹⁹

The fourth and final interpretation is to maintain that John did preach a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire and that the Gospel accounts can be taken at face value. The Old Testament prophecies which speak of the outpouring of God's Spirit find meaning in John's message, and would, says Abrahams, sound "quite natural to Jewish ears. . . ." ²⁰ Büchsel also believes that you *cannot* remove the baptism of the Holy Spirit from John's message.

Die Bedeutung des Täufer in der Geschichte des urchristlichen Geistbesitzes und Geistgedankes besteht also darin, dass er die altprophetischen Gedanken von einer Geistausgiessung in der künftigen Heilzeit aufgenommen und mit dem messianischen Gedanken fest verbunden hat.²¹

John portrays a Messiah who not only brings judgment, but one who burns *and* gathers. "Deshalb ist es ganz in der Ordnung, dass auch vorher von einer doppelten Taufe mit Feuer und Geist die Rede ist."²²

One may conclude that even though the terminology of "baptism" may be novel, the concepts of an outpouring of the Spirit and a visitation of fiery judgment find their roots in the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messianic era. By eliminating the reference to the Holy Spirit or making it refer to a fire in judgment, an unnecessary limitation is placed upon John's message. Against the background of prophetic expectation there is no valid reason to insist that John only announced a baptism of judgment. John sees the fulfilment of these prophecies in the "coming one" who he predicts will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His baptism was at once a preparation and a promise of the spiritual cleansing which the Messiah would bestow.

Judgments and evaluations of John's message must be made on the basis of his unique position in the redemptive plan of God. John was a prophet—περισσότερον προφήτου—and his eschatological message to the people of Israel must be understood within the entire movement of prophecy and prophetic symbolism. When John the Baptist is evaluated in the light of his entire mission it is evident that he made reference to a fire and Holy Spirit baptism.

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¹⁹ Kraeling, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.

²⁰ Abrahams, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²¹ F. Büchsel, *Der Geist Gottes im Neuen Testament* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1926), p. 147.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 143.