



# *The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom*

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*Volume I:  
From Bethlehem to  
the River Jordan*



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THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM: VOLUME I: FROM BETHLEHEM TO THE RIVER JORDAN.  
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# From Nazareth to the River Jordan: “You Are My Son, the Beloved; with You I Am Well Pleased”

**W**e have arrived at the end of chapter of the first volume in this series. If we have not yet met the adult Jesus, we have received many clues about what he would be like. The foreshadowing events of Matthew and Luke’s birth narratives set the stage for all we can expect. Luke’s story also shows us how Jesus began to live into his plan to reach the people who he will become the “messiah” for. In his bluntness, comes for us to appreciate the question about who,

† LUKE 3:15–18 John Preaches about the Coming One, According to Luke

**<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying,**

*“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

**<sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.**

1. What do you notice about the similarities and differences between Luke’s version and the other two? What might they signify?
2. Why do you think Luke connects John’s baptism to questions about the Messiah?

The people, upon hearing the most credible prophetic voice of their time, are in a state of heightened awareness. They are living under Roman occupation, but hoping for deliverance. How might things get better? Who will deliver them? Does this voice, crying in the wilderness, belong to the Messiah, the obvious vehicle of that deliverance?

John himself will provide a two-part answer. One part is a denial of the title (albeit an indirect one). The other part points to the “more powerful” one who is to come. John’s self-effacing words are another installment in Luke’s pattern of comparing John and Jesus. Beginning in his birth narrative, Luke recognizes John’s greatness, but consistently makes him subordinate to Jesus. For example, the circumcision of John occurred in the hill country. But the circumcision of Jesus occurred in the greater dignity of the Jerusalem Temple. Likewise, thirty-some years later, John’s baptism with water is of less value than Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Luke’s emphasis on the contrasts between John and Jesus may reflect an historical concern of his community. Early Christian missionaries in Acts of the Apostles—the second part

of Luke's two-volume work—encountered John's disciples during their travels. Some years after John's death, these people were still members of his movement. Their presence, and the continuing vitality of that movement, created a problem for Christians. The reason: the Christian claim that John was a forerunner of Jesus. Because of that status, John's movement should have merged into the Christian community, rather than continuing on its own.

This integration had not completely occurred. Therefore, Christians felt the need to establish John's credentials firmly as the forerunner, without letting those credentials bleed over into, or intrude upon, Jesus' role as Messiah. For Luke to convey this story is to establish the proper relationship between John and Jesus by using the words of John the Baptist himself. John denies being the Messiah, and points to someone else, implying that the "coming one" will fulfill that role. This episode clarifies relationships, relieves the tension between the John and Jesus movements, quiets competing ideas among their followers as to who is rightly called the Messiah, and offers a consistent message that the Luke-Acts community can use in its mission.

As with Matthew, Luke connects baptismal ideas of fire and the Spirit. But Luke offers more tools to help us understand that connection, including a dramatic one still commemorated in a major Christian feast. Chapter 2 of Acts contains this story:

*<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

Luke's second book shows us the power of the Spirit connected to the symbol of fire. What John proclaimed before the outset of Jesus' ministry comes into maturity after Jesus' resurrection. It is a gift from God that can be seen, heard, and felt.

The people of the world, once fragmented by the differences in their language, speak in others' tongues. Also, they hear their own languages on the lips of those present. The ancient divide of the peoples, dating to the Tower of Babel, is bridged.<sup>3</sup> Those who were formerly separated by the perils of human ambition are now united in the kingdom of God. The purifying and illuminating power of the Holy Spirit is at work.

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<sup>3</sup>See Gen. 11.



1. By looking at the connections between Luke and Acts, how are your interpretive efforts affected? Are there other connections you could explore as well?
2. How do you respond to the images of water, fire, and spirit? Would this image change if you defined “spirit” in the Jewish way, and called it “wind”?
3. The biblical understanding is that God created us out of dust (See Gen 2:7), and that we shall return to dust (See Gen. 3:19). If we, both as creatures of dust and objects of baptism, are added to the mix of images, then “earth” would be present, along with wind, fire, and water. These are the four substances the ancients understood to be elemental. Viewing the world through their eyes, we can conclude that *everything* converges in the baptismal imagery. Does this approach allow us to look at the biblical story of baptism from a new vantage point? Does it say something about completeness?



† LUKE 3:19–20 The Herodians Terminate John’s Ministry

<sup>19</sup>But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by [John] because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup>added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

1. What is Luke telling us? What evil things might Herod have done to cause him to shut John up? Was prison his personal tool for avoiding accountability?
2. Didn’t John baptize Jesus? How could he have done that, if he was in prison?