



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

by Edward L. Bleyнат, Jr.

*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 first 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 will show us how Jesus began to live into his plan for the disciples who he will become. It may seem a little blunt, but his bluntness comes from a deep spiritual conviction about who,

4. How do you respond to the example John sets? Have you experienced times to speak, and times to remain silent? Did John make the right choice about when to speak, and against whom? Why (not)?



### ✠ MARK 1:9–11 The Baptism of Jesus, According to Mark

**9**In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10**And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **11**And a voice came from heaven,

*“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

1. Here we return to the main storyline that most of us remember: John baptized Jesus. What led to that baptism?
2. Why was Jesus’ baptism by John necessary?
3. First-century Jews invested the river Jordan with meaning and expectation. What should our expectations be?
4. At the segment’s close, we hear a voice from heaven declaring Jesus’ identity. What function does the voice serve?

In this passage and its parallels, we reach the climax of our volume. The introductory words of the pericope, “in those days,” draw the reader’s attention toward what follows. It is Jesus’ first appearance in Mark.

Jesus has come out of Nazareth to the river Jordan. He has not taken a short walk into the wilderness, but has made a purposeful trip. Nazareth in Galilee is quite some distance from where the Jordan flowed through Judea, the place of John’s baptismal activity.

Jesus' first public appearance is tied to the work of John the Baptist. John is leading a movement that begins in the desert and courses through the Jordan River. There, his followers are immersed in the water, and they undergo a symbolic death to the old ways. They emerge, cleansed and transformed, before returning to the populated places of Judea. John is leading a movement away from emptiness and exile, and toward God. Away from death, and toward new life.

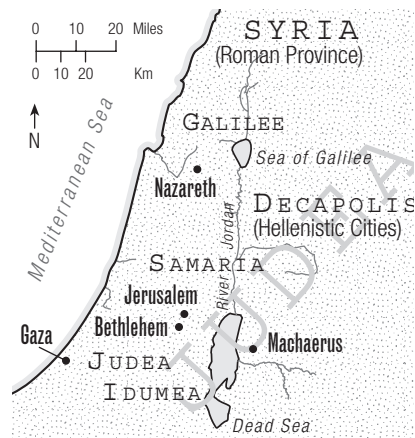
When the two meet, John baptizes Jesus. This was probably not their first encounter. John may have been living in the Qumran community near the Dead Sea, and may have come out from it to practice a public ministry different from the separationist ways of the Essene movement. But how Jesus got from Nazareth to the river Jordan is of less importance to us than what happened when he arrived at the Jordan. It is here, the place of retreat and renewal, where a voice from Heaven is heard. It punctuates Mark's narrative and affirms Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

This is a powerful scene that we will better understand as we explore not only its specific words and phrases, but also its broader context. As we do this, we face a problem that the early Church also had to address. Why is Jesus being baptized?

To Mark, John's baptism is one "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). For Jesus to submit himself to this rite raises a perplexing question. Early Christianity had already embraced the notion that Jesus was sinless. For Paul, whose writings predated Mark's gospel, this principle was a basic one (*See 2 Cor. 5:21*).<sup>8</sup> When we take this into account, it seems unnecessary for John to baptize Jesus because: (a) there was nothing to forgive in a sinless man; and (b) no repentance was needed. Therefore, we might conclude, no baptism was required. So, why was Jesus baptized?

The problems do not stop with the question of sinlessness. By baptizing him, John appears to be bringing Jesus into his fold. This development would seem contrary to John's earlier proclamation: The one who is to follow is the greater one. If he is greater, why is he being initiated into a movement where John is the principal leader? How do we resolve this baptismal problem?

## Nazareth and the Jordan (30 C.E.?)



<sup>8</sup>But see Mark 10:18, where Jesus deflects a description of himself as "good."

We will consider these questions more thoroughly when we explore Mark's parallels, along with some non-canonical Christian writings and the Gospel According to St. John. For now, we will set them aside as we consider other aspects of Mark's text. We will then return to the problematic questions about baptism when we see what Matthew and Luke do with the story.

John's baptism of Jesus is a mighty event. We read in Mark that the heavens were torn apart. It is an image showing God's direct intervention in the world. The same type of image is reflected at the end of Mark's gospel, when the crucifixion is accompanied by a rending of the curtain in the Jerusalem Temple from top to bottom. These beginning and ending images frame Mark's story as a whole. Just as the hand of God rips the heavens open to proclaim Jesus' identity in the baptismal beginning, it also rips the Jerusalem Temple curtain from heaven earthward to proclaim what that identity means at the end of the story: No man-made curtain can separate us from God's sacrificial love.

Out of the sky's rupture, the Holy Spirit descends, borne on the wings of a dove. A voice from Heaven speaks. It says nothing to the crowds, nor even to John the Baptist. The words are directed to Jesus, in the second person, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus, and Jesus alone, receives the message of God's favor.

1. Mark's baptismal scene develops as quickly as the introduction to the gospel itself. Did you feel prepared for such a scene? What interpretive challenges does it create for you?
2. Images of torn heavens, rending of a curtain in the temple, doves, and voices from above create a sense of the holy. Where might these images lead us?



† MATTHEW 3:13–17 The Baptism of Jesus, According to Matthew

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

<sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying,

*"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

<sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him,

*"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."*