



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”

We 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,

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

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

¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying,

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

¹⁵But Jesus answered him,

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

Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

1. We ask two questions again here that we will ask repeatedly in this series: What do you notice about the similarities and differences between Mark’s version and Matthew’s? What might they signify?
2. Does Matthew have a different understanding of the practice of baptism than Mark?
3. What does “righteousness” refer to in this passage?

The last time that we were with Jesus in The Gospel According to St. Matthew, he was a baby. Joseph had moved the Holy Family to Nazareth when their days in Egypt ended. While the dangers of Judea were less acute than at the time of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, it was far from a safe place. Judea was under the rule of the brutal and incompetent Archelaus. An angel had warned Joseph to take the family to Galilee, where they settled.

Now, thirty-some years have passed. Jesus is an adult. Matthew’s story resumes with Jesus traveling from Galilee to see John at the Jordan. Jesus has come to be baptized by John.

When studying Mark’s version, we questioned why, exactly, Jesus was to be baptized. We found no easy answers. Our still-challenging task may be a little more approachable in Matthew’s gospel, as he has already taken a few steps to help us along the way.

Matthew eliminates one problem. He does not describe John’s baptism as being for the forgiveness of sins.⁹

Matthew helps us solve a second problem by describing the baptism in a slightly different way. The same question we raised in Mark—why does John baptize the “more powerful one,” instead of the other way around?—is resolved by the verbal exchange between John and

⁹John’s baptismal candidates do, of course, confess their sins in Matthew (See Matt. 3:6). Even so, the baptismal rite itself is not specifically connected to forgiveness of sins, as in Mark.

Jesus. John argues that Jesus should be the one baptizing him. His idea is compatible with the description of the coming one as “more powerful.” However, Jesus shows John to be operating under a misconception. Righteousness itself requires the baptism Jesus seeks.

Why? There is some thought that Jesus is simply affirming the relationship between the two of them. John’s description of one “coming after me” speaks not to the timing of their public appearances, but to Jesus having been John’s disciple.¹⁰ This linkage would properly place John in the role of Jesus’ baptizer. From this perspective, Jesus’ decision to have John baptize him makes perfect sense.

The use of the word “righteousness” to explain the baptismal decision also aids the reader. According to Professor Long (See footnote 10, *supra*), there are two main lines of thought about what righteousness means in this context. One is that the term refers to human righteousness, or the possibility of human beings entering into a right relationship with God, and each other, through Jesus’ “total involvement in the human condition, his sharing in the fullness of human experience, in order that humanity may be forgiven, saved, and made righteous.”¹¹ The second idea is that the phrase denotes a cry to God for his righteous deliverance in order to “set things right.”¹²

Either interpretation leads to the same outcome. By stepping into the baptismal waters of the Jordan, a place frequented by sinners who came to hear John preach, Jesus is identified with humanity itself. It is a sacramental expression of what the opening verses of Matthew foretell. Jesus is called “‘Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:23).

Matthew also follows a different course than Mark in describing the heavenly voice. Here, the heavens are opened up—not torn—and Jesus sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove to alight on him. A voice from Heaven then says “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The baptismal experience Matthew describes is not a private communication, as in Mark; it is a third person declaration to those present that Jesus is the Son of God.

What might be Matthew’s purpose in having the heavenly voice publicly validate Jesus? As is often the case, we can look to the Old Testament for clues. Chapter 42 of Isaiah begins this way:

¹⁰A disciple is one who learns. Calling Jesus a disciple of John does not subordinate either his character or his power to John’s. As used here, the word describes the process through which Jesus gained the knowledge and discipline that his human nature needed in order to carry out his mission. For more on this and related topics, see Professor Boring’s commentary on Matthew in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* series, at 159–160. See also Thomas G. Long’s commentary on Matthew in the *Westminster Bible Companion* series, at 32–34. Professor Long is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. He has been affiliated both with Columbia Theological Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary.

¹¹See Long, *supra*, at 33.

¹²*Id.*

¹Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
²He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
³a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

By invoking Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew connects the Old Order to the New. Jesus is identified as God's servant upon whom his Spirit rests. His mission is to establish justice, practice mercy, and walk humbly with God. The prophetic tradition of Micah 6:8 continues.

1. Mark's version of the baptism holds more mystery than Matthew's. Does one speak to you more than the other? Why?
2. In Mark, we see a tendency to conceal information about Jesus' identity. In Matthew, we see a tendency to disclose it. Mark's technique is sometimes called the "Messianic secret," a concept to which we will be more formally introduced later in this series. Why might Mark use this technique? Why might Matthew take a different approach?

† LUKE 3:21–22 The Baptism of Jesus, According to Luke

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven,
"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."