

Luke 3:1-22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 02 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 3 verses 1 to 22 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iteria and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness, and he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight, every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you,

God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the crowds asked him, What then shall we do? And he answered them, Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise. Tax collectors also came to be baptised and said to him, Teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, Collect no more than you are authorised to do. Soldiers also asked him, And we, what shall we do? And he said to them, Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, I baptise you with water. But he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the Tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased. Once again, as he does in Luke chapter 1 verse 5, and Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 2, in Luke chapter 3 verses 1 to 2, Luke sets the scene within the context of the wider world and its rulers and empires, and of Jerusalem its kings and priests.

[3 : 1 2] A new ruler is coming onto the world stage, and from this time onwards the nations and their rulers must reckon with him. While the other gospels don't mention Pontius Pilate until the time of Jesus' trial, Luke introduces him as a character here. He also speaks of the surrounding regions, establishing a more cosmopolitan context for the events that will occur. Seven historical figures are mentioned, Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas. This roots the narrative in a clear historical context. It is very easy for us to forget that history is measured relative to persons, rather than according to the more abstract metric of numbers. To enter into history is to take up a position in the world of human affairs relative to all these different figures.

So we might speak of this particular year as the 2020th year of our Lord, the year of the pandemic, and the 69th year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Donald Trump being President of the United States. Such a way of dating, as Luke dates the events here, tells us a great deal more than the year 2020. The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah. This is a familiar formula

for the word of the Lord coming to the prophet. Note the fact that many of the prophet's books are introduced with a similar expression. The formula is often further contextualized by mentioning the reign of particular kings or rulers, often foreign ones, along with the name of the prophet and his father. So for instance, the word of the Lord that came to Hosea the son of Berai in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel.

Or the words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. Or in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai, the prophet, to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Or in the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying. The prophets operate within an international context, speaking as God's representatives to kings and rulers of nations.

Unsurprisingly, John the Baptist is later imprisoned in this chapter for speaking out against Herod, the king. John the Baptist declares a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. As N.T. Wright observes, the remission of sins refers primarily to God's restoration of sinful Israel. The baptism was an act of national, not just private, repentance.

This baptism occurred in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan. Those who came to be baptised by John had symbolically to leave the land and re-enter it by washing. John is one preparing the way for the returning king in the wilderness. He baptises in the wilderness as the one who is the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord, making his path straight. He is preparing a people to be brought into the land by Jesus, Joshua. John was from a priestly family and his actions should be understood in the light of this. Baptism wasn't something that arose out of the blue, but it's something related to the rites of the Levitical system. Nor was John alone in developing water rites. We have similar ritual washings associated with the Essenes. John the Baptist here raises the question of who the true children of Abraham are, a question that is central in many other parts of the Bible, not least Romans and Galatians. In using the expression brood of vipers, he is effectively declaring that the multitudes coming to him are like the seed of the serpent. In Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 there is enmity placed between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. And John is suggesting that rather than there being the children of Abraham as they suppose themselves to be, they are actually the children of the evil one. God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. God later raises up Christ from the stone grave as Abraham's true heir.

[7:32] And I think that it's possible that John is alluding to Isaiah chapter 51 verses 1 to 2 here. Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord, look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you. For he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him. Israel is raised up from the rock and God can do the same thing again. John declares that the axe is laid to the root of the trees. The trees are going to be chopped down at their very roots, not just at the trunk.

Once again, the image comes from Isaiah chapter 10 verses 33 to 34. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power. The great in height will be hewn down and the lofty will be brought low. He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. Those who know the Isaiah reference will recognise that what comes next is a rod growing from the stem of Jesse. The kingdom is cut down beyond even David and a new David will arise, like life from the dead. The image of the axe and the trees is also reminiscent of Psalm 74 verses 4 to 7, where the trees are associated with the temple. The nation and its temple will be cut down by the axe of the Romans in AD 70 and burned.

Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place. They set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees, and all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. The imagery is also found in Daniel chapter 4 verses 10 to 16. The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these. I saw and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful, and its fruit abundant, and

in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. He proclaimed aloud and said thus, Chop down the tree and lop off its branches. Strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it, and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him, and let seven periods of time pass over him. There Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, is judged for his pride, and it's a judgment upon the kingdom that he's associated with too. Perhaps we should recognize that the names of verses 1 and 2 in this chapter are also a list of trees. These great trees of the earth that will be brought low. [10:47] With the advent of his kingdom, God is bringing a great axe to the forest of the world. Jesus is declared to be mightier than John. Here Jesus is presented as if a powerful warrior.

Once again, perhaps, we are in the world of Isaiah allusions here. Jesus is like the description of the Lord as a mighty warrior, single-handedly working salvation, treading out the winepress on the day of his vengeance, in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 1 to 6. John the Baptist isn't worthy to loose Christ's sandals for this treading. The references to strength are significant. The Hebrew meaning of Gabriel's name also refers to might and strength. And the scene is being set for a showdown with the strong man who holds the world in bondage. Our first introduction to Christ in the New Testament through the testimony of John the Baptist is as the one who winnows at the threshing floor.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Christ is the one who works the threshing floor, much as he is the one who treads out the grapes and the winepress in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 1 to 6, and Revelation chapter 14 verses 14 to 20, where he also reaps the wheat. And only a dull ear would miss the heavy allusion to Malachi chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings and righteousness to the Lord.

The temple of Malachi chapter 3 is replaced with the threshing floor in Luke chapter 3, And it makes sense, because the temple was built upon a threshing floor, and the symbolism of these two things get associated with each other. Not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain is associated as a principle with the way that the priest should be able to eat from the altar.

The priests are the oxen that work in the temple, that work in the threshing floor. They're preparing the grain of Israel for the bread of God. Christ, however, is the one who purges both the temple and the nation of Israel. He is the one who separates wheat from chaff, burning the latter and gathering the former. It's a time of judgment. These are images of God's judgment drawn from places like Psalm 1.

[13:27] Herod the Tetrarch persecutes John the Baptist at the instigation of his wife Herodias, and the parallel to Jezebel's instigation of Ahab's persecution of Elijah, in whose spirit and power John came, in verse 17 of chapter 1, that should be clear. Jesus is baptised when all of the people have been baptised, presumably suggesting that it was not just as one of the crowd. Should we see a suggestion that Jesus is the one who completes the full number? Perhaps. I'm not sure whether Luke intends this, but you might see the flood account in the background here. When all have entered the ark, God closes the door. Then the heavens are opened. The Holy Spirit later descends upon Jesus like a dove, like the dove descended on the new earth after the flood. I think Luke definitely intends this, but I'm not completely persuaded that he intends a wider set of flood allusions.

In the baptism of Jesus, we see Father, Son and Spirit in a single event. The voice of the Father from heaven, the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove, and the Son coming up out of the water.

In contrast to other gospel descriptions of the baptism of Christ, Jesus, we are here told, is praying at the time, and this is part of Luke's foregrounding of the theme of prayer more generally.

Why is Jesus baptised by John? Various reasons can be given, and different gospels emphasise different things. Among other things, it creates continuity between the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Just as Moses and Joshua in Joshua chapter 1, and Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 2, pass the baton of ministry on the far side of the Jordan, so John passes the baton of ministry, the ministry of the prophets, to Jesus the Son at the same place. Jesus has the same name as Joshua, and a related name to Elisha, and he leads us into the promised land. His ministry is compared to that of Elisha at various points in the gospel of Luke, and before Jesus, Elisha was the most prominent miracle worker in the land. In being baptised with the rest of the people, Jesus also identifies with them, and identifies them with him. He is the one who will lead them into the promised land. He is the new Joshua who will go before the people. As the leader of the people, he also takes their state upon himself, along with all of their history, and so in being baptised, he is assuming the weight of the burden of Israel, present in the land, but not truly enjoying the fellowship with God that they should do, because of their sin. Jesus enacts the repentance of the nation that he represents by being baptised with John's baptism. At his baptism, Jesus is also being set apart as a priest. He begins his ministry at about 30 years of age, which is the age at which the priests began their ministry. Jesus' baptism was a baptism into priesthood, and the fact that a genealogy follows should be related to the fact that Jesus is entering into priestly ministry at this point. The genealogy marks him out as qualified for priesthood.

[16:33] The baptism is a confirmation both to Jesus and to John of Jesus' status as the Son of God. In John's gospel, the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus is that which manifests Jesus to John as the Son of God, and this marks the definitive beginning of Christ's ministry, but it also demonstrates that John's ministry has achieved its purpose.

It is important to remember that a qualification for the Twelve was having been there since the baptism of John, and each one of the Gospels highlights the ministry of John at the very outset of their story.

John the Baptist is an integral part of the story of Christ. Jesus' own story is a story of three baptisms. His baptism where he is anointed and manifested in the Jordan, the baptism of his death, and the baptism of the Spirit that he performs at Pentecost.

And in Jesus' baptism, he gathers up the story of all the great baptisms of the Old Testament, things like the creation, the flood, the Red Sea, baptism into priesthood, the ritual washings, Elijah crossing the Jordan, and many other such events.

And he gathers these into his story. He takes up the baton from the last great Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist. He identifies with a sinful people, and then out of their broken history, he forges a new one.

[17:51] Our baptism is how we are plugged into his baptism. We are baptised into him as Israel was into Moses, the one who was drawn from the water. We are baptised with him in the Jordan, anointed with his Spirit for ministry, and declared to be God's beloved children.

We are baptised with him in his death, dying and rising to new life. We are baptised with his baptism of Pentecost, clothed with the mantle of the ascended Christ's Spirit, and made one body with him. And the story of all things is gathered together and summed up in the baptised Christ, and we in him. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism should be related to the later descent of the Spirit upon the church at Pentecost.

As Christ ascends into heaven, his Spirit descends upon the church, like the mantle of Elijah fell to Elisha, and Elisha received the firstborn portion of Elijah's spirit when Elijah ascended in 2 Kings chapter 2.

Elijah's ascension is Elisha's Pentecost. A further connection to Luke's account of Jesus' baptism might be seen in the story of Ezekiel, in chapter 1 verse 1.

[18:59] Jesus is a new Ezekiel, as we will see in what follows.

This is the 30th year of his life, as it was the 30th year for Ezekiel. He's by the river, he's with the exiles, the heavens are opened, and he sees visions of God.

If John the Baptist was introduced to us like one of the Old Testament prophets, the stage is now set for a new prophet. A question to consider.

What Old Testament accounts might the words of the Father from heaven remind us of?