

2.1 John the Baptist/izer

The major passage about John the baptizer is found prior to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. John is introduced here as a prophet. The opening Lk.3.1-2 resonates with the opening of prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the same vein as the birth narrative the narrator informs the audience/reader about the historical context of the events narrated. Thus we learn that now Tiberius is Caesar, Pontius Pilate is governor and Herod, the son of Herod the Great is tetrarch in Galilee. This is a repeat of the specific interest of the narrator in setting the scene. What happens here must be seen in the wider context of the 'big history'. The narrator thereby also indicates that he has knowledge of this wider context and his work is thus well qualified as trustworthy source of information. Although only little can be asserted in terms of historical facts about John the Baptizer, there are some hints to his ministry prior to Jesus' encounter with him, as well as references to him and his disciples later in Luke as well as in Acts. We find him again in Lk 5.33 where his ascetic life-style is compared with the life-style of Jesus and his disciples. After being imprisoned we learn that he sends disciples to Jesus to find out who he is. Only in 9.7-9 are we told that John was actually executed by Herod, an act which is also reported by Josephus and thus of historical reliability. Later when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray they do so with a reference to John who according to them taught his disciples how to pray (11.1). Sometimes Jesus or the narrator refer to John the Baptizer to qualify the time they live in as the beginning of the messianic era (16.16; Acts 1.5). Interestingly in Acts 19.1-4 disciples are found in Ephesus who only know of the baptism of John which may be an indication that they were John's disciples. In many of the sermons of Acts, John the Baptizer is mentioned as the important prophet who paved the way and announced the coming of the Messiah. Thus there can be no doubt that John played a significant role in the time prior to and during the earliest part of Jesus' public ministry. It is difficult to reconstruct what precisely the relationship between the two men was, but the narrator of Luke-Acts is keen to depict an image of ministries of different stages rather than of competition between the two. The fact that the narrative does not hide that it was not obvious to contemporaries of the two who they were, nor obviously for John who Jesus was seems to refer to necessary clarifications of their ministries. If there was any doubt the narrator makes it absolutely clear that from the perspective of a Christ-follower John cannot be the Messiah/Christ but is the one in the vein of Elijah redivivus prepares the way of the Lord. The questions thus was more who Jesus was (as explicitly mentioned in several of the question passages) rather than who John was.

The introduction of the ministry of John in the narrative of the Gospel leaves no doubt that John's role is important as the forerunner of the one who is to come. In a prophetic manner it is emphasized that the word of God comes to John, that is, God is perceived as the driving force behind John's ministry. John's message is summarized as 'a baptism of repentance for the release of sin'. The Isaiah quotation which clarifies how to understand John's role and message is longer here than in the parallel versions in the gospels of Matthew and Mark and includes the quote 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (3.6), whereas the others end with 'make the path straight'

Significantly the narrative suggests that John's call to repentance in the context of preparing the Lord's way is understood as preparing a people. Thus the prophetic images of road building become images of repentance, the repentance required requires a transformation as radical as the transformation of the landscape. The prophetic references of Lk 3.4-5 reappear in Acts in the context of sermons of the apostles.(Acts 2. 40; 8.21;13.10). The fact that John is mentioned again and again in these sermons means that John is not merely forerunner of the one to come who is surpassed by the one came after him, but rather the mission he had initiated is a mission which in some ways continues throughout Luke-Acts. Although John and Jesus are clearly distinguished Jesus and his disciples in a way take over and continue the mission and message of John the Baptizer. In calling tax collectors and

sinners into his ministry Jesus actually practices what John has proclaimed. He introduces his own mission as being to 'proclaim release...' (4.18) he asserts his authority to 'release sins' (5....)and defends his mission 'to call ...sinners to repentance' (Cf also Lk 24.47 mission to proclaim 'repentance for release of sins' is given by resurrected Christ to followers).

In Acts we find a depiction of Christ followers as continuing John's mission in some sense: they prepare the way of the Lord in preparing a people, in calling them to repent (see e.g. Acts 2.38)

Paul too in such a role in that he presented as summarizing the message as follows: 'to repent and to turn to God doing works worthy of repentance' (Acts 26.20).

Significantly one of the fruits of repentance mentioned by John is the sharing of food and clothing with those who need it. The parable of the barren fig tree in Lk 13.6-9 and the warning of Jesus that a tree not bearing good fruit will be cut down resonate with this aspect of John's

preaching. The emphasis on sharing with those in need has further echoes in various commandments of Jesus (Lk 6.30; Lk 12.33; Lk 14.12-14; Lk 18.22) and the commands to tax collectors and soldiers in 3.12-14 are related to Zachaeus offer 'Look, half of my possession, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' (Lk 19.8). Thus the major themes of John's preaching and mission appear again later in Luke-Acts as incorporated into the mission and message of Jesus.

The Empowerment of Jesus 3.21-22

The account of Jesus' baptism are similar in the Gospel of Mark and Luke. The meeting of John and Jesus is depicted as of high significance, but it is interesting to note that whereas Mark actually reports Jesus' baptism Luke does not. Although it seems self-evident that John baptized Jesus the narrator actually avoids giving an actual account of the encounter. Lk 3.21 only mentions that Jesus had been baptized. The spirit and the voice from heaven do not appear a moment of baptism but afterward while Jesus is praying. Whilst the Gospel traditions are consistent in their account of the baptism of Jesus by John, Luke is reluctant to depict the scene in a way which would imply that the Messiah was baptized by the 'forerunner'! It is unclear what the motive behind this reluctance may have been. Whether it seemed inconceivable that the one without sin could be baptized for the repentance of sin? Or whether there is an indication of some tension between Jesus and John remains open.

The fact that in Lk 3.22 the opening of the heaven, the descending of the Spirit and the voice of Lord are said to have occurred whilst Jesus was praying is an interesting and typical detail of Luke's narrative. In Luke-Acts times of prayer and worship are frequently the occasions for divine revelations (to Zechariah 1.9-11; Anna 2.37-38; Cornelius Acts 10.2-6; Peter Acts 10.9-16, Paul Acts 9.11-12; Acts 22:17-21). Jesus also often is referred to as praying. The choice of the twelve is preceded by prayer (6.12) and the Transfiguration takes place while Jesus is praying (9.31).

Thus the baptism scene in 3.21-22 fits with these other scenes in which revelation and divine direction are associated with prayer and worship.

In Luke's perspective the focus of the baptism narrative is actually not on the scene of Jesus' baptism but on what is associated with it. While Jesus is praying the Holy Spirit descends upon him, and he hears a voice from heaven: the focus clearly shifts from the act of baptism to the divine affirmation and empowerment of Jesus, the Messiah. Moreover, the descent of the Spirit has a narrative effect. It initiates a sequence of events. It serves as a bridge or introduction to the temptation scene. Whilst the genealogy of Jesus is inserted between the baptism scene and the temptation the latter is clearly linked via the Holy Spirit to the former. The genealogy seems to be placed arbitrarily here only at first glance. The one who has been empowered and acknowledged as 'my Son, my Beloved' in Lk 3.22 is now presented as part of a genealogical network which links him with Abraham, David and eventually Adam, who is identified as 'son of God' (Lk 3.38).

The Holy Spirit subsequently leads Jesus into the wilderness, and after the temptation 'esus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee and in the next scene he publicly announces that 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me' (4,18). The Spirit is a driving force in each scene from 3.22 to 4.18 and consistently related to Jesus mission. The Spirit thus is seen as the divine power active in Jesus' mission. The close connection between the descent of the Spirit and the beginning of Jesus' mission has parallels with the course of events at the end of the Gospel of Luke and beginning of the Book of Acts. The risen Christ informs the disciples that the beginning of their mission is related to the descending of the Spirit (Lk 24.46-49 and Acts 1.8). The Pentecost scene (Acts 2) which demonstrates that the coming of the Spirit immediately leads to the preaching of the gospel and the expansion of the community. In both, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, the descent of the spirit initiates sequences of events which are of primary significance throughout these writings.

In the scene around the baptism of Jesus (Lk 3.21-22) the descent of the Spirit is accompanied by a heavenly voice. This double sign is entrenched with scriptural allusions (Ps 2.7 and Isa 42.1). It is a strong affirmation of a special relationship of trust, which indicates that the one who just has been baptized is empowered for a unique mission.

This unique relationship requires unique responsibility. Jesus must respond to God's trust by doing God's will in his ministry. J. Neyrey (pp168-70) and J. Green(50) both draw attention to the designation 'son of God' in the Hebrew Bible and in Second Temple Judaism where the term referred to, and required a distinctive moral relationship with God; thus it is a designation which is frequently given to the righteous and the obedient.

The temptation narrative and the public announcement of Jesus' ministry and mission in the synagogue of Nazareth are in some ways linked to each other in that the first demonstrates a false understanding of this mission whereas the scene in the Nazareth synagogue on the other hand announces true understanding of his mission.

Essential Readings

- ** 2.1 Ringe Sharon, 'A Time of Preparation' in *Luke*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1995, pp.49-62.
- ** 2.2 Evans Craig, 'Josephus on John the Baptist' in Levine A.J. et.al., *The Historical Jesus in Context*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007, pp. 56-63.
- ** 2.3 Fitzmyer Joseph, 'The Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts', in Verheyden,J. ed.*The Unity of Luke-Acts*.Leuven: Leuven University Press 1999, pp. 165-83.

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abdingdon Press 1996, pp.77-99.