Jesus And The Baptist: Luke 3:21-22

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We love biographies. We each live our own individual lives as a story, with each moment writing a line, and each day turning a page. And because we live our story, we love those of others. Most often, if one picks up a biography of a modern woman, or a biography written in the modern age about an ancient man or woman, the story will begin with their birth, and concentrate heavily on their early childhood. Freud taught us that the things that happen when we are youths, children, and even infants, are the things most formative for who we become later in life. And this hovers as a modern assumption behind how we tell and hear our life stories today.

But this is a decidedly modern notion of the Western world. In the Ancient Near East, it was not so. An individual wasn't important until he was a man, capable of living and acting in the world of men. Children were hid in the background, seen perhaps, but rarely heard, and better neither. They were unimportant as anything but "future." This is part of why the Gospels share almost nothing about the childhood and early years of Jesus. To be sure, they each focus on his birth, being as it was the moment of Incarnation that made the stars sing and the worlds shake. And then one has the brief little vignette by Luke (and Luke alone) that we saw before, of young Jesus in the temple, asking questions of the teachers, and learning from them (Luke 2:41-52). But as we explained in our brief treatment of the larger context of that sole passage, Luke's primary point in sharing it is to contrast John and Jesus, and to show that while Jesus experienced a normal human development, he was nonetheless greater than John.

And that is all we get. Modern biographers tease out the absence of "child Jesus" stories with their own speculative and often irreverent imaginations. And ancient sources dabbled in the same imaginative game. But the canonical Gospels don't seek to satiate this curiosity. To them, as most others of their age, it was what Jesus does in the world of *men* that is most important. And they all share in common the understanding that the adult ministry of Jesus began at his baptism by John, with the opening of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit, and the Voice that endorsed the Person and Mission of Jesus. It was this event that began the story. It all started here. As we continue to work our way through Luke's writings, we come now to this breathtaking moment.

Luke 3:21-22 - Jesus Is Baptized By John And Endorsed By The Father

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized 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.""
(Luke 3:21–22 ESV)

Luke has just finished narrating his presentation of John's ministry, preaching and baptizing. He ends that narrative with this small paragraph which both ends John's story and begins Jesus'. He presents Jesus as being baptized, like all the people (in solidarity with humanity). He shows that Jesus is vindicated and endorsed by the Father, as the Voice from heaven after the baptism combines two different strands of Messianic thought into one Divine person. He thus sets the stage for the temptation that will follow. Marshall explains the significance of what happens here, "This event is different; it is the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit (4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38), the attestation of his Sonship, and in effect his call to begin his ministry. It takes place in the atmosphere of prayer, i.e. the ideal situation for receiving a Divine revelation" (Marshall, Luke, NIGTC, pg. 150).

Reading Horizontally - Luke Alongside The Other Gospels

The Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is one of those extremely rare events that can be found in all four of the canonical Gospels (Aland #18 - Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34). They each understood this Divine affirmation to be a true prerequisite to the ministry of Jesus. But as with most stories that one or more of the Gospels share in common, the story has been modified in each Gospel to suit the intent of the individual writer. If we read the texts in parallel, we can more readily notice the unique emphasis that each individual Evangelist has given to his account.

Matt. 3:13-17	Mark 1:9-11	Luke 3:21-22	John 1:29-34
13 "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.	9 "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee	21 "Now when all the people were baptized,	29 "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."
16 And when Jesus was baptized,	and was baptized by John in the Jordan.	and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,	

immediately he went up from the water,	And when he came up out of the water,		And John bore witness:
and behold, the heavens were opened to him,	immediately he saw the heavens being torn open	the heavens were opened,	
and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;	and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.	and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove;	"I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."" (John 1:29–34 ESV)
and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."" (Matthew 3:13–17 ESV)	And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."" (Mark 1:9–11 ESV)	and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."" (Luke 3:21–22 ESV)	

Technically, the only accurate way to comment on the minor editorial differences between the Gospels is of course to work with the original language texts. (One may consult such a parallel in the Aland Synopsis.) But the ESV has done a good job translating in a way that these differences appear in translation as well for the most part, so we simply share their translation here, in parallel format. In this synoptic presentation, we have highlighted the different editorial emphases and Gospel traditions with a variety of colors. These can be explained in the following legend;

Legend of Synoptic Relations

- Blue represents the Triple Tradition (The Markan Material Shared also by Matt, Luke, or both)
- Red represents Double Tradition (The Material shared by Matthew and Luke, but not Mark - sometimes called Q)
- Green Represents material unique to Mark (The Markan Single Tradition)
- Yellow represents material unique to Luke (The Lukan Single Tradition, or Special L)
- Grey represents material unique to Matthew (The Mathean Single tradition, or Special M)

Closely examining the different ways each Evangelist goes about telling this story reveals much. We may note several relevant points.

- Mark sets out the account simply. His "was baptized" allows the baptism to unfold before the reader as Mark sets out the scene. He uses the common "and it came to pass" of his normal narrative storytelling. He also fixes the time as "in those days", a common phrase for him (Mark 1:9; 8:1; 13:17; 13:24). This more specific temporal element will be dropped by both Mathew and Luke. Almost everything else that Mark writes will be picked up and used, either by Matthew, or by Luke, or by both.

- Mark presents the heavenly Voice, and the descent of the Spirit, as being a more subjective event only experienced by Jesus. When "he came" up out of the water, immediately "he saw" the heavens opened, and "he saw" the Spirit descending. Mark's use of the third person makes this an event that seems like a private experience of Jesus, in which the crowds do not share (though one which, apparently, John could observe). To highten this idea even more, in Mark, the Voice from heaven speaks directly to Jesus, in the second person. "You" are my beloved son, with "you" I am well pleased.

- Mark uses the violent phrase "ripped open" to describe the heavens opening, a word both Mathew and Luke modify to sound softer.

- Mark speaks of the Spirit coming "into" Jesus, while both Matthew and Luke both have the Spirit coming "upon" Jesus (a point obscured in the ESV translation, and thus sadly not marked in red above).

- In contrast, Matthew adds a second mention of the fact that it was "to John to be baptized" that Jesus came, so that his account emphasizes the baptism by John, by mentioning it twice.

- Matthew also, together with Luke, changes the wording that Mark used to describe the heavens opening. The phrase Mark used means, "ripped open." But both Matthew and Luke, together, have changed this phrase to a much more mild one that simply means that the heavens opened. Because they both make the exact same change, it is sometimes suggested that their shared source/sources must have had this passage, and contained this language. This is possible, but cannot be said for certain. Bock explains that, "This may well suggest that Matthew and Luke are independently agreeing with one another here. There is no need to appeal to an additional source for Matthew and Luke" (Bock, Luke 1:1-9:50, BECNT, pg. 333).

- More substantially, Matthew has added the long section from Matt. 3:14-15 into the narrative. This element isn't known in the other Gospels. And it speaks powerfully to the historical reliability of the account. Even the most skeptical scholars accept that this story of Jesus being baptized by John is historical (see Marshall, Luke, NIGTC pg. 150-151 for details). Even those who regard as fabrication almost every account in the Gospels are forced to acknowledge that this account took place, and the reason is what is known as *the criterion of embarrassment.* Just think about it. John had been preaching a baptism of repentance. This is a baptism associated with repentance from *sin*. Those being baptized are patently admitting to their sinfulness, and renouncing their former sinful life while expressing allegiance to God. And yet Jesus comes to this baptism, and Jesus is baptized with a baptism that is explicitly for *sinners*. Further, this baptism by John suggest that Jesus is submitting to John as though Jesus were the lesser figure. This is scandalous to Christian thought! If the Church were in the habit of inventing stories about Jesus, they would surely not invent one like this! This story is rather something of an embarrassment that must be explained. The only reason for recording it is that it did in fact happen, and was part of the authentic Jesus tradition. But Matthew's addition makes it clear that the Church struggled with the story, and realized how easily it could miscommunicate, and could imply that Jesus was a sinner, and lower than John. Matthew thus adds a clarifying subsection, wherein John and Jesus both acknowledge that Jesus is the greater one, and that his baptism isn't related to any personal sin of Jesus.

- Further, Matthew retains Mark's claim that the heavens were opened to Jesus alone, adding the "to him" that makes this an experience unique to Jesus. But unlike Mark, and unlike Luke, Matthew changes the person in which the heavenly Voice speaks. It now no longer speaks *to* Jesus in the second person of private direct address, but *about* Jesus to the crowds in the public third person. "This is the one" rather than "you are the one," and "in whom" rather than "in you." For Matthew, while the opened heavens and anointing of the Spirit may have been a more private experience of Jesus, the Voice from heaven needed to be a more public declaration in order to authenticate Jesus on the wider scene, and in which even Matthew's readers could then hear this declaration about who Jesus is being made to them as well. Bock notes that, "It is easer to see Matthew being responsible for a single change than to see two authors independently making the same change. The nature of the event emerges. Jesus had a private experience of the Spirit, but it was not an entirely private or internal vision, for John the Baptist also could testify to the event [John 1:33-4]." Matthew also adds the suggestion that the Spirit, "rested on him."

- Luke, on the other hand, has singularly added the phrase that, "all the people were baptized." As we have seen and will see again, Luke is intent on showing that Jesus is the Savior, not only of the Jewish People, but of "all flesh," offering a salvation that is for "all." Thus, since the baptism of Jesus points to the solidarity of Jesus with humanity, Luke has emphasized that this identification is with "all" of humanity.

- Luke further adds the note that after his baptism, Jesus was praying. While in Mark the heavens open immediately upon his coming up out of the water, in Luke, the heavens seem to open as a response to the prayer of Jesus. This is in keeping with the emphasis that Luke will have throughout the Gospel and Acts on prayer and its power. Prayer precedes a number of important events in Jesus' life for Luke (the choosing of the twelve, 6:12; Peter's confession, 9:18; the Transfiguration, 9:29; the Lord's prayer, 11:1; and Gethsemane, 22:41; etc.).

Reading Vertically - Luke And His Inspired Intent

Having read the passage "horizontally" to note the different ways the Evangelists handle the story, we are now in a position to read the passage "vertically" to see what Luke specifically intends to communicate through the story as he tells it in his own context. So let us look at his inspired account, that in it we may hear the Voice of the Spirit, who I believe ultimately inspired it to speak to the Church.

The Spirit's Descent - Luke 3:21-22a

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,
the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him
in bodily form, like a dove"
(Luke 3:21-22a)

Luke begins with his statement that all the people are coming to John to be baptized. And Jesus comes too. He identifies with all of humanity by being baptized as they are. He is one of them. But after his baptism, while praying, the Divine action and Voice make it clear that while he stands in their place as one of them, he is also decidedly *not* one of them. Luke writes to say something about who Jesus is, and what he has been sent to do. The questions of Jesus' identity and purpose finds their answer in two elements of the narrative.

First, the descent of the Spirit. Luke alone gives the descent of the Spirit a concrete expression by explaining that he was *"in bodily form like a dove."* This doesn't mean an actual dove descended, but rather that the descent was soft and gentle, in the same *manner* in which a dove might descend. For Luke, this is a Divine anointing. Just as kings of old were to be anointed with an oil that represented the Spirit's presence and power, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit directly. Also, by the Spirit's descent and anointing, Luke makes it clear that the "coming one" that John had spoken of is Jesus (Luke 3:15-18), who is anointed with the Spirit, and will baptize others with the eschatological Spirit. Luke will in fact pick this idea up again repeatedly, as in Acts 10:37-38 in the sermon by Peter, who will preach that,

"...You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."
(Acts 10:37–38 ESV)

For Luke, this "anointing" of Jesus with the Spirit is probably the primary point of the Spirit's descent. The idea of "the heavens opening" is common biblical language for dramatic action by God (Ezekiel 1:1; Isaiah 24:18; 63:19; Gen. 7:11; Mal. 3:10). Even Stephan's vision that Luke will later narrate starts with "the heavens opening" (Acts 7:56). Darrell Bock explains the phrase when he writes,

> *"The picture is of God stepping out of heaven to address people, of God entering into their everyday world. This adds to the event's mood. Clearly God takes the initiative to show humanity the way to him."*
> (Bock, Luke 1:1-9:50, BECNT, pg. 337).

The Divine Testimony - Luke 3:22b

"and a voice came from heaven,

"You are my beloved Son;
with you I am well pleased.""
(Luke 3:21–22 ESV)

But the second way in which the identity and mission of Jesus are pointed to in the passage is by the *content* of the Voice. In a very real way, the grammar of the entire paragraph leads up to the declaration from heaven as its climax. In fact, Luke has far less interest in the baptism *per se* than he does in the anointing with the Spirit and the Voice from heaven. Green notes, "The purpose of the Divine voice in 3:22 is above all that of providing an unimpeachable sanction of Jesus with regard to his identity and mission." (Green, NICNT Luke, pg. 187). How does the Voice accomplish this? Not just by what it *says* so much as by *the language it uses* to say it. There is a great deal of discussion about precisely what images are evoked here, and for what purposes. But most see the Voice intentionally echoing two different OT passages.

First, the phrase *"you are my beloved Son"* is taken almost wholesale from the LXX (an ancient Greek translation of the OT) of Psalm 2:7. Psalm 2 is an enthronement psalm, read on the occasion of the installment of the Davidic King at his coronation. It restores hope in the midsts of evil gentile rule that one day the promise of the Davidic covenant will be fulfilled, and the righteous Ruler of God will reign on the throne. In framing his address to the Son in the language of Psalm 2, the Voice makes explicit that the "Son" he addresses is the promised King, the long hoped-for Messiah, who has come now as King. The Spirit has come upon him as the "anointing" that was promised to this King (Psalm 2:2). This is all straightforward, and right in keeping with what Luke has already claimed for Jesus. He is the promised Davidic Son (Luke 1:35; 2:49). To find this claim here again is not surprising, expect perhaps in that here it is spoken to Jesus, maybe for the first time.

But second, the passage also contains an allusion to Isaiah 42:1. In the latter section of Isaiah, the prophet pointed the people to a coming "Servant of the Lord" in whom they could find their hope. At times, Isaiah saw the people of Israel themselves as being this "servant." But at other times, the prophecy about the Servant seemed to stretch clearly beyond the time of Israel and onto a future individual. What was odd about this coming "Servant" was what was predicted for him in Isaiah's songs. He would be one who suffered immensely (Isaiah 53). He would be gentle, and would hear the cries of the oppressed. It was thus common in Judaism to think of several different "Messiahs" to come, who would fulfill what were apparently vastly different sets of expectations. But this Voice now combines in *one saying* two radically different strands of messianic expectation. Jesus is the Son who will rule with power on the Davidic Throne. But he is *also* the "Servant" who will suffer for his people. Isaiah had declared,

"Behold 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."
(Isaiah 42:1 ESV)

Jesus is seen here as being *"the Servant"* who is the one *"in whom my soul delights,"* and because of his anointing with the Spirit, being the one of whom God could say *"I have put my Spirit upon him."* All of these different Messianic strands are brought together in this single and incredibly important declaration to Jesus, which weaves together in a single tapestry strands that had long seemed disparate in Hebrew thought. And this raises the question not only of Jesus' identity, but also of Jesus' self-awareness of that identity.

Just Who Did Jesus Think He Was?

Luke has taken pains to show that Jesus has undergone a normal human development. He didn't always know everything - he learned by asking questions of the teachers (Luke 2:46-47). He, *"grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him"* (Luke 2:40 ESV). He, *"increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man"* (Luke 2:52 ESV). One cannot increase in wisdom if he starts with all of it. Luke has been passionate to affirm that Jesus is truly and fully human. But when did Jesus realize he was something (and someone) more than those around him? When did he gain the Divine self-conscience? Could Luke have written the words we've just quoted if he had been born with it? Nothing in the Gospels tells us directly (though some scholars have speculated at length).

I would suggest humbly that if one were to look for an event when the ambiguous awareness of Jesus became the certain resolve that would send him willingly and knowingly to his death in Jerusalem, there is no better event to look to than this one, at his baptism. Here we have direct revelation from the Father to the Son about his person, and his mission. Here, I suspect, Jesus came to realize what his followers would not understand until after his death and resurrection --that Jesus was the promised King. But he had not come to rule by killing his enemies - he had come to rule by dying for them as the suffering Servant of Isaiah. As Marshall explains, "The [historical] case that Jesus' ministry was preceded by some kind of 'call'-experience is strong...[and this] account may well express in concrete form the consciousness of divine calling with which he began his ministry..." (Marshall, NIGTC, Luke, pg. 151).

The Singer Who Finds His Song

Calvin Miller has written an absolutely soul-stirring retelling of the Jesus story in mythic tones. He envisions Jesus as the Tradesman-turned-Troubadour, sent to sing the Ancient Star-Song to the world of dying men who desperately need its rescue. Practically every chapter of his work can make the tender heart weep. He hints tantalizingly at the childhood of Jesus, and even suggestively whispers possibilities about the self-awareness of Jesus concerning his own identity. He has captured the ambiguities so well, I want to share a part of his work here. He opens his first chapter with the simple poetic statement, "For most who live, hell is never knowing who they are. The Singer knew and knowing was his torment."

> *When he awoke, the song was*
> *there.*
>
> *Its melody beckoned and begged*
> *him to sing it.*
>
> *It hung upon the wind and*
> *settled in the meadows where*
> *he walked.*

He knew its lovely words and
could have sung it all, but
feared to sing a song whose
harmony was far too perfect for
human ear to understand.

And still at midnight it
stirred him to awareness, and
with its haunting melody it
drew him with a curious mystery
to stand before an open window.

In rhapsody it played among the stars.

It rippled through Andromeda
and Deepened Vega's hues.

It swirled in heavy strains
from galaxy to galaxy and gave
him back his very fingerprint.

"Sing the song" the heavens
seemed to cry. "We never
could have been without the
melody that you alone can sing."

But he drew back, sighing
that the song they so
desired was higher than the earth.

And always in his agony of
longing and reluctance, the
atmosphere around him argued back.

"You, too, are higher than the
earth! You sang the higher
music once, before the oceans
ever crashed their craggy
coasts."

He braced himself upon a
precipice above the canyon floor,
and with the wind full upon his
face, he cried into the sky:

"Earthmaker, tell me
if I have the right
to sing..."

But then his final word trailed

off into gales.

The gull screamed.

"No," he thought, "only Earth-
maker is everlasting.
His alone must be the theme from
which sprung the world I
stand upon."

And so he only loved but never
sang the song.

Full well he knew that few
would ever see him as a singer
of so grand a piece.

He knew that they would say to him:

"You are no singer! And even
if you are you should sing the
songs we know."

And well he knew the penalty of
law. A dreamer could be ostracized

in hate for singing songs the
world had never heard.

Such songs had sent a thousand
singers to their death already.

And the song which dogged his
aching steps and begged him
pleadingly to sing it was
completely unfamiliar.

Only the stars and mountains
knew it. But they were old. And
man was new, and chained to
simple, useless rythmes; thus he
could not understand the majesty
that settled down upon him.

But daily now it played upon his
heart and swept his soul, until
the joy exploded his awareness --
crying near the edge of sanity,
"Sing....sing...SING!"

If the Voice that came from heaven can be seen as having settled some of that tortuous ambiguity that Jesus might have felt in seeking identity as a young boy, then I think Miller's marvelous recounting of the Baptism of Jesus by John captures what it meant that God spoke so clearly to him about the nature of his Messianic mission in those moments following his baptism and prayer. Miller recounts the sense of growing awareness that might have preceded those moments while Jesus served as a carpenter.

> *"He worked the wood and drove the pegs methodically. The shavings from the adze piled high upon the floor. 'Earthmaker, full of mercy,' he said, when evening had come, 'I am a tradesman!' 'No,' said the silent air, 'not a tradesman -- a troubadour instead!' 'A tradesman!' he said firmly as he smashed his mallet on the vise. 'A troubadour!' the silence thundered back."*

Miller opens the scene of the baptism with the poetic note,

> *"Two artists met one time within a little wood. Each brought his finest painting stroked by his complete uniqueness. When each revealed his canvas to the other -- they were identical.*
>
> *So, once in every solar system there are two fingerprints alike.*
>
> *But only once."*

And he recounts the scene as follows, with the Voice, the song, what it might have meant for Jesus, for who he was, and for what he had been sent to do. He feels the growing sense of purpose, the beckoning deep in his soul that we might imagine that Jesus must have felt; the beauty of a forerunner that Luke has made plain in juxtaposing the unequal ministries of John and Jesus; the deep sense of destiny, and purpose, that must have attended Jesus' own self-reflection prior to those moments. These are captured so well by Miller in the way that only poetry can accomplish. We end our comments on Jesus' baptism with these lyrically (and Christologically) beautiful words. They are well worth pondering;

His seeming madness made the music play a hundred times more loudly than before.

It lured him from his highland home.

He left his mallet broken on the vise and walked away.

Never had he been the way he walked, and yet his feet knew every step. He could not cease to marvel how they moved his body forward through the mist of circumstances which he vaguely knew by name.

His naked feet intrigued him, for they moved with a purpose which his mind had not yet measured. Besides, they each one wore a curious scar of some wound as yet unopened; yet they had been there long before his birth. What twist of meaning had Earthmaker given him, to scar his feet before he ever walked?

From the hills, he walked ever downward to the valley miles below.

Down, down, down -- until the vegetation thickened into shrubs, and the desert gave way to river jungles.

And there, where water lapped at his fatigue, he heard a singer, singing his compelling carols to the empty air.

The tradesman knew that it was just an earth song, for it was different from the Star-Song which begged him be its singer -- yet somehow like it.

The River Singer finished and

they walked into the trees.

"Are you the Troubadour, who
knows the Ancient Star-Song?"
the tradesman softly asked.

*"No, **you** are the Great Troubadour*
for whom the songless world,
so long has waited," the
River Singer said. "Sing, for many
years now, I have hungered
to hear the Ancient Star-Song..."

"I am a tradesman only..."

Then the River Singer waded out
into the water and beckoned
with his hand. Slowly
the tradesman followed.

They stopped waist-deep in
water. Their eyes swam and
they waited for the music
to begin.

It did.

The tradesman knew the River
Singer heard it too.

The water swirled around them
and the music surged.

Every chord seemed to fuse the
world in oneness.

They stood until the surging
current buried them in song.
It then receded and the music
died away.

And the river was once more a
simple river.

Then over that thin silver
stream the thunder pealed, and
a voice called from the sky
above...

> *"Tradesman! You are the Troubadour! Go*
> *now and sing!"*

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