

Resonance

A THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Vol 5.3 – The Holy Spirit

Why did Jesus get Baptized? An Exegesis of Luke 3:21-22

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Since Jesus is already God, why does he feel the need to get baptized? Why was Jesus' sonship announced through a voice from heaven after he was baptized? This paper seeks to directly engage with Luke 3:21-22, and address the issues it raises on whether the purpose of Jesus fulfilling the law of baptism is related to demonstrating his sonship, and the role the Holy Spirit plays in Jesus' baptism and announcement of sonship. First, investigation of Luke 3:21-22 will be performed through analyzing the text and translation, form and structure, grammatical and lexical data, literary and historical context, as well as biblical and theological data. Second, the analysis will be applied to life issues of the 21st century, and how Jesus' baptism is still relevant to our contemporary lives.

First, analyzing the text and translation of Luke 3:21-22 in English demonstrates that Jesus' baptism and declaration of his sonship occurred in a sequential manner. In Luke 3:21 on Jesus' baptism, the words used and word order between English translations did not present significant differences. While in Luke 3:22, after Jesus' baptism, NAS, KJV, and ESV used "my beloved son," NRS used "my son, the beloved," NIV used "my son, whom I love," MSG used "my son, chosen and marked by my love," while NET used "my one dear son." ESV and NET both explained the alternative word order "my son, the beloved" is also applicable for "my beloved son," and NET further explained that to phrase it in the alternative way has the intention of expressing "pertaining to one who is the only one of his or her class, but at the same time is particularly loved and cherished."^[i] The use of language in the English translation for this phrase demonstrates the close relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son in the announcement. NRS, NAS, NIV, KJV, and ESV stated "with/in you/thee I am well pleased," MSG stated "pride of my life," while NET stated "in you I take great delight." ESV and NET both noted that some manuscripts instead stated the alternative "(you are) beloved son; today I have begotten/fathered you", but NET stated that the weight of the manuscript testimony is against this reading.^[ii] UBS5 stated that the preferred variant "You are my beloved son, in you I am well pleased" has more witnesses than any of the other variants. For the choice between "with you I am well pleased" versus its alternative "today I have begotten/fathered you," NET's explanation weighs the manuscript testimony against the latter reading.^[iii] There is a possibility of a non-harmonistic reading changed to be in line with other Gospels (cf. Matthew 3:17 and Mark 1:11). In any case, if most of the translations chose to use the wording of "with you I am well pleased," and the alternative only at best made it into the translation notes of some translations, then it is more likely that the popular variant is closer to the original Gospels. The language here displays the oneness between God the Father and Christ the Son, seeing how God the Father is well pleased with Christ the Son in executing his will. The announcement of Jesus' sonship directly subsequent to his baptism establishes the logical link as it occurred sequentially. Nonetheless, considering the internal and external evidence reveals that Luke 3:21-22 does not

contain important variants that affected or altered the meaning of Jesus' baptism and the descending of the Holy Spirit.

Second, analyzing the form and structure of Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:21-22 also shows the relationship between his baptism and the announcement of his sonship. In analyzing the synthetic outline of Luke, it has been observed that Jesus' baptism is the turning point where he starts engaging in public ministry, especially through demonstrating his authority and origin. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* states that the structural components for the narrative can be separated by geography, with Jerusalem being the center point; thus the change of focus of the story from John the Baptist to Jesus at this point in Luke's account leads the readers towards the climax of the story, with Jesus traveling towards Jerusalem.^[iv] Outlining Luke 3:21-22 suggests that Luke 3:21a records the baptism of Jesus, while Luke 3:21b-3:22 records the response from heaven on Jesus' baptism. Jesus was baptized, and subsequently the heaven made responses regarding his baptism through opening, having the Holy Spirit visually descending, and a voice of God that speaks of Jesus' relationship with God the Father. The point of this passage is, through Jesus' baptism, to demonstrate the authority of Jesus and who vested him with the authority. The function of this passage in the narratives signifies the beginning of Jesus' ministry by establishing his endorsement from God the Father. The exegetical significance of this passage is the implication of the Trinity at work, since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all featured in this passage. At the same time, Jesus' participation of baptism with "all the people" reflects his being fully God and fully human.

Third, analyzing the grammatical and lexical data in Luke 3:21-22 demonstrates that the intent of the author in writing about Jesus' baptism is to illustrate him undergoing ritualistic washing to fulfill the law. Investigating the significance of Jesus' baptism demands diachronic study of the use of the word *baptizō* in the pericope. In 2 Kings 5:14, the translation in NASB is that Naaman "dipped himself" to be cleansed from leprosy as Elisha instructed him; while in Judith 12:7, the translation in NRSV is that Judith "bathed" in a spring in Holofernes' camp before she attempted to decapitate Holofernes. According to Lidell and Scott, *baptizō* could mean to dip in or under water; to be over head and ears in debt; to draw wine by dipping the cup in the bowl; or to baptize or to get oneself baptized.^[v] The meanings found through diachronic study exhibits meanings that vary significantly from the layman's understanding of the use of *baptizō* in Luke 3:21-22; thus synchronic study will be pursued to further investigate its meaning. Through synchronic study, *baptizō* is found to possibly mean to dip or to immerse; to cleanse or to purify by washing; to administer the rite of baptism or to undergo baptism,^[vi] to wash ceremonially for purpose of purification; to use water in a rite for purpose of renewing or establishing a relationship with God; or to cause someone to have an extraordinary experience similar to an initiatory water-rite.^[vii] The range of meanings according to the Greek New Testament lexicons are more narrow than the general Greek lexicons listed under the diachronic study, with ritualistic or ceremonial washing for the purpose of purification in the forefront of meanings. This is likely to be the intended meaning in the use of such in Luke 3:21-22. Luke's usage of *baptizō* in most occasions in Luke-Acts (ESV) is used to refer to ritualistic or ceremonial washing, yet in Luke 11:38, it is used to mean wash up before having a meal. In the parallel account of Jesus' baptism in the other Synoptic Gospels as well as other occurrence of the word in John, *baptizō* is used only to mean ritualistic or ceremonial washing. Context is always important in understanding a word, and in terms of context of this passage, it does not make sense to say that Jesus or the crowds in the river were merely washing before taking a meal

together. It makes more sense with regards to the context to say that they are going through a ritualistic purification. Given the comparison with Luke's use of *baptizō* in other instances in his work, as well as the parallel account of Jesus' baptism in the other Synoptic Gospels, it is safe to conclude that *baptizō* in the context of Luke 3:21-22 means to fulfill the law of undergoing a ritualistic purification, rather than the other meanings listed in diachronic or synchronic study. Jesus participated in the ritualistic or ceremonial cleansing because he wished to fulfill the law as well, which also explains the Holy Spirit coming down and God's voice speaking after Jesus' "*baptizō*."

Fourth, analyzing the literary and historical context of Luke illustrates that Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:21-22 conveys the author's intent to turn the focus from John the Baptist to Jesus. The author wrote in *Koine* Greek for both prose and poetry in Luke. The style of writing demonstrates that the author had the capacity to vary the style of expression to suit speakers and occasion, suggesting that the author had received good education, and had the resources to construct a convincing historical account with specific intention of building up from John the Baptist and pointing towards Jesus' ministry.^[viii] The implied readers are from a relatively heterogeneous community, are likely located in an urban center in the eastern Mediterranean within the Roman Empire; thus the author's writing is weaved together with the intent of conveying a message about Jesus through the cultural-historical context of the implied readers.^[ix] This is why the knowledge of Jewish liturgy and knowledge of those in political authority at the time is important in reading Luke, as knowing this background gives a more vibrant picture of the social fabric both at the time of Jesus and at the time of the author.^[x] Moreover, the central theme of Luke is to demonstrate God's great plan of salvation being fulfilled in Jesus, starting from Jesus' baptism with the presence of Holy Spirit, which continues to unfold through the Spirit-filled church in Luke-Acts.^[xi] How is this relevant for Jesus being baptized in Luke 3:21-22? Luke's readers should have knowledge of baptism's iconic meaning as a religious rite, as well as being aware that the evangelist has the ability to write in a way to convey his message so that Jesus' baptism signifies a starting point of his ministry through fulfilling the law.

Fifth, analyzing the biblical and theological data for Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:21-22 demonstrates that the Holy Spirit, rather than John the Baptist, plays an important role in Jesus' baptism. For the account of Jesus' baptism, there is not much selectivity involved, since it is found in all four Gospels, given the importance of the event. The adaptation in Luke revealed the author's focus of the baptismal account is on Jesus praying as the Spirit descends, and the sequence of events somewhat infers Jesus' role in giving the Holy Spirit to humankind. Matthew and Luke emphasized it is the "Holy Spirit" or "Spirit of God" descending, demonstrating the Trinity in action and stressing the motif of the Spirit. The heavens open refers to Isaiah 64:1, preparing the reader for the divine revelation to follow, and the descent of Holy Spirit marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.^[xii] On top of that, Luke added the Holy Spirit being in bodily form to establish that the Spirit is not a mere vague existence, but rather, a reality. The adaptation of this pericope aligns with the larger context of Luke-Acts, since the evangelist is known for emphasizing the Holy Spirit at work. The Holy Spirit is omnipresent throughout Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, while John the Baptist is not mentioned within this pericope. This signifies both the Holy Spirit's importance in Jesus' baptism, as well as moving John the Baptist away from the spotlight of the story as Jesus comes towards the center of the focus. In terms of the arrangement, it is interesting to observe that Luke focuses more on John the Baptist

and less on Jesus at the beginning, and makes a switch at this point: since John the Baptist is to prepare for the coming of Jesus' ministry, hence the literary account mirrors this reality as well. Through this pericope, Luke expresses a unique point of view that is different from Mark and Matthew: Luke is emphasizing a transfer of focus from John the Baptist to Jesus, focusing less on the baptismal event and more on Jesus' endowment of the Spirit and God the Father affirming his sonship.[xiii] John the Baptist's imprisonment removes him from the stage as Jesus' ministry begins, since the focus of Jesus' baptism should not be the presence of John the Baptist, but rather, the presence of the Spirit.[xiv] This effectively shifts the readers' attention from John the Baptist to Jesus and his interaction with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Jesus' baptism as recorded in Luke 3:21-22, being applied to life issues of the 21st century, reveals that the focus of the passage is not actually on baptism, but rather, Christology and pneumatology, as it seeks to demonstrate Jesus' identity and mission as well as to highlight the work of the Holy Spirit in anointing people for ministry.[xv] Jesus' baptism is relevant to contemporary culture because it demonstrates Jesus' sonship and authority, while at the same time his surrender to the law of baptism begs for us to reconsider our individualism and why we are unwilling to submit when even Jesus with all the authority is willing to do so. The significance of this passage was Jesus' personal experience of prayer and descent of Holy Spirit after his baptism, reflecting his communion with God and begins his public career establishing his devotional attitude towards the Father, which was consistent with the end of his ministry, being full of prayer and submission.[xvi] Prayer is frequently an occasion for divine revelation and instruction in Luke-Acts, and the context in which Holy Spirit is given. For us in the 21st century, we should mirror our Savior in that our work and ministry should be based out of our relationship with God through prayer and devotion, instead of depending on our own abilities alone.

The different analytical approaches demonstrate respectively that Jesus' baptism led to the announcement of his sonship, the author's intent recording Jesus' baptism at this location in this account of the Gospel is to shift the focus from John the Baptist to Jesus' ministry, as well as the role the Holy Spirit plays in Jesus' baptism and announcement of his sonship. As this paper has demonstrated, Jesus was baptized to fulfill God the Father's law, and his sonship was announced as the Holy Spirit descended, bringing together the three Persons in Trinity. The saying "too cool for school"—an attitude common to the 21st century individuals, including churchgoers, believing that they are above the law—does not apply to Jesus, and neither should it be applied to those who truly wish to follow him.

Meet the Author



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Ann Gillian Chu grew up in Hong Kong as a Canadian, and graduated from the University of Edinburgh with Master of Arts (Honours) in English Language. In a turn of events, she became a Fellow of Chartered Certified Accountant by profession. She completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Theology with the Alliance Bible Seminary in Hong Kong, and graduated from Regent College in Vancouver, B.C. with a Master of Divinity. She is now completing her Doctor of Philosophy (Divinity) with the University of St. Andrews.

Recommended Reading

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Endnotes

[i] NET Bible, <https://net.bible.org/>, accessed on February 3, 2016.

[ii] NET Bible, <https://net.bible.org/>, accessed on February 3, 2016.

[iii] NET Bible, <https://net.bible.org/>, accessed on February 3, 2016.

[iv] Luke Timothy Johnson, "Luke" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 4 K-N* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 410.

[v] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1996), 305-6.

[vi] William D. Mounce, *the Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 112.

[vii] Frederick William Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 2000), 164-165.

[viii] John T. Carroll, *Luke: a Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1-4.

[ix] Carroll, *Luke*, 1-4.

[x] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 186-258.

[xi] Mark Strauss, "Luke" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 318-515.

[xii] Sheila Klassan-Wiebe, "Luke 3:15-17, 21:22," *Interpretation* (1994): 397-401.

[xiii] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 185-187.

[xiv] Richard J. Erickson, "The Jailing of John and the Baptism of Jesus: Luke 3:19-21," *JETS* 36:4 (Dec 1993): 455-466.

[xv] Klassan-Wiebe, "Luke 3:15-17, 21:22."

[xvi] Shirley J. Case, "The Circumstances of Jesus' Baptism: An Exposition of Luke 3:21," *The Biblical World* 31:4 (April 1908); 300-302.