

## JESUS AND HIS BAPTISM

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### Summary

*'Baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire' on the lips of John the Baptist referred to the coming Kingdom in terms of death and resurrection in which the nation would be cleansed and reborn. The experience of Jesus at the Jordan convinced him that he must not only proclaim the coming Kingdom in the power of the Spirit but bear God's judgement on behalf of the nation (Lk. 12:49-50). On the cross he underwent the baptism of fire and received the baptism of the Spirit at his resurrection. At Pentecost the church, like Jesus at Jordan, was empowered to proclaim the coming Kingdom and called to share in the sufferings of Christ before Jesus returns to baptise the world in fire and the Holy Spirit.*

### I. Introduction

It is a fact of history that the first Christians came to understand the Cross as an atoning sacrifice and from a very early point in time. It was not inevitable that they should do so. Granted that they believed Jesus had been raised from the dead, there was no necessity for them to reason from resurrection to atonement, since they might simply have said that the resurrection proves that Jesus is victorious over his enemies, as many Easter hymns still do. The fact that almost from the first they declared that Christ died for our sins requires an historical explanation, and the best place to seek one must be in the words spoken of or by Jesus himself in his life time. As George Beasley-Murray says:

I would ask...what there was in the ministry of Jesus which led to the interpretation of Easter in terms of his exaltation as Lord and Messiah at God's right hand and his death as redemptive. Appearances of a beloved teacher after his death would by no means necessarily have that significance, and certainly it would

not follow from the reconstructions of Jesus' ministry offered by some scholars of late.<sup>1</sup>

As an example of the scholars to whom he refers we may cite E.P. Sanders, whose presentation of the historical Jesus confines itself to explaining why the Jewish and Roman authorities came to execute Jesus, without discussing how that death might figure among Jesus' own self-understanding and aims.<sup>2</sup> This is unsatisfactory not just from the standpoint of Christian theology, but also historically. If the apostolic preaching of the Cross was a theological development, as Sanders would say,<sup>3</sup> it is likely to have been the development of something that was there in the ministry of Jesus before Easter.

This article explores one strand of the evidence in what is of course a complex enquiry. To explain the shape of its argument, I would ask the reader to imagine a river from the middle of which protrudes an ancient finger of stonework, once the central support of a bridge. The bridge has long since disappeared, but the stones in the river are irrefutable evidence of its existence, and if you search the banks on either side you can see where the two great spans came to rest. The finger of stone is the saying of Jesus about fire and baptism which stands as an isolated fragment of unimpeachable authenticity in the middle of Luke's gospel (Lk. 12:49-50). The evidence on the bank further from us is the prophecy of John the Baptist about Spirit and fire, and on the bank nearer to us the signs that accompanied the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. This article will seek to reconstruct the spans in between, John to Jesus and Jesus to Pentecost, and the connecting links will be found to be baptism and fire.

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<sup>1</sup>G.R. Beasley-Murray, 'The Kingdom of God and Christology in the Gospels', in J.B. Green and M. Turner (eds.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 25.

<sup>2</sup>E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>Sanders, *Historical Figure*, 308, n. 10.

## II. Fire and Spirit: The Expectation of the Baptist

We may begin with the expectation of John the Baptist, reported in all the Gospels that the Coming One would baptise in the Holy Spirit, or rather, as Matthew and Luke have it, in the Holy Spirit and fire. The authenticity of the saying in its Q form is widely accepted.<sup>4</sup> ‘Baptising in the Holy Spirit’ does not appear to have survived very long as a description of Christian experience, however the phrase is understood.<sup>5</sup> Where it does not actually appear on the lips of John, it is only used to draw an explicit contrast between John’s baptising and the activity of Jesus to which it points (Acts 1:5; 11:16), and does not appear to have had an independent life. It is therefore not likely to have been read back into the story of John.

We should also follow most recent scholarship in understanding the Spirit here as a gracious gift and not as a destructive wind.<sup>6</sup> With James Dunn, we should see John as a preacher of good news, and reject the view, popular earlier in this century, that the Baptist spoke only of judgement. The Old Testament provides ample warrant for seeing the Spirit as the bringer of cleansing and life—notably Isaiah 44:3 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, 37:1-14—and it seems much more likely that the Baptist was expecting the Coming One to fulfil these prophecies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>See R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 275, n. 39 and the literature cited there, and R.P. Menzies, *The Development of Early Christian Pneumatology* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 135-36.

<sup>5</sup>Outside the Gospels and Acts the only possible reference is 1 Cor. 12:13, though personally I think, with G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962) 167-71, against G.D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 175-83, that this refers to baptism (in water) to which the one Spirit has led and through which the one Spirit is promised.

<sup>6</sup>J.D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970) 9; Menzies, *Development*, 140; Webb, *John*, 275, n. 40 and the literature cited there.

<sup>7</sup>The title ‘Holy Spirit’ might seem an obvious sign of later Christian editing, but ‘holy Spirit’ is well attested in Old Testament (e.g. Ps. 51:11) and DSS (e.g. 1QS 4:20-1); see Webb, *John*, 276-77. John’s phrase was probably ‘spirit of holiness’, as in the primitive christological confession of Rom. 1:3-4. Menzies, *Development*, 136-40, sees the Spirit rather as an anointing for a prophetic ministry by which the nation will be cleansed through the separation of the righteous from the wicked. This is in line with his basic thesis that in intertestamental Judaism the Spirit is not credited with soteriological or cleansing

On the other hand there is no doubt that 'fire' is a symbol of judgement and of wrath. It is widely so used in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature.<sup>8</sup> Moreover God's wrath is repeatedly said to be 'kindled', as if it were fire. It is true that fire is also spoken of as cleansing or purifying, notably in Isaiah 4:4 and Malachi 3:2-3, but in both places it is the nation, or some body within it, that is cleansed and cleansed by the separation and destruction of what is evil within it. This fits well with John's next words: 'the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' So fire in itself is symbolic of the destructive consequences of judgement. The word 'baptise' is of course used here metaphorically in the sense of 'overwhelm', as it is often enough in contemporary Greek literature, the metaphor being suggested by the literal use of baptise with which it is contrasted.<sup>9</sup> So John is saying that the Coming One will pour out in full measure the Spirit of the holy God, as foretold by the prophets, together with the fire of God's wrathful judgement against evil, as expected in the 'last days'. In other words he proclaimed the imminent Day of the Lord which establishes the Kingdom of God.

Who then receives this 'baptism'? A widely held view has been that the righteous are to be baptised in Spirit and the wicked in fire,<sup>10</sup> but in his 1970 study Dunn challenged this, insisting that John spoke of only one baptism administered by the Coming One to all alike (ὑμᾶς), though with differing results. The righteous would be purified in the fiery Spirit, and the wicked consumed. Two studies that appeared twenty years later disagreed with this conclusion. Robert Menzies showed that one of the key verses to which Dunn had

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functions, but Menzies seems to ignore the witness of Is. 44:3 and Ezk. 36: 25-27, 37:1-14, as Dunn pointed out in his review, *EQ* 66 (1994) 175.

<sup>8</sup>*E.g.* Am. 7:4; Ezk. 38:22; Mal. 4:1; En. 90:24-27; Ps. Sol. 15:6; 1QS 2:8; 3:27-32.

<sup>9</sup>J.D.G. Dunn, 'The Birth of a Metaphor—Baptised in Spirit', *ExpT* 89 (1977) 134-36; G. Delling, 'ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ ΒΑΠΤΙΣΘΗΝΑΙ', *NovT* 2 (1957) 100; A. Oepke, 'βαπτω κτλ', *TDNT* I (ET; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 530; Jos. *BJ* 3.368; 423 (of ships foundering); 4.137 (of a city overwhelmed with disaster); *AJ* 10.169 (of a person overcome by drink).

<sup>10</sup>See Dunn, *Baptism*, 10, n. 8 for a list of scholars holding this view.

appealed (Is. 4:4) referred not to the purification of penitent individuals, but, as we have seen, to the cleansing of the nation by the removal of the wicked from within it.<sup>11</sup> The whole thrust of the winnowing metaphor, which he understood to refer to the activity of the Coming One, was the separation of the righteous and the wicked with a separate destiny for each. Robert Webb independently reached the same conclusion, but refined the significance of the winnowing. John speaks of the Coming One as a farmer with a *πτύον* in his hand, and a *πτύον* is not the fork with which grain and chaff are separated but the shovel by which each is removed to its proper place, grain to the barn and chaff to the fire. So it is John who is the winnower, winnowing by his preaching, the threshing floor is the land of Israel, which is cleansed by the action of destroying the wicked in the fire.<sup>12</sup> These scholars agree in seeing Spirit and fire as the experience of the righteous and wicked respectively, and the cleansing as directed not to individuals but to the nation.<sup>13</sup> The recipient of this double ‘baptism’ is thus Israel, and the fire stands for God’s wrath against her sins.

It is all very well to liken God’s wrath to fire, but to what reality does the metaphor refer? What is this fire, and what form might John or his hearers have expected God’s wrath to take? There is a remarkable silence on this point among the scholars I have consulted. Dunn refers to ‘the messianic woes’, citing a number of passages in apocalyptic literature all as rich in symbolism as the words of the verse before us.<sup>14</sup> Menzies says simply that, ‘The “fire” is the destructive wrath of God which will consume the unrighteous.’<sup>15</sup> But what are we supposed to be thinking of? Lightning? Webb speaks vaguely of ‘some form of military

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<sup>11</sup>Menzies, *Development*, 138.

<sup>12</sup>Webb, *John*, 295-300.

<sup>13</sup>B.F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979) 118, had earlier reached a similar conclusion: ‘If it is Israel that is judged, it is Israel that is saved. But as judgement means the burning of the chaff, saved Israel is, in respect of its collective selfhood, a remnant.’

<sup>14</sup>Dunn, ‘Metaphor’, 135.

<sup>15</sup>Menzies, *Development*, 139.

endeavour in which [the Coming One] fought against and defeated the enemies of the righteous,' suggesting the removal of the Roman occupying forces may be in mind.<sup>16</sup> This is more to the point, but as it stands it suffers from the fatal objection that John clearly envisaged judgement falling on Israel, or at least the wicked within her, and not on the Romans. Can we be more precise?

So much discussion of wrath has been focused on the character of God (*e.g.* what it means to say that God has wrath, in what respects God's wrath is like ours and how wrath can be reconciled with love) that it is easily overlooked that wrath in the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature is frequently used to refer not so much to something in God but to the outworking of that something among men. If 'fire' is a metaphor for wrath, 'wrath' itself is often a metaphor for disaster, especially for death. 'Wrath', that is to say, is an *interpretation* of earthly events and not a straightforward description of them. In the Old Testament, according to Eichrodt, 'Any misfortune can be regarded as the work of divine wrath.'<sup>17</sup> Similarly Fichtner: '[The prophets] interpret national oppression and defeat, both past and present, as the sway of Yahweh's wrath manifested to Israel in individual blows.'<sup>18</sup> An excellent example of this is provided by the refrain in Isaiah chapter 9 and 10: 'For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still' (Is. 9:12, 17, 21, and 10:4). The context makes plain that the reference is to invasion and war, so that Assyria, the invading power, is called 'the rod of my anger' (10:5).

Wrath continues to be closely associated with death, its consequence and outworking, in the intertestamental literature, whether the reference is to the consequences of the primal sin or to disasters occurring in the course of history. For example:

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<sup>16</sup>Webb, *John*, 303.

<sup>17</sup>W. Eichrodt, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (ET; London: SCM, 1961) 259.

<sup>18</sup>J. Fichtner, 'ὀργή (in the Old Testament)', *TDNT* V (ET; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 400.

Adam said to Eve, 'Why have you wrought destruction among us and brought upon us great wrath, which is death gaining rule over all our race?' (Ap. Mos. 14:2).<sup>19</sup>

Here we note that wrath is defined not as an attribute of God, but as the punishment inflicted, death itself. Again, Levi recalling the fate of the people of Shechem says:

This is how they treated the nomadic people, seizing their wives and murdering them. But the wrath of God ultimately came upon them (T. Lev. 6:11).

God's wrath on that occasion, we may recall, took the form of human revenge, Levi himself being the instrument of destruction. The phrase reminds us of Paul's cryptic comment in 1 Thessalonians 2:16, which also most probably refers to some historical disaster (recent or imminently expected<sup>20</sup>) interpreted as divine anger. The same perspective is found in the Psalms of Solomon. For Israel to be handed over to the Gentiles is seen as the expression of God's great anger (Ps. Sol. 7:3-5). Pompey's capture of Jerusalem is understood as a cup of divine judgement (8:14; cf. 17:11-12). God's anger is once again spoken of as a flame of fire and its historical expression as famine, sword and death (15:4, 7).

Above all it is the Maccabean literature that demonstrates this point most clearly. It is well known that in this literature the deaths of the martyrs are interpreted as the means by which God's wrath could be turned away from Israel.

I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the

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<sup>19</sup>Apocalypse of Moses is the name given to the Greek text of the document whose Latin text is known as the Life of Adam and Eve. The Hebrew original is dated to between 100 BC. and 200 AD.; the Greek text is dated before 400 AD. See *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. Charlesworth (London: Darton, 1985) vol. 2, 252.

<sup>20</sup>This depends in part on the meaning of ἔφθασεν, for which see C.C. Caragounis, 'Kingdom of God, Son of Man and Jesus' Self-understanding', *TynB* 40 (1989) 20-23.

Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation (2 Macc. 7:37-8).<sup>21</sup>

In similar vein it is said of Judas Maccabeus that 'he turned away wrath from Israel' (1 Macc. 3:8), though this was not by giving his own life but because he 'destroyed the ungodly out of the land'. In this he resembled Phinehas (Num. 25:11) of whom God said:

Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites.

In the case of Phinehas, God's wrath manifested itself as a plague that killed twenty-four thousand. In the case of the Maccabees, God's wrath refers to a time of intense religious persecution, including the burning of sacred books and the killing of those who adhered to the law and the mothers who had their children circumcised. The passage concludes:

But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their heart not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or profane the holy covenant; and they did die. Very great wrath came upon Israel. (1 Macc. 1:62)

Interestingly, *REB* translates this last sentence: 'Israel lay under a reign of terror.' While that is obviously an extremely unsatisfactory translation of the Greek, since it conceals from the English reader exactly the theological interpretation the writer was at pains to make, it does accurately describe in historical terms what was going on. The writer believes that this time of tribulation is in some way an expression of God's holy displeasure at the sins of his people, but the word 'wrath' in this context refers not to the disposition of God but to the painful experience of his people, namely to a reign of terror brought about by foreign troops.

Returning to John the Baptist, I am suggesting that by 'fire' John was referring to God's wrath, and that by 'wrath' he will have

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<sup>21</sup>The Bible translation in use throughout this article is the *NRSV*.

had in mind a time of 'great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be' (Mt. 24:21 *cf.* Dn. 12:1). The suffering that would overwhelm the nation would take the form not of heavenly thunderbolts but of historically experienced troubles, such as war, famine and the persecution of the faithful at the hands of foreign armies. It does not seem to me an objection to this interpretation that the Baptist ascribes the fiery baptism to the Coming One. In the first place it is well attested that the Kingdom of God was to be ushered in by acts of judgement and times of trouble sometimes called 'the messianic woes' or 'the birth pains of the Messiah'.<sup>22</sup> Second, although John expected the arrival of an agent of God rather than God himself he ascribes to him functions normally exercised only by God,<sup>23</sup> and it is characteristic of Jewish thought to attribute directly to God actions that have a secondary human cause. Third, if the coming of the Messiah is the occasion for God to release his wrath and pour out his blessings it is quite natural for John to ascribe these activities directly to the Messiah. Finally, Jesus himself speaks of bringing not peace but a sword (Mt. 10:34 // Lk. 12:51), although it is clear that the sword will not be in hands of Jesus himself. The saying refers to the effect of his ministry, not to the ministry itself, and the same may very well be true in the case of the Baptist's prediction.

I conclude that John was a proclaimer of the imminent Kingdom, exactly as Matthew says he was (Mt. 3:2). In agreement with the prophets of Israel, but especially Ezekiel, he saw this in terms of a mighty outpouring of the Spirit, bringing cleansing from sin, new hearts, national resurrection, a mighty river flowing for the healing of the land, but he also saw that the coming of the Kingdom would be ushered in by unparalleled times of national distress through which God would clear away the wicked and impenitent from the face of the land. God would bring this about by sending his messenger, someone

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<sup>22</sup>D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM, 1964) 271-76, cites in particular Jub. 23:13-21, and notes that 'One evident sign which appears in practically every account is that of fearful *war* in which nation will rise up against nation' (274).

<sup>23</sup>Webb, *John*, 282-88.

like the messianic figure of Psalms of Solomon 17 perhaps, except that where the Psalm sees this in terms of purging Jerusalem from Gentiles who trample her to destruction, John by the very stance of his ministry knew that the fire was directed at Israel herself.

### **III: Fire and Spirit: The Vocation of Jesus**

Our evidence is that at least one person so understood John—Jesus himself, as in the cryptic logion in Luke 12:49-50:

I came to bring fire to the earth,  
and how I wish it were already kindled!  
I have a baptism with which to be baptised,  
and what stress I am under until it is completed.

The authenticity of these words is widely accepted for a number of reasons, such as their strongly Semitic language and style, the riddling obscurity of the saying, its dissimilarity from early Christian preaching, and the fact that each part is attested elsewhere in the Jesus tradition, the ‘fire’ saying in the Gospel of Thomas (10, 16) and the ‘baptism’ saying in Mark 10:38.<sup>24</sup>

That fire here also refers to judgement, and that Jesus has accepted as his own the role ascribed by the Baptist to the Coming One as we have explained it, is confirmed by the words that immediately follow: ‘Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division’ (Lk. 12:51; *cf.* Mt. 10:34). Jesus goes on to speak of a time of division and social dissolution typical of times of persecution, or war, especially civil war (51-53) through which Jesus saw that judgement would fall on a nation that rejected the call of God through him. Witherington comments:

In these utterances Jesus is going beyond John, not merely proclaiming judgment’s coming but also seeing himself as the one who will ‘cast fire on the land’, causing division, decision, and

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<sup>24</sup>I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 545; B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 121; Dunn, ‘Metaphor’, 137.

finally judgement of those who do not respond properly.<sup>25</sup>

That might seem a large conclusion to draw from one saying of Jesus, if it stood alone, but the verse does not stand alone. A great deal of Jesus' teaching looks forward to an expected time of judgement and sees it in terms of war and military disaster. Like the prophets before him, Jesus used a great deal of eschatological language and imagery that tend to suggest to the Christian reader that he is talking about the end of the world and of events still future to us. But as George Caird never tired of showing, prophetic discourse that appears to be talking about the end of the world has in fact a referent much nearer to hand in historical events expected within the prophet's own world and life time, events which because of their eternal consequences could rightly be described as 'world shattering'.<sup>26</sup> Caird notes how in Luke 17 a depiction of eschatological judgement contains within it a warning to a man on the rooftop not to go back indoors to collect his possessions, showing that Jesus has in mind the destruction of Jerusalem not the Parousia. He goes on to ask:

Is it possible that Jesus used eschatological language, not because he thought that the world was shortly coming to an end but because he believed that through his ministry Israel was being compelled to face a decision of eternal consequences, a decision between the fulfilment and the final negation of her national calling as the people of God?<sup>27</sup>

Other passages of Luke's gospel make it plain that Jesus indeed expected God's judgement to come on the land as a result of its response to his message, and that this judgement would be visited on Israel through human instruments and earthly trouble. Luke 19:41-44, for instance, reads:

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<sup>25</sup>Witherington, *Christology*, 123.

<sup>26</sup>This insight is developed by N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992) 282-86.

<sup>27</sup>G.B. Caird, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Penguin, 1963) 198.

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying 'If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts round you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognise the time of your visitation from God.

Similarly, Luke 21:20-24 remembers Jesus' expectation of God's judgement upon Jerusalem in this way:

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Moreover, in Luke 23:28-31 we have a prophetic oracle of judgement on Jerusalem that brings together stock apocalyptic imagery<sup>28</sup> with a clear implication of fire (when the wood is dry it will *burn*). These passages are a sufficient indication that Jesus understood himself, in line with the Baptist's prophecy, as one who would cast fire on the earth (or land).

Jesus foresaw the judgement that his ministry and the response would provoke, but he also saw something else: he was not simply to be the dispenser of judgement, nor even the unwilling cause of it, but must also submit to it himself. It is generally agreed that the reference to 'baptism' in the second part of the saying (Lk. 12:50) cannot be taken literally, either with reference to Jesus' baptism at the

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<sup>28</sup>'They will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; cf. Ho. 10:8; Rev. 6:16.

hands of John (which was now in the past) or to Christian baptism. Almost certainly it must be taken as a metaphor for intense or overwhelming suffering, the image of flood waters being a well-established metaphor for judgement, like fire and sometimes combined with it in the Old Testament.<sup>29</sup> We have already had reason to note the metaphorical use of βαπτίζω in Josephus for overwhelming disaster.<sup>30</sup> If this is right, then in the first part of this saying we have Jesus speaking of himself as initiating judgement, and in the second of undergoing it, and it is very widely held that in this saying we have a unique insight into the mind of Jesus, which shows him both expecting death and seeing it as in some sense vicarious.<sup>31</sup> Dunn is typical of this understanding of Jesus' words:

Jesus came to cast fire on the earth, and how he wishes it were already kindled *on himself*. How he longs for the baptism, *which he came to administer*, to be accomplished on himself. This baptism is undoubtedly to be linked with the cup (of wrath) of Luke 22:42f. Thus we may say that for Luke Jesus' ministry as Servant and Representative is consummated by his suffering the messianic baptism of fire on behalf of his people.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, this is not the only place in the gospels where Jesus speaks of his death in this way, but for the reasons given it is the most difficult to explain away as a reflection of early Christian preaching.

We may well wonder from where this insight came to Jesus. No doubt the increasing hostility convinced him that he would share the fate of all God's prophets (Lk. 13:33). Clearly his tears over Jerusalem show him to be deeply concerned for the fate of his people should they reject the gospel of the Kingdom, so that like Moses (Ex. 32:30-2) he would take this punishment on himself, if he could. No

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<sup>29</sup>Ps. 66:12; Is. 30:27-28; 43:2. See G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 249-50.

<sup>30</sup>See n. 9 above.

<sup>31</sup>Delling, 'ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ', 110; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 75; *idem*, *Kingdom*, 250; Dunn, *Baptism*, 42; *idem*, 'Metaphor', 137-38; Meyer, *Aims*, 213-17; Witherington, *Christology*, 123-24.

<sup>32</sup>Dunn, *Baptism*, 42.

doubt as has often been suggested his meditation on the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah led him to see his vocation in terms of vicarious suffering, but according to the Gospels the fountain head and origin of all such ideas lay in the experience of Jesus at the Jordan. For Jesus was baptised by John, as Jeremias says, 'in order to take his place among the eschatological people of God that the Baptist was assembling.'<sup>33</sup> Whether or not he knew himself to be the Coming One, he presumably shared the Baptist's expectation, and looked eagerly for the expected baptism in Spirit and fire to arrive. But following his baptism there happened to Jesus what had not happened to anyone else who had been baptised by John: he himself was anointed with the Holy Spirit and declared by the heavenly voice to be God's Son, the royal representative of all Israel, and the Servant with whom God is well pleased. The Spirit empowered Jesus to proclaim the imminent Kingdom in word and deed, and the divine Word called him to suffer judgement on behalf of his people.

It is widely accepted that the words, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Lk. 3:22 and par.), contain an echo of the opening Servant song (Is. 42:1). What has not been recognised is the true significance of the dove. Largely as a result of this story the dove has become a stock symbol for the Holy Spirit in Christian art and hymnody, but there is no evidence that it had this significance in the Old Testament or in intertestamental Jewish literature.<sup>34</sup> There has accordingly been a bewildering variety of interpretations, and Davies and Allison in fact list no less than sixteen, concluding that the dove is intended to recall the hovering of the Spirit over the primal waters at the Creation and that 'the events of Genesis 1 were being recapitulated or repeated in the Messiah's life: the eschatological creation had commenced.'<sup>35</sup> This may be an

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<sup>33</sup>J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (ET, London: SCM, 1971) 49

<sup>34</sup>Jeremias, *Theology*, 52; F. Lentzen-Deiss, *Die Taufe Jesu nach den Synoptikern* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1970) 180.

<sup>35</sup>W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988/1991) vol. I, 334.

interesting theological reflection on the significance of Jesus, but it does not seem to be a prominent theme in Matthew.

More recently Allison has claimed support for this interpretation from a scroll fragment from Qumran newly published by R.H. Eisenman.<sup>36</sup> The relevant line reads: ‘and over the Poor will His Spirit hover, and the Faithful he will support with his strength.’ Allison notes that the same verb רָחַף (‘to hover’) is used both in Genesis 1:2 and in the Scroll fragment and claims that this confirms that the dove in the Synoptic account also alludes to Genesis and the action of the Spirit in Creation.<sup>37</sup> This prompts several questions. First, does Genesis 1:2 imply the action of a bird? If so, what action and what bird? Second, does the Qumran fragment intend a reference to Genesis 1:2 and with what implication? Third, is the dove in the Synoptic Gospels intended to recall Genesis 1:2 and with what implication? In answer to the first question, the verb only otherwise occurs in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 32:11 with reference to eagles. Its meaning is uncertain, but perhaps ‘watching over protectively’ captures the sense.<sup>38</sup> There is no clear link with doves. The answer to the second question is that an echo of Genesis is probably intended. If so, the reader is presumably being told that the Spirit who watched over creation is now watching over his people. The answer to the third question must be ‘doubtful’ on two counts. First, it is a large leap from the verb ‘hovering’ to the noun ‘dove’, given that there is no tradition linking dove and Spirit. Second, even if a reference to Genesis is intended, new creation is not thereby implied. It is not implied by the Qumran fragment; rather, the Qumran fragment supports a connection between the dove and God’s suffering people.

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<sup>36</sup>R.H. Eisenman, ‘A Messianic Vision’, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17/6, (1991) 65.

<sup>37</sup>D.C. Allison, ‘The Baptism of Jesus and a New Dead Sea Scroll’, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18/2 (1992) 58-60.

<sup>38</sup>V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 115; G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word, 1987) 17.

Much more promising is the idea that the dove marks out Jesus as the new Israel.<sup>39</sup> Davies and Allison reject the new Israel interpretation of the dove on the ground that the dove is identified with the Spirit not Jesus, but if the purpose of the dove is to *designate* Jesus as Israel then it may be that the Spirit has taken this form or been represented in this way in order to recall some particular characteristic of the mission of Israel that Jesus in the power of the Spirit is to fulfil. As Feuillet says: 'The dove at the baptism of Jesus prefigured the principal result of the Spirit's outpouring, the constituting of the new Israel, the perfect community of the age of grace.'<sup>40</sup> In other words, the dove at Jordan, like the fire at Pentecost, is not there to tell us something about the Spirit, but about the mission of Jesus.

There seems no doubt that the dove is sometimes found as a symbol for Israel. What does not seem to have been adequately noticed is the way in which the dove in the Old Testament is sometimes used as a symbol of suffering, not least when it refers to Israel (*e.g.* Ps. 74:19; Is. 38:14; 59:11; Je. 48:28; Na. 2:7).<sup>41</sup> Two examples may be given from Jewish literature later than the New Testament. The *Mekilta*, commenting on Israel's peril at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:13) says:

To what were the Israelites at that moment like? To a dove fleeing from a hawk, and about to enter a cleft where there is a hissing serpent. If she enters, there is the serpent! If she stays out, there is the hawk!<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Scholars holding this view include: R. Tournay, 'Le Psaume LXVIII et le Livre des Juges', *Revue Biblique* 66 (1959) 363; Lentzen-Deiss, *Taufe*, 181, 265ff., who cite 4 Ezra 5:26; W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: CUP, 1964) 40-44; T.A. Burkill, *Mysterious Revelation* (New York: Ithaca, 1963) 17-19 (very tentatively); and W.L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1974) 50, 53-58.

<sup>40</sup>A. Feuillet, 'Le Symbolisme de la Colombe dans les Récits Evangéliques du Baptême', *Recherches des Sciences Religieuses* 46 (1958) 538 (my translation).

<sup>41</sup>Note the repeated reference to the sound made by doves which most English versions render 'moaning'.

<sup>42</sup>J.Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta* (3 vols.) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933) 211.

The *Midrash Rabbah* (I.xv.2) commenting on the Song of Songs expounds all the ways in which Israel is like a dove among which is the following: 'As the dove puts forth her neck to slaughter, so do Israel, as it says, "For thy sake we are killed all day long".'<sup>43</sup>

However, the most notable reference occurs in Psalm 74:19: 'Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; do not forget the life of your poor for ever.' So at least it reads in MT followed by *NRSV*. *REB* following *LXX* prefers 'Do not cast to the beasts the soul that confesses you', but 'dove' is surely to be preferred as the harder reading which because of its association with weakness and suffering makes a better parallel with 'your poor'. The relevance of this reference lies above all in its place in a psalm of national emergency. It begins: 'O God, why do you cast us off for ever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?' It describes the national crisis as follows:

Your foes have roared within your holy place;  
 they set up their symbols there.  
 At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes.  
 And then with hatchets and hammers they smashed all its carved  
 work.  
 They set your sanctuary on fire;  
 they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name, bringing it to the  
 ground.  
 They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them';  
 they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land (4-8).

It is not surprising that the date of the psalm has been debated, some attributing to the time of the exile and others as late as the Maccabean period. Although the earlier date seems generally preferred today, the conditions it describes agree very closely with the those of the Maccabean crisis.<sup>44</sup> The psalm would surely have been felt to speak of and to those terrible days which were, we recall, interpreted as the

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<sup>43</sup>E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon, 1958) vol. 8, 42.

<sup>44</sup>See M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 246-47 for a summary of recent debate.

outworking of God's wrath, just as were the events described in the psalm. It is against this background that Israel is described as a dove delivered over to wild beasts, so that Jacquet can write:

The image [sc. of the dove] is not purely delightful; it is intended in the mind of the psalmist to characterise better than anything else Israel in her precarious situation, since doves are the only birds allowed as sacrificial offerings and in addition well known for their inability to defend themselves.<sup>45</sup>

This finds confirmation in the teaching of Jesus himself, who in Matthew 10:16 appears to have applied two proverbial expressions used by the rabbis of Israel's perilous position *vis à vis* the nations to the mission of his disciples in a hostile world where they will be as sheep in the midst of wolves, wise as serpents but innocent as doves.<sup>46</sup>

I suggest then that the Spirit took the form of the dove to convey to Jesus, or was so represented in the tradition on which the Synoptists drew to convey to the hearers/readers, that as Israel it was his destiny to suffer and die for Israel. (The Lion, as John will put it, is the Lamb.) That this is indeed the meaning of Jordan for Jesus, and not just a theological interpretation attributed to the event by later Christian reflection, is confirmed by Luke 12:49-50 (and also by Mk. 10:38, and 45). These are not the words of someone who thinks the Kingdom of God has arrived, but the words of someone who expects it imminently while knowing that the Kingdom his words and deeds have heralded can only come to Israel if he himself is first baptised in fire and Spirit as Israel's representative and on her behalf. He himself must submit to the fire, so that new life through the Spirit, resurrection indeed, may be experienced by all who by repentance and faith have constituted themselves the new Israel in him.

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<sup>45</sup>L. Jacquet, *Les Psaumes* ([Belgium]: Duculot, 1977) vol. 2, 479 (my translation).

<sup>46</sup>Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 2, 181.

And so of course it happened. Death came to Jesus in the form of a Roman cross. The forces of perverted nationalism, the guardians of a misconceived holiness, that Jesus foresaw would bring down on Israel the wrath of God in the form of foreign armies, procured the death of Jesus at the hands of foreign soldiers. The fire which he foretold was kindled on Jesus himself and the flood waters of death baptised him. But faith would see this death as the outworking of God's wrath, borne by Jesus and averted for all who turned to God in repentance and faith. This was Jesus' faith, and became the faith of those who believed in him, when the resurrection of Jesus vindicated his hope and gave birth to theirs. In his resurrection Jesus experienced in full measure the baptism in Spirit that Ezekiel had foretold, and did so as the representative and first-born of the new people of God. At Easter Jesus underwent the baptism in fire and Spirit he himself came to bring, enduring the wrath of God in his death and receiving God's gift of life in his resurrection, as the one in whom is incorporated through faith the new Israel, which is the new Adam.<sup>47</sup> In him the Kingdom of God is at last inaugurated, to be consummated at his Second Coming when Jesus will baptise the world in Spirit and in fire.<sup>48</sup>

#### **IV. Fire and Spirit: The Ministry of the Church**

Meanwhile there is work to do. The good news of the coming Kingdom must be proclaimed not just to ethnic Israel but to the whole world, not by Jesus but by his church. Men and women must be called to repentance and faith so that they too can belong to the people of God whom Jesus embodies, so that when the Kingdom comes they will not perish in the fire of God's wrath but will be overwhelmed instead in the river of life at the resurrection, and the church is to be the herald of this coming kingdom. For this purpose the church must receive an anointing like that of Jesus. Pentecost parallels Jordan, not

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<sup>47</sup>Wright, *People of God*, 262ff.

<sup>48</sup>It is no objection to this view that it agrees with the perspective of Paul in 1 Cor. 15:20-28.

as a work of regeneration or Christian initiation, as Dunn thinks,<sup>49</sup> but as a commissioning or equipping for prophetic ministry, as Turner and Menzies argue.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Pentecost is not the coming of the kingdom, as Dunn appears to argue,<sup>51</sup> any more than Jordan was the coming of the kingdom, though many have argued otherwise.<sup>52</sup> Pentecost is at most the foretaste of the kingdom, enabling those who receive the Spirit to proclaim forgiveness and life in the name of Jesus.<sup>53</sup>

Pentecost parallels Jordan, because, while Jesus is called to be the eschatological prophet, and no one else is called to be that, the church is also called to a prophetic vocation and is equipped with the same Spirit. Jordan and Pentecost occur at similar points in each of Luke's two volumes and are surely intended to be seen as parallel to one another. Both events are described in the language of apocalyptic symbolism, picture language that puts into words essentially private and ineffable visionary experiences. At Jordan the heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends and the voice of God commissions. At Pentecost there is the sound of a great wind from heaven, there is fire, and there is the sign of foreign languages. The meaning and outcome of both events is prophetic activity. Jesus is anointed to preach good news to the poor, and the disciples are constituted witnesses, who declare the mighty acts of God to an international audience, and explain their experience in terms of the gift promised by Joel, and specifically in terms of prophecy.

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<sup>49</sup>‘It was only at Pentecost that the 120 became Christians’ (*Baptism*, 53).

<sup>50</sup>M. Turner, ‘Jesus and the Spirit in Lucan Perspective’, *TB* 32 (1981) 28, argues against the view that sees Jesus’ experience of the Spirit as archetypal for Christians. Jesus is the unique dispenser of the Spirit, and he dispenses to enable his church to prophesy (37-38). See further, *idem*, *Power from on High* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1996) 188-212. Menzies argues that the Spirit is given, whether to Jesus or to his church, to enable mission; the Spirit is the source of prophetic activity (*Development*, ch. 10).

<sup>51</sup>Dunn argues that at Jordan Jesus entered the New Age, but that no one else could do so until Pentecost, *Baptism*, 40-52.

<sup>52</sup>Turner, ‘Jesus’ 29-34, is typical of the widely held view that the Kingdom was present in the ministry of Jesus from the time of his baptism. However, see C. Caragounis, ‘Kingdom of God/Heaven’, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1992) 420-25.

<sup>53</sup>Once again, the fact that this agrees closely with Paul’s description of the Spirit as ἀπαρχή and ἀπαρχή does not prove it is wrong.

The wind and the languages are fairly straightforward as signs of the Spirit and of prophetic activity, but what about the fire? Commentators have generally made little of this, beyond seeing it as intended as some sort of fulfilment of John's word about Spirit and fire. Luke does not otherwise mention it, even when recalling John's prophecy. On the lips of the Baptist we saw that 'fire' must mean wrath and judgement, which led Dunn to conclude, following his exposition of Luke 12:49-50, that Jesus had borne the fire of judgement on behalf of his people, so that now Jesus baptises only in the Holy Spirit. Baptism is *no longer* in fire.<sup>54</sup> But then what is it doing in the Pentecost narrative? Marshall was quite right to reject Dunn's argument at this point, but he himself could only offer the suggestion that fire in some way stood for power.<sup>55</sup> This is also unconvincing. Fire is everywhere a symbol of wrath, but wrath as we saw is an interpretation of suffering. Surely it is better to agree that fire is meant to recall John's prophecy, where it meant suffering, and to suggest that it still means suffering here. Those who are commissioned by the Spirit to be witnesses of the coming Kingdom are to witness not simply by the words they speak or the miracles they perform, but are to suffer in their own persons the hostility and rejection still directed against their Lord by an unbelieving world. Those who are baptised into Christ Jesus are baptised into his death (Rom. 6:3), rejoice in their sufferings (Rom. 5:3), and in their flesh complete 'what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (Col. 1:24).<sup>56</sup> Of course they do not atone for the sins of the world thereby, but as disciples of Christ they carry the cross after him, and win their victories in the same manner as he did. John said that Jesus would baptise in fire; Jesus came to see that this baptism must be borne by himself; as his body the church is bearing it

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<sup>54</sup>Dunn, *Baptism*, 43, 'Metaphor', 173.

<sup>55</sup>I.H. Marshall, 'The Significance of Pentecost', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977) 351.

<sup>56</sup>The connection with Col. 1:24 is also made by Delling, 'ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ', 113; and Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 75.

still. That is the meaning of the fire.<sup>57</sup>

In this way the fire at Pentecost carries the same message as the dove at Jordan, and the two mysterious symbols may be thought to be mutually interpreting. If so, the parallel between Jordan and Pentecost is closer than is usually thought. It is not just that they occur at similar points in the narrative and lead to similar results in the life of Jesus and of the church. The torn heavens correspond to the wind from heaven, and the key word is 'heaven' as the source of the vision. In both cases there is supernatural speech, in the first case a voice from heaven designating Jesus as God's Son and Servant, in the other an endowment upon the disciples to enable them to speak out the great things of God, namely that 'God has made him both Lord and Messiah' (Acts 2:36). Finally the Spirit, who in the form of a dove designated Jesus as Israel suffering for Israel, comes as fire to tell those who are the new Israel in him that they will bear their witness not only in prophetic power but also in weakness and death (like the two witnesses of Rev. 11).

## V. Conclusions

By way of providing an agenda for further study and debate I shall conclude by summarising the primary features of this study, and sketch the broader picture within which I think they make sense, in particular with respect to the meaning of baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire and its relation to the Kingdom of God.

1. Baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire refers to resurrection and judgement which, in accordance with Ezekiel, God will bring to the nation through his Messiah. Baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire is thus a way of speaking about the Kingdom of God, what Moltmann

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<sup>57</sup>It may be said that if that was so at some earlier stage of the tradition, Luke himself knows nothing of this, since he makes nothing of it. The fire is nowhere else mentioned. But then the wind from heaven and the sign of languages do not recur either (unless 19:6 is a partial exception). At any rate Luke is no stranger to the idea that suffering as well as power are promised to Christians (9:16; 14:22).

calls 'the divine tempest of the new creation, which sweeps out of God's future over history's fields of the dead, waking and gathering every last created being'.<sup>58</sup>

2. At Jordan Jesus was anointed with the Spirit to equip him to be the herald and messenger of the Kingdom in this sense, as the New Age marked by the restoration of Israel and through her of the whole Creation. In the power of that Spirit he proclaimed the imminence of the Kingdom by word and deed. In his ministry the life of the Kingdom, or the Age to Come, is experienced as foretaste.

3. Jesus was also marked out by the dove and commissioned by the heavenly voice for a role of vicarious suffering, as Israel and for her. He knew that he was the one to baptise in the Holy Spirit and fire; but he also knew that this was something he must undergo on behalf of the nation. Otherwise Israel's baptism would be all fire and no Spirit.

4. At Easter Jesus was baptised in the Holy Spirit and fire. He was baptised in fire at the Cross, and baptised in Spirit at the resurrection. The Kingdom of God was thus inaugurated, in that the resurrection expected in the last days had actually occurred, although only to Jesus. The Kingdom of God will be consummated when Jesus returns to baptise the world in Spirit and fire. Only then will the Baptist's prophecy be finally fulfilled.

5. At Pentecost the disciples underwent a parallel experience to that of Jesus at Jordan. The disciples were anointed with the Spirit to enable them to be the messengers of God's Kingdom in word and deed. In the symbolism of fire they were also promised that they too would suffer in solidarity with their Lord.

6. Jordan and Pentecost can both be described as baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), but only in a proleptic sense. They are not the coming of the Kingdom. They are the foretaste of the Kingdom. Both look forward to the fullness of the Spirit, which is resurrection, for Jesus and for us.

7. Christian Baptism, though now performed in the name of Jesus or of the Trinity, has the same meaning for us as baptism did for

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<sup>58</sup>J. Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (ET, London: SCM, 1994) 104.

John. It still expresses repentance toward God and faith in the Coming One, now known to be Jesus Christ our Lord. It still enrolls a person among the people of God, now seen to be the Body of the Messiah. It does not of itself bestow the Spirit, but it does constitute a promise of the Spirit, both as power to witness, sharing in the sufferings of Christ in this life, and as resurrection in the life of the world to come.