



**THE LUTHERAN CHURCH - MISSOURI SYNOD**

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY  
AND CHURCH RELATIONS

210 NORTH BROADWAY • SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI 63102

TELEPHONE 314-231-6200

RALPH A. BOHLMANN, PH. D.  
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

THEODORE F. NICKEL, D. D., CHAIRMAN  
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June 1973

TO THE PASTORS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD

Dear Brethren:

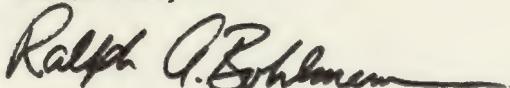
We are pleased to send you five exegetical studies of Biblical pericopes prepared at the request of the CTCR by Drs. Paul Bretscher, Horace Hummel, Erich Kiehl, Walter Maier, and Martin Scharlemann. These essays are part of a series designed to assist the church in identifying, understanding, and resolving various issues related to the authority and interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Although the enclosed essays have been reviewed by the Commission, the Commission has not formally adopted them. They are not position papers of the Commission nor do they necessarily represent the viewpoint of the Commission as such. But they do represent, in the judgment of the CTCR, serious and helpful attempts to discuss and illustrate important features of contemporary historical-critical methodology. We have found that this methodology is often easier to understand and evaluate when it is applied to a specific pericope than when it is discussed in purely theoretical or abstract terms.

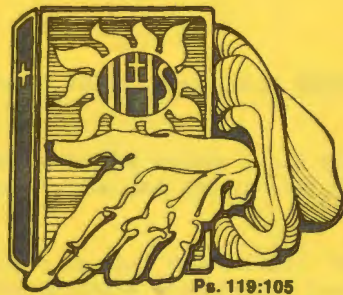
We know that you are very busy, particularly in these weeks, but we hope that you will find the opportunity to work through these essays and perhaps to discuss them with your fellow pastors. As you study these essays, may we suggest that you also refer to two CTCR documents that deal with contemporary Biblical interpretation. One is "A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies" prepared in 1966; the other is "A Comparative Study of Varying Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation", a three-column document recently mailed to the pastors and teachers of the Synod and included in the Appendix to the 1973 Convention Workbook.

God bless your study and proclamation of His Saving Word!

In Christ,



Ralph A. Bohlmann



Ps. 119:105

# BIBLICAL STUDIES SERIES

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THE LUTHERAN CHURCH - MISSOURI SYNOD, 210 NORTH BROADWAY, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI 63102

## THE BAPTISM OF JESUS, CRITICALLY CONSIDERED

by

PAUL G. BRETSCHER, Th. D.  
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Valparaiso, Indiana

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The Commission on Theology and Church Relations has reviewed the materials appearing in the *Biblical Studies Series* and authorized their publication, not as position papers of the commission, but as study materials intended to assist the church in identifying, understanding, and resolving various issues related to the authority and interpretation of Holy Scripture.



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## THE BAPTISM OF JESUS, CRITICALLY CONSIDERED

The application of historical reasoning in the modern sense to the study of Holy Scriptures has revolutionized the process of biblical interpretation and the secular world's understanding of the Bible as literature and as history.

Ought our Synod welcome and participate in that revolution? Is it possible to see it as an instrument of God and to harness its resources in the positive expectation that our Lord intends it for richer blessings in our knowledge of Him and of his Word? Can we accept and use such reasoning without fear of contradicting the Bible's inspiration, undermining its authority as the Word of God, and losing the Gospel?

Or is such an approach to the Bible inimical to the Gospel, a rationalistic compromise with the world's wisdom, and a contradiction of humble faith?

In some such form we may pose the vital question that is tearing our hearts. A deep concern for the Gospel belongs to our common heritage. Thereby our Lord Himself compels us to take the matter seriously. He has not allowed us to lapse into indifference, or to drift unwittingly into mere human accommodations that have answered nothing and taught us nothing. His love for us, and his rule over us sustains us in hope against all tensions and perplexities. We live by his promise that those who seek will find (Luke 11:9-13).

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations has proposed that one way to get at this question is to test historical-critical insight against particular texts. The text assigned me is that of Jesus' baptism. It is necessary to digress for a moment, however, so as to understand as clearly as possible what critical reasoning means.

### Historical-Critical Reasoning Defined

The term "historical-critical" capsules a conscious way of using the mind to pursue knowledge in the field of history. It needs to be understood in relation to critical thinking in general, and in contrast to non-critical thinking.

Most of our thinking and knowing is non-critical. We see something and immediately we know what it is. Our posture is one of trust. We do not expect to be deceived, neither are we conscious that we may be misreading the evidence. From phenomenon to perception to knowledge, that is the simple sequence. It is also persuasive. "I saw it with my own eyes," we say, and "Seeing is believing." No suspicious questions disturb us, as to the role our mind plays in knowing. The mind works, but without any consciousness of its own working. In general non-critical thinking is workable. Things are what they seem. It is very important to our sanity that we can take so much for granted, that we do not have to think about or suspect everything we think we know.

Critical thinking arises when we have occasion to wonder whether we have been seeing things rightly, whether the reality may not be something different from our first-impression understanding. The posture of critical thinking is one of doubt, hence of active curiosity in the awareness of something that does not make sense, of something to be known which is not yet known fully or rightly. In critical thinking the curious and aroused mind becomes aggressively active. It initiates a far more careful and exhaustive perception of phenomena, also by seeking experimental evidence. It integrates the perceptions in such a way that things now make persuasive sense. Everything fits together coherently in the simplest way. The result is "scientific" understanding. There is no ultimacy of knowledge by this process, of course, and no infallibility either. But every new scientific reconstruction, tested and reconfirmed, or revised, or subsequently rejected, contributes something to the growth in knowledge and understanding of society as a whole.

When Immanuel Kant published his Critique of Pure Reason in 1781, a systematic process of critical thinking with regard to natural phenomena, sometimes called the "scientific revolution," had been under way for more than two centuries. Kant's contribution was to define and clarify the role of the human mind in the process of "knowing." In all knowing, whether critical or non-critical, the mind must be active. For knowing consists not merely in the impact of phenomena on the senses, but also in a mental process that organizes phenomena so that they make sense in a total picture. Anything "seen" that does not fit into such a unified whole is troublesome, the object of immediate curiosity, because it remains unknown (a flying saucer, for example). In its organizing work the mind contributes conceptual materials of its own, which Kant called "categories." Concepts of cause and effect, purpose, time, quantity and quality, and a host of others, are not resident in phenomena as we see them. They are rather tools of the mind by which we fit things together so as to make sense out of them in relationship to each other. The mind may err. We may connect phenomena in a wrong way, reading cause for effect, for example. The error may yield humor, or slander, or tragedy.

Kant's analysis contributed much toward the rise of one of the latest in the series of new sciences, the science of history. "Historical-critical" is simply the application of consciously critical thinking to the study of history. But the historian faces a complexity beyond that of any natural scientist.

Though the natural scientist learns from others in his field, there is basically only one mind of which he must remain critically conscious as he reads his evidences and draws them together into a unified picture, namely his own. But the historian is working with people, with minds therefore other than his own. He does not fully know what he is reading in a historical source unless he can put himself into the mind of its writer, and see the reality under the categories of thought which contributed to that writer's "knowing." Perhaps the historian by carefully searching all evidences and invoking his own categories to make sense out of what he sees, will even come to know more by way of the phenomena than the original writer knew. There is a basic assumption here, of course, namely that that historical sources or artifacts derive from people whose minds worked the way our own minds work. The human mental process is a constant, which the historian can assume and understand, and upon which he can build. Every document is the product of human thought, bears the imprint of a mind, is fashioned out of whatever perception of reality made things intelligible to its author and by which he could expect to be understood by his readers.

As historians came to appreciate the importance of mental processes for the writing and reading of history, they saw potential pay-dirt in all kinds of phenomena they had overlooked before -- little discrepancies, puzzling ways of saying things, and the like. Such difficulties were no longer overlooked or suppressed. They were welcomed and sought out. To know a thing fully every detail had to make sense in terms of a total picture of reality.

That is what historical-criticism brings to Bible study. Until late in the 18th century the writing of history consisted in gathering stories, explaining discrepancies, integrating divergent accounts so as to incorporate all details, arranging materials end to end in some chronological sequence, filling in gaps by artful speculation, often heightening the effect with information gathered by visiting the scene. Our familiar Bible histories have been put together by that process. The revolution in our understanding and use of the Bible as literature and as history, effected by critical study, has been truly painful and shattering.

What has been painfully shattered is not really the Word of God as Gospel in its fullest ramifications, or even the authority of the Scriptures as God's inspired Word. What is shattered is rather some mistaken judgments of men as to what the form of the authoritative and inspired Bible must be. Also shattered is the notion that non-critical thinking in Bible reading, the "trusting" and unquestioning acceptance of the first-impression sense of a text, must somehow yield the truth and authoritative meaning of the Spirit. For the posture of "trust" in non-critical thinking and knowing is purely a cultural thing and has nothing in common with that "child-like faith" which clings to God's promises of forgiveness and life through Jesus Christ. The skepticism of the critical mind in its awareness that something just does not make sense is likewise a cultural resource, and has nothing in common with the unbelief and doubt of the natural man in his resistance to the Word of law and grace. Furthermore, the use of hard and unremitting reason in order to pursue any question so as to know the meaning of the Scriptures in terms of the minds of its human writers, and thus by faith to know better what God is saying for us today, has nothing to do with a "rationalism" by which the sinful heart harnesses the mind and finds excuses against submitting to the Word of God.

Much depends, therefore, on what we mean by the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures. That is a prior question, and a vital one among us. Though this is not my present assignment, it may be useful to propose here a working definition of the inspiration of the Scriptures in relation to critical study.

In order to know and use the Scriptures properly it is necessary to recognize and confess two realities. The one is that the Bible is God's Book, given by the Spirit to be the voice of His Word, His lamp shining in the darkness of our hearts (2 Pet. 1:19-21), His instruction for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:14-17). The appropriate response to this first reality is the open ear and the joyful searching of faith, thus also the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The other reality is that the Bible is historical -- the product of human thought, experience, and expression. Here the appropriate response is the careful and intensive searching of the questioning and critical mind for full understanding. The mind itself is a creation of God, not to be suppressed or buried, but used in trusting servanthood by God's command and with confidence of His blessing (Mt. 25:14-30).

Each of these two realities of Scripture is complete, integral, and pervasive. Each has to do with all the Scriptures. Neither reality denies, contradicts, or violates the other in any way. The two realities must be distinguished and not confused. Yet they are never separated, for God's voice addresses us in the words and history of men. To assimilate these two realities into a single conceptual whole is beyond my capacity. I am satisfied to distinguish them, but to watch with high expectation and delight as they intersect, as historical words and events burst open with the word and wisdom of God in Christ, to free anxious consciences from captivity to sin and judgment, to "give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins" (Lukel:77).<sup>1</sup>

#### Rudolf Bultmann on Jesus' Baptism

Rudolf Bultmann must surely remain incomprehensible and a grave threat to anyone who assumes that non-critical thinking represents the appropriate posture of Christian reverence for the Bible as the Word of God,

and that the first-impression sense of a passage must yield its literal meaning. For as a Lutheran preacher Bultmann submits altogether to the authority of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God,<sup>2</sup> even while as exegete he binds himself deliberately and without fear to the rigorous discipline of clear critical thinking.<sup>3</sup> To Bultmann this is no paradox, no fortunate inconsistency. This is God's calling. This is obedience. This is the way it must be.

Since Bultmann's name has come to symbolize the hazards of historical-critical study among us, it is good to hear him also as preacher. The following passages are extracted from an article, "How Does God Speak to Us Through the Bible?", first published in The Student World in 1934.<sup>4</sup>

The word of the Scriptures teaches . . . us to understand that the word of judgment is at the same time the word of grace, that God demands the death of man in order to grant him life, that God in his mercy sent us Jesus Christ, that his mercy surrounded us before we were aware of it. . . .

The Bible does not approach us at all like other books, nor like other "religious voices of the nations," as catering for our interest. It claims from the outset to be God's Word. . . . We came to know it through the Christian church, which put it before us with its authoritative claim. The church's preaching, founded on the Scriptures, passes on the word of the Scriptures. It says: God speaks to you here! In his majesty he has chosen this place! . . .

But when in the preaching of the church the word addresses you, it shows you your nothingness, your sin, and tells you that God is merciful to you and has loved you from all time.

The Scriptures teach this as God's word addressed to you, ever more clearly, and again and again. For no one has ever heard it enough. . . . It remains his sovereign word, which we shall never master and which can only be believed as an ever-living miracle, spoken by God, and constantly renewed. How should he who has heard it once not listen and hope, strive and pray, that he may hear it again?

The word of God never becomes our property. The test of whether we have heard it aright is whether we are prepared always to hear it anew, to ask for it in every decision in life; whether we are prepared to let it intervene in the moment of decision; to let it convince us of our nothingness, but also of God's mercy, freeing us from all pride -- "and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (I Cor. 4:7) -- but also from any faint-heartedness -- "as having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (II Cor. 6:10)!

The exegetical work to which we turn for Bultmann's critical judgments with respect to Jesus' Baptism is his History of the Synoptic Tradition, first published in 1921.<sup>5</sup> Bultmann came to the synoptic Gospels seeking Jesus, much as the "Greeks" in John 12:20-22 came to Philip saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." For the disciples had an enormous advantage. They knew Jesus in the flesh, were part of his human history. They understood not only what they were saying about his person and work, but also how the history itself, climaxing in the passion and resurrection, yielded that revelation of the Gospel which they proclaimed through the Spirit. A flat reading of the Gospels simply did not make Jesus historically "visible" to Bultmann, as he had been historically visible to the disciples. The critical insights of his predecessors were very persuasive to Bultmann. The Gospels are not really biographies. They gather all kinds of materials concerning Jesus, his sayings, his work, his passion, as these were remembered and collected from the oral and early written tradition of Christian worship and preaching in various places. One chief problem Bultmann saw in dealing with this material as we have it lies in the "relationship of the primitive Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity."<sup>6</sup> Bultmann concluded that the synoptic Gospels as we now have them were put together in their present form out of impulses traceable to Hellenistic Christianity (thus they are written in Greek), but out of materials deriving largely from the Palestinian tradition. The Gospels "do not tell of a much admired human personality, but of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of the Church, and do so because they have grown out of Christian worship and remain tied to it."<sup>7</sup>

Bultmann's study of the literary history yields the conclusion that the Gospels "have nothing to say about Jesus' human personality, his appearance and character, his origin, education and development," that they "lack any interest of a scientific-historical kind."<sup>8</sup> In his book Jesus, first published in 1926, Bultmann draws on the earliest strands of primitive Palestinian material, especially sayings of Jesus, so as to reconstruct as well as possible Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and call to repentance. He rejects any doubt as to whether Jesus really existed as unworthy of refutation,<sup>9</sup> yet expresses his conviction that it is possible for us to know next to nothing concerning the life and personhood of Jesus in the historian's sense of knowing, since our Christian sources have not interested themselves in that, and other sources simply don't exist.<sup>10</sup> To "see Jesus" as the disciples saw and knew him historically is beyond us, Bultmann thinks. We can see and know him now only by the worship and proclamation of him as the Son of God, our Redeemer and Lord, and that by the Word, Spirit, and faith.

It is not Bultmann's intention to detach the Gospel from the history of Jesus, in which it is so deeply rooted. The history of Jesus must surely be significant and its impact very real, for the Gospel proclamation testifies to it and could not have come into being without it. Bultmann acknowledges only that he, by the disciplined thinking of the critical historian, has been unable to penetrate the church's celebration and proclamation of the voice of God in that history, so as to recover the event itself. Others have since renewed the quest.

Against this background, let me turn to my specific assignment, to view Jesus' baptism in the light of critical history. My approach will be not to dispute Bultmann's method, but to engage him within his method, as one critical exegete might respond to another.

### "This Is My Beloved Son"

Like many other commentators, Bultmann assumes that the Old Testament root of the word from heaven at Jesus' baptism is Psalm 2:7, "You are my son, this day I have begotten you." He takes it to be an "adoptionist" formulation having to do with Jesus' messiahship. Bultmann is convinced of the historicity of Jesus' baptism by John. He argues, however, that the miraculous elements in the story as we have it (the Spirit's visible descent and the voice from heaven) express ideas which came into view only after Jesus' death and resurrection. It was by way of that death and resurrection, as Acts 2:36 declares, that "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified," and wants "all the house of Israel" now to know it assuredly. Similarly, God "designated (Jesus to be) Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). Since the baptismal narrative reveals Jesus as "the Son of God in power" and marked by "the Spirit of holiness," it follows that the story should be classified as a "faith legend" with Hellenistic Christian roots. Even though an actual event underlies it, its true significance for the church is not historical in the scientific sense, but "religious and edifying."<sup>11</sup>

Bultmann is mistaken in one fundamental assumption, however, and that mistake is bound to call into question also his conclusions. The declaration "This is my beloved Son" is not rooted in and defined by Psalm 2:7, or by Isaiah 42:1 (as quoted in Matt. 12:18), or by Genesis 22:2, 12, 16, or by combinations of these as suggested in various commentators. The text by which we must understand the voice from heaven is rather Exodus 4:22-23, "Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.'<sup>12</sup>

The Hebrew for the key phrase, "Israel is my first-born son," reads bni bchori Yisrael, literally "my son, my first-born, Israel (is)," or in Greek, ho huios mou, ho prototokos mou, Israel (estin). (The Septuagint has huios prototokos mous Israel.) In the New Testament the heavenly word to Jesus occurs seven times, not counting the indirect reference in John 1:29-34. There are the three synoptic accounts of Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), three accounts of his transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:35), and then the transfiguration account in 2 Peter 1:17. The Greek in this last is most striking! It reads ho huios mou, ho agapetos mou, houtos estin, answering exactly to the construction of Exodus 4:22 in the literal form I have just projected. The only variations are houtos ("this one") for Israel, and agapetos for prototokos. ("beloved" for "first-born"). No other proposed root for the baptismal word exhibits anything like this degree of correspondence. By the standards of critical persuasiveness, it is as sure as any such matter can be that the voice from heaven is applying to Jesus the name God had spoken upon his people Israel in the exodus history.

That houtos, referring now to Jesus, should replace Israel is quite understandable in view of the new history and application now unfolding. The shift from "first-born" to "beloved" holds fascinations of its own. We are immediately reminded of New Testament texts which remember the term "first-born" and apply it to Jesus in the very context of his sonship (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5; in Heb. 12:23 "first-born" designates the church). Jerome, furthermore, preserves in Latin a fragment from an ancient Hebrew language Gospel in which the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism actually says "filius meus primogenitus," exactly the bni bchori of Exodus 4:22!<sup>13</sup>

It turns out that the substitution of "beloved" for "first-born" in our traditional texts is readily explained. Evidences leap forward which show that Judaism in and long before Jesus' day not only knew and treasured the text, "Israel is my first-born son," but also wrestled to interpret particularly the word "first-born." Surely it could not mean literally that the Lord would have other "sons" besides and after Israel! The evidence suggests that the term "first-born" frequently gave way to interpretive paraphrases. Expressions of endearment, like the agapetos ("beloved") in the baptismal word, occur in connection with sonship in Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:20 (compare 9b); Ephesians 1:6; Colossians 1:13; John 5:20.

Another tradition seems to have heightened "first-born" into "only." Indirect evidence may be seen in Zechariah 12:10 and Genesis 22:2, 12, 16. Thus the designation monogenes ("only") for Jesus as God's Son in John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9, would have its roots also in the "first-born" of Exodus 4:22. In II Esdras 6:58 (preserved only in Latin), a significant cluster of terms attaches to "first-born", Nos autem populus tuus quem vocasti primogenitum, unigenitum, aemulatorem, carissimum, "We are your people whom you have called first-born, only, imitator, most dear." The term "imitator" suggests a theme which Jesus develops in connection with sonship (Matt. 5:9, 45, 48; Luke 6:36), and which St. Paul explicitly applies to Christians in passages like Ephesians 5:1, "Be imitators of God as beloved children" (compare 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; Heb. 4:16; 13:17).

Other terminology also seems to be attracted into this cluster. In Deuteronomy 4:37 God's choosing Israel is joined to his loving them. A saying ascribed to Jesus in Gospel of Thomas 50 encourages God's people to confess, "We are his sons, and we are the chosen of the living Father."<sup>14</sup> In Luke 9:35 the heavenly voice at Jesus' transfiguration declares, "This is my Son, my Chosen," as though "Chosen" too could displace the original "first-born" (see also Luke 23:35). The designation "servant" in connection

with sonship is also close to hand in Exodus 4:22-23, "Let my son go that he may serve me."

The voice from heaven speaks upon Jesus a text that was familiar and dear to Israel. The parallel designation, "with whom I am well pleased," is also familiar. It expresses the favor in which God holds his people (Ex. 33:16), his delight in them (Num. 14:8), and recurs in New Testament texts like Luke 2:14 and 12:32, also 1 Cor. 10:5.

### "A Voice from Heaven"

Though Bultman thought of the voice from heaven as a miraculous element which would make a notable impact on the Hellenistic Christian mind, we may begin to sense now a different kind of accent. The point originally may not have been the miraculous mode of transmission, like a megaphone from the sky, but rather that God himself is speaking this word, at this baptismal moment, and being heard. The transfiguration accounts say that the voice comes from the bright cloud, yet even here our attention is being directed not to the cloud but to the Author of the voice. 2 Peter 1:17 says simply that the voice was borne to Jesus "by the Majestic Glory." God himself is speaking, as Israel of old had heard God speak (Ex. 20:22). "Out of heaven he let you hear his voice," Moses recalls in Deuteronomy 4:36. A voice from heaven speaks to Jesus in John 12:28 and to John of Patmos in Rev. 14:13. The voice is alive, historical, intelligible, from God himself. Yet the texts are not interested in the mechanics of God's speaking and man's hearing, but in what is said. The content has the highest importance. Similarly when Luke 3:2, in parallel to Jeremiah 1:1 and other texts, says that "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness," it is enough to know that God spoke. Our question is not "How did God get the message across?" but "What did God say?"

We have seen that the actual words spoken by the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism are not unfamiliar and unprecedented. They come from the Scriptures. There is good reason to assume that John the Baptist also knew these words, and preached on them. Yet those words were in no way incarcerated in the Bible, neither were they John's theological opinion. In this context they were God's from heaven. Similarly when Jesus cited specific texts of Scripture in response to the tempter (Matt. 4:1-11), those familiar texts too spoke in that moment with all the authority of the voice from heaven, and were heard in the full impact of their divine origin. That is the sense in which the Lutheran Confessions also attach the "voice from heaven" to the words of absolution (AC XXV, 4).

### Baptism and the Word of Sonship

Had Bultmann known that the root of this heavenly word is Exodus 4:22-23, he could not have thought of our narrative as a "messianic consecration," or separated it from the event of Jesus' baptism on the strength of texts like Acts 2:36 and Romans 1:4.

Indeed, the very association of Exodus 4:22-23 with John's baptism invites us to search more diligently to understand what that baptism meant. It may be very significant that St. Paul so readily associates the term "baptize" with the old history of the Exodus. "Our fathers were all under the cloud (Matt. 17:5!), and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (I Cor. 10:1-2). I Cor. 10:5 suggests that at that moment they were the people "with whom God was well pleased," and Ex. 4:22-23 attaches to Israel in that very "baptismal" crossing the designation of God's "first-born son" and "servant."

Notice, however, how St. Paul thinks of that ancient "baptism." Its significance lies not in Israel's getting wet with the water, but in their "passing through" the sea. The sea was the boundary between slavery to Pharaoh and servanthood to the Lord. They crossed that boundary into the sonship of the Lord who loved them and called them out of Egypt. "All" the fathers who "passed through" belonged to the Lord as his people, even the "mixed multitude" of Exodus 12:38. When the "passing through" is completed, the triumph of the Lord is celebrated. In later thought the crossing out of Egypt merged conceptually with the crossing of Jordan into the promised land (Psalm 114). Thus the "passing through" seals the identity of Israel as the son, people, and servant of Yahweh. The old baptism "into Moses" contrasts for St. Paul with New Testament baptism "into Christ" (Gal. 3:26) and "into one body" (I Cor. 12:13).

John baptized in the Jordan at the point of the ancient crossing into the land (Joshua 3). He preached on the far side of Jordan (John 1:28), in Herod's territory (Luke 3:19-20). People from Judaea and Jerusalem had to "go out" to him, not merely out of their homes and towns, I suspect, but out of the land (Matt. 3:5). In my reconstruction the necessity to "pass through" the Jordan gave meaning to John's baptism. The kingdom of heaven was at hand, when God would lead his people to their ultimate inheritance. The baptismal "passing through" prepared the way of the Lord by sealing to those who longed for His coming their full sonship in Israel, with all sins or marks of doubt or disability "forgiven." Thus even the investigating Pharisees and Sadducees, by crossing the Jordan to hear John, were inadvertently "coming for baptism" (Matt. 3:7), and John's response catches that irony. John stood as Moses had stood, calling Israel out of bondage into freedom, out of the tyranny of human wildernesses into the kingdom which Yahweh in His coming was about to reveal in all glory (Is. 40:2-5),<sup>15</sup> but which would include also the destruction in wrath of every enemy. Thus the great comforting word of Exodus 4:22-23 belonged to John's preaching and



baptism as fully as it had belonged to Israel's crossing out of Egypt in the days of the fathers. That is also why any who question the authority of Jesus to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6) must face simultaneously the question of the "from heaven" authority of John's baptism (Matt. 21:23-27).

#### The Dove

Bultmann associates the dove with the messianic consecration which he feels is the significance of the story. "Without doubt it can signify nothing else than the pneuma, the divine power which fills the (messianic) king." A bird as symbol of the divine power which fills kings "is found in Persia as well as Egypt," and in Persia that bird is specifically the dove. Even in Judaism there is evidence that the figure of a dove represents the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> In Bultmann's view the "conviction could not naturally be derived from John's baptism" that Jesus is here consecrated as Messiah (Acts 4:27; 10:38 do not attach God's "anointing" of Jesus to the baptism), or that baptism bestows the Spirit (as in later texts like Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:22). "It follows," Bultmann feels, "that the Baptismal legend is firstly Hellenistic in origin."<sup>17</sup>

Bultmann's inferences are not arbitrary. They rest on a careful and serious awareness of many pertinent texts. I have demonstrated, however, that the name "my beloved Son" as spoken by the voice from heaven is not messianic. The possibility cannot be excluded, of course, that in the light of the full revelation of Jesus' messiahship through his death and resurrection (Acts 2:36), Christians could see all this outcome prefigured already in the baptismal moment at which Jesus' ministry begins. Evidence that this happened may be found in the variant reading at Luke 3:22, where Psalm 2:7 ("today I have begotten thee") is incorporated into the heavenly word. We cannot but remember then how "the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward" in connection with his anointing by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:13). Perhaps the early church (I do not see why the Palestinian church should have to be excluded here) did see and confess through this narrative that "the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon Jesus from that day forward."

Apart from such specifically messianic awareness, however, may not this reference to the Spirit's descent on Jesus have a prior meaning in connection with John's baptism and the heavenly word as we have understood it? Disciplined critical study is uncomfortable with such a question, for it requires too much speculation on the basis of too little evidence. Let me take the risk, however, if only to keep the possibility consciously alive. We have detected a strong conceptual link between John's baptism and ministry on the one hand, and the exodus history on the other. The Spirit of God is present in the exodus account under the form of the pillar of cloud and of fire, at least as interpreted in Isaiah 63:11-14, where the phrases occur, "Where is he who put in the midst of them his holy Spirit?" and "The Spirit of the Lord gave them rest." Thus the association of the Spirit with John's baptism in some sense would not have to be seen as an alien thought, even though the evidence is very indirect.

Furthermore, the very prominence of the baptismal narrative in the Gospels suggests that for Jesus himself, in his own consciousness, that event and the voice from heaven word he heard there was deeply significant. It is no arbitrary "psychologizing" to notice this. We are not dealing here with a "messianic consciousness." That question must be raised in other contexts. But the evidence is simply overwhelming that Jesus was deeply conscious of his sonship in the sense of Exodus 4:22-23. The temptations, his prayers, his preaching, all point to it, even his trial and the mockery at his death. It would be strange, therefore, not to see and know the Spirit and Breath of the Father in the Word and event which sets the stage for such significant consequences. And it is not at all strange now to read in Mark 1:12 that "the Spirit" drove Jesus into the wilderness, or to hear Jesus apply Isaiah 61:1 to himself, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me" (Luke 4:18-19).

Certain factors suggest, however, that the descent of the dove is a verbal imagery designed to highlight the impact of the Spirit's special coming on Jesus by putting it in visual terms. This is no random or ordinary dove. The vision of the dove includes also the opening of the heavens from which it descends (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21). The heavens which open here are the "firmament" which holds back the upper waters, to which the sun, moon, and stars are attached, and from whose waters the birds were created which "fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens" (Gen. 1:6-20). God opens these heavens to send forth the dove, whose air-borne flight might signify the breath (Spirit) of God. The entire description depends not only on a visible miracle, but also on the perception of cosmological reality which people held in that day. We must not fall into the trap of debating the scientific truthfulness of such a "firmament of the heavens" over against our Newtonian way of seeing the sky. That would only divert us from the impact of the historical and theological questions that face us in Jesus, and from the Word God speaks through him to our hearts. To attribute the dove and the opened heavens to a graphic literary imagery does not deny any historicity, however, but only defines it. Behind the imagery is the Spirit, and the Spirit is truly given. That miracle is reality itself and not merely a sign. As such it summons our reverent wonder.

Jesus' Conversation with John

It is impossible in this brief study to take up the host of historical questions associated with the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, as reflected in the conversation of Matt. 3:13-15. The evidences must include all references to John in the New Testament, and very prominently among them two other conversations of Jesus with John or with John's disciples (Matt. 9:14ff.; 11:2-6). With respect to the dialogue in Matthew 3:13-15, my preliminary suspicion is that John's question has to do not with Jesus' sinlessness, but with the fact that Jesus is the greater one who will baptize with the Spirit -- a baptism which John himself does not receive, since his death precedes the arrival of the kingdom (compare Matt. 11:11, "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he"). In that case not only Jesus' being baptized but even John's martyrdom belongs to what is fitting "to fulfil all righteousness," as does also Jesus' own death (Luke 12:50; Mark 10:38).

Implications

1. My findings differ from Bultmann's quite fundamentally. Since the heavenly word has to do with Jesus' sonship within Israel, and not with his messiahship, there are possibilities here for getting at the question of the historical Jesus beyond any that Bultmann saw. Given my understanding of the text, there is no reason any more to attribute the story to Hellenistic Christianity or to call it a "faith legend." The miraculous elements are not what Bultmann thought they were. The text has connections with Jesus' temptations and preaching beyond anything Bultmann was able to recognize.

2. My method does not differ from Bultmann's in any fundamental way. It depends on bringing to the text a critical curiosity that wants and expects things to make human sense. The very possibility of lifting the sentence "This is my beloved Son" out of its context, and of examining it as a thing in itself apart from what any other New Testament text may suggest or imply concerning its meaning -- that possibility is the gift of critical study. I find the reasoning persuasive that the Gospels as we have them are not coherent unities. They exhibit various layers of material -- oral tradition and its forms as "form-criticism" wrestles with them, literary units of materials available to those who put the Gospels together as we have them (speculations concerning a "Q" or an "Ur-Markus"), the imprint on these of whatever "editor" gathered them together as we have them (redaction-criticism), even the possibility of subsequent interpolations that may have begun as marginal sermonic or liturgical notes.

3. The process of critical thinking as applied to the Bible poses a most serious challenge to the assumption that "non-critical thinking," the first-impression sense of a text, must surely yield the Spirit's own clear meaning. I know well how that challenge provokes fear, and with it accusation. Critical study has been called rationalism, liberalism, destructive, subjectivity gone wild, arbitrary freedom to do with the Bible whatever one pleases, an obscuring of the clear, a confusion to the laity, a subversion of history and the Gospel, and the like. To me such charges are simply not true. They flow, I think, from a distortion rooted deeply in our piety -- a piety which tends, without thinking about it, to equate believing in the Bible with believing in the Gospel, as though the Word of God as Bible and the Word of God as Christ and Gospel were inevitably the same thing. That piety, in turn, derives from long-standing but unproved assumptions as to what an inspired Bible must look like so as to be properly divine -- assumptions supported, however, by no clear text of Scripture or clear argument in the Confessions.

Brethren among us who reverence the Bible as the Word of God, submit gladly to the Lutheran Confessions, and yet do critical thinking in Bible study, know that the Gospel is not threatened, for all that our view of the Bible as history and literature undergoes radical change. To such brethren critical tools are a gift from the Lord, to be used in expectation of blessings and without fear. They cannot submit to demands that critical thinking in searching the Scriptures be abandoned.

Jesus is our Lord, He alone. He is not about to abandon us. He has not put us through our agony for nothing. He has treasures of grace and Spirit in store beyond our dreams. He invites us now, against all natural fears, to enter what is "an exceedingly good land," and not to "rebel against the Lord" for fear of consequences. "For the Lord is with us!" That was the cry of Caleb and Joshua when they had scouted the land (Numbers 14:7-10). Surely our church will not respond with stones, as Israel did then!" (Num. 14:11)

We have wandered in our wilderness long enough.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a much fuller discussion see Paul G. Bretscher, "The Log in Your Own Eye," Concordia Theological Monthly, XLIII, 10 (November, 1972), pp. 645-686.

<sup>2</sup>See Existence and Faith, Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann, selected, translated, and introduced by Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Living Age Books, published by Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), for example, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," pp. 58-91, or the sermon on 1 Cor. 8:4-6, "Faith in God the Creator," pp. 171-182.

<sup>3</sup>"Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" Ibid., pp. 289-296.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 166-170.

<sup>5</sup>Translated by John Marsh from the third revised edition of 1958 (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers), 1963.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 372.

<sup>9</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr Paul Siebeck), 1964, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>History of the Synoptic Tradition, pp. 244f. including n. 1; 247-253.

<sup>12</sup>Paul G. Bretscher, "Exodus 4:22-23 and the Voice from Heaven," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXXXVII (1968), 301-311.

<sup>13</sup>See in Kurt Aland, Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt), 1964, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 523.

<sup>15</sup>That the "mightier one" whose coming John the Baptist proclaimed was in John's original preaching Yahweh himself, is the argument of Paul G. Bretscher, "Whose Sandals'? (Matt. 3:11)," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXXXVI (1967), 81-87. The verse cited should be translated, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, of whom I am not worthy to wear sandals" (Ex. 5:5). The version in Acts 13:25 may bring us closest to John's original saying. The nearest antecedent of the sandals is John himself, and the translation would be, "But behold, there is someone coming after me, of whom I am not worthy to remove the sandals of my feet." That Yahweh's coming occurs in the death and resurrection of Jesus is the revealed mystery which Christians celebrated in their recastings of John's saying, as though to make it express John's own expectant reverence for Jesus (e.g., Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16; John 1:27).

<sup>16</sup>History of the Synoptic Tradition, pp. 249f.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 250.