

Baptism of the Lord

St Luke's Gospel account of the Baptism of Jesus reads:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' (Luke 3:21-22) [1]

As always, a love for and familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures enriches a Christian's appreciation of the Gospels. It also reveals that we cannot take Jesus without his people, his Jewish traditions and sacred texts. Indeed, to somehow detach Jesus from his Jewish identity ends up distorting our efforts to draw close to the very person we Christians profess to know and love. St Pope John Paul II put it this way:

'To deprive Christ of his relationship with the Old Testament is therefore to detach him from his roots and to empty his mystery of all meaning.' [2]

When we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, then, what are some of the Old Testament passages that might fire our biblical energies, especially in pondering the intimacy between Father and Son ('my Son, the Beloved'), which is interpreted in a trinitarian key by Christians?

'You are my Son'

In Exodus 4:22-23, 'my son' refers to God's love for the people of Israel as a collective: *'Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son.'*

'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son' (Hosea 11:1).

'I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you"' (Psalm 2:7). Here, the psalmist sings of royal adoption; the Davidic king is anointed and called a son of God.

'the beloved'

A poignant father-son image is found in Genesis 22, the story of 'the sacrifice of Isaac' ('the binding of Isaac' in Jewish tradition). In the opening verses, God describes Isaac to Abraham as *'your only son...the one whom you love'* (22:2). The father-son intimacy builds as the

narrative develops. In a remarkable passage (22:6-8), containing repetition of 'father', 'my son', Abraham and Isaac walk together towards Mount Moriah, the site of sacrifice. Some Jewish commentators interpret these three verses as a turning point in the father-son relationship; Abraham's determination to carry out God's command becomes Isaac's will also; the two are now of one mind and purpose. Like bookends, the passage is held by the repeated phrase *'and the two of them walked on together'* (22:6,8). Naturally, Christian interpreters ponder this father-son relationship in the light of Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father, and the love between the Father and the Son.

Other Old Testament texts feed our reflection on Jesus, the Beloved Son, at his baptism in the Jordan. For example, Isaiah 42:1:

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

a voice came from heaven

To draw on a feminine image, note that Jewish tradition speaks of a *bat kol* (Hebrew): 'daughter of [the] voice', i.e., a heavenly voice representing God's proclamation or judgment. In the Talmud (*b. Ber.* 3a) this voice is depicted as 'cooing like a dove'. In Luke's Gospel, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, 'in bodily form like a dove', accompanied by a voice 'from heaven' (3:22). Empowered by divine love and filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led by the Spirit from the Jordan into the wilderness, and begins his public ministry (Lk 4:1,14). Like the Abraham-Isaac episode mentioned above, the declaration 'my Son' at the Jordan is a critical turning point in the biblical narrative. Luke's Gospel makes clear that this moment is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led.

[1] Cf. Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Jn 1:32-35.

[2] Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission, 11 April 1997. Emphasis added.

Bibliography: Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Scripture: NRSV

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