



MATTHEW 3; MARK 1; LUKE 3

COME FOLLOW ME COMMENTARY
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The Baptist and Baptism: “Prepare Ye the Way”

This supplemental study guide is to be read along with each verse or section of scriptural text. If you read them side by side, it can fill in historical, literary, and theological details.

The Book of Mormon Highlights John the Baptist (JBpst)

The Book of Mormon adds another witness to JBpst’s preaching and baptism of Jesus in 1 Nephi 10:9, 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:8. I find JBpst’s message to be one of restoration. The Book of Mormon overlaps with the themes from JBpst. For example, the Isaian citation, “prepare ye the way of the Lord,” is found 3 times in the NT and 10 times in the Book

of Mormon. John the Baptist has special significance to the restoration as the one who brought the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood (D&C 13). The biblical sections on JBPst are also augmented in the JST of the four Gospels.

THE GOSPELS INTRODUCE JBPST

At the time of the NT, a group of Jewish purists, who separated themselves from society to maintain their spiritual purity, left records of their beliefs. The Essene Messianic expectations in Qumran included waiting “until the coming of a prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel.”¹ Christianity proclaims that JBPst and Jesus fulfilled those roles.

Mk 1:1. The Gospel of Mark² begins with a short sentence that puts a spin on the opening of Genesis, “[In] the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Then the second sentence speaks of JBPst ministry. (Luke begins with JBPst’s miraculous birth, Lk 1:5–24, 39–66; Matthew begins with Joseph’s genealogy and part of Jesus’ nativity narrative, and John begins with the premortal *Word*, who was God.). Here are a few other details we learn from combining the four Gospel accounts of JBPst.

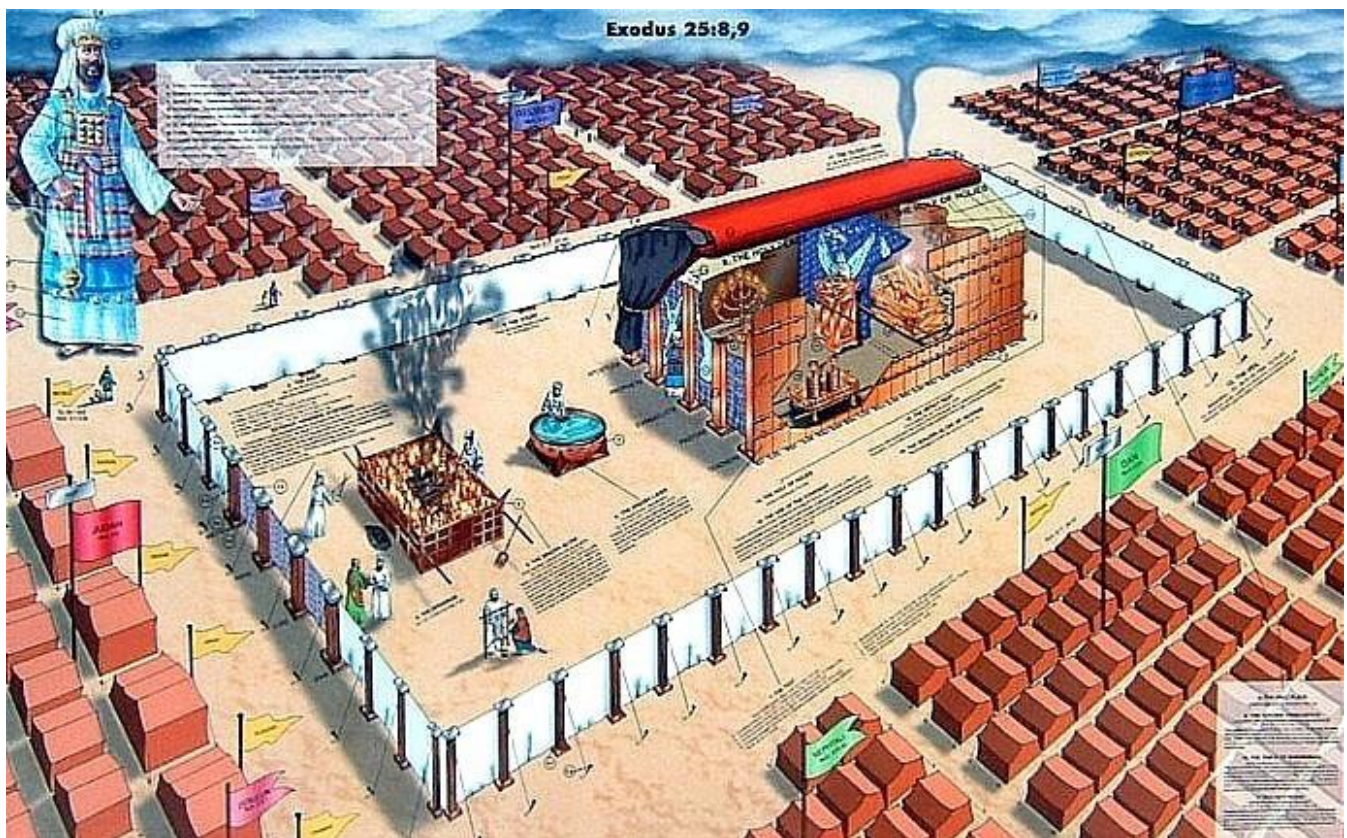
1. **DATE**—Thanks again to Luke, we can date JBPst’s preaching: “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (Luke 3:1). This is the only exact date we have in the New Testament (as I mentioned earlier, many biblical scholars calculate this as a sabbatical year).³
2. **POLITICAL LEADERS**—Leaders of the time are included by our historian and scholarly author, Luke. He also ties JBPst back to his father, to connect the birth narrative by repeating Zacharias’ name here (Luke 3:2).⁴
3. **DRESS and DIET**—Matt 3:4 and Mark 1:6 tell of wearing the thick, coarse (if woven), camel’s hair with a leather sash. Also like the Bedouins, he ate locust and wild honey (probably date honey). The dress sounds similar to the prophet Elijah 2 Kings 1:8, and they shared a spartan wilderness diet for a time.



4. LOCATION—Everyone mentions that JBPst was near the Jordan river, but John includes the southern place where the children of Israel crossed the Jordan to return to their promised land near Bethabara (John 1:28).

JBPst’s preaching and baptizing Jesus is the first event (and one of only six) that all four Gospels share.⁵ As a priest, JBPst would have been eligible to begin his service at age 30 (the age associated with authority in Judaism, Numbers 4:1, 35, 39). Each Gospel introduces Jesus as the fulfilment of an Isaian prophecy: A messenger to prepare the way of the Lord (Isa 40:3; and some of Malachi 3:1). JBPst taught that “the way” to prepare was to repent.

The Way



Mt 3:3 Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4; Jn 1:23. Isaiah’s prophesy has multiple times of fulfillments. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord,” is heavily used in modern revelation too—totaling 16 references! It was also a Puritan theme in early America. Jesus also used part of it in one of His “I AM” statements: “I am the way” (John 14:6). “The way” became the first name for believers in Christ following His death (Acts 9:2). When Jesus identified himself as “The Way,” it took on exceptional meaning. A symbolic interpretation refers to *the way* back to the presence of God, the way back to the Garden of Eden. It is the way back to the tree of life where one can partake of the fruit *without one’s sins*. God revealed this path back to God’s presence, or The Way, in the Mosaic Tabernacle and Temple rituals. Aaron and future priests, outlined the path by washing for a physical and spiritual cleanse in the brass laver or “molten sea.” They

dressed in holy garments of white linen, received an anointing to be set apart as servants of the Anointed One, or Messiah (Exodus 30:30; Lev 16:32). They sacrificed on the altar, sprinkled blood on the horns seven times (Lev 16:18–19), walked through the Holy Place with the incense, table of bread and wine, and then, once a year, on the Day of Atonement / *Yom Kippur*, the one and only high priest sanctified himself to walk past the menorah (representing the tree of life), sprinkled sacrificial blood on the veil seven times (Lev 4:6; 16:14), and then entered into the Holy of Holies, to the presence of God, symbolically sitting on the Mercy Seat (Leviticus 16). These steps are each symbolic of how we apply our Savior’s atoning sacrifice in our lives to be cleansed through Him. As a direct descendant of Aaron on both his father’s and mother’s lineages, JBPst prepared “the way” for The Redeemer, by teaching that it was through repentance that we can be receive a remission of our sins and be bought back to enter God’s presence.

JBpst Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness

Mt 3:2; Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3. We find the word “repent” repeated frequently in the Bible. This also adds to JBpst looking like an OT prophet. Yet it becomes a stronger theme in other scriptures.

- OT = 39 times. (As the OT is over four times larger than the NT, “repent” is actually far less frequent per word.)
- NT = 36 times.
- BoM = 220 times. (The Book of Mormon references also expand the definition that encourages change to [re]turn.)
- D&C = 82 times. (The Doctrine and Covenants’ frequent usage is more visible when word count is included.)
- PGP = 20 times. (Pearl of Great Price)

TEXTUAL HARMONY

As we look at all four Gospel accounts of JBpst’s preaching in harmony, we learn what each author emphasized, how the authors wrote, what their shared sources were, and why they emphasized certain things. For example, while the three “Synoptic” Gospels teach that JBpst preached repentance (Matt 3:2; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), John does not—nor does he use the word anywhere in his Gospel. In keeping with JBpst’s prophetic role as a restorationist, Mark and Luke both add that JBpst taught forgiveness, or remission of sins, in addition to repentance. *Remission* refers to “casting away,” which was the understanding of baptism since Adam (Moses 6:53).⁶

MARK 1:4

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins

LUKE 3:3

... he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins

In addition to the numbers above counting “repent,” modern scripture adds to our understanding of the term “repentance” with an extra 275 verses.⁷ Additionally, the JST adds significant changes to these verses on JBpst’s preaching that clarify the doctrine of repentance and forgiveness (see below Matt 3:7–12).

Lk 3:5. The JST nearly doubles the total size of Luke’s writings on JBpst (which also happens in Matthew starting in 3:8). The JST additions to this verse are unique in the Gospels and emphasize Christ’s salvation to the gentiles, his resurrection, and ascension “to dwell on the right hand of the Father,” acting as judge in the day of power. Another large section is added in the JST to Luke 3:13. These extra verses bolster Luke’s theme of the universality of Jesus’ message (see JST Appendix 3:4–11).

Lk 3:6. Each Gospel cites Isaiah 40:3–4, but Luke alone continues in Isaiah and adds the fifth verse: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” This specifically highlights Luke’s theology that Jesus came for *all*.

Mt 3:8–10; Lk 3:7–10. Luke includes a second call to repent, this time paralleling Matthew almost word for word (probably because they shared the same source material, unknown to us, but referred to as Q).⁸ JBpst’s condemnation evokes symbols from the Garden of Eden: viper, snake, trees, good fruit, wrath, spirit, etc. Again this exemplifies how he bridges the Old and New covenants as a restorer. The JST adds valuable additions. What are the doctrinal differences? Take a look:

JST MATT 3:7–11A

O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** *Why is it that ye receive not the preaching of him whom God hath sent? If ye receive not this in your hearts, ye receive not me; and if ye receive not me, ye receive not him of whom I am sent to bear record; and for your sins ye have no cloak. Repent, therefore, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance; and think not to say within yourselves, We are the children of Abraham, and we only have power to bring seed unto our father Abraham; for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children into Abraham . . . I indeed baptize you with water, upon your repentance;*

MATT 3:7–11A

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance; **9** And think not to say within yourselves,
We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham... **11** I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance

LUKE 3:7–10

Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
8 Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves,
We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. . . 10And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then?

At this time, many Jews felt that being a descendant of Abraham would automatically save them from eternal torture (Luke 16:24).⁹ JBpst (and later Jesus) made a radical change by denouncing this false tradition. One’s genealogy does not make you the seed of Abraham in the sense of being saved (see John 8:53; Gal 3:29). To be part of the house of Israel (through birth or adoption) one must bring forth good fruits—worthy “*upon your repentance*” (JST Matt 3:11).

Mt 3:11; Mk 1:7; Lk 3:16. I love this imagery of the Jewish customary relationship between a disciple and his teacher or servant and master that JBpst alludes to here (which I also mentioned in John 1:27). The Roman Empire maintained a clear social stratum. It carried over to Jerusalem where one half the population was slaves or servants. One of their jobs was to wash people's feet. Walking on dusty roads left one's feet so dirty that the cultural decorum required one's feet to be cleaned when entering a house. Washing callused, filthy, and often sore feet was such a demeaning job that it was left to society's lower classes: women, children, servants, and slaves. Interestingly, in a tutorial setting, students or disciples of a master teacher often chose to do everything they could for their teacher



Saint John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

in order to spend more time together (like feed and dress him). Everything, that is, except foot care. The rabbis specifically forbid disciples to wash their master teacher's feet because it was too demeaning.¹⁰ With that as background, note the wording in Mark 1:7 and Luke 3:16. By JBpst explaining that he is not worthy to carry the Messiah's shoes (Matt 3:11), or even stoop down to untie the latchet of His sandal (Mark 1:7), we find a powerful message of humility—and this coming from the man whom Jesus described as the greatest “born of women” (Matt 11:11). JBpst used a powerful image for his followers to understand his nothingness in comparison to Jesus.

Mt 3:11b; Mk 1:8; Lk 1:16b. If you were to introduce Jesus' mission in life, what would you say? I find it fascinating that of all the things Jesus did during his mortal ministry, JBpst chose to emphasize that the Promised Messiah would bring the baptism by fire, or the gift of the Spirit. This spiritual baptism

included a refining and judgment (Matt 3:12). The Spirit became so important in Christianity that some denominations refer to the time after Jesus' resurrection as the “Dispensation of the Spirit.”

In our dispensation of the fullness of times, one of the first things the Lord taught the young prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery was how to recognize and receive guidance from the Spirit (D&C 6:14–23; 8:1–3; 9:7–9; etc.). The Spirit became one of Joseph's favorite topics. On November 29, 1829, when he met with President Martin Van Buren in the White House, the President asked him what is the difference between his church and others. Joseph answered, “our mode of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost.”¹¹ President Nelson also emphasized “One of the things the Spirit has repeatedly impressed upon my mind since my new calling as President of the Church is . . .

[our need to] stretch beyond your current spiritual ability to receive personal revelation.”¹² Jesus’ redemption allows the Spirit to act in our lives. It is the agent that communicates the atonement.

Mt 3:12. JST changes add a double emphasis that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Ghost and add that He has the power, or priesthood to do so. It also adds *when* the purging and judgment will come.

BAPTISM OF JESUS

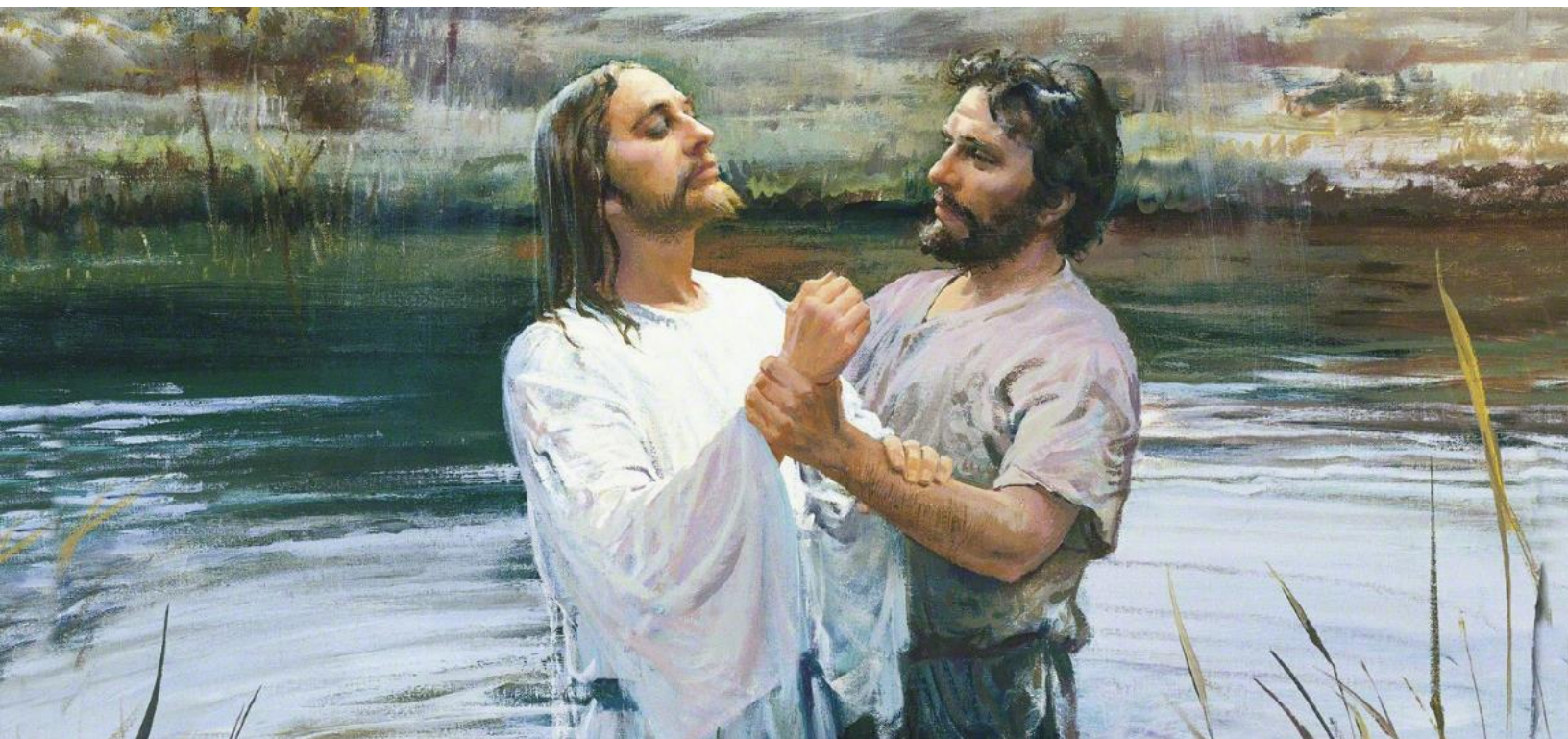


Figure 1 John the Baptist Baptizing Jesus by Harry Anderson. Image via LDS Media Library.

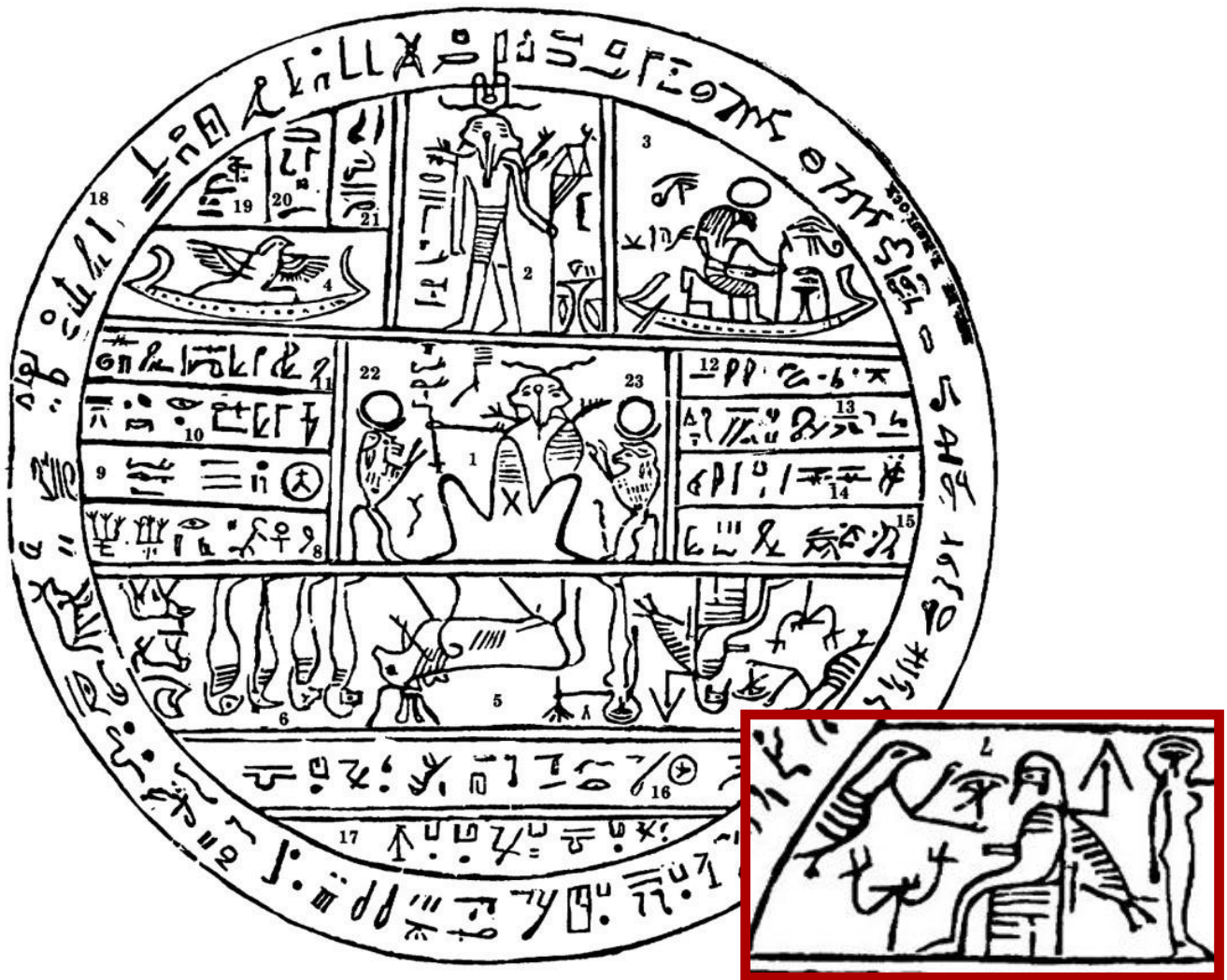
Mt 3:13–14; Mk 1:9; Lk 3:21. The Synoptic Gospels only mention the Jordan river, while John specifies Bethabara (John 1:28; also 1 Nephi 10:9). It is near Jericho and is the lowest land of the planet—which adds to the symbolism of baptism as a burial of the old man or woman (Romans 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17). The river was also parted there centuries earlier by Joshua 3:8, 15–16, Elijah (2 Kings 2:8), and Elisha (2 Kings 2:14)

JBpst’s baptism for the remission of sins is different than the Jewish cleansing “mikveh” baths. In the notes from John 1, we talked about the different Greek words as found in the ancient cookbook: 1) *bapto*, meaning to “dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge,” and 2) *baptize*, meaning to transform or make a change, like a cucumber becoming a pickle.¹³ JBpst’s call for baptism required a change into something new in our heart, mind and life. Throughout the NT, *baptize* refers to our union with the Savior (i.e. Mark 16:16). The Greek words communicate

that intellectual agreement is not enough. We need to form a union with Jesus that has the power to change our nature, to “become new creatures” (Mosiah 27:26).

Mt 3:15; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22. Why do you think Jesus had to be our exemplar in baptism? I know the pat answers: to humble himself before God, to be obedient to ordinances (2 Nephi 31:5-7); to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost; to gain an inheritance in the celestial kingdom—can you think of more?

Sign of the Dove



Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22. Jesus’ baptism includes heavenly witnesses and divine manifestations. The final member of the Godhead is now heard (by JBpst at least). The introduction is tender, “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” When ordinances are performed in the restored church of Jesus Christ, we also have many witnesses that heavenly beings often visit. Restored truths have also added new revelation to augment our understanding of the significance of the Holy Spirit as the “Sign of the Dove” in five ways:

1. We have other scriptures that also reference the dove (D&C 93:15; Gen 8:10–12; Lev 15:14; Hos 7:11; 11:11; etc. It is the same word used for pigeons in the Hebrew OT and the Greek NT.)
2. It is helpful to remember from D&C 130:22 that the Holy Ghost is a personage of Spirit.
3. In D&C 93:15; 1 Nephi 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:8, the wording from the baptism story is slightly different: “in the form of a dove.”
4. Joseph Smith taught at a Sunday meeting on January 29, 1843:

[John the Baptist] led the Son of God into the waters of baptism, and had the privilege of beholding the Holy Ghost descend in the form of a dove, or rather in the *sign of the dove*, in witness of that administration. The sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost, and the devil cannot come in the *sign of a dove*. The Holy Ghost is a personage, and is in the form of a personage. It does not confine itself to the form of the dove, but in sign of the dove. The Holy Ghost cannot be transformed into a dove; but the sign of a dove was given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or *token* of truth and innocence.¹⁴

The Book of Abraham includes the “sign of the dove” in Facsimile No. 2 (Kolob) in Figure 7 and the Temple. God is sitting upon his throne, revealing Key word of the Priesthood to Abraham and one of them relates one figure to this sign. It appears that the Spirit descended in bodily form and used a sign to identify himself.

Header Image: Image via LDS Media Library

ENDNOTES

¹ QS 9:1. Also see Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible: Luke vol 29*, 1311.

² Mark’s Gospel is historically attributed to John Mark, nephew of Barnabas (Col 4:10), companion to Paul (Acts 12:25), son of the wealthy property owner and Jerusalem disciple Mary (Acts 12:12), and close family friend of Peter (1 Peter 5:13). The early Christian Church claimed John Mark was the scribe who recorded Peter’s teachings in his gospel—including Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and Tertullian, the Muratorian Fragment, and the Anti-Marcionite Prologues. His gospel is the shortest, focusing on the reality of Jesus’ human emotions (e.g. compare Gethsemane scenes), the fastest moving, and was almost entirely used by Matthew and Luke, in their longer Gospels.

³ Tiberius reigned from August 19, AD 14, to March AD 37. John was age 30—and Jesus six months younger, when JBpst began His ministry (King David was also 30 when he began his reign). J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 259280; or H. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. Some suggest A.D. 27/28 as the Sabbatical year in Palestine, although this is complicated by which calendar system are you are using—Julian, Jewish, Syrain-Macedonian, and Egyptian. I like the discussion in E. Martin, *The birth of Christ recalculated*, 2nd ed. 1980.

⁴ Lynne Wilson, “Confusing Zacharias,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 2 (2013), 107–123.

⁵ (1) Baptism, (2) Cleansing of the temple, (3) Healing royal official's son; (4) Feeding 5,000; (5) Triumphal entry; (6) Passion, death, and resurrection.

⁶ Kent Brown, *BYU NT Commentary: Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 180–181.

⁷ The simple answer that repentance means the four R's (recognize, remorse, reconcile, renounce) is not enough. In addition to change, modern scripture teaches that repentance is also the condition of trying with all our heart, might, mind, and strength to live as Jesus would have us. When we are repentant, we feel and recognize the Spirit in our lives. Repentance, as taught in modern revelation, is actually the condition of our heart that earnestly tries to do only those things that will please our Savior and His Father.

⁸ German biblical scholars reported in 1900 that Matthew and Luke share much information unique to the two of them, but they often edit it in their own way (even placing the information at different historical times and places). The scholars deduced that Matthew and Luke shared a common source material, and called it after the German word “source / *quell*,” or more commonly known as “Q.”

⁹ Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: Luke*, 468, “Rabbinical literature later played on Israel's physical descent from Abraham as protection against God's wrath.”

¹⁰ Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin, *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 313.

¹¹ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:42.

¹² Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for our Lives,” *General Conference* (April 2018).

¹³ James Montgomery Boice, *Bible Study Magazine*, May 1989.

¹⁴ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 275-276. For original spelling see, Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990).