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May 2nd: Deuteronomy 3 & Luke 3:1-22

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The Transjordanian tribes. John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus.

Some passages referenced:

1 Chronicles 2:21-22 (Jair); Judges 10:3-5 (Jair the Gileadite, the judge); Genesis 50:23 (Machir); Numbers 32:29-42, Joshua 13:8-13 (other accounts of this stage of the conquest); Numbers 32:6-27 (Reuben, Gad, and Mannaseh to assist the other tribes in their conquest of the rest of the land); Genesis 13:14-15 (Abram views the inheritance from the top of the mountain).

Luke 1:5, 2:1-2 (previous references to rulers); Hosea 1:1, Amos 1:1, Micah 1:1, Zephaniah 1:1, Haggai 1:1, Zechariah 1:1 (introductory formulae for prophets); Genesis 3:15 (seed of the serpent); Isaiah 51:1-2 (Israel hewn from Abraham the rock); Isaiah 10:33-34, Psalm 74:4-7 (chopped down trees); Daniel 4:10-16 (Nebuchadnezzar as a felled tree); Isaiah 63:1-6 (the mighty warrior); Malachi 3:1-3 (the Lord suddenly coming to his temple); 2 Chronicles 3:1 (the temple built upon the threshing floor); Luke 1:17 (John the Baptist coming in the spirit and power of Elijah); Joshua 1, 2 Kings 2 (transitions between desert and land prophets); John 1:29-34 (Jesus manifested as the Son of God at his baptism); Ezekiel 1:1 (Ezekiel sees heavens opened and visions of God).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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names were changed, and Sibma. And they gave other names to the cities that they built. And the sons of Machaer, the son of Manasseh, went to Gilead and captured it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it.

And Moses gave Gilead to Machaer, the son of Manasseh, and he settled in it. And Jair, the son of Manasseh, went and captured their villages, and called them Havath-Jair. And Noba went and captured Kenath and its villages, and called it Noba after his own name.

This is also described in Joshua chapter 13, verses 8-13. And Gilead, and the region of the Gesherites and the Maakathites, and all Mount Hermon, and all Bashan, to Selechah, all the kingdom of Og in Bashan, who reigned in Ashteroth, and in Edrei, he alone was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. These Moses had struck and driven out.

Yet the people of Israel did not drive out the Gesherites or the Maakathites, but Gesher and Maakath dwell in the midst of Israel to this day. Gesher and Maakath appear to be micro-kingdoms. In Numbers chapter 32, verses 6-27, Moses had required Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh to join the rest of the tribes in their conquest of the land on the west side of the Jordan.

But Moses said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the Lord has given them? Your fathers did this when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to see the land. For when they went up to the valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land that the Lord had given them. And the Lord's anger was kindled on that day, and he swore, saying, Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt from twenty years old and upward shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me, none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the Lord.

And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone. And behold, you have risen in your father's place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel. For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people.

Then they came near to him and said, We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock and cities for our little ones, but we will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place. And our little ones shall live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until each of the people of Israel has gained his inheritance, for we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side

of the Jordan, the east.

So Moses said to them, If you will do this, if you will take up arms to go before the Lord for the war, and every armed man of you will pass over the Jordan before the Lord, until he has driven out his enemies from before him, and the land is subdued before the Lord. Then after that you shall return and be free of obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the Lord. But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out.

Build cities for your little ones and flocks for your sheep, and do what you have promised. And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben said to Moses, Your servants will do as my Lord commands. Our little ones, our wives, our livestock, and all our cattle shall remain there in the cities of Gilead, but your servants will pass over, every man who is armed for war, before the Lord to do battle as my Lord orders.

In the willingness of the tribes of Gad and Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh to fight with their brothers for the rest of the land, there is an expression of the commonality of the people of Israel. They are not just detached tribes, but they are coming together for a common purpose and a common destiny. They are divided in the land into different territories, but they have a common possession in the land, as they all belong to the one nation.

Fighting for each other's territories is one of the ways in which this is expressed. Moses also charges Joshua as the new leader of the people at this point. The defeat of the two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, is held forth as an example of how the Lord would bring them victory on the other side of the Jordan.

The Lord fights for Israel. Having been told that he could not enter the land, Moses pleaded with the Lord that he might be permitted to go over and see it. However, the Lord was angry with Moses on account of Israel, and he could not.

His association with an unfaithful people and his own unfaithfulness with the striking of the rock at Meribah-Qedash meant that he had to die on the far side of the Jordan. However, he does get to view the land from Pisgah. A question to consider.

In Genesis chapter 13, verses 14-15, we find a very similar description to that of Moses on Pisgah concerning Abram. The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward. For all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.

How might Israel have seen their own experience in that of Abram in Genesis 13 and 14, and what might they have learned from him? Luke chapter 3, verses 1-22. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and

Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturria and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the crowds asked him, What then shall we do? And he answered them, Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise. Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, Teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, Collect no more than you are authorized to do.

Soldiers also asked him, And we, what shall we do? And he said to them, Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages. As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the Tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased. Once again, as he does in Luke chapter 1 verse 5 and Luke chapter 2 verses 1-2, in Luke chapter 3 verses 1-2, Luke sets the scene within the context of the wider world and its rulers and empires, and of Jerusalem its kings and priests. A new ruler is coming onto the world stage, and from this time onwards the nations and their rulers must reckon with him.

While the other Gospels don't mention Pontius Pilate until the time of Jesus' trial, Luke introduces him as a character here. He also speaks of the surrounding regions, establishing a more cosmopolitan context for the events that will occur. Seven historical figures are mentioned, Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas.

This roots the narrative in a clear historical context. It is very easy for us to forget that history is measured relative to persons, rather than according to the more abstract metric of numbers. To enter into history is to take up a position in the world of human affairs, relative to all these different figures.

So we might speak of this particular year as the 2020th year of our Lord, the year of the pandemic, and the 69th year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Donald Trump being President of the United States. Such a way of dating, as Luke dates the events here, tells us a great deal more than the year 2020. The word of God came to John the son of Zachariah.

This is a familiar formula for the word of the Lord coming to the prophet. Note the fact that many of the prophet's books are introduced with a similar expression. The formula is often further contextualised by mentioning the reign of particular kings or rulers, often foreign ones, along with the name of the prophet and his father.

So for instance, the word of the Lord that came to Hosea the son of Beriah in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. Or the words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. Or in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai, the prophet, to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

Or in the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zachariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, The prophets operate within an international context, speaking as God's representatives to kings and rulers of nations. Unsurprisingly, John the Baptist is later imprisoned in this chapter for speaking out against Herod, the king. John the Baptist declares a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

As N.T. Wright observes, the remission of sins refers primarily to God's restoration of sinful Israel. The baptism was an act of national, not just private, repentance. This baptism occurred in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan.

Those who came to be baptized by John had symbolically to leave the land and re-enter it by washing. John is one preparing the way for the returning king in the wilderness. He

baptizes in the wilderness as the one who is the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord, making his path straight.

He is preparing a people to be brought into the land by Jesus, Joshua. John was from a priestly family and his actions should be understood in the light of this. Baptism wasn't something that arose out of the blue, but it's something related to the rites of the Levitical system.

Nor was John alone in developing water rites. We have similar ritual washings associated with the Essenes. John the Baptist here raises the question of who the true children of Abraham are, a question that is central in many other parts of the Bible, not least Romans and Galatians.

In using the expression brood of vipers, he is effectively declaring that the multitudes coming to him are like the seed of the serpent. In Genesis 3, verse 15, there is enmity placed between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. And John is suggesting that rather than their being the children of Abraham as they suppose themselves to be, they are actually the children of the evil one.

God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. God later raises up Christ from the stone grave as Abraham's true heir. And I think that it's possible that John is alluding to Isaiah chapter 51, verses 1-2 here.

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord, look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you. For he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him.

Israel is raised up from the rock and God can do the same thing again. John declares that the axe is laid to the root of the trees. The trees are going to be chopped down at their very roots, not just at the trunk.

Once again, the image comes from Isaiah chapter 10, verses 33-34. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power. The great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. Those who know the Isaiah reference will recognize that what comes next is a rod growing from the stem of Jesse. The kingdom is cut down beyond even David, and a new David will arise, like life from the dead.

The image of the axe and the trees is also reminiscent of Psalm 74, verses 4-7, where the trees are associated with the temple. The nation and its temple will be cut down by the axe of the Romans in AD 70 and burned. Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place.

They set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees, and all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire.

They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. The imagery is also found in Daniel 4, verses 10-16. The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these.

I saw and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful, and its fruit abundant.

And in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold a Watcher, a Holy One, came down from heaven.

He proclaimed aloud and said thus, Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field.

Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him, and let seven periods of time pass over him.

There Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian Emperor is judged for his pride, and it's the judgment upon the kingdom that he's associated with too. Perhaps we should recognize that the names of verses 1 and 2 in this chapter are also a list of trees. These great trees of the earth that will be brought low.

With the advent of his kingdom, God is bringing a great axe to the farthest of the world. Jesus is declared to be mightier than John. Here Jesus is presented as if a powerful warrior.

Once again perhaps we are in the world of Isaiah allusions here. Jesus is like the description of the Lord as a mighty warrior, single-handedly working salvation, treading out the winepress on the day of his vengeance in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 1 to 6. John the Baptist isn't worthy to loose Christ's sandals for this treading. The references to strength are significant.

The Hebrew meaning of Gabriel's name also refers to might and strength. And the scene is being set for a showdown with the strong man who holds the world in bondage. Our first introduction to Christ in the New Testament through the testimony of John the Baptist is as the one who winnows at the threshing floor.

His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Christ is the one who works the threshing floor, much as he is the one who treads out the grapes and the winepress in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 1 to 6 and Revelation chapter 14 verses 14 to 20 where he also reaps the wheat. And only a dull ear would miss the heavy allusion to Malachi chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. The Lord is the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.

And he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. The temple of Malachi chapter 3 is replaced with the threshing floor in Luke chapter 3. And it makes sense because the temple was built upon a threshing floor and the symbolism of these two things get associated with each other.

Not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain is associated as a principle with the way that the priest should be able to eat from the altar. The priests are the oxen that work in the temple, that work in the threshing floor. They're preparing the grain of Israel for the bread of God.

Christ however is the one who purges both the temple and the nation of Israel. He is the one who separates wheat from chaff, burning the latter and gathering the former. It's a time of judgement.

These are images of God's judgement drawn from places like Psalm 1. Herod the Tetrarch persecutes John the Baptist at the instigation of his wife Herodias. And the parallel to Jezebel's instigation of Ahab's persecution of Elijah, in whose spirit and power John came, in verse 17 of chapter 1, that should be clear. Jesus is baptised when all of the people have been baptised, presumably suggesting that it was not just as one of the crowd.

Should we see a suggestion that Jesus is the one who completes the full number? Perhaps. I'm not sure whether Luke intends this but you might see the flood account in the background here. When all have entered the ark, God closes the door.

Then the heavens are opened. The Holy Spirit later descends upon Jesus like a dove, like the dove descended on the new earth after the flood. I think Luke definitely intends this but I'm not completely persuaded that he intends a wider set of flood allusions.

In the baptism of Jesus we see Father, Son and Spirit in a single event. The voice of the Father from heaven, the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove and the Son coming up out of the water. In contrast to other gospel descriptions of the baptism of Christ,

Jesus, we are here told, is praying at the time.

And this is part of Luke's foregrounding of the theme of prayer more generally. Why is Jesus baptised by John? Various reasons can be given and different gospels emphasise different things. Among other things it creates continuity between the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Just as Moses and Joshua in Joshua chapter 1 and Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 2 passed the baton of ministry on the far side of the Jordan, so John passes the baton of ministry, the ministry of the prophets, to Jesus the Son at the same place. Jesus has the same name as Joshua and a related name to Elisha and he leads us into the promised land. His ministry is compared to that of Elisha at various points in the gospel of Luke.

And before Jesus, Elisha was the most prominent miracle worker in the land. In being baptised with the rest of the people, Jesus also identifies with them and identifies them with him. He is the one who will lead them into the promised land.

He is the new Joshua who will go before the people. As the leader of the people, he also takes their state upon himself along with all of their history. And so in being baptised, he is assuming the weight of the burden of Israel, present in the land, but not truly enjoying the fellowship with God that they should do because of their sin.

Jesus enacts the repentance of the nation that he represents by being baptised with John's baptism. At his baptism, Jesus is also being set apart as a priest. He begins his ministry at about 30 years of age, which is the age at which the priests began their ministry.

Jesus' baptism was a baptism into priesthood. And the fact that a genealogy follows should be related to the fact that Jesus is entering into priestly ministry at this point. The genealogy marks him out as qualified for priesthood.

The baptism is a confirmation both to Jesus and to John of Jesus' status as the Son of God. In John's gospel, the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus is that which manifests Jesus to John as the Son of God. And this marks the definitive beginning of Christ's ministry.

But it also demonstrates that John's ministry has achieved its purpose. It is important to remember that a qualification for the Twelve was having been there since the baptism of John. And each one of the gospels highlights the ministry of John at the very outset of their story.

John the Baptist is an integral part of the story of Christ. Jesus' own story is a story of three baptisms. His baptism where he is anointed and manifested in the Jordan, the baptism of his death, and the baptism of the Spirit that he performs at Pentecost.

And in Jesus' baptism he gathers up the story of all the great baptisms of the Old

Testament. Things like the Creation, the Flood, the Red Sea, baptism into priesthood, the ritual washings, Elijah crossing the Jordan, and many other such events. And he gathers these into his story.

He takes up the baton from the last great Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist. He identifies with a sinful people and then out of their broken history he forges a new one. Our baptism is how we are plugged into his baptism.

We are baptised into him as Israel was into Moses, the one who was drawn from the water. We are baptised with him in the Jordan, anointed with his Spirit for ministry and declared to be God's beloved children. We are baptised with him in his death, dying and rising to new life.

We are baptised with his baptism of Pentecost, clothed with the mantle of the ascended Christ's Spirit and made one body with him. And the story of all things is gathered together and summed up in the baptised Christ and we in him. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism should be related to the later descent of the Spirit upon the church at Pentecost.

As Christ ascends into heaven, his Spirit descends upon the church, like the mantle of Elijah fell to Elisha and Elisha received the firstborn portion of Elijah's Spirit when Elijah ascended in 2 Kings 2. Elijah's ascension is Elisha's Pentecost. A further connection to Luke's account of Jesus' baptism might be seen in the story of Ezekiel. In chapter 1 verse 1 Jesus is a new Ezekiel as we will see in what follows.

This is the 30th year of his life as it was the 30th year for Ezekiel. He is by the river, he is with the exiles, the heavens are opened and he sees visions of God. If John the Baptist was introduced to us like one of the Old Testament prophets, the stage is now set for a new prophet.

A question to consider, what Old Testament accounts might the words of the Father from heaven remind us of?