

The Messiah's credentials

By [George C. Heider](#)

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Since Jesus' baptism is featured this week in all three lectionary years, it's important to take into account the different emphases and nuances. Matthew is [quite concerned](#) with what John is doing baptizing Jesus, while Mark [employs](#) a distinctive verb (*schizō*, "to rip") to describe the opening of the heavens, a word that recurs only at the [moment of Jesus' death](#).

Luke's concern—seen even more clearly in [the passage](#) that follows today's—is to establish Jesus' full credentials. Luke's overall interest in Jesus as Savior to the nations should not get lost amid attempts to harmonize the day's central story.

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#):

- The lesson raises bluntly an issue that most of us would like to avoid thinking about: favorite children. Even God has one. To be sure, Israel's special status was, from the beginning, [intended](#) as a means to the end of blessing all nations, particularly in the light of God's abandonment of efforts to deal with humanity *en bloc* following the [Tower of Babel affair](#). But this lesson even speaks of God's ransoming Israel at the cost of others of his children. If there ever was a time for attention to context (specifically, the exilic audience), this is it. Still, we ought not explain away or otherwise domesticate the image too quickly: whatever we finally make of it, God is giving extraordinary expression of his power and love for Israel.
- It's worth observing that in the Old Testament outreach to the nations usually follows a [centripetal vector](#), while in the New Testament (especially Acts) it more generally has a [centrifugal direction](#). Given the Epiphany season's focus on missions, it's worth lifting up the both/and character of the biblical witness: in the divine economy, God both gathers and sends, both buys back and invests anew.

[Acts 8:14-17:](#)

- The New Testament—again, especially Acts—shows remarkable freedom in describing the link between baptism and the receipt of the Holy Spirit. Here there's a clear separation in time, echoing in its own way John's distinction between his baptizing with water and the baptism by "one who is more powerful than I" with "the Holy Spirit and fire." Clearly, the church's understanding of baptism took some time to develop.
- While scholars debate the origins of the division with what became more normative Judaism, Samaritans clearly represent the phenomenon of outsider-insiders that has manifested itself in a multitude of forms in centuries since. Of course, we can't simply read into the Samaritan/Jew relationship the particulars of other, subsequent human group distinctions. But it remains a useful paradigm for the discussion of the early church's struggle with the gospel's boundaries—and our own struggles today.

[Luke 3:15-17, 21-22:](#)

- The first thing to do with an appointed lesson that deletes verses is to check out the omission. In this case, the lectionary committee was apparently seeking to draw together John's words on baptism with Jesus' being baptized, by omitting [three verses](#) dealing chiefly with John's entanglements with Herod Antipas. What's potentially lost, however, is Luke's description of John's "fire and brimstone" preaching as "good news"—how so good, we might fruitfully ask?
- Another point not to be missed is the setup to the entire reading: whether the hopes of an expectant people for the Messiah's coming had been met in John. His answer is indirect: he insists that a greater baptizer is on the way. By implication, then, this question is answered by the opened heavens, the bodily appearance of the Holy Spirit alighting upon Jesus and the voice addressed to Jesus but overheard by John, the crowds and Luke's readers through the centuries.
- Why a dove? We've become so accustomed to the symbol that we may no longer ask. The text doesn't say, so any answer is necessarily speculative, but when did that ever stop a theologian? One obvious allusion is [the dove released from the ark](#) by Noah (especially given the linkage between Noah and baptism

found in [1 Peter 3:20-21](#) and often since). But there's another possibility: the book of the prophet Dove (Hebrew "Jonah") is among the Bible's clearest and most powerful testimonies to the all-inclusive embrace of God—just the point that Luke-Acts is intent on making. (Yes, the dove is also there in Matthew and Mark, but who's to say what Luke had in mind?)

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