The "Coming One"/"Stronger One" and His Baptism:
Matt 3:11-12, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16-17

J. Daryl Charles*

Introduction

In terms of significance, the figure of John the Baptist is unique in the scriptures. Only John furnishes a proper perspective with which fully to appreciate Jesus' messianic ministry. One of his prophetic pronouncements is the focus of the present study: the prediction of the "baptism" which the "Coming One" would bring. The saying is represented in the Synoptic Gospels through a Markan and a Matthean-Lukan tradition:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is stronger than I, whose sandals (Luke: thongs) I am not worthy to carry (Luke: untie); he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his (Luke: the) wheat into the (Luke: his) granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Matt. 3:11-12; Luke 3:16-17)

After me comes he who is stronger than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. (Mark 1:8)

Commentators in the twentieth century have espoused essentially three main interpretations of this Synoptic pronouncement and cast John's prediction, for the most part, as negative action, i.e., judgment. This is due in part to a renewed interest among scholars earlier in this century in critically reassessing the Gospel traditions. Practically speaking, John's baptism and pronouncement were no longer to be interpreted solely in light of Pentecost or Christian baptism. The present study will benefit from a review of the prevailing views among NT commentators of this century.

1) One theory for interpreting John's "Spirit-and-fire" logion which has enjoyed popularity is that John was referring to two separate and distinct baptisms: one for the repentant (in the Spirit) and one for the unrepentant (in the fire of judgment). This represented a reaction against a prevailing tradition historically which equated the "fire" of John's preaching with the Holy Spirit and thereby interpreted the coming baptism as a foremost gracious work.¹

2) A second view prefers "fire" alone (in opposition to "Spirit") as the accepted reading. Proponents would contend that "Holy Spirit and

---

*J. Daryl Charles is a Ph.D. candidate at Westminster Seminary.

¹Twenty-first-century proponents of this view include W. Michaelis, E. Lohmeyer, W. H. Brownlee, F. J. Leenhardt and R. E. Brown.
"fire" is not an authentic reading, rather a later editorial addition. This supposition has been by no means a minority view and is generally found among certain redaction critics, who, in the process of seeking to analyze the author's underlying theological motive, would hold "Spirit" as a "christianizing" of the text by the later Christian community.

3) Yet another view demands scrutiny. Some have interpreted John's prediction of the Messiah's work as solely judgmental, void of any gracious action whatsoever. Support for this argument is the rendering of πνεῦμα as not "spirit," but rather, "wind," and hence, a strong wind of God which is sent to render judgment, along with fire which would finally destroy what the wind had left. This theory rests upon the relationship between fire and wind as they appear together in the OT.

John the Baptist in the Synoptics is a preacher of not merely fire and brimstone. Both Mark and Luke record that John's rite was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, the Matthew-Luke account speaks of the "Coming One" bringing wheat into "his" barn. Repentance would meet the condition for salvation and partaking of the kingdom of God. John's baptism was not perceived as a way of escape from the coming baptism; rather those baptized by John ("I baptize you ...") must have seen grace coming to them; hence, a looking forward to the coming Messiah. John, as did Jesus, proclaimed "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2 = 4:17).

The British scholar J. D. G. Dunn is one of the few who has offered a refreshing—and much needed—alternative view to the aforementioned traditional arguments. Upholding the Baptist's capacity to prophesy of the Spirit and accurately pronounce the nature of the messianic office (i.e., to impart the Spirit), Dunn notes John's emphasis on repentance and forgiveness as well as a balance of threat and promise, curse and blessing, resident in his preaching. Can John have previewed the work of the Spirit?

Fire Symbolism in the Old Testament

One is struck by the frequency of association between fire and judgment in the OT. Reflective of the prophetic past, the strongly urgent

---

2Among its adherents have been J. Wellhausen, C. A. Briggs, R. Bultmann, T. W. Manson, P. Vielhauer and E. Haenchen.

3To this camp belong A. B. Bruce, C. H. Kraeling, C. K. Barrett, W. Grundmann and W. Bieder along with Best. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of related OT scriptures either speak of "wind" in a scattering sense or "fire" in a devouring sense.


7Ibid., 86.