

Defending the church's truth claims

6. Further developments

More about Jesus' baptism, his conception and his existence before all worlds

There is a bracket for the date of writing of 'Mark', between 65 and 75CE. It seems to be observable and was once very widely agreed among scholars that both 'Matthew' and 'Luke' incorporated most of 'Mark's material in their gospels. Nearly everyone agrees that the gospel of 'John' was the last of the four gospels to be written.

What was seen and heard to happen at the baptism of Jesus, and by whom? As 'Mark' puts it, Jesus had a vision which made his sonship clear to him when he came up out of the water at his baptism. "Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased'" ('Mark' 1. 10/11 NRSV). In 'Mark' there is a private vision and the Spirit speaks to Jesus in the second person singular. No one else sees or hears anything and the same spirit at once sends Jesus off into the desert. Another version of the Greek text of 'Mark', which has come down to us and is noted in the NEB, reads "You are my only son, on you my favour rests".

The baptism story carries the sonship of Jesus back to shortly before the beginning of his active work in Palestine. If we picture the crowds flocking to the great prophet standing across the water on the East bank of the river Jordan, his fervour and eloquence, the profound symbolic act of going down naked into the river Jordan to be washed clean of your sins before you re-enter the land promised by God to your forefather Abraham, we today may find it intelligible that a pious young man discovered his 'vocation' in that tremendous experience. No one will ever know what Jesus himself experienced, and for the first followers the growth of his personality was not of the least importance.

There are two minor developments of the baptism story in our canonical gospels, which, while they show how tradition varied and developed, do not constitute separate 'christological moments' for the purposes of the present argument.

'Matthew's version of the traditional scene by the Jordan is that Jesus alone sees the dove alighting on him, but the voice from heaven is heard by all present: ('Matthew' 3.16/17). 'Luke', writing between 80 and 85 CE, has a different version again in which all present both see the dove and hear the voice: ('Luke' 1. 21/22). In these scenes the tradition which 'Matthew' and 'Luke' found in 'Mark' is given a different spin, as the elements recorded in 'Mark' are put to different uses by the evangelists. Incidentally, 'Luke' understands that Jesus, in common with all the other Jews with whom he travelled that way, went out to John at the bank of the Jordan in order to be baptised 'for the forgiveness of sins' : ('Luke' 3.3). That

evidence has caused much heart-searching, and the deployment of much pious ingenuity ever since. How could the one without sin have come to do such a thing?

Next, the story of the virginal conception of Jesus carries his 'sonship' back from a time shortly before the start of his work to shortly before the beginning of his existence as an embryo. The story comes in two forms. 'Luke' makes it clear that he is not an 'eyewitness'. His account depends on stories from eyewitnesses, perhaps on stories from the second generation of followers - if 'ministers of the word' refers to a separate group - and on many others who had undertaken to write before him about Jesus: ('Luke' 1.1-2). Most scholars are convinced that the gospel of 'Luke' as we know it first saw the light of day without the 'infancy narratives' we now read in it, that is, that it started with a group of dates fixing in history the events with which the book deals ('Luke' 3.1). RE Brown in his exhaustive study of the 'infancy narratives' suggests that for 'Luke' (and indeed for 'Matthew') his 'infancy narratives' constitute a miniature gospel in themselves. Brown can find no clear evidence of a virginal conception in any material in existence before the books of 'Luke' and 'Matthew', but suggests that each brought together three strands of pre-existing material - the literary form of an angelic annunciation of a birth, the theological 'it must have been' of the descent from David of the Jew's expected messiah, and the setting of a young girl who is engaged to be married, but is still a virgin. It seems that these stories were first written down some 50-55 years after Jesus' death. 'Matthew's' understanding of the passage in Isaiah on which he relies (Isaiah 7. 14) depends on the connotations of the Greek word 'parthenos' in the Greek version of (most of) the books of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint; the Hebrew original does not, apparently, have the connotation that the young woman who bears the child is a virgin. This is the point from which we started with Dr Williams in Part 1.

The gospel according to 'John'. Lastly, so far as traditions in the books accepted by the church as canonical are concerned, came the wisdom tradition recorded by 'John', which understood that it 'must have been the case that' the special relationship between Jesus and God had subsisted 'in the beginning'. "In the beginning was the word... and the word became flesh": (John 1. 1-14) - as translated into Shakespearean English a magical incantation for many of us.

Part 7, building a creed; blocks and intellectual tools.