

Christus Victor, Part 4: Take Me to the River

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I. Take Me to the River (Luke 3:1-14)

In Luke's view, Jesus is not God, but *Son* of God. The language of being "God's Son" is metaphorical, of course, not biological, but there is a qualitative difference between being God and being God's Son. To be God is to be all-knowing and all powerful – the Creator of the Universe. To be God's Son is to be God's creation. It is to be "of God," but different from God at the same time.

If Jesus was different from God, this means that Jesus was not fully aware of everything God was aware of. If he was to fulfill God's will for his life, therefore, he had to discern that will and intention. Given the extraordinary amount of time Jesus spends in prayer and meditation in the gospels, it seems that discernment of a will that was not completely known to him from moment to moment is exactly what Jesus was doing. In other words, Jesus was subject to human limitations just as we are.

Besides having to take time to intentionally discern God's will for his life, as Jesus did for forty days after his baptism, it appears that Jesus came to know God's will for his life in another way that is common to human experience – or at least not all together uncommon. Namely, Jesus would occasionally have mystical experiences that simply came upon him unannounced, whether he was expecting them or not. These mystical experiences, in fact, seem to have formed the core of Jesus' sense of identity and purpose in life. And they became the foundation of Jesus' most central message.

One particularly dramatic example of a mystical experience for Jesus was his experience at his baptism. A close reading of Luke's Gospel strongly suggests that while Jesus may have had inklings of his identity earlier in life, it was a mystical experience that took place in the wake of Jesus' baptism that awakened him to who he was, and whose he was. In fact, if Luke's story accurately conveys the events that took place that day, it is likely that Jesus entered the Jordan River with one set of assumptions of what was going on and what he was accomplishing by being baptized, and walked out of the river having experienced those assumptions being turned on their head and replaced by a radical new reality – which would become the basis of the New Covenant he would proclaim. You see, you miss all this good drama if you simply assume Jesus knew everything just like God.

So what was Jesus expecting as he stood on Jordan's shore preparing to enter the water? Likely he was expecting what everyone else in the crowd was expecting, which Luke conveys in the words of John the Baptist. He was expecting to be baptized for the *repentance of sins* – something that would be a little difficult to receive if you were already God!

The purpose of the baptism John invited people to receive, besides forgiveness of sins, was to help purify the nation of Israel so that God could finally send God's Messiah to lead Israel in a revolution to create, in essence, a state of heaven on earth.

Being one of those who accepted John's invitation to be baptized, Jesus stands on the bank of the Jordan River likely expecting to receive personal purification which would enable him to become one of God's army of the righteous who would tip the balance in Israel, allowing the Messiah to come and the revolution to begin. Imagine his surprise once he receives baptism, then, to hear God telling him essentially, "You're the One!"?

But this was not the only surprise Jesus would encounter in his baptism. If anything, God had an even greater surprise in store for him.

II. River of No Return (Luke 3:15-18)

John the Baptist insisted that he baptized only with water, but that the Messiah would baptize not with water alone but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. As prescient as John was, both he and his message were still embodiments of an Old Covenant which was about to be replaced. Thus, he interpreted his intuitions through Old Covenant eyes. For instance, when he speaks of a baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire, what John assumes is that the Messiah will bring God's wrath upon the unrighteous, thereby eliminating them from the earth so that heaven and earth might be joined. There is nothing to suggest that Jesus – before his baptism – expected anything different from John than a simple rite of purification by water. However, when Jesus was baptized, he experienced not only the sensations and awareness that being dunked under the water brings, but experienced the Holy Spirit's *fire*. And his experience overturned all the common assumptions about the relationship between heaven and earth.

But I get ahead of myself. Since Jesus' mystical experience at the Jordan would be, by definition, indescribable in human language, and in fact, trivialized by any attempt to describe what went on, Luke offers us just a metaphorical symbol of a dove and a voice saying "You are my son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased" to represent what went on. He's too wise to say anything more.

But I'm not! And I think that a little speculation about what was going on in Jesus' mind and heart when he was baptized is not inappropriate, so long as one is clear that one is speculating, not knowing; and that one isn't trying to represent the totality of what was going on inside Jesus but rather pointing vaguely toward his experience, which would have been much greater than words can possibly describe.

Actually, what I'm going to do is point toward Jesus' experience using the experience – or rather a set of experiences – of someone else. Namely, the late New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg. In the compilation of writings that was just released posthumously on Borg's behalf, Borg describes a set of experiences that he says literally converted him from being a Biblical scholar to being both biblical scholar and mystic. I believe that Borg's experiences bear a strong resemblance not only to many people's

experiences (perhaps even your own), but point to the core of Jesus' own mystical experience at his baptism.

Writes Borg, these experiences “weren’t a product of thinking, even though over time they have greatly affected my thinking, perhaps more than anything else has. And they made God real to me.

“In retrospect, I understand that they were mystical experiences ... But I did not know that at the time. I knew nothing about mysticism. It had not been part of four years of undergraduate and five years of graduate study of religion. Whenever I had tried to read books about mysticism on my own, they were utterly opaque. My eyes glazed over. I couldn’t figure out what they were talking about.

“The experiences were brief: none lasted longer than a minute or so, and some only a few seconds. They may not sound like much as I describe them, but I have since learned that this is one of the classic features of experiences like these: they are difficult to express in words. Even when words can convey what was experienced, they can only inadequately convey how it was experienced and the transformative power of the experience.

“Aware of that difficulty, I share one of these experiences that illustrates features common to all of them. It happened as I was driving through a sunlit rural Minnesota winter landscape alone in a nine-year-old MG two-seater roadster. The only sounds were the drone of the car and the wind through the thin canvas top. I had been on the road for about three hours when I entered a series of S-curves. The light suddenly changed. It became yellowy and golden, and it suffused everything I saw: the snow-covered fields to left and right, the trees bordering the fields, the yellow and black road signs, the highway itself. Everything glowed. Everything looked wondrous. I was amazed. I had never experienced anything like that before – unless perhaps in my early childhood, and so I no longer remembered it.

“At the same time, I felt a falling away of the subject-object distinction of ordinary everyday consciousness – that “dome” of consciousness in which we experience ourselves as “in here” and the world as “out there.” I became aware not just intellectually but experientially of the connectedness of everything. I “saw” the connectedness, experienced it. My sense of being “in here” while the world was “out there” momentarily disappeared.

“That experience lasted for maybe a minute and then faded. But it had been the richest minute of my life. It was not only full of wonder but also filled with a strong sense of knowing – of seeing more clearly and truly than I ever had. For about two years, I experienced more moments like this one. Some were just as vivid, and others were mere glimmerings. Most were visual. A few were triggered by music – a chamber orchestra in a college chapel, a symphony orchestra in a concert hall. The latter were not about a change in seeing, but about a change in hearing that again involved a falling away of the subject-object distinction of ordinary consciousness. During the experience, it was not I listening to the music but something outside myself. Only the music was left.

“For about twenty years, I didn’t have any more experiences like those, even as I yearned for them. I occasionally wondered why they had stopped and concluded that perhaps they had been for a reason and had served their purpose. But what I had known in those experiences had changed me.

“Then, in my mid-fifties, I had the longest and most intense such experience I’ve ever had. It happened an hour or two into a flight from Tel Aviv to New York – in economy class – a detail I add not to establish virtue, but to make it clear that I hadn’t had any before-dinner drinks. I think the experience lasted about forty minutes – not that I timed it, but it began before dinner was served and ended as the flight attendants were removing the dinner service.

“As during the experiences of my thirties, the light changed. It became golden. I looked around, and everything was filled with exquisite beauty – the texture of the fabric on the back of the seat in front of me, the tray full of food when it arrived (which I did not eat). Everybody looked beautiful – even a passenger who, as we left Tel Aviv, had struck me as perhaps the ugliest person I had ever seen. He had been pacing the aisle and was so hard to look at that I averted my eyes each time he passed by. Even he looked wondrous. My face was wet with tears. I was filled with joy. I felt that I could live in that state of consciousness forever and it would never grow old. Everything was glorious, filled with glory.

III. River of Dreams (Luke 3:21-23)

I believe that when Jesus arose from the waters of baptism and was sitting in meditation by Jordan’s shore, he experienced a fundamental shift in consciousness – an opening of the eyes, a widening of the heart, and explosive expansion of soul that is similar to Marcus Borg’s experiences but went far beyond them. Jesus saw the world for what it really is: glorious. Filled with glory. Instead of experiencing the vision for mere moments, Jesus’ internal “eye” remained open. He saw clearly that God was a part of everything and everything was a part of God, from the river and rocks, to the bushes and trees beside the river, to the people who sat in their shade – all was full of God. All was therefore radiant with life and love and beauty, and everything was connected to everything else in one seamless fabric of Being. Even human pain and sorrow, sin and rebellion, was part of this intimate web of relationship with God, joined in such a way that all sin and alienation was ultimately bound up in salvation in the Beloved Community.

The implications of what Jesus discovered on Jordan’s shore were staggering. God’s Kingdom wasn’t coming. It was already here – had probably *always* been here. The Messiah, therefore, would not be one who would usher in a Realm to come, but would open people’s awareness to the presence of a Realm that was already here and invite them to become its citizens. And when it came to who that Messiah would be who would reveal this Realm to the world, Jesus heard God say, “You’re the One!”

This experience so fundamentally challenged Jesus’ notion of Reality that he immediately

hid himself in the wilderness for forty days to try to make sense of it – and to discern whether or not the vision was from God. Is it any wonder he would do this? For, what he saw overturned the entire enterprise that John the Baptist was promoting, and that Israel had assumed was its basic mission for the last several centuries. And his vision still fundamentally challenges people to this day – including his own followers!

Yet despite the obstacles Jesus undoubtedly knew were before him, Jesus emerges from the wilderness and the very first words out of his mouth indicate that he has, in fact, accepted the Reality he experienced at the Jordan and his identity as God's Messiah. He announces, "The Kingdom of Heaven is already here! Change your whole way of thinking and believe the good news."

From Jesus' day down to this one, the big question he continues to challenge us with is, "Do you yet believe the good news?" If so, then the question is, "Have you oriented your life around your citizenship in God's Realm, or are you waiting for a different Realm to come?"