

WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

by Otis Wasson

**Used by permission: Originally published in *TRUTH* — August 1990.
TRUTH is a Grace Gospel Publication.**

**[The baptism referred to is the water baptism which Jesus experienced at the hand
of John the Baptist, not Jesus' baptism mentioned in Luke 12:50 - GSD]**

**Pastor Otis Wasson, who retired to Florida, is now with his Lord in glory.
He was the pastor of Berean Bible Church, Evansville, Indiana for many
years.**

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? The Lord Jesus was perfect and needed no cleansing, yet He was baptized. Was it necessary for Him, as the sinless Son of God, to be baptized for repentance of sins or for a good testimony? What does God's Word have to say regarding these questions? "But John forbad Him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering, said unto Him, suffer it to be so *now*: for thus it becometh us *to fulfill all righteousness*. Then he suffered Him" (Matt. 3:1~15).

Did John understand these words of the Lord? What did Jesus mean by "all righteousness?" Does "all" mean all without exception wherever the word is used? If so, how would one explain Acts 13:29? - "And when they had fulfilled *all* that was written of Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a sepulcher." Of course, "all" was not fulfilled concerning Him when He was taken down from the Cross, only the particular "all" of prophecy concerning His suffering. Therefore, the "all righteousness" in Matthew 3:15 does not mean all without exception. It concerns a specific righteousness which Christ came to "fulfill." In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the prophets: I came not to destroy but to fulfill." The apostle Paul, by the Holy Spirit, tells us: "For Moses describeth *the righteousness which is of the Law* that the man which doeth those things shall live by them." In Luke 2 we read at least five times that "all things" were done "according to the law" (Lk. 2:22, 23, 24, 39, 43).

Christ's fulfilling of all righteousness at His baptism, therefore, involved a specific requirement demanded by the Old Testament law.

There are at least four *appointed* chronological events in the life of our Lord. Why are only *four* ages of the Lord mentioned regarding His earthly life? Any sincere Bible student will want to know why these four ages of Christ are highlighted in the Scripture.

- Circumcision on the eighth day.
- Presentation at forty days.
- Confirmation at twelve years.
- Baptism at thirty years.

Circumcision on the Eighth Day

"And when the *eight day* were accomplished for the circumcising of the child His name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before He was conceived in the womb" (Lk. 2:21).

We must first learn the origin of this ceremony. In Genesis 17:10-12 we read, "This is my covenant ... everyman child among you shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin: and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is *eight* days old shall be circumcised among you..." The law of circumcision is herewith established as a required statute in Israel.

This law was incorporated into the law of Moses. We read in Leviticus 12:2-3: "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, if a woman have conceived seed and born a man child, then she shall be unclean seven days, according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean, and in the *eighth day* the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised."

So Jesus was circumcised precisely according to the righteousness of the law of circumcision. Paul said in Galatians 5:3, "For I testify again to every man that is circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole law." In circumcision, Jesus bore about in His very flesh the seal of a voluntary obligation to do the whole law, something which was uniquely possible only by Jesus Christ since the fall of Adam. In His circumcision He was brought under a palpable pledge to be "obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross." But what did His circumcision mean to us? We read in Colossians 2:11: "In whom you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ."

Presentation at Forty Days

"When the days of her purification *according to the Law of Moses* were accomplished they brought Him to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord." This event is according to the law of Moses as written in Leviticus 12:2-7. Then in Luke 2:22-24: "...they brought Him to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord; (as it is written in the Law of Moses, every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord); and to offer a sacrifice *according to that which is said in the law* of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Their meager sacrificial offering was a "fulfilling the righteousness of the Law" written in Leviticus 12:8. Is it not becoming obvious that these featured ages of Jesus, including all that was done at the age of his presentation in the temple, was to fulfill specifically all righteousness of *the Law*?

Twelve Years Old

"Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover, and when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem *after the custom of the feast*" (Lk. 2:41-42). At twelve years of age, every Jewish boy becomes "a son of the law" (which is what *bar mitzvah* literally means). Since his parents had performed everything according to the Law of Moses, Joseph then paid the five shekels of redemption money for his firstborn son to the temple prescribed by Numbers 4:46-47 and Numbers 18:16. This gave Joseph the legal right to be "reckoned" as the father of Jesus and to be so registered in the temple (see Lk. 3:23). The Law commanded the faithful in Israel to make this ascent to Jerusalem at the Passover (compare Lk. 2:41, 42 with Deut. 16:1,2). Consequently, all this, too, was done "according to the Law of the Lord." Still other Jewish laws were established for another age, and that was the age of thirty.

Thirty Years of Age

In Luke 3:23 we read: "...and Jesus Himself began to be about *thirty years of age* (being as was supposed) the son of Joseph which was the son of Heli." We read in the preceding verses that Jesus had just been baptized by John. To the sincere truth-seeking child of God, the thirty years of age when Jesus was baptized must raise certain questions. Surely, whatever takes place at this thirty-years-of-age milestone in Jesus' life must follow the very same principle as the other three aforementioned ages, that is, "according to the Law of Moses." Several reasons have been given for the baptism of Jesus:

- To be numbered with the transgressors.
- To be set apart to His Messianic ministry.

- To take His supposed lot with the remnant.

No doubt these are all included in the reasons why Jesus was baptized, but they are not the whole or the greatest explanation. Why not be satisfied with Jesus' own answer: "...it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). To the sincere truth-seeking mind, the logical procedure is to search and diligently try to find out *what righteousness* He was fulfilling on this occasion. Since His circumcision, presentation, and *bar mitzvah* were in fulfillment of the law of the Lord, so His baptism can also only be according to His law. But what does this baptism of Jesus have to do with the Law of Moses?

Righteousness brought Jesus where sin had brought Israel—to John's baptism. In whose name did John baptize? He baptized in the name of Him who was to come (Acts 19:4). Did John baptize in his own name? No, for Jesus was the One who was to come. Was Jesus baptized in the Triune Name? No, for "in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). What was John's baptism? Let the Word answer: "John did baptize in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4). But Christ had no sins to repent of or to be remitted, so His baptism could not be for repentance or remission of sins. Then why was Jesus baptized?

How would you like to have been in John's position when Jesus came forward to be baptized? Little wonder he cried out, "Forbid it to be so, I have need to be baptized of thee and comest thou to me?" John knew he could not baptize that sinless One with his baptism, for on that day he looked and said, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). How could Jesus be baptized "for repentance for the remission of sins" when He had no sin? Jesus' baptism by John *must* be for a different purpose than

John's other baptismal candidates. In fact, Jesus Himself tells us what the purpose of His baptism really was—"It becometh us *to fulfill all righteousness.*" What righteousness? "Moses speaketh of the righteousness that cometh by the Law" (Romans 10:5). But what law?

Israel's Priesthood

Biblical laws had been established in the Old Testament concerning water baptism. "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And you shall be unto me *a kingdom of priests* and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shall speak unto the children of Israel." Here we have the promise that the *nation* of Israel is to be "a kingdom of priests." This is what Peter is referring to when he says, "You are a chosen generation, *a royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Pet. 2:9). Surely no discerning Bible teacher would confuse this special privilege of the nation of Israel with any promise given to the Body of Christ. Because Israel as a nation did not keep the statutes of the Lord, however, God chose one tribe out of the twelve tribes as "priests unto the Lord" to represent the entire nation of twelve tribes. This was the tribe of Levi.

The Lord gave specific Laws for the induction into the priestly office. "Aaron and his sons thou shalt bring unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation and shalt *wash* them with water" (Ex. 29:4). The Hebrew word for "wash" is *rachaz*, which is a term for one of the ceremonial washings referred to in Hebrews 6:2 and rendered there as "baptisms." Thus we see here the origin of water baptism and the reason for its practice. Water baptism was an induction into the office of the priesthood for the tribe of Levi.

There is another law of the Lord concerning baptism. He who served in the tabernacle of the Lord must be *thirty years* of age. "Take the sons of Levi. . . From thirty years old and upward, even until fifty years old, all that enter into the host to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation" (Numbers 4:1-3). Remember, Luke 3:21-23 says: "and Jesus Himself began to be about thirty years of age."

Thus we see the full force of Jesus' words when He said, "It becometh us to fulfill all righteousness," namely, "the righteousness that Moses describeth in the Law." Here, then, is the Law of baptism. Perhaps you will say that Jesus was of the tribe of Judah and that the law spake of no other tribe serving as priests. Indeed, Hebrews 8:4 says: "For if He were on earth He should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the Law."

John came preaching "Repent, for the kingdom is at hand." Jesus also began his preaching by saying "Repent, for the kingdom is at hand." The twelve apostles went forth preaching the same message. What kingdom was at hand? Is this not the kingdom of which Jehovah promised the nation Israel as a kingdom of priests?

So then, Christ in His baptism was not representing merely one tribe, Judah or Levi, but the entire nation, all twelve tribes, since they are to be a priestly nation to all other nations. "You shall be named the *priests of the Lord*: Men shall call you the *ministers of our God*: you shall eat the riches of the Gentiles and in their glory shall you boast yourselves" (Isa. 61:6; compare with Rev. 1:6 and 5:10). When Peter preached at Pentecost, his message was, "Repent, be baptized, for the remission of sins, and God will send Jesus back and the times of the restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began." [per Acts 2:38 AND later Acts 3:19-21, a few days after this Pentecost, GSD]

Incidentally, what about the restitution of the judges in Israel (Isa. 1:26; Jud. 2:18)? Did not Jesus promise in Matthew 19:28, "Verily I say unto you, that you which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

It is certain Israel will be inducted into her priestly office by water baptism in the future, with Jesus Christ as King and Messiah. Since no other public ministry prescribed its age limits, it is reasonable to conclude that the baptism of Christ was for His consecration to the priestly office, in personification of the entire nation, to which He was inducted with water baptism in accordance with the law of Moses.

Conclusion

In this dispensation of the grace of God we are not instructed to be baptized into the office of the priesthood but into the Body of Christ. How? "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). Also consider the words of Paul, apostle to the Gentiles: "I thank God I baptized none of you but Crispus and Gaius... lest any should say that I had baptized in my own name" (1 Cor. 1:14). And again in verse 17: "For *Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.*"

By rightly dividing the Word of truth we rob no one of any blessing but leave each of the programs of God in its respective place. How blessed to know the one Spirit baptism of Ephesians 4:5 which blesses us with all Spirit blessings in the heavenlies (Ephesians 1: 3-4). "Buried with Him in baptism wherein also you are risen with Him, through faith in the working of God who hath raised Him from the dead" (Col. 2:12).