

# Exegesis

*A few years ago two BEC Study Conferences were devoted to various views of the Baptism of the Spirit. Here a comparison of Matthew 3:1-12 with Malachi 3:1-5 is proposed as one key to a better understanding of this vexed issue. The crucible of suffering is not often mentioned in the present debate but its relevance is clearly demonstrated in this article.*

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## Exegesis 5: Spirit Baptism and Suffering

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*Keith Walker*

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The purpose of this brief article is not to solve a problem, but to air it and the effect is probably to complicate it! The issue of the nature and place of baptism in the Spirit within the *ordo salutis* continues to be a major irritant in evangelical circles. It remains a cause of tension in our BEC constituency. Such is the vehemence of the debate that it is difficult for us to ‘come out of our corners’ and do anything other than swap well-known punches. It is hard to make progress. It is hard to break new ground. And we make no pretence of attempting that. It is suggested, however, that in exegeting Matthew 3:1-12 (and its parallels), a crucial passage with respect to this vexed issue, some comparison with Malachi 3:1-5 may be necessary and helpful. In the first place, some reasons for that suggestion must be adduced.

### **The Demands of Progressive Revelation**

Whilst it is always true that all relevant parts of the Scripture may and should be brought to bear upon any particular passage in order to elucidate its meaning; in a special way, what has gone before in the progress of revelation may be of particular value. Now, of course, the debate about the meaning of John’s expression ‘baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ gains no **direct** help from the OT. The expression is new in unfolding revelation and so it demands interpreting in the light of the way the phrase is used in its immediate context and later in redemptive history.

The debate revolves then around two foci:

1. Is ‘baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire’ (Matt. 3:11) one activity or two? Is it one thing, typified at Pentecost? Or is it two things; baptism with the Spirit (for salvation) being paralleled in the soteric aspect of Matt. 3:12, and baptism with fire being paralleled in the condemnatory/destructive aspect?
2. The meaning of expressions coupling cognates of *baptizo* and *en pneumatī* in Acts—Revelation.

And yet, although John's baptismal language may find no direct precedent in the OT, other questions are valid. Does the flow of thought in Matthew 3 echo any OT passage? Does the Sitz-im-Leben into which John is speaking find any precedent in earlier revelation? What should drive us peculiarly hard to look for such OT illumination of this NT passage is the trans-covenantal nature of John's ministry, and the fact that his contemporaries understood him. Arguably, he stands closer to the OT prophets than to the NT apostles.

We would suggest that Malachi 3:1-5 fits the bill both in respect of Sitz-im-Leben and content as an OT passage which Matthew 3:1-12 echoes. And it does so in a way which eliminates the need for speculative links such as J D G Dunn postulates between Malachi 3:4 and 1QS4:21, and between John and the Qumran sect.<sup>1</sup>

## Sitz-im-Leben

The whole context of the book of Malachi is that of a people who had fallen into a formal, but dead religion. In terms of worship (1:6-14), the teaching of the Law (2:1-9), marriage and divorce (2:10-16) the Post-Exilic age was one of spiritual and moral defection from Yahweh. They wanted a comfortable, convenient religion, a god who does the good pleasure of those who are righteous in their own eyes (2:17). Moreover, they may be an *ad hominem* appeal to some popular boasting of being Abraham's children in 2:10.<sup>2</sup> It is into this context of sham religion that the words of 3:1-5 are uttered.

Similarly, the specific context given in Matthew 3 for John's teaching (though Luke is less specific and Mark and John very general) is that of an audience of men who kept a form of religion without real devotion. The reference to those who boast of their physical descent from Abraham (3:9) points to people resting rather comfortably in their supposed religion. The need for a real rather than pretended repentance is laid before them (3:8).

## Content

Both Malachi and John speak into this situation in a way intended to disturb their ease. Both speak of the Messiah's coming as one of judgement. But before we come to that we can notice two other aspects of the flow of thought common to Malachi 3 and Matthew 3.

1. **John's ministry.** Though Matthew (3:1-3) and the other Synoptists quote Isaiah 40, the passage John himself used to explain his ministry (Jn 1:23), the Synoptics parallel Mal 3:1 in defining the preparatory nature of John's ministry.

2. **The expectation of the people.** Luke 3:15 makes quite plain that those who gathered to John were people who expected the Messiah to come, even though their understanding of that may have been awry. It may well have been that the Pharisees and Sadducees (of Mat 3:7) had seen the significance of John's ministry and were anxious to make a show of repentance before Messiah came. Likewise, the people of Malachi's day would have claimed to be living in hope of the Messiah's advent, hence the ironic subordinate clauses of 3:1, 'you are seeking' and 'whom you desire' (NIV).

**But.** There is, as it were, an implicit ‘but’ in the flow of each argument. In both Malachi’s and John’s preaching the argument proceeds thus: ‘All right, you say you want the Messiah to come. Well, first of all, another messenger will come to prepare the way, John the Baptist. And then Messiah will come. **But** be warned, it will not be comfortable’. ‘Who can endure the day of His coming?’ (Mal 3:2). His purpose in coming is judicial. According to Malachi he will condemn by testifying against those-‘who do not fear the Lord Almighty’. (A description we presume to be a catch-all for what precedes it in 3:5). And in relation to those he has purposed to save, purification, involving a kind of judgement, separating the dross from that which is valued and destroying the former, will be achieved via the uncomfortable, but necessary experience of the crucible (3:2-4). The reference is to the means of purging in the hard school of life in Christ, overseen by Jesus our Refiner. It is a process by which the dross, worthy of his judgement, is removed.

This same judicial thrust is evident in Mat 3:7-12: ‘Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’, ‘The axe is already at the root of the trees’, ‘unquenchable fire’, and even the ‘winnowing fork’ image all speak of Christ’s office as Judge.

Yet in both Malachi and Matthew enough is said to make plain that the ultimate purpose of all of this judging, which is condemnatory and purifying, is the creation of a body of true worshippers (Mal 3:3-4), a harvest of good grain (Mat 3:12).

### **Luke 12:49 and 50**

This contention, that the ministry of Christ foreseen in Matthew 3 should be understood in the light of Malachi 3 gains further support from Luke 12:49 and 50. In verse 49, our Lord’s solemn words indicate his own conviction that his ministry has this judicial aspect, and here he too uses the language of ‘fire’. In verse 50 he interposes the thought that he has a baptism to undergo; and surely the choice of language is interesting. It fits our contention perfectly. Our Lord has come to judge, to bring fire, to baptise with fire. The word is not there in verse 49, but the concept is, and prompts the baptismal language of verse 50.<sup>3</sup>

### **Baptism with the Spirit and Suffering**

We would suggest that these links of context and content and these verses in Luke 12 demand that Matthew 3 and the ministry of Christ taught there be understood in the light of Malachi 3 and the ministry of Christ projected there.

If that is accepted, then no matter how we understand baptism ‘with the Holy Spirit and with fire’, as one activity or two, there are two options open to us. Either:

1. The prediction of Christ’s baptising with the Spirit (with or without fire) is quite distinct from the passage’s general thrust of warning to these Pharisees and Sadducees, or
2. Christ’s baptising with the Spirit is allied to his role as Judge, and more particularly and specifically as purifier and refiner of his people.

Against the former option we have to note that neither the immediate context nor earlier revelation can have been of any help to John's hearers in understanding his expression 'baptise ... with the Spirit'. In favour of the latter option is the established link between the idea of baptism and purification.

Now, of course, option ii) need cause no problem to either of the most popular Reformed views of baptism with the Spirit. Whether at the point of regeneration or subsequently, baptism with the Spirit is seen as relating to the process of Christian growth. What this link does demand is that the individual's experience of Spirit-baptism need not be one of immediate pleasure. It might well be at a time of experiencing the 'crucible' that Christ is baptising with the Spirit. To be sure, the intended purpose of that activity includes blessing; but being baptised with the Spirit may not always be accompanied by 'joy unspeakable'. On the other hand, this link seems to suggest an activity more continuous than regeneration.

The tentative conclusion that we draw is that the promise of Christ's baptising with the Spirit was not meant to make the Pharisees and Sadducees feel comfortable, rather the opposite. Whether or not regeneration or subsequent experiences of blessing are rightly called or comprehended within 'baptism with the Spirit', experiences of suffering as Christ seeks to refine us may well be subsumed under **that** heading. We have to ask, are the regeneration-only or the subsequent-blessing/'joy unspeakable' views big enough?

*Rev Keith R Walker MA is pastor of Borrass Park Evangelical Church, Wrexham*

## References

1. BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, James D G Dunn, SCM, pp.10f
2. Some commentators suggest that this reference to Abraham recurs in 2:15. The verse is difficult both to translate and interpret, however, and other ways of understanding it seem to us more likely.
3. Though we have not done so here, it is possible to pursue this whole approach through an exposition of Luke 12:49-53 linked with Matthew 10:32-39.

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*Though a man has a precious and rare jewel, yet if he know not the value thereof, nor whereof it served, he were neither the better nor richer of a straw. Even so though we read the scripture, and babble of it ever so much, yet if we know not the use of it, and whereof it was given, and what is therein to be sought, it profits us nothing at all. It is not enough, therefore to read and talk of it only, but we must also desire God, day and night, instantly, to open our eyes, and to make us understand the medicine of the scripture, every man to his own sores. Unless we intend to be idle disputers, and brawlers about vain words, ever gnawing upon the bitter bark without, and never attaining unto the sweet pith within; and persecuting one another in defending of wicked imaginations, and phantasies of our own invention.*

William Tyndale  
Preface to the translation of the Pentateuch 1520