

# “Baptised in the Spirit and Fire”: Single or Double Baptism?

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## Abstract

The Synoptic Gospels as well as John’s Gospel contain the words ascribed to John the Baptist, that one is coming who is greater than John who will baptise people “in the Holy Spirit.” Matthew and Luke add that the baptism will not only be in the Holy Spirit but also in/with fire (Q 3:16). This article discusses various interpretive options for the term “baptism in the Holy Spirit (and fire).” If it refers to a *single* baptism, there are four options: (1) John the Baptist originally said that the baptism would be with “fire,” and “Holy Spirit” was added at a later stage. (2) Mark 1:8 with its reference to the baptism with the “Holy Spirit” is more primitive than Q 3:16’s baptism with the “Holy Spirit and fire.” (3) “Spirit” refers to “breath” or “wind” and John proclaims a single baptism that would bring a breath or wind, of fiery judgment. (4) the single baptism consists of two elements: Spirit and fire and these are administered simultaneously to the one recipient. The other possibility is that the term refers to *two* baptisms: one with the Holy Spirit and another with fire. Then Q 3:16 is held as more primitive than Mark 1:8, usually with the argument that Mark and John omitted the reference to “fire” because they wanted to emphasise the salvific aspects of John’s prophecy. *Double* baptism entails two different groups of baptisands: the righteous receiving a baptism in the Spirit, and the wicked undergoing a baptism of fire. The two baptisms do not necessarily take place for both groups at the same time. After evaluating the different arguments, this article concludes that it is not possible to arrive at one “correct” interpretation or understanding of John the Baptist’s prophecy regarding the Messiah’s baptism. Baptism in the Holy Spirit and/or fire can refer to a single baptism of one or two elements administered to the one recipient, with the ensuing effect depending on the state of the recipient, or to two baptisms: one salvific for the repentant (baptism in the Holy Spirit), and the other retributive for the disobedient (baptism with fire).

### Key Terms

John the Baptist; Holy Spirit; baptism; fire; judgment; purification

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The words of John the Baptist that someone is coming who is greater than he who will baptise people in the Holy Spirit are found in all four gospels (αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ, Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). The context of the reference to the baptism in the Spirit is John the Baptist's eschatological warning. John follows his command to bear fruit with the advice to refrain from thinking that his listeners have Abraham as their father because God is able even from stones to raise up children for Abraham.<sup>2</sup> The implication is that physical descent is no guarantee of salvation any more, if it ever was (Witherington 1988, 231). Neither baptism by John nor physical descent from Abraham is sufficient to save one from judgment (Meier 1994, 29, 74). God has the freedom and power to open up the possibility for inclusion of other groups, including the gentiles (Nolland 2005, 145). The listeners should know that the axe already lies at the roots of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9; Matt 3:10). However, John does not state what will happen but what could happen. His words offer an opportunity for the Pharisees and Sadducees to change their ways and avoid judgment (Ernst 1989, 159).<sup>3</sup>

The audience responds and asks how they might ready themselves for the impending judgment (Luke 3:10–14) and whether John is God's agent of salvation (Green 1997, 180). In answering the first question, John

<sup>1</sup> The valuable contribution of Petra Dijkhuizen, editor of *Neotestamentica*, is acknowledged with gratitude.

<sup>2</sup> "Children" and "stones" probably represent a wordplay in Aramaic: the two words sound very similar (Manson 1979, 40). "Stones" were also used to symbolise God's people (Exod 24:4; 28:9–12; Josh 4:20–21).

<sup>3</sup> Jesus continues the tradition of the Baptist (Matt 3:7) of being critical towards the religious groups of his day by calling the Pharisees (in Matt 12:34) and scribes and Pharisees (in Matt 23:33) a "brood of vipers"; the polemical, paraenetic, and eschatological elements of his message are also linked with John's, in continuation with the Jewish prophets (Kraeling 1951, 39–45; Taylor 1997, 135–138; Keener 2009a, 168, 483; Dennert 2015, 158).

explains the requirements: people should share what they have with others without sustenance; tax collectors should act with integrity, and soldiers should refrain from threats or blackmail (Luke 3:11–14). In answering the second question whether John is the Messiah (Luke 3:15), John emphasises that the Messiah is far superior to him in status, like a master to a slave—so much greater that John is not worthy to be his slave or carry his sandals.<sup>4</sup> John is the messenger (or prophet) who prepares the way for the Coming One, echoing Mal 3:1 and 4:5 (Φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ).<sup>5</sup> No wonder John is nervous about baptising Jesus (Matt 3:14; Keener 1997, 83).<sup>6</sup> The Messiah is more powerful (or stronger) than he demonstrated by the way the Messiah baptises<sup>7</sup> in comparison with John’s baptism that is a repentance-baptism, a cleansing by which one’s life is oriented anew toward the service of God, especially in the context of interpersonal relations and care for the poor (Green 1997, 181). What does the Messiah’s baptism consist of?

While Mark 1:8 and John 1:33 suffice with “he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit,” Matthew and Luke add that he will also baptise “with fire” (καὶ πυρὶ). Is this an addition to the original logion of John, or is the Q version of the saying the original (Q 3:16)? The contention is that it is not possible to know which saying represents the original of John the Baptist. The researcher can only try to understand the meaning of the two phrases independently.

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<sup>4</sup> France (1985, 98) and Keener (1997, 83) opine that a rabbi’s disciple was expected to act virtually as his master’s slave, but to remove or take away his shoes was too low a task even for a disciple (*b. Ketub.* 96a). Cf. Van Bruggen (1993, 110): “Johannes, die zo imponerend is dat men hem voor de Messias houdt, acht zich niet waardig om het minste slavenwerk voor hem te doen (de schoenriem losmaken).”

<sup>5</sup> The enigmatic saying of Jesus in Matt 11:11, that there has not risen among those born of women one greater than John the Baptist but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John], is probably to be interpreted in terms of the distinction that John already made between his contribution and that of Jesus, as demonstrated by Jesus’s distinction in 11:12 between the “days of John the Baptist” and the time he is speaking (“now”).

<sup>6</sup> In terms of Malina’s (1983, 32; cf. Tigcheler 1987, 83) description of the Mediterranean world as a society of honour and shame, Jesus’s baptism should be interpreted as a public act of humiliation because as the giver of the true baptism he submits to baptism by one lower in stature than him, in order to fulfil God’s plan (Matt 3:14–15).

<sup>7</sup> The terms “baptise” and “fill” are used interchangeably in terms of Spirit baptism, and indicate that a person is immersed in and filled with the Spirit.

To what does the baptism in fire refer and what is the relation between the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the baptism in fire? Several answers have been given to this question and diverse issues are at stake. The first issue is whether a single or double baptism is supposed: with the Spirit-and-fire or in the Spirit and with fire (cf. Dunn 1972; Webb 1991a; Nolland 1989, 152–153).

The early church already interpreted Spirit-and-fire-baptism in these two ways (Dunn 1972, 81). Chrysostom related “fire” to the Holy Spirit, implying that the Baptist says the Coming One will baptise with the fire of the Spirit, leading to inflaming and purifying believers. This is a gracious outpouring of the Spirit that blesses those who believe and signifies a single baptism. Origen (*Hom. Luc.* 24), in contrast, speaks of a double lustration: of those who repent and are baptised by John with the Holy Spirit, and of the unrepentant with fire, which tells of judgment and punishment, thus signifying two baptisms (e.g., Brown 1965, 135).

A century ago, the eschatological intent of John’s and Jesus’s message and the element of threatening and judgment in the Q version of John’s preaching received new emphasis, implying that references to a gracious Holy Spirit who blesses believers became incompatible with the Baptist’s message of eschatological wrath.

## 2 A Single Baptism

The argument that “baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire” in Q 3:16 refers to a single baptism<sup>8</sup> with two elements or aspects is strengthened by the fact that the text only utilises one preposition before “Spirit” and “fire” (βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρί). A preposition not repeated before a second noun puts the two nouns in the same category (Floor 1979, 4), even though exceptions to the rule exist. Thus, since “Holy Spirit and fire” are governed by a single preposition in Greek (ἐν), it is grammatically more probable that a single baptism of two elements is referred to in Q 3:16.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, John is addressing a single group of people in Luke 3:16 (using “[to] all,” πᾶσιν) just as in Acts 2 the fire falls not on some but on all the

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<sup>8</sup> Webb (1994, 289–291) remarks that the debate about a single baptism has been inadvertently distorted by interpreting the frame of reference of the logion in terms of the noun “baptism” rather than the verb “baptise” that is found in the text. He argues that while “baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire” is more naturally understood as a single baptism, “to baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire” can just as naturally refer to two distinct (but related) activities. His remark deserves attention.

<sup>9</sup> NET Bible, *Notes* Luke 3:16.

followers of Jesus (πάντες, Acts 2:1; cf. Twelftree 2009, 79–80). Mainly for this reason a single baptism is to be preferred in the interpretation of this phrase, according to this argument. The implication is that the reference is to one agent and two aspects or elements, either to a believing group to whom “Holy Spirit” and “fire” are beneficial (referring to those expecting the Messiah to come soon [Προσδοκῶντος δὲ τοῦ λαοῦ, Luke 3:15]), or to unbelieving recipients for whom “Holy Spirit” as well as “fire” are elements of judgment (referring to the unrepentant “brood of vipers,” Luke 3:7). John expects the baptiser to baptise the people he is talking to in one and the same Holy Spirit-and-fire experience. The Messiah will baptise everyone in the Spirit and in fire, but with different effects.

Another option that supports a single baptism is to suppose that John the Baptist would originally have said that the baptism will be with “fire” and that “Spirit” was added at a later stage so that the reference is only to baptism with fire. Briggs (1894, 67) presented this argument the first time comprehensively, arguing that John’s preaching refers to fire alone and contains no mention of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> His message was one of judgment, and the figure John proclaims is expected to come will judge by means of a baptism with fire. The experience of the early church following the day of Pentecost eventually would lead them to identify (or incorrectly associate) “baptism with fire” as the “baptism with the Spirit” (Taylor 1997, 157). Q 3:16 (Matthew 3:11 // Luke 3:16) then represents the transformed tradition that conflated the two traditions. However, there is no text or manuscript anywhere which speaks of “baptise with fire,”

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<sup>10</sup> Best (1960, 238–239) also mentions several reasons for doubting that John spoke of the Spirit: (1) Acts 19:1–7 seems to imply that the Spirit did not feature at all in John’s preaching. However, it is doubtful whether the Ephesians had ever heard John himself or were his followers or disciples. (2) A reference to the Spirit would have been inconsistent with the context in which John prophesies about a Messiah cleansing Israel with a fiery punishment. In reply it could be argued that “fire” in the OT was not exclusively used to denote destruction and punishment, but also blessing (cf., e.g., Isa 4:4; 30:28; Amos 7:4; Mal 4:1). (3) In Jewish tradition prior to John there was no expectation of the Spirit as the gift of the Messiah; it was considered a gift from God himself. The eschatological outpouring of the Spirit is not directly connected with the Messiah, except perhaps in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (*T. Levi* 18:6–8; *T. Jud.* 24:2–3), and the Isaiah Scroll found in Cave 1 at Qumran (see Hui 1999, 106–107). In response, Dunn (1972, 91–92) is probably correct when he argues that John himself took part in the creative moulding of the eschatological hopes that he was heir to and, influenced by the Qumran sect, he reinvented the baptism of repentance, and linked the outpouring of the Spirit to the Messiah.

requiring one to make a purely hypothetical construction, while Luke's account of Pentecost fails to support such a reconstruction, with no reference to "fire" in Acts 1:5 when Jesus repeats the saying of Mark 1:8 (Dunn 1972, 84–85). In Acts 2:1–4, it is "tongues that are like fire" (γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρός, 2:3) which accompany the baptism, and the Spirit is not identified with fire at all, while the consequence of speaking in tongues is ascribed to "being filled with the Holy Spirit" (ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες πνεύματος ἁγίου, 2:4). It is improbable that a term, "baptism with fire," would have been created that opposed Spirit-baptism and water-baptism so sharply (Dunn 1972, 85, referring to Michaelis's argument).

A connected argument is that "Spirit" refers to "breath" or "light breeze,"<sup>11</sup> and that John proclaims a single baptism that would bring a breath or wind of fiery judgment (so Van Bruggen 1993, 110). In this way, "wind" and "fire" are connected to form one concept. The Holy Spirit is a strong wind of judgment, a holy fire that destroys the chaff (Eisler 1931, 274–279). Consequently, references to "fire" as expressed by Jesus in the Gospels are in terms of judgment or destruction, especially in the case of the *gehenna* of fire (εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός, Matt 5:22; 18:9), referring to the unquenchable fire of the Jerusalem dumps, or eternal or long-lasting fire (εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον, Matt 18:8).<sup>12</sup> The same use of "fire" marks the NT epistles (1 Cor 3:13; 2 Thess 1:8; Heb 12:29; 2 Pet 3:7).

A coinciding argument is that the context of John's words also demonstrates that the fire should be interpreted in terms of judgment. Matthew 3 explains that many curious Pharisees and Sadducees come to see John's baptism when John denounces them and warns them of God's coming wrath. John warns that only trees that produce good fruit will survive while the others will be thrown into the fire (εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται, 3:10). This reference to "fire" in Matt 3:10 is linked to v. 12, that the one

<sup>11</sup> This is an acceptable translation of πνεῦμα; cf. Jenni and Westermann (1997, 1204). The argument that "spirit" initially referred to "wind" assumes that the adjective "holy" was added as a Christian interpolation. However, there is almost no manuscript evidence for such an omission: only mss. 63 and 64, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine support it (Hui 1999, 103). John is then assumed to have stated that the Coming One will baptise with a wind of fiery judgment or with the two elements of wind and fire (Best 1960, 238). The imagery of wind and fire is implied in the next verse where the farmer is winnowing the grain in the wind, separating the wheat from the chaff, after which the chaff is burned with fire.

<sup>12</sup> That these two, εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον and εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός, are viewed as synonymous by the author of the Gospel of Matthew can be seen by the use of both in Matt 18:8 and 9.

coming and baptising those present is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork,<sup>13</sup> cleaning up the threshing area and gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire (τὸ δὲ ἄχυρον κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ).<sup>14</sup> Understanding John’s baptism as a wind of fiery judgment in Matt 3:11 is plausible in terms of vv. 10 and 12 (Smith 1926, 142).

However, should fire solely be associated with judgment? This is the topic of the next section.

### 3 Purposes of Fire

“Fire” in the reference to Spirit-and-fire baptism is interpreted in different ways. Where in the case of single baptism Spirit and fire act together, beneficially, to affect the one baptised, “fire” has the meaning of purification, cleansing, purging, or sanctification of the believer (Hooker 2004, 32). France (1985, 98) is of the opinion that the “drenching” (as he chooses to translate “baptise”) that John promises is not a specific rite or experience, but it points to the purifying effect of the Messiah’s work, sanctifying the people of God in a way that John’s baptism could only symbolise. Malachi 3:2 uses the simile “refiner’s fire.” At Qumran also, purification is brought into relation with God’s “sprinkling” human beings with a “spirit of holiness” and “spirit of truth” that is described in terms of fire (1QS 3:7–9; 4:20–22).

In the HB (Isa 4:4; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2; cf. Isa 1:25) purification by fire was also a prophetic hope for prophetic empowerment.<sup>15</sup>

Another option is to identify “fire” with zeal and “Spirit” with enthusiasm and the gifts of the Spirit (Horton 2005, 74). Romans 12:11 contains the words, “be fervent in spirit” (τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες) with ζέσω referring to “boiling” or “seething,”<sup>16</sup> identifying “spirit” with “fire,” while 1 Thess 5:19 contains the opposite, that the Spirit should not be quenched,

<sup>13</sup> The πτύον was a tool used to toss the grain in the air to separate the seed or to gather up the respective piles of grain for storing and the chaff for disposing (Nolland 2005, 148).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Webb (1991b, 103–111) for an important discussion of the ancient farmer dealing with separate piles of wheat and chaff as he cleanses his threshing floor. The winnowing shovel in the hand of the Coming One reminds of the axe already placed at the root of the tree (Matt 3:10).

<sup>15</sup> See Joel 2:28–29; cf. Isa 42:1; 43:10–12; 44:3, 8–9; 59:21; 61:1; perhaps *1 En.* 91:1; Keener (1997, 6–48; 2009b, 128).

<sup>16</sup> Logos, *Lexham Analytical Dictionary to the Greek New Testament*, s.v. ζέσω.

quelled or checked (σβέννυτε). The same idea is found in the boldness, openness or frankness (παρρησία) with which the early believers preached the word of God, according to Acts 4:31.

The “baptism in fire” has also been related to the events of the day of Pentecost<sup>17</sup> where the believers’ baptism is characterised by two unusual signs that connect it with OT symbolism. The day of Pentecost was originally an OT harvest festival, since then interpreted as marking for the Christian church the day when the long-awaited spiritual harvest would begin. The first sign consisted of a sound like the blowing of a violent wind that came from heaven and that filled the house (Acts 2:2). Wind was a frequent symbol of the Spirit in the OT. The fact that it was a violent wind may suggest that it was the active breathing of the Spirit in regeneration that brings new life (so Horton 2005, 115). A second sign was the appearance of what looked like tongues of fire that divided and rested on each of them (ῥῶθησαν αὐτοῖς διαμεριζόμεναι γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρό, Acts 2:3). “Divided” may refer to “separated” or “distributed.” What it pictures is that something appears that looks like a mass of flame over the whole group that breaks up with a single tongue like a flame settling on the head of each one present (Horton 2005, 115). This is not a baptism with fire, in the sense that the people who are present are judged or cleansed. Those present have already accepted the teachings of the resurrected Jesus. They are present in obedience to his command that they should wait in Jerusalem until they have received power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them (Acts 1:8). Therefore, it is argued here that the tongues of fire should not be connected to judgment or cleansing but to another aspect of OT symbolism, namely as the fulfilment of prophecy in line with several references in the HB (cf. Isa 44:3; Ezek 36:26; 39:29; Joel 2:28; Horton 2005, 115).

Another important consideration is that fire is connected directly with God, his revelation and his overwhelming presence (Hui 1999, 110), and not only in terms of judgment. Given the close association between God and fire in Judaism, it should not seem strange to link the Holy Spirit

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<sup>17</sup> However, it is unlikely that John envisaged that the Coming One would grant the Spirit to his people in any manner comparable to Jesus’s bestowal of the Spirit at Pentecost, allowing room for the argument that John’s words in the Gospels can only be read through the lens of later Christian experience of Pentecost. What John envisaged was a Davidic messianic figure who would once-and-for-all cleanse and purify Israel with the power of the fiery Spirit (Hui 1999, 115).

to fire in Q 3:16 (Hui 1999, 111). According to Deut 4:24, his jealousy is like a fire: “YHWH your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God”:

כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵשׁ אֹכְלָהּ הוּא אֵל קַנָּא

In Exod 3:2, the angel of YHWH appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush and although the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. The angel is identified with YHWH. He revealed himself to Israel on Mount Sinai and the mountain was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly (Exod 19:18):

וַהֲרֹ סִינַי עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ מִפְּנֵי  
 אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵשׁ  
 וַיַּעַל עָשָׂנוֹ כְּעָשָׂן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁת וַיִּתְרַד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד

The appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel (Exod 24:17). In Deut 5:22–27 Israel responded to the revelation of the fire of God on Sinai or Horeb with the request that although YHWH had shown them his glory and greatness, and they had heard his voice out of the midst of the fire (Deut 9:10; 10:4), Moses should speak on their behalf to YHWH and tell them what YHWH had said, and they would hear and do it. They were afraid that the great fire of YHWH would consume them and that they would die if they heard the voice of the LORD God any further.

YHWH also went before the people in the desert through a pillar of fire and of cloud (Exod 14:24; Deut 1:33; Ps 78:14), but this was in order to protect them. In Deut. 9:3, God is described as a consuming fire who will go before his people to destroy their enemies.

According to Ezek 1 and 8, YHWH reveals himself in the midst of fire like gleaming metal and Dan 7:9–10 relates that a stream of fire issued from the Ancient of Days, his throne was fiery flames and its wheels were burning fire. Jeremiah 23:29 states that YHWH’s word is like fire, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces. Fire is related to the revelation of God.

Further, Ps 18 relates the prayer of someone who called on YHWH to save him from his enemies. YHWH heard the plea and then the earth reeled and rocked, the foundations of the mountains trembled and quaked, smoke went up from YHWH’s nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth while glowing coals flamed forth from him (Ps 18:7–8; cf. 2 Sam 22:4–15). Ps 50:3 utilises similar images: “Our God comes; he does not keep

silent; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest” (cf. Ps 97:3).

Fire plays an important role in terms of service to God and sacrifice in the world of the OT. In Israel’s cult, fire was kept burning on the altar continually and care was taken that it did not go out (Lev 6:13). The first time Moses and Aaron brought sacrifices in the tabernacle Aaron blessed the people when he came down from offering the sin offering, burnt offering and peace offerings. The glory of YHWH appeared to all the people and fire came out from before him and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, frightening the people (Lev 9:22–24). The same happened when David saw the angel ready to destroy Jerusalem, and YHWH relented from the calamity. The angel commanded that David should raise an altar on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. David built an altar and presented sacrifices and called on YHWH, who answered him with fire from heaven (1 Chr 21:15–26). When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, again fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of YHWH filled the temple (2 Chr 7:1). Isaiah 31:9 refers to YHWH whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

Returning now to fire in the context of judgment, the symbol of fire is indeed used many times as a sign of YHWH’s indignation and wrath (e.g., Ezek 21:31; 22:21). Isaiah 66:15–16 states that YHWH will come in fire to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

By way of conclusion, the revelation of God in the HB is often attested to with the phenomenon of fire in one form or another, with fire serving not just negatively as a sign of judgment, but also as a sign of the glory of God, with power to purify and protect. This leads to the possibility that one can interpret the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire as the appearance of God through his Spirit, revealing his glory. Then “fire” underlines baptism with its different consequences for believers and unbelievers as the result of the revelation of God.

#### **4 Double Baptism**

A second way to interpret the reference in Q 3:16 (Matt 3:11 // Luke 3:16) is to view the Coming One as administering in effect two baptisms, one with the Holy Spirit and another with fire (cf. Webb 1991a, 289–295 for full discussion). In this case Holy Spirit baptism refers to an immersion or filling with the Spirit of Christ whereas fire baptism refers to a judgment of the wicked, as reflected in 2 Pet 3:7 and Rev 18:8–9. Fire interpreted

thus refers solely to judgment of the unbeliever (Luz 2005, 171–172). The fire will destroy all that is worthless, what is separated from the wheat and thrown up with the winnowing fork (or “shovel”) for the wind to blow away and be burnt with fire that is unquenchable (πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ).

The reading is supported by Luke 12:49, “I have come to bring fire to the earth (set the earth on fire), and how I wish it were already kindled.” A co-text correlates “fire” with “division” in Luke 12:51–53, and fire is used as a familiar metaphor or instrument of judgment (Green 1997, 182). In this case, John’s mission serves to bring division between those who embrace God’s purpose and those who do not, although the full realisation of John’s words points to the final judgment. What John envisages in Q 3:7–9 and 15–17 is consistent with Jesus’s parables of eschatological judgment (Hui 1999, 114), which speak of a final separation of the wheat from the tares (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43), the good fish from the bad (13:47–50) and the sheep from the goats (25:31–46). John sees no great time gap between his own day and the time when the baptism in Spirit and fire will be administered. He argues as though his words are about to be fulfilled in the one coming who is greater than he, who will be the baptiser (Horton 2005, 73), without realising that the Messiah would first have to suffer, die and be raised before actually baptising with the Spirit. In hindsight, John’s prophecy of eschatological cleansing and judgment was not fully realised in Jesus’s earthly ministry. In a sense it will only be consummated with the manifestation of the Son of Man from heaven (Hui 1999, 114). In light of this, Floor (1979, 5) as well as Keener (1997, 80) connect the baptism with the Spirit to the first coming of Jesus and the baptism of fire to the second coming, with “fire” referring to unbelievers being cast into a furnace of fire (κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ, Matt 3:12). The Messiah is the saviour for those who follow him and the judge for his enemies. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus baptises believers with his Spirit. And at the second coming, Jesus will baptise in fire, judging the world with justice, punishing the wicked (Keener 1997, 83) and freeing the captives (ibid., 213). However, the text does not suggest that the Baptist had a first and second coming of Christ in mind and there are also no instances in the history of its exegesis where the text was interpreted in this way.

Even so, the two different baptisms, a baptism in the Spirit for the righteous, and a baptism in fire for the wicked (Arndt and Gingrich 1957, 737) do not necessarily take place for both groups at the same time. According to Acts 1:5, after his resurrection Jesus commands his disciples not to leave Jerusalem before the Father sends the gift he promised.

Referring back to John's baptism with water, he promises that they will be baptised in the Spirit "in just a few days" (οὐ μετὰ πολλὰς ταύτας ἡμέρας). In this way, the Spirit baptism is identified with what happened on the day of Pentecost, described in Acts 2:1–4, as "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες πνεύματος ἁγίου). When Luke 3:16 is compared with Acts 1:5 and 11:16, it becomes clear that Luke sees the full actualisation of John's promise in the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and in the resultant Christian mission, with Acts 2:3 referring to "divided tongues, as of fire." This allows for the reading of the phrases in Acts as elliptical, leading to a reduction of the definition of Jesus's baptism ("Holy Spirit and fire") to the first term for purposes of emphasis (Dupriez 1991, 151–152).

The debate has implications for the *Redaktionsgeschichte* of the logion. Either Mark was an abbreviator, leaving out "with fire," probably to accommodate the early church's experience after the day of Pentecost, or Mark contains the original tradition, and then "with fire" is a Christian *peshet* to the fulfilment on the day of Pentecost. Or Luke and Matthew derived their version from Q.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Mark omits all the rest of John the Baptist's talk of judgment and fire leads one to accept that it is much more likely that Mark (and the tradition he drew on) abbreviated the fuller saying (so also Dunn 1972, 85).

## 5 Synthesis

Scholarly opinions are divided about the term "baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire" and it can be (and has been) explained in various ways, making it difficult to decide which option has the most merit.

It is contended that the tendency that developed in the first part of the twentieth century to interpret the Baptist's message exclusively in terms of judgment and wrath is one-sided. After all, John preaches "a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). The offer of forgiveness and blessing always offsets John's threats of punishment and destruction, as illustrated in the metaphor that follows the baptism logion. John is concerned with the mercy and judgment of God simultaneously (Nolland 2005, 146) and even though John is critical of the Pharisees and

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<sup>18</sup> See Simpson (1966, 50) who discusses these options and demonstrates the difficulty of choosing a sensible alternative.

Sadducees, he still holds out to them the possibility of repentance and fleeing from the coming retribution (Luke 3:7).

Some argue that the baptism of the Coming One is envisaged as a single baptism; The single baptism can then refer to “fire” with “Holy Spirit” only added at a later stage; or, reversely, to “Holy Spirit” with “fire” not included in the term; or to “spirit” that is translated as “breath” or “wind,” implying that John proclaims a single baptism that would bring a wind of fiery judgment; or, lastly, to a single baptism consisting of two elements, Spirit and fire, that are administered simultaneously to the one recipient.

Grammatical considerations carry the most weight to support this last viewpoint. John then speaks of a baptism that is neither solely destructive nor solely gracious, but one that contains both elements in itself (Dunn (1972, 86). In this way the baptism logion maintains the balance between judgment and blessing, so that like the saying which follows, it can serve both as a promise to those who submitted to John’s baptism (Beasley-Murray 1962, 38) and as a warning to the impenitent, reflecting the basic tenor of the Baptist’s message. There is, after all, no biblical precedent to connect the “Holy” Spirit exclusively with acts of salvation. For instance, the prophets of the HB spoke words of judgment through the Holy Spirit. Another consideration is that the revelation of God is regularly accompanied by fire in one form or another, so that baptise-with-the-Holy-Spirit-and-fire could also relate to the revelation of the glory of God. Then the meaning of the phrase would be that one is baptised by the Coming One with the Spirit that reveals God and all his glory, reinforcing the message that the Messiah’s baptism will for the repentant be a purgative, refining, empowering experience (Green 1997, 181) and a merciful judgment (Dunn 1972, 86), while the unrepentant and impenitent, the brood of vipers who fail to produce good fruit, will be broken and destroyed.

Another option is the term “baptised-with-Spirit-and-fire” refers to two distinct baptisms involving two distinct groups of recipients. Dennert (2015, 159) thinks that this coheres best with the thrust of John’s preaching that separates the good and the bad. The various fates of the obedient and disobedient are highlighted (also in Matt 13:36–43, 47–50; 25:31–46), and here John emphasises that the work of the coming figure is to baptise two groups of people to whom are administered two distinct elements: Spirit and fire. The ministry of the Coming One will be to take these two groups to their end, whether to the granary or to the fire, that is,

to blessing or judgment (Webb 1991b, 109–111). Being immersed in the Spirit refers to the positive side of the coming of the Messiah, leading to the gathering of the grain in the barn, while being baptised with fire refers to the negative result of his coming, where the chaff will be burned with inextinguishable fire (Luke 3:17; Van Bruggen 1993, 110). The different baptisms do not need to occur at the same time.

It has been contended that it is not possible to know which saying and/or interpretation represents the original of John the Baptist. Due to the complex and multifaceted use of the symbol of “fire” in the Scriptures, the most balanced view is that the elements of Holy Spirit and fire can be both beneficial and retributive although in the *context* of Q 3:16 fire may point exclusively to judgment, as some commentators emphasise.

Lastly, what does the Messiah’s baptism mean today? Some argue that Spirit baptism refers to conversion only, while others use the term to refer to a subsequent experience of empowerment. Keener (1996, 17–78) discusses the implications of these two stances critically. Hooker (2004, 34) defines the baptism with the Holy Spirit in terms of Jesus baptising (“plunging”) believers into God’s purifying and creative power, bringing them cleansing, forgiveness, renewal and life. For Pentecostals, the experience of Spirit baptism is central in their theological endeavours and denotes purification and sanctification (Brown 2003, 91) with a charismatic, vocational and prophetic dimension, and balanced by a separation of the righteous remnant from the chaff (Mittelstadt 2010, 52, 59).

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