

**VISIONARY EXPERIENCES DURING JESUS' BAPTISM: A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SCHOLARLY VIEWS**

by

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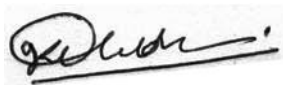
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own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been
indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thomas K L Vaidyan', written over a horizontal line.

SIGNATURE

January 22, 2019

(Thomas K L Vaidyan)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
SUMMARY.....	ix
SAMEVATTING	xi
KAKARETŠO	xiii
CHAPTER 1	
JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS: CLAIMS IN THE SOURCES	1
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 COMPARATIVE OVERVIEWS OF THE DATA AND EVIDENCE IN THE SOURCES ON JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONARY PHENOMENA	4
2.1 Mark's views of visionary phenomena during Jesus' baptism	4
2.2 Matthew and Luke's versions of accounts on Jesus' baptism	7
2.2.1 Comparison between Matthew and Mark's versions	11
2.3 John's testimony on Jesus' baptism compared to the Synoptic Gospels	12
3 INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES IN THE SOURCES	15
4 CONCLUSION	16
CHAPTER 2	
AN OVERVIEW OF MAJOR SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON THE REPORTS ABOUT JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONARY PHENOMENA	17
1 INTRODUCTION	17
2 J.D.G. DUNN	18
3 J.P. MEIER	20
4 J. MARCUS	21
5 L.W. HURTADO	23

6	E.P. SANDERS	23
7	THE FELLOWS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR	25
7.1	J.D. Crossan	27
7.2	M.J. Borg	28
7.3	R.J. Miller	29
7.4	J. Strijdom	30
7.5	R.L. Webb	31
8	CONCLUSION	33
CHAPTER 3		
SELECTED STUDIES THAT SEE JESUS' BAPTISM ACCOUNTS AS REPORTS ABOUT VISIONARY EXPERIENCES		35
1	INTRODUCTION	35
2	J.J. PILCH	36
2.1	Pilch's viewpoints on holy men or shamans	36
2.2	<i>Mono- and polyphasic</i> cultures	41
2.3	Insights from altered states of consciousness (ASC)	44
3	S.L. DAVIES	47
3.1	<i>Alter-persona</i> consciousness in cross-cultural research	47
3.2	ASC as a dissociative psychological transformation	51
4	R.E. DEMARIS.....	56
5	CONCLUSION	59
CHAPTER 4		
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BAPTISMAL VISION AS ASC		61
1	INTRODUCTION	61
2	PILCH'S MODEL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONARY EXPERIENCES	62

2.1	Understanding of ASC by Pilch	62
2.2	Using the shamanic model by Pilch,.....	65
2.3	Understanding human behaviours and values from <i>etic</i> and <i>emic</i> viewpoints	67
3	DAVIES' MODEL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS	70
3.1	Understanding ASC and spirit possession	70
3.2	Davies' model of spirit possession	72
3.3	Davies' explanations on encouraging the spirit possession by John the Baptist	73
4	DEMARIS' UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS	76
4.1	ASC linked to ritual activity	76
4.2	Spirit possession, a manifestation of ASC, as a model	77
5	CONCLUSION	79
CHAPTER 5		
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE THREE SCHOLARLY INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS ON JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS		81
1	INTRODUCTION	81
2	SCHOLARS WHO TAKE JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS IN THE TEXTS LITERALLY	82
2.1	Features and characteristics of the literal approach	82
2.1.1	Literal reading of texts	82
2.1.2	Understanding of the visions at Jesus' baptism	83
2.1.3	The literal approach taking the visionary events as unique	83
2.1.4	The criterion of embarrassment as confirmation of the visionary events	85
2.2	Highlights on the literal approach	87
3	SCHOLARS WHO TAKE JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS AS LITERARY CREATIONS	87

3.1	Features and characteristics of the literary creations approach	87
3.1.1	Understanding of the visions as literary creations	87
3.1.2	Use of comparative materials supporting the literary creations view	88
3.2	Comparison of the literary creations and the literal approaches	89
4	SCHOLARS WHO SUGGEST JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISION AS ASC	90
4.1	Features and characteristics of the ASC approach	90
4.1.1	Understanding of the visions with cultural sensitivity	90
4.1.2	Use of comparative materials supporting the ASC view	92
4.2	Comparison of the ASC views with literal and literary creations approaches	94
5	A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF THE THREE SCHOLARLY INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS OF THE VISIONS IN TERMS OF META-ANALYSES	96
5.1	Caretaker versus critical interpretations of the visionary accounts	96
5.2	Instances of naturalistic and humanistic approaches in the different views on visionary experiences	98
5.2.1	Naturalistic approach to religion	98
5.2.2	Humanistic approach to religion	99
5.2.3	Naturalistic versus humanistic explanations of the visionary accounts	100
6	CONCLUSION	104
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	106

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Lynn and Neha, and grandson, Aeron, are really proud of this. I hope extension of this study to other fields can close the gap between humanistic and naturalistic approaches to religion and science.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to critically analyse selected scholarly views on the visionary experiences during Jesus' baptism. Modern scholars have different opinions about the reports in the New Testament on Jesus' baptismal visionary phenomena. Some scholars interpreted the events as Jesus' actual seeing or vision and others accept it as literary creations by the authors, to make sense of the reports on seeing and hearing that are hard to understand. Reports like a Spirit descending in the form of a dove are extraordinary for most people and pose interpretive challenges. The two distinct trends identified in the study of visionary experiences are those who take the text on the visions literally and those who see them as literary creations. There is a new trend in biblical scholarship, which is comparative and invokes insights from cross-cultural research in order to understand the accounts of the visions as altered states of consciousness (ASC). These views are also presented, compared and evaluated selecting three major views from modern New Testament scholars. Among the scholars identified, who take the baptism visions literally, are Dunn, Meier, Marcus, Hurtado, Borg and Webb. The scholars selected, who consider the baptism visions as literary creations, are Sanders, Crossan, Miller and Strijdom. The scholars, who contributed to the new development in interpreting the texts on visionary experiences as ASC, are Pilch, Davies and DeMaris. Pilch uses the theoretical model of ASC and understands it differently from those used by Davies and DeMaris on which they base their interpretations. A scientific explanation of ASC is built from theories about how the brain and culture, together, create

certain states of consciousness. All these views are analysed based on the scholarly interpretations from the three definitive trends in the visions research, comparing the caretaker versus critical at a meta-analysis level.

KEY TERMS

Jesus' baptism; historical Jesus research; visionary experiences; critical analysis; literal approach; literary creations view; altered states of consciousness; neurological perspective; spirit possession; psychological transformation; cross-cultural anthropology; naturalistic and humanistic explanations.

SAMEVATTING

Die doel van hierdie studie is om enkele wetenskaplike beskouings van die visioene by Jesus se doop krities te ontleed. Hedendaagse geleerdes verskil in hulle uitleg van die Nuwe Testamentiese beskrywings van Jesus se doopvisioene. Volgens sommige het Jesus die gebeure letterlik in 'n visioen gesien en volgens ander is die visioene literêre skeppings, 'n poging van die outeurs om die onverklaarbare beskrywings van wat ander gesien en gehoor het, te verstaan. Dat die Heilige Gees in die gedaante van 'n duif uit die hemel neergedaal het, is vir die meeste mense iets ongewoons en bowendien bemoeilik dit die uitleg daarvan. In 'n studie van visioene kan twee tendense onderskei word: enersyds diegene wat tekste waarin die visioene beskryf word, letterlik vertolk en andersyds diegene wat die tekste as 'n literêre skepping beskou. Dan is daar 'n nuwe tendens in Bybelse geleerdheid wat hom op vergelyking toespits. Die bevindings van kruiskulturele navorsing word ingespan om die beskrywing van visioene as alternatiewe bewussynstoestande (ABT) te verstaan. Hierdie beskouings word eweneens aangebied, vergelyk en beoordeel op grond van drie toonaangewende beskouings wat deur eietydse Nuwe Testamentiese geleerdes gehuldig word. Dunn, Meier, Marcus, Hurtado, Borg en Webb tel onder die geleerders wat die doopvisioene letterlik vertolk. Sanders, Crossan, Miller en Strijdom, daarenteen, beskou die doopvisioene as literêre skeppings. Pilch, Davies en DeMaris het bygedra tot die nuwe tendens om tekste waarin visioene beskryf word, oor die boeg van ABT te gooi. Pilch gebruik die teoretiese ABT-model en lê die visioene op 'n ander wyse as Davies en DeMaris uit. 'n Wetenskaplike verklaring van ABT

berus op teorieë dat kultuur en die mens se brein gesamentlik sekere bewussynstoestande tot gevolg het. Hierdie opvattinge word met behulp van 'n wetenskaplike vertolking van die drie tendense in visioennavorsing ontleed deur op die meta-ontledingsvlak die opsiener en die kritiese te vergelyk.

KAKARETŠO

Morero wa nyakišišo ye ke go sekaseka ka botlalo dikgopolo tša banyakišiši tše di kgethilwego ka ga maitemogelo a pono nakong ya kolobetšo ya Jesu.

Banyakišiši ba sebjalebja ba na le dikgopolo tša go fapana ka ga dipego tša taba ya pono ya kolobetšo ya Jesu ka gare ga Testamente e Mpsha. Banyakišiši ba bangwe ba hlalositše ditiragalo bjalo ka go bona goba pono ya mmakgonthe ya Jesu gomme ba bangwe ba e amogela bjalo ka maithomelo a dingwalwa ka bangwadi, go hlaloša dipego ka ga go bona goba go kwa tše go lego bothata go di kwešiša. Pego ya go swana le ya Moya o Mokgethwa wa go theoga ka sebopego sa leeba ke semaka go bontši bja batho gomme e tšweletša ditlhohlo tša tlhathollo. Mekgwa ye mebedi ya go fapana ka nyakišišo ya maitemogelo a pono ke ya bao ba tšeago taba ya dipono go ba ye e nepagetšego le bao ba e tšeago bjalo ka maithomelo a dingwalwa. Go na le mokgwa wo moswa dithutong tša bibe, woo o bapetšegago ebile o tliša dikgopolo go tšwa nyakišišong ya go akaretša ditšo go kwešiša mabaka a dipono bjalo ka seemo sa boitemogo bjo bo fetotšwego (ASC). Dikgopolo tše gape di begilwe, bapeditšwe le go sekasekwa gomme di kgetha dikgopolokgolo tše tharo go banyakišiši ba sebjalebja ba Testamente e Mpsha. Magareng ga banyakišiši ba ba hlaotšwego, bao ba tšeago dipono tša kolobetšo go ba tše di nepagetšego ke Dunn, Meier, Marcus, Hurtado, Borg le Webb. Banyakišiši ba ba kgethilwego, bao ba tšeago dipono tša kolobetšo go ba tša maithomelo a dingwalwa ke Sanders, Crossan, Miller le Strijdom. Banyakišiši, bao ba tšeerego seabe kgatong ye mpsha ya go hlatholla ditaba tša maitemogelo a pono bjalo ka ASC ke Pilch, Davies le DeMaris. Pilch

o šomiša mmotlolo wa teori wa ASC gomme o kwešiša mmotlolo go fapana le wa go šomišitšwa ke Davies le DeMaris, woo ba theilego dihlahollo tša bona go wona. Tlhalošo ya saense ya ASC e theilwe godimo ga diteori go ya ka fao monagano le setšo, mmogo, di laetšago seemo se itšeng sa boitemogo.

Dikgopolo tše ka moka di sekasekilwe go ya ka dihlahollo tša banyakišiši go tšwa mekgweng ye mebedi ya tlhalošo ka nyakišišong ya dipono, go bapetša mohlokamedi le bohlokwa *maemong a meta-analysis*.

CHAPTER 1

JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS: CLAIMS IN THE SOURCES

1 INTRODUCTION

The sources in the four Gospels report on the events at historical Jesus' baptism and the visionary phenomena immediately following it (Mark 1:9-11; Matt 3:16-17; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34) in different ways. In Mark and Matthew's Gospels, it is reported that when Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heaven opened and the Spirit descended on him like a dove. He also heard a voice from the heaven addressing him as a beloved and well-pleased son. But in Luke, after John the Baptist is imprisoned (Luke 3:20), in the reports about what happened while Jesus is praying (Luke 3:21), Luke fails to mention that John the Baptist is the agent of baptism for Jesus.¹ Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke, tells of Jesus both seeing and hearing something from above. The Gospel of John does not report the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, but bears witness to Jesus as the one sent from God. The words attributed to John the Baptist contains what appears to be an allusion to the story of John's baptism of Jesus, where John is the one who saw the Spirit descending like a dove. There is also a second vision involving Jesus' encounter with the devil or the tester (Mark 1:12-

¹ Funk R.W. and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus* (New York: Polebridge Press, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 271.

13; Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), which is not mentioned in the Gospel according to John. These differences in regard to the details of the reports are dealt with in the following sections.

On all accounts, a “Spirit” descending in the form of a dove or an encounter with the devil would be an extraordinary or exceptional or “weird” events for most people. My personal reason is to understand these visionary phenomena at Jesus’ baptism which are hard to understand and they pose special interpretive problems. This research seeks to answer the key question: what are the main scholarly views on historical Jesus’ visionary experiences at his baptism by John the Baptist? This is answered through an interpretive approach, which will benefit the study of the religions, as well as society, and Christian communities.

Most New Testament scholars, engaged in the Gospel and historical Jesus research, find nothing historically reliable in these events of visionary experiences immediately following the baptism. Crossan observes that there is the ritual aspect, in view of the author of John’s Gospel, baptism is not a magic rite effecting forgiveness of sins, but the physical symbol of a spiritual reality already established before, without and apart from it. One could emphasize or underline the *epiphany* (an English cognate term for the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, meaning “manifestation”) and declare its divine necessity. With the Gospel of John, the baptism of Jesus is gone forever and only the revelation about Jesus remains.² Webb states that there is a possibility that the *theophany* (the Spirit’s descent and divine voice designating Jesus as God’s son) experience does take

² Crossan, J.D., *The historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 234.

place at the same time as Jesus' baptism, and it is equally possible that it occurs at some point in time subsequent to the baptism.³ Dunn⁴ believes that John the Baptist is influenced by the *Qumranian* baptisms. The texts concentrate on the exchange between John and Jesus as well as on the *epiphany* that took place right after Jesus emerged from the water. The description of the *epiphany* differs across the four versions, in terms of how far they present it as Jesus' subjective experience. Sanders starts by determining the evidences that are most secure and reveal several facts about Jesus' career *and its aftermath*,⁵ which can be known beyond doubt. Sanders does not consider the report about Jesus' seeing a dove or Spirit and hearing a voice as historical events. Scholarly interpretations vary greatly and some of the scholars see the visionary accounts as reports about events that really took place. Others think they are made up stories and the reasons for this disagreement are multiple, but include the nature of the sources on disagreements between the accounts. Scholarly assumptions and presuppositions on the reported events, including fixed views on visions and visionary perception, are some of the reasons. Hence, the purpose of this study is to critically analyse selected scholarly views on the visionary phenomena during Jesus' baptism. The trends in the way the baptism accounts are understood, are similar to larger trends in Biblical Studies as well as the Humanities in general. These experiences, as Slingerland⁶ suggests, are the spontaneous product of a

³ Webb R.L., "Jesus' baptism: its historicity and implications," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 277.

⁴ Dunn J.D.G., "Spirit and fire baptism," *Novum Testamentum* 2 (April 1972): 91-2.

⁵ Sanders E.P., *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985), 10-11.

⁶ Slingerland E., "Who's afraid of reductionism? The study of religion in the age of cognitive science," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (June 2008): 402.

very powerful, built-in faculty, the output of which seem inescapably real. This shifts the broader academic study of religious phenomena and experiences to a meta-theoretical level of comparison through humanistic and naturalistic approaches to religion. The broad research focus area is the critical interpretation of Early Christian Literature in ancient and modern contexts. The visionary experiences during historical Jesus' baptism is interpreted as a religious experience reported from the scriptural literacy in the New Testament and Early Christianity. In the modern contexts such experiences are also interpreted making use of anthropological, psychological and neuro-cultural readings of the early Christian literature.

2 COMPARATIVE OVERVIEWS OF THE DATA AND EVIDENCE IN THE SOURCES ON JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONARY PHENOMENA

2.1 Mark's views of visionary phenomena during Jesus' baptism

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:9-11).

Mark crowds the story of Jesus' baptismal visionary phenomena into two verses, 10 and 11 above. This account in Mark's Gospel identified the Spirit (*to pneuma*) like a dove (*hōs peristeran*) descending, and hears (*eis auton*, within him) himself a voice that speaks directly to him. The sight of the dove and hearing its voice definitely has a revelatory function, and the descent of a bird upon a chosen

person, as a sign, is a common motif in ancient Near Eastern legend.⁷ Jesus himself accepted John's baptism and this experience is private to Jesus.

In Mark there is no indication that the crowd or John saw anything; and the "heavenly voice," in the next verse, is addressed to Jesus alone. Jesus' attitude is highly unusual in the realm of Jewish tradition, as revealed in Mark 8:27-33. It transcends the current early Jewish picture of the *Messiah* (the anointed one for a special task, symbolizing the choice of a man for high office, the action that confirms and empowers the divine announcement). It confirms as well the expectation of the Son of Man that the Baptist had placed upon him.⁸ This instance can be interpreted as the calling of Jesus to be a holy man, as the holy spirit of God descended upon him and the voice from heaven announced a new identity, that of a beloved Son, pleasing the Father. This passage echoes the words from the Jewish scripture "You are my Son" (Ps 2:7). The verses which follow are in line with the widespread Jewish hope that another leader, like Judas Maccabaeus, would arise and scatter their enemies. The words, "with thee I am well pleased" (Isa 42:1) also is referred in Mark 1:11. This Gospel begins with John the Baptist's preaching, as fulfilment of the Old Testament prophesy and promise of a mightier one, who would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This is Jesus of Nazareth, who is baptized by John, who received the Holy Spirit and is acknowledged by God as his son and servant. The relationship between John the

⁷ Gero S., "The spirit as a dove at the baptism of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 18, no. 1 (1976): 19. Published by BRILL [Cited 23 October 2014]. Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1560595>.

⁸ Stuhlmacher P., "The Messianic Son of Man: Jesus' claim to deity," in *The historical Jesus in recent research, Sources for biblical and theological study, Volume 10* (ed. Dunn J.D.G. and S. McKnight; Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 332-33.

Baptist and Jesus has significant implications for understanding Jesus.⁹ It relates particularly to the early foundational events and ideas like visionary phenomena that occurs during baptism and its witnessing experience by John the Baptist. These visionary and auditory experiences influence Jesus' convictions about the fatherhood of God. They also influence his belief in his ability to combat evil through the Spirit of God that has taken him over, helping to bring about the reign of God in the world.

According to Brown,¹⁰ there is a reference to Jesus as the "anointed one" and to the Spirit as the agent of the anointing and empowering. The activities of Mark's Jesus are directed at the purification and consecration of Israel through the rite of "baptism" with the Holy Spirit, in view of preparing Israel for Yahweh's return and the establishment of God's reign. Before this could happen, Jesus must be consecrated by John's baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit of God. Immediately after this event, Jesus is tempted in the desert as follows:

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him (Mark 1:12-13).

Mark compresses the story of the temptation, as shown above, and no details are given by the author, who places nearly all the events in Galilee. The temptation event in Mark is part of or an extension of the baptismal visionary phenomena. The author might have followed the oral traditions to collect and write down

⁹ Webb R.L., "Methodological reflections on John the Baptizer's influence on Jesus," in *Jesus research: new methodologies and perceptions, the second Princeton-Prague symposium on Jesus research, Princeton, 2007* (eds. Charlesworth J.H. with B. Rhea in consultation with P. Pokorný; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 769.

¹⁰ Brown C., "With the grain and against the grain: a strategy for reading the synoptic gospels," in *Handbook for the study of the historical Jesus, Volume I: How to study the historical Jesus* (eds. Holmén T. and S.E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 625.

some of the stories about Jesus of Nazareth, which he had become familiar with through hearing about them repeatedly in his community. Jesus' preparation for his public ministry is completed by the Spirit driving him into the wilderness, where he overcomes temptations. In Mark the baptism introduces two visionary phenomena: seeing the Spirit, as well as being driven out into the desert, and the encounter with Satan, which are presented as "events" that took place.

2.2 Matthew and Luke's versions of accounts on Jesus' baptism

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:16-17).

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22).

According to Matthew, the voice declares Jesus' identity to the crowd (Matt 3:17) and adds that the *pneuma* is the "Spirit of God." When the event of descending is translated "like a dove," the difference between *hōs* in Mark and *hōsei* in Matthew is obscured as both are translated as "like." Though, in both Mark and Matthew, the event is retained as a visionary experience, there is an imagistic quality¹¹ of the event in the use of the word in Mark. Also, in Matthew, the event has the dove *alighting on* Jesus. Matthew (Matt 14:5) mentions the formation of a crowd around John¹² and the people considering John a prophet. There are

¹¹ Schroer S., *Wisdom has built her house: studies on the figure of Sophia in the Bible*, translated by Maloney L.M. and W. McDonough; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 132.

¹² Strijdom J., "A historical Jesus hallucinating during his initial spirit-possession experience: a response to Stevan Davies' interpretation of Jesus' baptism by John," *HTS* 54, no. 3 & 4 (1998): 598.

historical facts in connection with John's preaching, Jesus' baptism and the visionary phenomena, together with the voice that is heard. The language recalls earlier experiences of the other world in the Jewish tradition, like with Ezekiel, some six centuries before Jesus, momentarily seeing into the other world, as if through a door or "tear"¹³ (See Ezek 1:1; Isa 61:1; 64:1). The cultural world of Jesus and his followers is dealing with spirit and such activity is an essential part of their belief system. Hence, such activities are common experiences to the first hearers or readers of the Gospels. Jesus is also accepted as a holy man through his guide and has been contacted by the spirit world, and the Spirit has revealed its identity.¹⁴

Luke reports the event as if it is a real event (*egeneto*), not a vision, as the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus "in bodily form" (*sōmatikō eidei*) like a dove. As in Mark, the voice from heaven personally addresses Jesus. Luke's Gospel treats one subject at a time as the material he gathered gave some account of the career of John the Baptist (Luke 3:1-20). The Spirit, through whose agency Jesus is conceived, which he received at his baptism and controlled him in his temptations, is the same. By the power of the same Spirit he healed and taught (Luke 4:16 ff), he gifted it (from the Father) to the disciples (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8) and it directed Jesus' followers. Jesus must have long pondered God's work among his own people and in the life of humankind during the years he spent in

¹³ Borg M.J., "The spirit-filled experience of Jesus," in *The historical Jesus in recent research, Sources for biblical and theological study, Volume 10* (eds. Dunn J.D.G. and S. McKnight; Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 305.

¹⁴ Pilch J.J., *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2011), 115.

Nazareth. His own deepening experience of God's presence, his prolonged study of the Scriptures, and his participation in village debates might have led him to make up his mind about the nature of that work. It is possible that this informed his experience at the River Jordan. in the wilderness and he later related this to his disciples. For the first time, he might have indicated to his followers what it meant to him in the light of the history of his people. According to Luke, as Jesus is praying after his baptism, he suddenly became aware of his unique destiny. It is reminiscent of a royal Psalm (Ps 2) and one of the Servant Songs (Isa 42:1) as found in the Mark's Gospel also. From the Jewish scriptures, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Ps 2:7) is an Egyptian notion of the begetting of the Pharaoh by the god that has applied to the kingship in the Old Testament.¹⁵ Jesus hears God calling him to his unique relationship with Him and the unique work he had to do. John calls on men to return to the renewal of God's real work through repentance (Matt 3:11), faith (Mark 1:15) and judgement (Matt 3:11, 12), and finally proclaims his successor (John 1:36). Jesus now knew that the leadership is passed on to him and given into his hands. As a Jew, Jesus had all the knowledge of the Jewish scriptures before his baptism and he might have been evaluating what the scriptures meant within the current situation of the community surrounding him. His visionary phenomena as the demanding voice of God, identified himself with those he had come to save. After the baptism, the temptation of Jesus is reported in Luke as follows:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He

¹⁵ Schroer, *Wisdom has built her house: studies on the figure of Sophia in the Bible*, 133.

ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’” The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdom of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So, if you worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’” The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time (Luke 4:1-13).

This narrative is similar to the events reported in Matthew 4:1-11, but with a difference in the order of the second and third temptations. Another difference is the addition of the answer to the first temptation that, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matt 4:4). There is also another addition in Matthew, in the last verse, “Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him” (Matt 4:11). By examining the quotations from the Old Testament, in their original context, after the baptismal experience Jesus’ replies to the third temptation. In Luke, “cast thyself down from the temple” has reference to Deuteronomy 6:16 and Exodus 17:1-7. The Israelites had been asking Moses to prove that God is with them and, in a similar way, Jesus is shown rejecting the temptation that he is the expected *Messiah* (Mark 8:11-13). The fact that so much of Matthew’s special material is Jewish in tone and is concerned with Jewish matters indicate the author lived close to Jewish communities.¹⁶ In order to show that Jesus is the Jewish *Messiah*, that his

¹⁶ Evans C.F., “The gospel makers and their message,” in *A source book of the Bible for teachers* (ed. Walton R.C.; London: SCM Press, 1970), 255-57.

disciples are the true people of God and the Old Testament, the Law, the author interpreted it accordingly. In both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the baptismal visionary and the temptation phenomena are treated as two events, one seeing the Spirit and the other the encounter with the devil. In Matthew and Luke, this event is narrated elaborately, with 11 and 13 verses respectively. But in Mark the same event is mentioned very briefly, in two verses only.

2.2.1 Comparison between Matthew and Mark's versions

Capes¹⁷ notes the following differences in Matthew and Mark's versions of Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences:

- Matthew adds "Behold!" to the visionary aspects of the story.
- He changes Mark's "the heavens were split" to "the heavens were opened."
- He writes that Jesus saw the "Spirit of God," while Mark simply had the "Spirit."
- He alters Mark's phrase, the Spirit comes down "into him," to say that the Spirit comes "upon him."
- He changes the heavenly voice to say, "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased," from Mark's more personal, "You are my Son, the beloved in you I am well pleased."

In the visionary phenomena, Jesus "saw the Spirit of God descending 'as if' it was a dove and it comes upon him" (Matt 3:16) and in Mark it is "as" a dove.

This change in Matthew's version suggests that the dove refers adverbially to the manner of descent and not to the visible appearance of the Spirit.¹⁸ The dove represents the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and the only reference to

¹⁷ Capes D.B., "Intertextual echoes in the Matthean baptismal narrative," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 9 (1999): 41.

¹⁸ Capes, "Intertextual echoes in the Matthean baptismal narrative," 46n.

a dove in the New Testament occurs at Jesus' baptism. Though there are these differences, Matthew and Mark's versions of visionary phenomena agree significantly.

2.3 John's testimony on Jesus' baptism compared to the Synoptic Gospels

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven, as a dove, and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (John 1:32-34).

The "synoptic" is derived from the Greek word, *synoptikos*, which means "seeing together" or "having a common view of." It is used specifically in reference to the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, which are similar in form, outline and contents. The Synoptic Gospels relate the story of Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his public ministry. But, in John's Gospel, it appears implicitly as the Baptist's witness to Jesus as the one upon whom the Spirit descended from heaven like a dove and remained. In John 1:32, there is no mention at all of Jesus' baptism, but there is a testimony about seeing the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending from heaven and resting upon Jesus. John the Baptist claims himself as a witness to Jesus' *messiahship*. John the Baptist's purpose is thus to testify (John 1:6-8), pointing to Jesus, as "the one who should come" and "He came to his own things" (John 1:11). One's "own things" is a Greek phrase for "home."¹⁹ From John 3:22-24, it is also clear that Jesus met John the Baptist, accepted him as his teacher and guide, and became his apprentice. Even though

¹⁹ Blaiklock E.M., *Commentary on the New Testament: a chapter by chapter exposition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 80.

Jesus is John's counterpart to the baptism, in the Gospel of John, the account is given as the direct testimony of the Baptist himself. The full significance of his experience is revealed only when the heavenly token is interpreted as directly from God, providing corroborative evidence to confirm who it is that had come to him. As John baptized in water, Jesus shall baptize in the Holy Spirit, John had seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God. The Gospel of John describes the setting of the baptism and, being aware of Jesus' baptismal visionary phenomena, presents the event as part of a *theophany* experience or revelation to the Baptist, which he gives as a testimony. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus prays, and then the Holy Spirit descends from heaven like a dove and rests on him, and God reveals to him that this is the one who will baptize with Holy Spirit. As many people followed him, Jesus said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true" (John 10:41). They believe that, as John testifies, the Spirit that comes down from heaven as a dove, and remains in Jesus, is responsible for performing all the miraculous signs they experienced. As at this baptism, Jesus experiences the visionary phenomena and the voice or some kind of equivalent inner experience. This clearly, at least, had the potential to have affected later activities of both Jesus and John the Baptist. At his baptism, Jesus experiences, in some powerful way, the awareness that he had been singled out for an exceptionally close relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is gifted for a very special task that he would fulfil in the future.

Matthew records the baptism and the visionary phenomena, but also reports John's hesitation to baptize Jesus and the latter's convincing reason to proceed (Matt 3:13-17). Luke avoids having John baptize Jesus, and only records Jesus'

baptism. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus begins his active ministry after being baptized by John. John does not recount the *theophanic* voice, but reveals his own divine revelation (John 1:33). Instead of the divine voice acknowledging Jesus as “my beloved Son,” it is John himself who bares “witness that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34b). The account of John’s witnessing to Jesus, based upon his baptism, reveals little verbal agreement apart from the phrase “the Spirit descending like a dove,” which suggests knowledge of the event rather than use of the Synoptic Gospels as sources. The narrative of Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:9-11) has two basic parts: the baptism proper (Mark 1:9) and Jesus’ visionary phenomena that followed (Mark 1:10-11). The visionary phenomena itself consists of two things seen by Jesus, the rending of the heavens (Mark 1:10a) and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove (Mark 1:10b), and the heavenly voice heard by him. During the whole episode, the focus is on what Jesus saw. The narrative recounted that, as Jesus was coming up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. The dove had been considered as the symbol of all kinds of virtues, particularly of gentleness and innocence, and could be the rationale behind the association of the Spirit with the dove. In addition to the visionary phenomenon of Jesus seeing the Spirit descending upon him, the voice expresses the proclamation of the identity of Jesus. Mark’s presentation of the visionary phenomena experienced by Jesus, indicates with what consciousness Jesus begin his ministry. Jesus is fully aware of the tearing open of the heavens, of the presence of the Spirit and of his relationship to God, the Father. Mark describes the rending of the heavens in graphic detail, as an extraordinary action in progress, and Jesus as the recipient of its unfolding. In Matthew 3:16 and Luke

3:21, the opening of the heaven is described as something of a normal phenomenon, which seems to be in preparation for a subsequent event. In Mark, however, the very opening of the heavens is an event, which is significant in itself. Mark's emphasis on the event of the rending of the heaven is evident in the chiastic structure he used to refer to the objects of Jesus' visionary phenomena, in verse 10. In Mark's presentation, Jesus is the only one who saw and experienced what transpired at his baptism. John the Baptist, who administered the baptism, is not described as being party to the events that surrounded Jesus' baptism (cf. John 1: 32f).²⁰ Jesus' temptation account and encounter with Satan are absent in the Gospel of John. The sources do not report on the visionary phenomena, but they report that Jesus saw and heard certain things during or after his baptism and this is witnessed by John the Baptist only.

3 INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES IN THE SOURCES

An overview of information provided in the Gospels, as outlined above, shows that the sources and their accounts provide basic interpretive challenges. The differences in the sources, as mentioned, show interpretive problems in regard to the reported events that are hard to harmonise. It is difficult to understand if one wants to take them as reports about actual events that took place in time and space. They pose interpretive challenges, as they cannot be taken at face value or give reasons for their interpretive solutions. The differences between them are significant for scholars reading them literally, who focus on particular aspects. Those who search for comparative material are less concerned with the

²⁰ Palachuvattil J., *"He Saw": the significance of Jesus' seeing denoted by the verb Eiden in the Gospel of Mark* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2001), 91.

differences, focusing instead, on the extraordinary nature of the accounts. In view of these differences, the reports on the visionary phenomena at Jesus' baptism are interpreted by various modern scholars differently. There are scholars who interpret the events literally, as actual events, real to Jesus, while others interpret it as myths or literary creations or visionary events. Critical interpretation of these views on visionary experiences will include both the ancient and modern contexts making use of the new trend in anthropological, psychological and neuro-cultural explanations from cross-cultural research also.

4 CONCLUSION

In this Chapter the sources from the New Testament reports in the Gospels on the events at historical Jesus' baptism leading to the visionary experiences are introduced. There are interpretive challenges in the sources which are dealt with the modern scholars in different ways. Some of the scholars focus on reading the sources literally, and others consider them as literary creations. There is a modern trend for some scholars to interpret the sources from the anthropological and neuro-cultural perspectives. The different scholarly views are collected, critically analysed, evaluated and interpreted in this investigation. The different voices and viewpoints of scholars are presented as the Chapters progress with an ascending and accumulating understanding of the issues on Jesus' visionary experiences at baptism. Finally, a comparative evaluation of the scholarly interpretive traditions of the visions will be made through the instances of naturalistic and humanistic approaches to religious visionary experiences. The different interpretive viewpoints evaluating the source relations on Jesus' visionary experiences at baptism are discussed in the following Chapters.

CHAPTER 2

AN OVERVIEW OF MAJOR SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON THE REPORTS ABOUT JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONARY PHENOMENA

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern scholars have different interpretations on the historical events of Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences. There are scholars who believe that, at the baptism, Jesus had established a link between his consciousness of sonship and the spiritual experience. His experiences reveal insights into his relationship with God, as the Father, and how the powerful activity of the Spirit manifested in his own life. Some scholars agree with the sources in the Gospels that Jesus literally received the Spirit at his baptism by John, and that this is historically certain. The experiences would have been the self-understanding of Jesus, with a sense of the special relationship he has with God, as Father.

Still, there are scholars who reject this report on visionary experiences of seeing and hearing as mythological creations by the authors of the Gospels. Especially the encounter with the devil in the desert, immediately after the baptism and after fasting for 40 days, and the related incidents, are viewed as made-up stories. According to the sceptics, the information on seeing the descending dove and hearing the voice are improbable, as no variable evidence is available. Moreover, his temptations would have been internal struggles and not acted-out scenes as reported in the gospels. However, it is credible that the followers of Jesus would have created these stories in order to interpret them theologically. Scholars who question the veracity of these reports need the claims about these historical events to be demonstrated by evidence and argument.

Even though all of the selected scholars agree that Jesus was baptized by John at the beginning of his career, their disagreements are on the visionary experiences. Their interpretations point out whether the reports are either literally true or literary creations. Some scholars consider the reported events as dissociative experiences or some form of religious experiences. Their individual interpretations for their respective arguments are given in the following sections.

2 J.D.G. DUNN

Dunn²¹ states that the *theophany* gives some entrée into Jesus' personal experience at his baptism. The baptism of Jesus is the first important passage in all four Gospels and it tells us about Jesus' visionary experience explicitly. But none of the accounts gives any detail about the act of the baptism itself, except that it took place in the River Jordan. As John the Baptist's activity was also not given, it is possible that the author expected the readers and hearers to fill in the details from their knowledge about the practice of baptism in their own communities. Two key concepts that governed Jesus' preaching and praxis throughout his ministry were the loving care of God as Father and the startling power of the Spirit that manifested in Jesus' work. These twin realities, which Jesus apparently experienced deeply himself, correlate perfectly with the descent of the Spirit and the heavenly voice heard after Jesus' baptism. Mark understands John's prophesy that "he will baptise with the Holy Spirit," as programmatic for Jesus' ministry of purification. The Q form (Sayings Gospel Q, which stands for the German word *Quelle*, meaning "source." Q is the source on

²¹ Dunn, "Spirit and Fire Baptism," 91-2.

which Matthew and Luke draw, in addition to Mark.) of prophesy adds the words “and with fire” (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). John anticipates the baptism in the Spirit, while the “fire” belongs to the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophetic eschatology. The eschatological discourses in the Synoptic Gospels are the *Messianic* pronouncement of judgment upon those who refused to repent and prepare for the advent of the Kingdom of God and the words “must have been a metaphor of judgment.”²² Jesus experienced his relationship with God as an intimate family relationship and thought of himself as God’s Son. This sense, as son, must have been central to Jesus’ self-understanding during his baptism in the Spirit at the River Jordan, which was primarily initiatory. In Mark and Matthew, Jesus saw the heavens opening and the Holy Spirit descending. Luke describes the event without showing events from the point of view of one of the characters. The Gospel of John presents the events through the eyes of John the Baptist describing it as his, rather than Jesus’ visual experience. But, in the synoptic accounts, the heavenly voice accompanying the vision is best understood to be heard by everyone present, including Jesus, John, John’s disciples and the crowd, because it was a public event.

There exists confusion about the descent of the Spirit at the moment of Jesus’ adoption as the Son of God and his appointment as the *Messiah*. It may also merely be the climax and confirmation of a growing conviction that he was the Son and the *Messiah*. Dunn argues that the anointing with the Spirit during Jesus’ baptism equipped him with power and authority for his career and mission that

²² Dunn J.D.G., “The birth of a metaphor – baptized in spirit,” in *The Christ and the spirit*, 2, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 105.

followed. Textual evidence for the initiatory significance of the baptism in the Spirit is conspicuously absent. These suggestions by Dunn are for theological interpretations and, therefore, not convincing to those who look at them differently. But Dunn believes that, at the baptism, the link between Jesus' significant experience of his consciousness of Sonship and Spirit is made. For Dunn, it is certain that Jesus believed himself to be empowered by the Spirit and thought of himself as God's Son. These convictions must have crystallised at some point in Jesus' life.²³

3 J.P. MEIER

Meier²⁴ suggests that during the whole process, that is, leaving his home and occupation, hearing John's message and accepting his baptism, possibly spending some time with John as his disciple, and, finally striking out on his own, Jesus develops intellectually and experiences existentially the key insights into his relationship with God as Father and, therefore, the powerful activity of the Spirit manifested in his own life. The crystallisation of these key themes, and their coherence, addresses the preaching and praxis in Jesus' ministry. John, a model for spirit-inspiration, is present and, perhaps, announces the potential to imitate this state by saying that the repentant would someday receive the Spirit. The fact that Jesus experienced reception of the Spirit at his baptism, by John, is historically certain. The baptism of the supposedly superior and sinless Jesus by

²³ Dunn J.D.G., *Jesus and the spirit: a study of the religious and charismatic experience of Jesus and the first Christians as reflected in the New Testament*, NTL (London: SCM, 1975), 63.

²⁴ Meier J.P., *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus, Volume 2: mentor, message, and miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 108.

his supposed inferior, John the Baptist, is a criterion of “embarrassment”²⁵ that would have created difficulty for the early Church. The early Church would have created material that embarrassed its creator or weakened its position in arguments with opponents. In John’s gospel, Meier argues that in a struggle with latter-day disciples of the Baptist, who refuse to recognize Jesus as the *Messiah*, suppressed the baptism of Jesus by the Baptist. They might have recorded the Father’s witness to Jesus and the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus without telling when this *theophany* occurred²⁶ (John 1:29-34). It is highly unlikely that the Church went out of its way to create the cause of its own embarrassment. Hence, the Gospel reports on Jesus’ baptismal visions are about actual events of seeing and hearing for Meier.

4 J. MARCUS

As Marcus²⁷ observes, it is probable that Jesus’ baptism was a formative experience in his life, and this may suggest that it had a visionary element. At some point in Jesus’ early ministry, he had an inaugural experience that formed the basis for the vocation he subsequently articulated and lived. He appears to have possessed a strong sense of prophetic authority. Such a sense of prophetic authority almost demands a radical experience of a divine encounter, to explain its existence. Marcus suggests that Jesus did experience a prophetic call-vision.

²⁵ Meier J.P., *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus, Volume one: the roots of the problem and the person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 168.

²⁶ Meier, *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus, Volume one: the roots of the problem and the person*, 169.

²⁷ Marcus J., “Jesus’ baptismal vision,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 513.

He proposes that its content was, instead, another visionary experience that Jesus narrates as “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightening” (Luke 10:18). But this can be incorporated as an additional part of Jesus’ prophetic call-vision, along with the Spirit’s descent and the designation as God’s Son. But Marcus calls into question the specific content of the *theophany* of the descent of the Spirit and the designation of Jesus as God’s Son. Visions are frequently influenced by biblical themes. Jesus’ baptismal experience includes seeing the Spirit descending like a dove, since this is apparently an allusion to one or more biblical passages, such as in Noah’s dove and the Spirit hovering over the deep, in Genesis 1:2. They do not always follow straight-forward rules of logic and grammar.²⁸ The descent of the Spirit-dove would have possessed a parallel, cosmic significance for Jesus. This instance reveals the inauguration of the Holy Spirit’s cosmic reign of forgiveness and re-creation. The basis on which Jesus felt empowered to depart radically from John the Baptist’s programme, is the vision of a dove and hearing of the voice. Those are the marks of Jesus’ reception of the Spirit of God. Jesus’ immersion, in Mark, also refers to the sound of a heavenly echo, a *bat kól* (in the Hebrew scripture this voice is called the “daughter of the voice” of God, the echo of something God has spoken). But in addition, Jesus’ own seeing of the heavens opening and the Spirit descending, is a distinctive trait. The descriptions on Jesus’ visionary experiences at baptism, as given in the sources in the Gospels are considered by Marcus as an inaugural experience leading to a prophetic call-vision.

²⁸ Marcus, “Jesus’ baptismal vision,” 519-20.

5 L.W. HURTADO

As observed by Hurtado,²⁹ a phenomenological approach employs comparisons with religious experiences in another era and in other cultures. In the historical context at this religious event, the religious devotees would see their experiences as an encounter with divine realities. Hurtado argues that the recognition of such historical factors generates powerful religious experiences which are perceived by the recipients as revelations.

Revelatory religious experiences, such as visions and prophetic inspiration, are important factors in the appearance of innovative insights and beliefs.

Sociologists and anthropologists tend to focus on the social and cultural conditions that may be associated with religious experiences. Psychologists tend to look for personal psychological conditions that may be associated with them.

Hence, the revelatory visionary experiences during Jesus' baptism directly contributed to a significant religious innovation. Hurtado says nothing about the report on seeing and hearing, but only mentions the baptismal visions as religious experiences.

6 E.P. SANDERS

Sanders observes that Jesus began his active ministry after being baptized by John and that he accepted John's baptism is virtually certain.³⁰ According to him, two of the things that are most securely known about Jesus are the beginning and the

²⁹ Hurtado L.W., "Religious experience and religious innovation in the New Testament," *The Journal of Religion* 80 (2000): 183-9.

³⁰ Sanders, E.P., *The historical figure of Jesus* (Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1993), 93-4.

outcome of his career, and these are also the two most illuminating facts. Jesus began his public work in close collaboration with John the Baptist, probably as a disciple. One of the almost indisputable facts is that Jesus was baptised by John. He concludes that John really did baptise Jesus and, in turn, it implies that Jesus agreed with John's message, it is time to repent in view of the coming wrath and redemption. Thus, at the beginning of Jesus' career, he accepted the mission of John. Sanders argues that Jesus must be understood on a trajectory that runs from an eschatologically-oriented John to an eschatologically-oriented early church.³¹ He also notes that, in the story of Jesus' baptism, the vision of a dove descending and a voice from heaven addressing Jesus, is a quotation from Psalm 2:7, where "Son of God" is applied to the King of Israel – who is an ordinary human being. In the kingship ritual, the king is addressed as "my son." Hence, it appears that in Mark, "you are my Son" is intended as a statement of adoption since God gave Jesus special status *when he was baptized*.³² The title would imply a special standing before God and an unusual power to accomplish good. Since, during Jesus' baptism, as a dove descends and a voice from heaven addresses Jesus as "beloved Son," the first followers of Jesus started calling him the "Son of God." They would have meant a person standing in a special relationship to God, who chose him to accomplish a task of great importance. Sanders does not say anything about Jesus' seeing a dove/spirit and hearing a voice. He does not consider the report on these elements as a historical event.

³¹ Sanders, *The historical figure of Jesus*, 94-5.

³² Sanders, *The historical figure of Jesus*, 243-45.

Regarding the encounter with the devil in the desert, Sanders thinks it as a mythological creation. He considers whether the 40 days in the desert referred to an actual 40 days, and argues about what fasting for 40 days would entail. Sanders views that all the elements of the baptismal visionary phenomenon are parts of a made-up story or literary creation.

7 THE FELLOWS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR

The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar belong to the Jesus Seminar or they are members of the Westar Institute, headquartered in Santa Rosa, California, USA. A majority of them believe that the descriptions on Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences, owe its details to the imagination, either of Mark or the storytellers in the early Christian movement.³³ One of the 176 events examined by the 79 Fellows is the baptism. 84% of the 79 Fellows deny that Jesus actually saw the heavens open or that the Spirit descended like a dove. They also deny that Jesus heard a voice from heaven saying the three things reported. Since the memory of this event occurs during Jesus' public activity, it is suggested that Jesus probably did have some kind of powerful religious experience. The Fellows affirm that Jesus had visionary experiences, on occasion, with the possibility that his baptismal experience involves a vision of some kind. Hence, the information on seeing the descending dove and hearing the voice are improbable, as it does not fit verifiable evidence and it is largely or entirely fictive.³⁴ The Fellows view the

³³ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 54.

³⁴ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 37.

words of John the Baptist, about witnessing the Spirit coming down and remaining on Jesus, to be the formulation of the author of the Fourth Gospel.³⁵ But the Fellows agree that Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan River, as mentioned in Mark 1:9 and Matthew 3:13, since “the historical reliability of this information is virtually certain. It is supported by a preponderance of evidence.”³⁶ While the Jesus Seminar consists of a collective of scholars, most members of the Jesus Seminar also acted independently. Some of their independent views differ radically from the collective view of the Jesus Seminar. Even then, the sources disagree with each other on the visionary phenomena experienced at Jesus’ baptism.

Regarding the temptation of Jesus, the Fellows are firmer in their convictions that Jesus did not have an actual encounter with Satan.³⁷ The forty-day period is likewise symbolic. Forty expresses a relatively long, but indefinite, time and it is often connected with events that have special religious significance. The majority of the Fellows believe Jesus spoke of Satan, but they are fairly dubious that he ever spoke to Satan. The responses attributed to Jesus are all drawn from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the *Septuagint* (abbreviated LXX). A graphic portrayal of Jesus opposing the devil by quoting scripture would be useful for later Christians, who had to refute claims that Jesus was inspired by someone other than the God of Moses. Therefore, it might have

³⁵ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 368.

³⁶ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 36.

³⁷ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 55.

originated with members of the Jesus movement who composed Q.³⁸ The Fellows are of the opinion that the temptation story is based on what Jesus' followers imagined he did, when he was alone in the desert. His temptations would have been internal struggles and not acted-out scenes that could have been observed by others, had others been present.³⁹

7.1 J.D. Crossan

One of the individual Fellows, out of 79⁴⁰ who contributed to the Jesus Seminar, is Crossan. According to him, Mark is quite content to tell of the baptism in Mark 1:9 and then conclude with the *epiphany* in Mark 1:10-11. But those twin elements of baptism and *epiphany* furnish a problem and solution for texts dependent on Mark.⁴¹ Firstly, one could negate or deny the baptism and, secondly, one could emphasise or underline the *epiphany*. Luke 3:21a barely mentions Jesus' baptism in a syntactical rush toward prayer and the *epiphany*.

Matthew 3:13-15 faces the problem and declares its divine necessity. John 1:32-34, probably dependent on the Synoptic Gospels for his Baptist traditions, never mentions a word about Jesus' baptism in all of John 1:19-34 and emphasizes, instead, what John witnessed concerning Jesus. For Crossan, the criterion of multiple attestation is paramount to conclude that "Jesus' baptism by

³⁸ Funk R.W., R.W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The five gospels: the search for the authentic words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 134.

³⁹ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 43.

⁴⁰ Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The acts of Jesus: the search for the authentic deeds of Jesus*, 537-42.

⁴¹ Crossan, *The historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant*, 233.

John is one of the surest things we know about them both,”⁴² Jesus and John the Baptist. But the report about the actual event of seeing and hearing, is a literary creation by the authors of the Gospels in order to interpret them theologically.

7.2 M.J. Borg

Another Fellow of the Jesus Seminar, Borg, states that the “heavenly voice,”⁴³ in Jesus’ baptismal visionary phenomena, has some historical uncertainty, because the words so perfectly express the post-Easter perception of Jesus’ identity. As such, they must be historically suspect as the product of the followers of Jesus in the years after Easter. The vision of the descent of the Spirit is followed immediately by another visionary experience or sequence of experiences.

According to both Mark and the tradition behind Matthew and Luke, the Spirit “drove” or “led” Jesus out into the wilderness. Like Moses and Elijah and other Jewish holy men, Jesus journeyed into the wilderness alone, beyond the domestication of reality provided by culture and human interchange. There, in a desolate desert area near the Dead Sea, he underwent a period of extended solitude and fasting, practices which produce changes in consciousness and perception, typical of what other traditions call a “vision quest.” The sequence of initiation into the world of Spirit through baptism, followed by a testing or ordeal in the wilderness, is strikingly similar to what is reported of charismatic figures cross-culturally. This suggests that the early church continued to experience

⁴² Crossan, *The historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant*, 11, 234.

⁴³ Borg, “The spirit-filled experience of Jesus,” 305.

reality in the same spirit-filled way that Jesus did.⁴⁴ Borg worked independently and differs radically from the collective view of the Jesus Seminar.

7.3 R.J. Miller

One of the several inconsistencies in the New Testament, as Miller points out regarding Jesus' baptism, is contained in the following question. "Was Jesus baptized by John (as in Matthew and Mark), by someone else after John was imprisoned (as in Luke), or not at all (as in John)?"⁴⁵ As a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar, Miller develops four criteria for historical research that help differentiate between history and belief. He points out that an historical understanding of the events in the Bible adds a dimension to its study and the rules of history are not particular to studying Jesus or the Bible, but apply to the study of anyone or anything from the past. In reconstructing from the evidence available, the possibility of misunderstanding is a pressing reality, due to the nature of historical knowledge. The four principles of historical research essential for a proper appreciation of the search for historical Jesus are:

1. The claims about history must be demonstrated by evidence and argument.
2. Historical knowledge is always a matter of greater or lesser degrees of probability and never absolutely certain.
3. Historical reconstruction is the result of fitting together the partial evidence so as to imagine what the past was like.

⁴⁴ Borg, "The spirit-filled experience of Jesus," 306-7.

⁴⁵ Miller R.J., "Back to basics: a primer on historical method," in *Finding the historical Jesus: rules of evidence, Jesus seminar guides Volume 3* (ed. Scott B.B.; Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2008), 12.

4. Findings about the historical value of biblical passages neither support nor undermine the truth of religious beliefs, except for those few beliefs that depend on the literal truth of historical statements.⁴⁶

In the light of the above, a critical analysis of scholarly views on Jesus' baptismal visionary phenomena, from the sources themselves, provides an interpretive challenge.

7.4 J. Strijdom

Strijdom interprets on John's insistence that his audience first had to denigrate their existing self-concepts and to regard themselves as sinners, before they could be forgiven, created the ideal condition conducive to a dissociative experience.⁴⁷

In such a situation, the descent of the Spirit on Jesus and the voice from heaven shape and interpret Jesus' identity. The testimony of the vision by John the Baptist appears to have been interpreted by him as the authorisation of God's Spirit. Jesus' own vision of the dove, as the Spirit, radically changes his orientation and his conception of purity. Matthew and Mark's emphasis on what Jesus saw, directs attention to the private and immediate nature of the experience. The descent of the Spirit can also be understood as a trigger of Jesus' reflection on his selfhood. The dialogue with the Baptist, in Matthew's Gospel, reports Jesus' abstract knowledge of himself, prior to his baptism, indicating that his subsequent experience is influenced by previous, conscious reflection on his identity. In the broader context of Luke's narrative, Jesus' baptism is shaped by reflection on past experience and the portrait of a young Jesus in the temple (Luke

⁴⁶ Miller, "Back to basics: a primer on historical method," 17-8.

⁴⁷ Strijdom, "A historical Jesus hallucinating during his initial spirit-possession experience: a response to Stevan Davies' interpretation of Jesus' baptism by John," 597.

2:41-52) suggests a gradual learning process that prepares the way for the *epiphany* at the baptism. Matthew and Mark describe the descent of the Spirit as Jesus' private experience. By contrast, in Luke's gospel, the *epiphany* is probably seen and heard by everyone present, the heavenly voice uses the second person pronoun (as in Mark). It adds a personal tone to the message, as a means of making the relationship known to the members of the Baptists movement. Hence, the personal experiences reported on, in regard to Jesus' baptismal visions, are not actual events of seeing and hearing, but a dissociative experience.

7.5 R.L. Webb

A Fellow and contributor to the Jesus Seminar, Webb states that, within the realms of historical probability, Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist and it is a significant turning point in Jesus' life, from a peasant artisan to public ministry.⁴⁸ Webb considers that Jesus did experience some form of prophetic call-vision (sense of prophetic authority as Jesus was perceived by himself and others as a prophet) involving the components associated with the *theophany* narrative.⁴⁹ It is somewhat probable that the prophetic call-vision incorporated the elements of divine sonship and Spirit anointing of the *theophany* narrative. There are difficulties with this event taking place at the same time as Jesus' baptism, rendering such temporal placement as only a possibility.⁵⁰ If, at his baptism,

⁴⁸ Webb, "Jesus' baptism: its historicity and implications," 309.

⁴⁹ Webb, "Jesus' baptism: its historicity and implications," 308.

⁵⁰ Webb R.L., "Jesus' baptism by John: its historicity and significance," in *Key events in the life of the historical Jesus, a collaborative exploration of context and coherence* (eds. Bock D.L. and R.L. Webb; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 112.

Jesus also experienced a prophetic call-vision, then this event is even more decisive in Jesus' life. Further, if it included the elements of divine sonship and Spirit-anointing, then the period during which Jesus was baptising should be understood as alongside John. Then, the *theophany* is also related, conceptually, to John's prophetic announcements of an expected figure, who would baptise "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). As Jesus was himself anointed, the implication is that the one who would ultimately baptise others must himself first be baptised by that same Spirit. The announcement of divine sonship could be explored for the implications it would have for the self-understanding of Jesus. They imply his sense of having a special relationship with God, as Father, and his role within the plans and purposes of God for Israel.⁵¹ The divine announcement in Mark 1:11 is understood to combine the images of the *Messiah* (Ps 2:7) and the servant of *Yahweh* (Isa 42:1). This role of the anointed one, which might contribute to explaining why Jesus later radically reinterpreted *messiahship* to be a suffering figure.⁵² Regarding Jesus' wilderness temptation event, Webb notes that the devil twice inaugurates his temptation with the statement, "If you are the Son of God..." (Matt 4:3, 6), which appears somewhat incongruous, unless it is a reference back to the voice in the *theophany* that states, "You are my Son..." (Luke 3:22). The devil calls into question the *theophanic* declaration, in a repeated question, without a reference.⁵³

⁵¹ Webb, "Jesus' baptism by John: its historicity and significance," 143.

⁵² Webb, "Jesus' baptism: its historicity and implications," 309.

⁵³ Webb, "Jesus' baptism: its historicity and implications," 264-65.

On a few points, there is agreement between Matthew and Luke in their texts, as against that of Mark's. Their agreements include omission of the same words, addition of the same words, alteration of grammatical forms and alteration of word order. Webb's view are applications of theological categories, such as understanding *theophany* as a prophetic call-vision, divine sonship and Spirit-anointing, as explained above. His work is independent and also differed radically from the collective view of the Jesus Seminar.

8 CONCLUSION

From the arguments of the scholars mentioned above, two distinct trends in the interpretation of Jesus' baptismal visions are identified. There are those scholars who take the text on the visions literally and those who see them as literary creations. These scholars represent two definitive trends, based on the differences between the texts and the wide range of scholarly interpretations of the reports about the seeing the visions or the visions, as mentioned above. The scholarly views expressed by Dunn, Meier, Marcus, Hurtado, Borg and Webb are literal in nature. On the other hand, the scholarly views on visionary experiences expressed by Sanders, Crossan, Miller and Strijdom are about literary creations. It is necessary to look more closely at how the scholars arrive at their conclusions. One interesting or new development in understanding the accounts regarding seeing the Spirit as a dove, is to interpret the texts as reports about visions or visionary experiences. There is a new trend in biblical scholarship, which is comparative and invoke insights from cross-cultural research to understand the accounts of the visions as altered states of consciousness (ASC). This interpretive trend is based on the modern anthropological and neuro-cultural

studies. In Chapter 3, these major views, together with the views of the third trend of scholars, are presented in order to see the texts as reports about visions. From the cross-cultural comparative material, it becomes clear that there is no consensus or agreement among these scholars also. Although numerous scholars claim that the reports are about visions, they do not agree about what visions are and how they should be understood as real cultural and historical events that impact on people's lives.

CHAPTER 3

SELECTED STUDIES THAT SEE JESUS' BAPTISM ACCOUNTS AS REPORTS ABOUT VISIONARY EXPERIENCES

1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapters 1 and 2, some traditional and modern views on Jesus' baptism stories in the Gospels are analysed and presented. There are some scholars who see the reports about the baptismal visionary experiences not as actual events of real seeing but as visions. In this Chapter, three selected views in this regard are presented, though there is no consensus or agreement among them on what visions are in the context of Jesus' baptism event. These scholarly views by Pilch, Davies and DeMaris, actually use the language of the sciences to talk about the visionary experiences. Their interpretive discourses treat visions differently, as opposed to commenting merely on the content of the visions as explained in the New Testament Gospels. They bring interpretive tools from the anthropology and psychology disciplines and other insights from sub-disciplines of anthropology that could be applied to religious phenomena, in order to make sense of the visionary accounts. These sub-disciplines include cultural anthropology and psychological anthropology, like cross-cultural psychology and social psychology. They have introduced cross-cultural research and employed different interpretive strategies in order to understand the baptism accounts, moving beyond the traditional view of actual visual perceptions and of hearing. They also do not consider the reports as literary creations, due to knowledge about the human nature and of the integrated body-mind system. They make use of related, but distinct, theories and models on visionary encounters, paying attention to the background of their sources in different ways. Their respective

viewpoints that identify the specific tools and insights for each, are presented in detail below.

2 J.J. PILCH

2.1 Pilch's viewpoints on holy men or shamans

Pilch states Jesus' identity⁵⁴ or his belief that he is the beloved Son of God helped him in his new work with John the Baptist and he is baptised in order to please God. The baptism is a public event, witnessed by everyone present. God personally proclaims a relationship of Father and Son, patron and client, with Jesus. Without this public declaration, Jesus would have been unable to initiate his ministry. The cultural world of Jesus and his followers is permeated by a belief in spirits, and Pilch points out: "In Jesus' Mediterranean world, human beings possessed by a spirit are in a disvalued state. Moreover, the relationship of spirits to this world and their involvement in it certainly preoccupies Jesus and his contemporaries."⁵⁵ Hence, the event of visionary experiences during Jesus' baptism does not surprise or shock the believers in the Israelite tradition.

In the baptism scene, Jesus is adopted by God and commissioned as God's beloved Son. The scenes in the Gospels can be interpreted as the intention of Jesus to be a holy man. Jesus meets John the Baptist, his teacher and guide, and becomes his apprentice (John 3:22-24). During his lifetime, Jesus appears to

⁵⁴ Pilch J.J., *The cultural world of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday - Cycle A* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 21.

⁵⁵ Pilch J.J., "Power," in *Biblical social values and their meaning: a handbook* (eds. Pilch J.J. and B.J. Malina; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 141.

have been recognized as a holy man, a *Hasid* or *Saddiq*⁵⁶ (see Mark 10:17; Luke 20:21), a broker on behalf of God, the patron. The *Hasid* performs acts of kindness or generosity rooted in and driven by a kinship-based relationship. The *Saddiq* is the ideal person, who strives to avoid sin and keep all the commandments. In the steps toward becoming a holy man, Jesus has met his guide, John the Baptist, and has been contacted by the spirit world, and the spirit has revealed its identity. In the Israelite tradition, the holy man fits into the category of shaman.⁵⁷

Pilch observes that in the prevalent circum-Mediterranean culture, when someone is in a “mystic state,”⁵⁸ communication with spirit takes place through vision and audition, as at Jesus’ baptism, which is normal in the socio-centric biblical world. Research, drawn from psychological anthropology, suggests that this mystic state is variously described, among others, as a trance, waking dream, vision, waking vision or ecstasy, which provides the appropriate scenario for reading and interpreting⁵⁹ many synoptic accounts. Anthropologists, who specialise in the ancient Mediterranean region and its literary records, point out that approximately 90 percent of world cultures and 80 percent of circum-

⁵⁶ Pilch J.J., “Appearances of the risen Jesus in cultural context: experiences of alternate reality,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 (1998): 53.

⁵⁷ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 110.

⁵⁸ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 223.

⁵⁹ Pilch J.J., “The transfiguration of Jesus: an experience of alternate reality,” in *Modelling early Christianity: social-scientific studies of the New Testament in its context* (ed. Esler P.F.; London: Routledge, 1995), 57.

Mediterranean cultures readily experience this ASC.⁶⁰ An ASC is a human condition of experience in which sensations, perception, cognition, and emotions are altered.⁶¹ This allows a person to have a glimpse into dimensions of alternate reality, not usually available in ordinary consciousness. It can be induced, either directly and intentionally or indirectly and unintentionally. On a continuum, such experiences extend from rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, on the one end, through to a trance and culminate in a possession-trance, on the other, with many different experiences in between. In the biblical record alone, which is included in the anthropological data bank, it is evident that the people of this ancient culture were certainly among that 80 percent that had ASC experiences.

Pilch identifies the alternate reality with the dream pattern common in ASC experiences, which has a typically pattern of elements. Those experiencing the visions are initially frightened and do not recognise the figure who offers calming assurance and identifies himself.⁶² Then the figure offers information such as clarification of identity or granting of a favour. The purpose of the experience is to illuminate a puzzle in life or to suggest or approve a line of conduct. Jesus recognised the figure by seeing the Spirit descending as a dove and hearing a clearer grasp of the identity in the vision at the baptism⁶³ event. Pilch argues that

⁶⁰ Pilch J.J., *A cultural handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 196.

⁶¹ Pilch, "Appearances of the risen Jesus in cultural context: experiences of alternate reality," 53.

⁶² Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 197.

⁶³ Pilch, "Appearances of the risen Jesus in cultural context: experiences of alternate reality," 58.

it is a pattern of human experience constructed by the culture, rather than by someone's creative imagination.

Pilch introduces the notion of ASC, which is central to his argument. He incorporated insights from Mediterranean anthropology and other anthropological sub-disciplines, to aid in constructing a “kitbashed”⁶⁴ (word used in the context of problem solving and theory building: in German, *Kitbaschierung*) model. An *etic* perspective is a view from outside a system under study or an outsider observer's viewpoint of a society's ideology or phenomena.⁶⁵ Modern readers of ancient Mediterranean texts, like the Gospels, often begin by imposing their modern perspective on these ancient Mediterranean texts as a first step in interpretation. If the process stops here, the interpretation will be ethnocentric and, if the process continues, this imposed *etic* or outsider perspective can gradually evolve to a derived *etic* perspective. Then it reflects the ancient understanding fairly and accurately in modern categories from an entirely different culture. Pilch⁶⁶ observes that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and the resultant ASC gave him a sense of his identity, as the loving and pleasing Son, an experience of Spirit presence. Jesus demonstrated that he acquired the necessary ritual skills to deal with and control the spirit world in his career as a healer. In this state a person's sense perceptions are different than normal. It is any state of

⁶⁴ Pilch J.J., “Altered states of consciousness: A ‘Kitbashed’ Model,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996): 133-38.

⁶⁵ Pilch J.J., *Healing in the New Testament: insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 154.

⁶⁶ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 3.

awareness that differs from the normal awareness of a conscious person in a certain brain state. The use of “altered,” “alternate” or “alternative” connotes a non-normative approach to waking consciousness. Its form and/or content are primarily determined through factors different from normal waking awareness.

Pilch points out:

Normal or ordinary consciousness is that which has adaptive value for a human being within a particular culture and environment. In circum-Mediterranean cultures, belief in and conceptions of spirit entities and their relations to human beings are part of normal consciousness. Jesus was quite awake during his temptation in the desert, or when he encountered people possessed by evil spirits. These were not dream or hallucinations. They were experiences in an alternate state of consciousness, most likely a trance.⁶⁷

The function of the ASC is to solve a problem or convey new information, like the visionary experience during Jesus’ baptism. Pilch⁶⁸ considers that social-scientific approaches, particularly cultural, Mediterranean, and psychological anthropology (cross-cultural psychology and social psychology) provide us with a set of hermeneutical tools that can be used for interpreting the visionary experiences during Jesus’ baptism. Due to the pan-human potential for ASC experiences, it is possible to explain it in terms of the all-pervasive autonomic system that regulates practically every major function in the human body. Jesus’ Jewish religious background, and previous religious education and training under John the Baptist, might have influenced Jesus to experience the visionary experiences of a beloved and pleasing Son of God. The image formation of a

⁶⁷ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 219.

⁶⁸ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 120.

descending dove might have implications of his own personal reasons, in his memory, like the sacrifice of doves to the Jerusalem Temple by the poorest Jews. With such ASC experiences, the different images formed, sounds heard and roles that manifest, are interpreted and experienced differently in different countries, cultures, societies, communities and families.

2.2 *Mono- and polyphasic cultures*

Anthropologists divide cultures mainly into *monophasic* and *polyphasic* societies and these insights contribute to an interpretive model to look at visions.

Polyphasic cultures recognize and utilize multiple states of consciousness such as visions and meditative contemplative states. Such societies value and cultivate these states, honour those who master them, and derive much of their understanding of the mind, humankind and the cosmos, from them. John the Baptist and his admirers, like Jesus of Nazareth, and their followers belonged to such a culture, along with most of their contemporaries.

Monophasic cultures recognise very few ASC states and these societies give little credit to alternate states and classify them into some pathological categories. They can have great difficulty recognizing unfamiliar states like healing or spiritual potentials. An example of this can be drawn from Capps’⁶⁹ discussion on Albert Schweitzer’s *Psychiatric study of Jesus*. One of the four basic conclusions of Schweitzer is that, “The only symptoms that may be accepted as historical, and thus possibly can be discussed from the psychiatric point of view – the high

⁶⁹ Capps D., “Beyond Schweitzer and the psychiatrists: Jesus as fictive personality,” in *Jesus research: new methodologies and perceptions; the second Princeton-Prague symposium on Jesus research, Princeton 2007* (ed. Charlesworth J.H. with B. Rhea and P. Pokorný; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 427-28.

estimate that Jesus has of himself, and perhaps also the baptism hallucination – fall short of proving the existence of mental illness.”

Laughlin⁷⁰ identified peoples in *polyphasic* cultures, as societies, where both the world view and the individual’s identity are specifically informed from experiences in ASC like visions. In *monophasic* cultures, such as the modern technocratic societies in the Euro-American-Aussie one, as well as modern industrial Chinese, Japanese and other Asian societies, such experiences are called “normal waking states,” as opposed to “alternative states” namely dreaming, visions, drug trips and ritual enactments. They expect the boundaries between mind and world to be clear and sturdy. They do not feel the need to train the mind to be controlled. Even though *monophasic* cultures are correlated with a technocratic world view, they retain elements or sub-cultures that tend toward the *polyphasic*, as in their pre-modern world views and practices. It can be deduced that, in the minds of the authors and audiences in the *polyphasic* cultures, no distinction is made on an event taking place in real time and those taking place as visions.⁷¹ *Polyphasic* societies can further be subdivided as follows:

*Minimally polyphasic societies*⁷² seem primarily oriented toward waking phases of consciousness, but also give minimal credence to the exploration of dreaming and other phases. Exploration of alternative phases is encouraged

⁷⁰ Laughlin C.D., “The ethno-epistemology of transpersonal experience: the view from transpersonal anthropology,” *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 32, no. 1 (2013), 43-4.

⁷¹ Craffert P.F., “‘I ‘witnessed’ the raising of the dead’: resurrection accounts in a neuroanthropological perspective,” *Neotestamentica* 45, no. 1 (2011): 14.

⁷² Laughlin C.D., J. McManus and E.G. d’Aquili, *Brain, symbol & experience: toward a neurophenomenology of human consciousness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1990), 294.

within ritualized contexts and great emphasis is placed upon interpretation of dreams and other experiences in terms of its comprehensibility to the waking ego.

*Maximally polyphasic societies*⁷³ conceive reality as existing on multiple levels that may be experienced and verified in different phases of consciousness. All, or a portion of the population are guided into confirmatory experiences *via* symbolic text, ritual action or instruction, often under the *aegis* of a holy man or an adept master.

*Polyphasic void societies*⁷⁴ are maximally polyphasic as described above. In addition to that the institutions in these societies encourage exploration of dream and other alternative phases as means to the realization of a phase of consciousness beyond any phenomenal reality. Individuals who are recognized as having attained void consciousness, accrue high social status as the greatest healers, guides, leaders, sages and teachers – those who are wise relative to the ultimate truth.

There is an intimate relationship between the mind of a person and attributes like consciousness and personality, due to the quality of dynamic changes in response to environmental and developmental factors. A mapping can be done according to the way that the understanding of mind shifts from one social setting to another.

By paying attention to the way that social groups experience phenomena, it is possible to identify the implicit rules that people use in feeling, perceiving and

⁷³ Laughlin, McManus and d'Aquili, *Brain, symbol & experience: toward a neurophenomenology of human consciousness*, 294.

⁷⁴ Laughlin, McManus and d'Aquili, *Brain, symbol & experience: toward a neurophenomenology of human consciousness*, 294-95.

responding to the world around them.⁷⁵ Such an approach could help to classify and explain the differences observed between different social worlds, as there are culturally variable aspects to the ideas and expectations about the mind. Some cultures rigorously train their minds to be calm and controllable.

2.3 Insights from altered states of consciousness (ASC)

The Mediterranean people, as an example of a *polyphasic* culture, are more likely to interpret an ASC experience as an encounter with someone from the realm of Spirit or of God. But a person from a Western society, as an example of a *monophasic* culture, may be inclined to interpret such an experience as a “hallucination,” something pathological.⁷⁶ Experiments suggest that telepathy, mystical experiences, clairvoyance and other ASC may be subconscious capabilities in most individuals and can be used to improve health conditions and help fight diseases.

Pilch argues, about recent research on the human brain and nervous system, that they not only explain how ecstatic trance experiences occur and why they are a universal human experience, but they also help human beings to interpret this experience. This knowledge will help to understand and interpret reports of ecstatic trance experiences. From a neurological perspective, the strategies for over-stimulating the senses induce an ASC “from the bottom up,”⁷⁷ an ASC that

⁷⁵ Cassaniti J. and Luhrmann T.M., “Encountering the supernatural: a phenomenological account of mind,” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 2 (2011): 50.

⁷⁶ Pilch J.J., *Visions and healing in the Acts of the Apostles: how the early believers experienced God* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), 3.

⁷⁷ Pilch, *Visions and healing in the Acts of the Apostles: how the early believers experienced God*, 175.

begins in the autonomic nervous system and moves to the brain. Inducing a trance in this way involves the brain and the autonomic nervous system, which has two components: the sympathetic or arousal subsystem and the parasympathetic or quiescent subsystem.⁷⁸ The autonomic nervous system connects the brain with the rest of the body and plays a key role in generating basic emotions like joy. The sympathetic or arousal subsystem helps human beings adapt to beneficial and harmful stimuli in the environment. The parasympathetic or quiescent subsystem maintains homeostasis and conserves the body's resources and energy. By stimulating or quieting the senses, it is possible to produce a brief, but intense, ecstatic trance experience.⁷⁹ According to Pilch, it is plausible that the quiet event of Jesus' baptismal experience contributed to inducing an ASC, in which Jesus had visionary experiences. Sometimes the visionary's emotional state influences the interpretation and when the trance experience is ended, the visionary gives unusual experiences an interpretation that makes good sense. This is often facilitated by longer reflection, further analysis or discussion with others, especially if the trance is experienced in a group or communal setting,⁸⁰ as happened publicly on the bank of the River Jordan during Jesus' baptism.

Pilch argues that the causal operator perceives and imposes causal sequences in the organization of reality.⁸¹ It strives to impose control and order over reality.

⁷⁸ Pilch, J.J., "Paul's ecstatic trance experience near Damascus in Acts of the Apostles," *HTS* 58, no. 2 (2002): 694.

⁷⁹ Pilch, "Paul's ecstatic trance experience near Damascus in Acts of the Apostles," 695.

⁸⁰ Pilch, "Paul's ecstatic trance experience near Damascus in Acts of the Apostles," 696.

⁸¹ Pilch, "Paul's ecstatic trance experience near Damascus in Acts of the Apostles," 702.

This mechanism in the brain⁸² always constructs fact-with-interpretation. Another mechanism, the holistic operator, involves the potential for developing and experiencing ASCs, which are not linear, but rather holistic. The experiences provide glimpses into the spirit world, which can be and sometimes are generated or at least perceived by the causal operator. One result of such ASC experiences is a reorganization of the personality structure, as was the case with Jesus' baptismal identity as the beloved and well-pleased Son of God. It can also cause realignment of the individual towards the world, as seen in Jesus' encounter with Satan, in the desert, immediately after the baptismal visionary experiences.

In order to deal with spirits, the holy man must be able to "see"⁸³ spirits clearly as well as other things in an alternate reality. Pilch ascribes ASC induction procedures for altering emotional states. The free and unrestrained expression of emotions in all human interactions is a core value in Mediterranean culture, since it makes a person authentically human, from a Mediterranean perspective.⁸⁴ Cultural practices, like prolonged fasting, contribute to nutritional deficits, which affect serotonin synthesis in the human body and produce emotional disturbances, hallucinations, alterations in cognitive and emotional functioning and,

⁸² D'Aquili E.G., and A.B. Newberg, *The mystical mind: proving the biology of religious experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 149-50.

⁸³ Pilch J.J., "Altered states of consciousness in the synoptics," in *The social setting of Jesus and the gospels* (eds. Stegemann W., B.J. Malina and G. Theissen; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 108.

⁸⁴ Pilch J.J., "Emotion/Demonstration of feelings," in *Biblical social values and their meaning: a handbook* (eds. Pilch J.J. and B.J. Malina; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 53.

occasionally, symptoms that are interpreted as possession,⁸⁵ which can also be used in order to explain Jesus' baptismal visions.

3 S.L. DAVIES

3.1 *Alter-persona* consciousness in cross-cultural research

Davies⁸⁶ argues that under the ritual circumstances of John's baptism, Jesus was in a state of *alter-persona* consciousness, which came to be defined as possession by God's Spirit; an argument that is also based on reliable historical fact. The voice from heaven is the human experience of psychological dissociation. Jesus began to despise himself as he was, and he accepted the premise that he should be and could be in another condition. Davies maintains that individuals, who generate alternative *personae* in religious contexts, are people who have first self-denigrated their primary *personae*. The spirit is the crucial link and there is a Spirit of God able to possess people. At his baptism, Jesus received this Spirit and, therefore, one may regard the sayings of Jesus as the sayings of God through this Spirit. This idea stems from the Jewish theory of prophecy that, through God, Spirit prophets communicated God's words.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Pilch J.J., "Holy men and their sky journeys: a cross-cultural model," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 108-9.

⁸⁶ Davies S.L., *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity* (Dublin: Bardic Press, 2014), 100. It is noted that the pages from 41 to 244 in this book is repetition of the pages from 7 to 209 of the Book by the same author from Chapters 1 to 14 in *Jesus the healer: possession, trance, and the origins of Christianity*, London: SCM Press, 1995.

⁸⁷ Davies S.L., *New Testament fundamentals, Revised edition* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), 57.

If Jesus labelled the Spirit “the Son,” Davies contends that he is both the Son of God (in the sense of possession by the spirit-Son) and the Christ (in the sense of possession as anointing).⁸⁸ He suggests that the baptism accounts essentially describe Jesus’ initial spirit-possession experience. This adoption-cum-possession theory proposes that Jesus was not possessed by the Spirit prior to his baptism and that he underwent a psychological transformation, during which he was anointed with the power to begin his *messianic* work of establishing the Kingdom of God. Within the cultural framework of the ancient community of Jesus, the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit was understood by his followers, due to their Jewish belief system. The visionary experiences originated from the expectation motif then dominant in Israel, creatively reshaped by John the Baptist, and from the emotional upheaval that the event of his baptism brought about in Jesus’ life.

It is thoroughly reasonable, historically and psychologically, that a spirit-possession experience would occur under the circumstances described in Mark’s Gospel, especially as supplemented by Q’s information about the Baptist’s preaching. Jesus’ culture accepted possession as a possibility, the psychological shift between a self-denigrated and despised self, to an immediately changed self-affirmed forgiven self, as a result of the principal point of John’s preaching. It follows that the psychological conditions that engender spirit-possession are in effect for Jesus and the cultural conditions that permit spirit-possession are also in effect.

⁸⁸ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 183.

Davies maintains that John the Baptist conducted baptisms, establishing a patterned response for people who were present, and holds that Jesus' baptism was historically certain. Participants were first subjected to self-denigration, which then called them to repentance and, finally, led to a perceived self-transformation. In such a setting Jesus' first spontaneous possession experience occurred among a group of onlookers, primed for their self-transformation or revelation. Such a fortuitous and circumstantial beginning of Jesus' career started with the reception of the Spirit. The evidence reporting repentance, and visionary and auditory experiences of the order of a hallucination, and spirit experience and demonic temptation, is coherent, possession consistent and explicable with psychological states and events.⁸⁹

Reports of Jesus' temptation experience are in accord with cross-cultural evidence regarding initial experiences, as Jesus was violently driven against his will (in the Greek word used in Mark 1:12) into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Matthew and Luke employ much softer words, like "led," instead of a forceful external influence upon Jesus. Demon-possession seems to have been the most common explanatory paradigm available at the time of Jesus, which he did not accept as an alternative.⁹⁰

In John the Baptist, a prophet and a spirit-inspired person, Jesus had a model for the possibility of affirmative spirit-inspiration. During an initiation possession experience, visual hallucinations are not uncommon and there is little

⁸⁹ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 94-5.

⁹⁰ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 98.

precedent or consequence to the Spirit of the Jewish God appearing in the form of a dove. Johannine tradition (John 1:33-34) knew of an association between the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus and immediately witnessed that he is the Son of God. Jesus did regard himself as the Son of God, or Jesus believed that the Spirit of God was such that, when the Spirit was active in him, he was transformed into the Son of God, the possession experience. Jesus was surely capable of thought and speech that was not simply derivative, but his own. Jesus identified the Spirit by which he was possessed as the Son, because, in psychological circumstances, where auditory hallucinations are nearly normative, Jesus heard a voice saying something to the effect “this [the Spirit] is my beloved Son.”⁹¹ That Jesus identified the Spirit with the Son is more than likely and the *bat kól* announced that, as in Mark 1:11.

An auditory hallucination occurring to a radically dissociated person is, in context, perhaps the single most likely event. Throughout the story of Jesus’ baptism, the events related fit remarkably well with what one might predict as an individual, who came to baptism for repentance and who then received a spontaneous possession experience. Davies proposes that possession “is the substitution of an altered form of consciousness for an individual’s normal form of consciousness, with the consequence that the identity of the individual is believed to have been replaced with the consciousness and identity of a possessing spirit.”⁹² As a patterned cultural phenomenon, a person can expect the

⁹¹ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 96-7.

⁹² Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 59.

feeling of revelation to be accompanied by a sense of mastery and delusion of ego omnipotence. Since Davies is using Western psychological theory, he could have cited a common psycho-spiritual outcome of spiritual revelation of the ego dissolution, rather than inflation. Jesus' self-identification, as the Son of God, through the visionary experiences at baptism, was a religious experience of the self. Jesus' conscious reflection on the ritual seems to prepare for his subjective experience, possibly evoking his vision following the ritual of baptism.

Matthew's Gospel has previously explained that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1: 18-20) and therefore he does not require the baptism story to explain the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus. The baptismal account is preserved in Matthew (Matt 3:1-17), while the author of Luke separates Jesus' baptism from the descent of the Spirit and the heavenly voice when Jesus was praying (Luke 3:21-22). The author of John chooses to replicate the baptismal story, turning it into a vision by John the Baptist (John 1:32). Matthew and Mark's emphasis on what Jesus saw, directs attention to the private and immediate nature of the experience and the descent of the Spirit can also be understood as a trigger of Jesus' reflection on his selfhood. Jesus incorporates different aspects of the divine, which extends to his agency, self-reflection and understanding of the body.

3.2 ASC as a dissociative psychological transformation

Davies argues that Jesus' healings during his ministry, after the baptismal experiences, could have been plausible and historically true, due to the reports at

the time on possession accounts that are about dissociative phenomena.⁹³ They are hallucinations in the modern psychological sense and the story of the baptism of Jesus is “about the origin of a dissociative psychological transformation.”⁹⁴ Jesus was possessed by the Spirit and therefore he should be recognised as a spirit-possessed healer. He points out that, “It was not the relationship: ‘possession of,’ but the relationship: ‘possessed by,’ the fundamental difference being, whether the identity of Jesus was thought to be in control of a spirit entity, or whether the identity of Jesus was sometimes thought to have been replaced by a spirit entity.”⁹⁵

By elevating the passivity of the individual undergoing a possession experience and emphasizing the dominant role of the new persona, Davies’ theory limits the degree of control that Jesus held in the subsequent application of his power and guards against the possibility that he was exerting control over a spirit. The Spirit possession behaviour, as observed by the people that “he is outside himself” (Mark 3:21), literally means that Jesus was “not himself but another.”⁹⁶ Davies attempts to demonstrate that Jesus suffered from a psychological episode in which his original persona, as Jesus of Nazareth, was subordinated or replaced by a new, temporary persona of the Spirit of God, making use of the language of dissociation. During these possession episodes, Davies claims that Jesus was able

⁹³ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 242.

⁹⁴ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 100.

⁹⁵ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 126.

⁹⁶ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 130.

to operate as a spirit-possessed healer, but he should not be identified as himself, but another person, the Spirit of God.⁹⁷

The idea that Jesus was the embodiment of the Spirit of God arose not from pious belief alone, but from a series of historical events, such as repeated occurrences of alterations in ego identity, anthropologically classified as possession-trance. Jesus had psychological experiences of a sort that were familiar to him and others. From the historical event evidenced by ancient sources appropriate to Jesus' time, and in keeping with valid reasoning based on those sources, this experience is in accordance with current knowledge in such fields of study as contemporary anthropology and psychology. According to reliable biographies available, the historical fact show that Jesus was understood to be possessed by the Spirit of God, that this was caused by understandable historical factors, and his spirit-possession led during his life-time to understandable consequences. Studies of spirit possession have identified a set of common behavioural patterns that are associated with the individual undergoing a possession experience. Davies illustrates the basic factors of the experience of spirit-possession, as they are implicit, in a single sentence: "When they lead you away and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that time. It will not be you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). The formulation, "not you, but Spirit," affirms that a primary *persona* has been temporarily eliminated or subordinated and another *persona*, "the Spirit," is temporarily dominant and functional within the

⁹⁷ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 53.

body and mind of the former person.⁹⁸ This claim is essentially psychological and the status of the *persona*, “you,” when the Spirit is speaking, is absent or subordinate. The nature of the Spirit that speaks is an alternative to the subordinated *persona* of the individual and, hence, it is a type of *persona*. Another example is taken from ancient definitions of prophets, who are identified people dissociated from the origin of their own ideas and from the origin of their own words and, often, from the usual tone of their own voices, through their voices, gods speak.⁹⁹ This dissociation and prophesy are unusual psychological states, the ASC. It is not this *persona* that had these ideas, words and utterances, but the other *persona*.

The basic theme is that Jesus was periodically possessed by an alternate personality, which he interpreted as the Spirit, also called the Son of God. During these episodes, the ego of Jesus was suspended, so that there were really two people speaking from one body. Davies avoids saying that this possession was strictly a product of Jesus’ unconscious, rather than of the Holy Spirit, though for those believing in a collective unconscious, there might be little difference.

Davies maintains that the bizarre imagery of the descent of a dove and a voice that are used by the Gospel authors, when describing Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:9-11; Matt 3:1-17; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34), are found nowhere else in the Gospels. Davies claims that, since the baptismal accounts, provided by the Gospel authors, meet the criterion of multiple attestations, the criterion of

⁹⁸ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 64.

⁹⁹ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 81.

embarrassment and the criterion of dissimilarity, the baptism accounts can be considered to be a historically reliable record of events.¹⁰⁰ The story of the baptism of Jesus is not about what happened or what Jesus believed, but about the origin of a dissociative psychological transformation. It is the story of a spirit-possessed man, whose new social role resulted from that specific status. What Jesus of Nazareth formerly could not do the Spirit of God subsequently could do. What the Spirit of God did, acting through Jesus' body, is some of what the historical Jesus did and what he, and those associated with him, believed.¹⁰¹ Those associated with Jesus believed "Jesus saw the Spirit descend in the form of a dove, because that was what Jesus saw and he told them about it."¹⁰² The possession phenomenon, underlying Jesus identifying himself as the Son of God, is presumably caused by conversion disorder, attributed to psychosomatic factors, a feature of what modern psychologists call dissociative personalities. Davies indicates no mechanism to account for when Jesus was in or out of the possession state. There is nothing in the scriptures to suggest that Jesus went into the Son of God *persona* due to the factors immediately around him, but the factors he enumerates do not apply. To accept his arguments, very high degree of confidence in the modern psychoanalytic theory is required, although he makes active use of the work of anthropologists Goodman and Bourguignon, as documented.

¹⁰⁰ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 96.

¹⁰¹ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 100.

¹⁰² Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 96.

4 R.E. DEMARIS

DeMaris challenges the longstanding and solid consensus among scholars that Jesus' baptism is historically certain, but the vision (or *theophany*) that followed has little or no claim to historicity, as revealed in Mark 1:9–11. Many New Testament texts are interwoven with rites and this is an example of a text reporting the execution of a rite.¹⁰³ The visions and related phenomena are commonplace in the many cultures that sanction entry into ASC, which include the Mediterranean culture, ancient and modern. Thus, from a cross-cultural perspective, Jesus' baptismal vision has the character of an ASC, which anthropologists call possession trance. A trance involves the temporary absence of the spirit from the body and interaction with spirits in an alternate realm. The possession trance involves temporary or permanent entry of a spirit into a person and that person becomes another.¹⁰⁴ In Mark (Mark 1:9-11), DeMaris¹⁰⁵ notes the sequence of the ritual action of Jesus' baptism by John and argues that the ritual of baptism triggered spirit possession (the Spirit descending like a dove into Jesus) and it fits an ASC experience (Jesus' visual and aural encounter with the spirit world, the heavens splitting and God speaking).

The ASC research examines and compares what could variously be described as ecstatic, trance, mystical, transcendental or visionary experiences that pervade

¹⁰³ DeMaris R.E., *The New Testament in its ritual world* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

¹⁰⁴ DeMaris R.E., "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," in *The social setting of Jesus and the gospels* (eds. Stegemann W., B.J. Malina, and G. Theissen; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 146-47.

¹⁰⁵ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 147.

human cultures around the world.¹⁰⁶ Scholars have identified a range of conscious states that reasonably fall under this category like alterations in thinking, disturbed sense of time, loss of control, change in expression of emotions, change in bodily image, perceptual distortions, changes in meaning and significance assigned to experiences and perceptions, a sense of the ineffable, and feelings of rejuvenation.

The Gospel of John omits the baptism of Jesus, although it describes the setting of the baptism and seems aware of Jesus' baptismal vision, presenting it as a *theophany* or revelation to the Baptist (John 1: 29-34). Matthew records the baptism and vision, but also reports John's hesitation to baptise Jesus and the latter's convincing reason to proceed (Matt 3:13-17). Luke avoids having John baptize Jesus, narrates John's arrest, but records Jesus' baptism and, immediately after his baptism, Jesus prays, then the Holy Spirit descends (Luke 3:20-22). Hence, there is a possibility for both the absence of the instance of baptism in John and the insertion of Jesus' prayer between the baptism and vision in Luke. In Matthew and Luke's gospels, the graphic language of possession underwent softening over time and eliminated Mark's striking image of the Spirit driving or casting Jesus out into the desert in the scene that follows (Mark 1:12; Matt 4:1; Luke 4:1).

Anthropological studies of cultures in which possession takes place note occasions when entry into an ASC happens spontaneously, involuntarily and suddenly, apart from any ritual. Such spontaneity often occurs in an individual's

¹⁰⁶ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 145.

initial experience of possession. Since Jesus' baptismal vision represents the first report, Jesus went into a possession trance, perhaps in which the Spirit fell upon him spontaneously. Support for this surmise comes from the immediate context in Mark, verse 1:12, where the Spirit seizes Jesus and casts him out into the desert, as no ritual prompts this occurrence of possession.¹⁰⁷ Hence, Jesus' baptismal vision has a stronger claim to historicity than the baptism itself.

DeMaris argues that the implications of anthropological research on ASC, as a framework for historical Jesus research, provide the basis for keeping Jesus' baptism and the baptismal vision together and treating the whole episode as a historically plausible account.¹⁰⁸ This widespread and well-attested phenomenon, experienced in the Mediterranean societies, is known as possession trance. According to DeMaris, the followers of Jesus may have introduced the ritual activity of a baptismal rite into the story of his spirit possession in the New Testament and so the baptism has a lesser claim to historicity than the possession by Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁹ Most investigators have implicitly or explicitly assumed that the trance states in different cultures are similar or identical, without explication of the grounds for such assumptions. It is very likely that people in ancient Palestine had visual and auditory experiences of the sort reported, in conjunction with Jesus' baptism.¹¹⁰ The communities and individuals regularly depended on ritual activity to induce ASC or to trigger entry into the state of possession. But,

¹⁰⁷ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 150.

¹⁰⁸ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 151.

¹⁰⁹ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 152.

¹¹⁰ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 137.

spontaneous entry into such states does occur in many cultures and so it is also possible that Jesus entered an ASC without any ritual prompting, as sometimes happens among the populations in which such states occur.

The account of Jesus' baptism and subsequent vision belongs to this cultural pattern. In cultures with institutionalised ASC, those who experience them will encounter what they have been socialized to expect. Since Jesus grew up in Israelite society, he knew and could have drawn from the stories of his culture to articulate what happened in his possession trance. In Israelite culture, it would have been crucial to present Jesus' possession trance, not as spontaneous, but as culturally patterned and ritually structured. Or else, the report that Jesus' vision resulted from ritual anointing at the hand of a prophet-like figure, John the Baptist would have counteracted any interpretation of Jesus' possession.¹¹¹ In a social-scientific approach, it is essential to identify events and their sequence as events that would have been plausible in the culture of first-century Judea.¹¹² Hence the events, like Jesus' baptism and spirit possession, as an ASC, have a historical background.

5 CONCLUSION

The three scholars mentioned in this Chapter see the reports about the visionary experiences of Jesus at baptism, not as actual events of real seeing, but as visions. Although Pilch, Davies and DeMaris see Jesus' baptism visions as visionary encounters, they use different approaches. The different terminologies used by

¹¹¹ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 151.

¹¹² DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 152.

them such as anthropological literature, ASC, dissociation and possession, are terms that refer to similar phenomena and are merely different terms used to describe the same instance. Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences are examples of the very same human experience described by means of different perspectives. All of the above reconstructions belong to the realm of interpretive discourses that treat visions different from the mere content of the baptismal visions explained in the Gospels. They bring different explanations from psychiatry, anthropology and others, regarding Jesus' baptismal visionary accounts. The co-dependent factors that is considered in the study of ASC as visionary experiences, are examples of the new development in visions research. These three scholars see the baptism accounts about visionary experiences not as explained literally, or as literary creations. Their scholarly interpretations of the visionary accounts are analysed in the next Chapter through the insights they bring towards understanding visions as real cultural and historical events that have consequences cross-culturally.

CHAPTER 4

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BAPTISMAL VISION AS ASC

1 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter, the analysis of the views of Pilch, Davies and DeMaris on Jesus' baptismal visionary experience is done critically. These scholars, to various degrees, make use of modern cross-cultural research by exploring the context of the first century Palestinian cultural situations reported in the New Testament. How each scholar employs the anthropological and/or the psychological insight, is analysed, exploring their similarities and differences, using the criteria of definition and application in their models. Anthropology has a great stake in the notion of cultural relativism, in other words, the belief "that cultures vary freely in their belief systems and institutions, and that the individual is a product of the culture in which he or she is reared."¹¹³ The use of cultural anthropology and other sub-disciplines, like psychological anthropology and cultural psychology, together with interdisciplinary coordination of the advances in the related disciplines, are applied by these scholars. Their explanations impact on how the biological processes that mediate consciousness and experience in the cultural context of Jesus' community is viewed. Even though all the scholars, mentioned in the previous Chapters, analyse the visionary accounts, these three scholars see these accounts as neither literally nor as literary creations. The tools and insights used by them to clarify certain aspects about Jesus' baptismal visions, is through

¹¹³ Laughlin C.D., *Communing with the gods: consciousness, culture and the dreaming brain* (Brisbane, Australia: Daily Grail Publishing, 2011), 18.

the lens of it as an ASC experience, however, they reveal different understandings of the same terminology, as explicated in the following sections.

2 PILCH'S MODEL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONARY EXPERIENCES

2.1 Understanding of ASC by Pilch

Pilch¹¹⁴ uses the definition for ASC put forward by the psychological anthropologist, Bourguignon:¹¹⁵

[A]ltered states of consciousness are conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are altered. They are characterized by changes in sensing, perceiving, thinking, and feeling. They modify the relation of the individual to self, body, sense of identity, and the environment of time, space, or other people. They are induced by modifying sensory input, either directly by increasing or decreasing stimulation or alertness, or indirectly by affecting the pathways of the sensory input by somatopsychological factors.

This definition is derived from the work of Ludwig,¹¹⁶ who regarded ASC as:

[T]hose mental states, induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation, in terms of subjective experience or psychological functioning, from certain general norms as determined by the subjective experience and psychological functioning of that individual during alert, waking consciousness. This sufficient deviation may be represented by a greater preoccupation with internal sensations or mental processes than is usual, by changes in the formal characteristics of thought, and by impairment of reality-testing to various degrees.

¹¹⁴ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 220.

¹¹⁵ Bourguignon E., *Psychological anthropology: an introduction to human nature and cultural differences* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 236.

¹¹⁶ Ludwig A.M., "Altered states of consciousness," in *Trance and possession states* (ed. Prince R.; Montreal: R.M. Bucke Memorial Society, 1968), 69-70.

Based upon psychological anthropology, culture has “a formative role in the development of the personality of society’s members.”¹¹⁷ Cross-cultural psychologists emphasise the retention of the plural, “states,” in ASC, as various kinds and degrees of altered consciousness are available in each culture and even in each of its subsets.¹¹⁸ But, Pilch¹¹⁹ describes the human experience¹²⁰ identified as ASC by “alternate state of consciousness,”¹²¹ with the “alternate reality”¹²² as the central element. Pilch also uses ASC for both “altered states of consciousness” and “alternate state of consciousness,” while “altered” falsely suggests the existence of a “stable” state of consciousness that changes.¹²³ Hence, Pilch adopted and tried to use “alternative state of consciousness”¹²⁴ as a state in which one can anticipate significant qualitative and quantitative differences in consciousness from one culture to another.¹²⁵ The “alternate reality” is also not distinguished with respect to the “actual reality,” “material reality”¹²⁶ or even the

¹¹⁷ Laughlin, *Communing with the gods: consciousness, culture and the dreaming brain*, 51.

¹¹⁸ Pilch, “Altered states of consciousness in the synoptics,” 106.

¹¹⁹ Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 15.

¹²⁰ Pilch J.J., “Psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to interpreting the Bible in social-scientific context,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (1997): 115.

¹²¹ Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 13.

¹²² Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 2.

¹²³ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, xii.

¹²⁴ Pilch, *The cultural world of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*, 71.

¹²⁵ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 219.

¹²⁶ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 116-18.

physical reality, which Janzen calls “the entirety of material existence.”¹²⁷ Pilch¹²⁸ gives an analogy of a gigantic, cosmic tree to explain the worldview of traditional shamanic reflection of the universe. The middle world contains the spirit or essence of all things, the “real” world behind the visible world, sometimes called “alternate reality,” though that more properly describes the upper world.¹²⁹ Since only sensitive special persons can reach this tree, they alone can see and work in that world, which is parallel to the one in which human beings live.¹³⁰ Thus, according to Pilch, alternate reality is parallel to consensual reality, the visible world in which human beings live and agree to be real.¹³¹ From a cultural psychology perspective, he states that human consciousness is that each culture shapes into a fixed and stable state, which adapts the individual to survive in the culture’s consensus reality.¹³² In the ancient Middle Eastern culture’s consensus reality, spirits were a normal part of consensus reality and such situations are encountered in the Bible.

ASC experiences provide glimpses into the spirit world and scientists sometimes call spirits “personalised power sources.”¹³³ A variety of spirits, both

¹²⁷ Janzen W., “Earth,” in *Anchor Bible dictionary*, Volume 2 (ed. Freedman D.N.; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 245.

¹²⁸ Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 1-2. This is also repeated in Pilch’s *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world* (2011), 55-6.

¹²⁹ Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 2.

¹³⁰ Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 11.

¹³¹ Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 13.

¹³² Pilch, *A cultural handbook to the Bible*, 184.

¹³³ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 185.

good and bad, readily intervene in the daily life of human beings.¹³⁴ Jesus was led into the wilderness by a good spirit, where a malicious spirit, the devil, tempted him (Luke 4:1-13). This was to attack his honourable reputation as the “beloved and pleasing Son” (Luke 3:21-22). Pilch suggests that “ASCs are not only real experiences and culturally plausible, but they actually are veridical, real events.”¹³⁵ As the reality described by science and that imagined by people exist, Laughlin notes that in traditional societies, the intermediate level by which reality is imagined, is the spiritual domain, which seamlessly bridges the gap between knowledge about the world and direct experience.¹³⁶

2.2 Using the shamanic model by Pilch

Pilch applies the shamanic model, but he modifies the essential criteria of a shaman, put forward by Townsend,¹³⁷ to match the realities that appear in the Bible. The usual sequence of becoming a shaman, in the biblical context, is (1) direct contact/communication with the spirits, (2) control of or power over the spirits, (3) control of the ASC, (4) focus on the material world, and (5) travel through the spirit world.¹³⁸ Pilch interprets many instances in the Bible with this sequence of becoming a full shaman. This sequence is as follows: contact with

¹³⁴ Pilch J.J., *The cultural dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 159.

¹³⁵ Craffert P.F., “Alternate states of consciousness and biblical research,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 47, no. 2 (2017): 101.

¹³⁶ Laughlin, *Communing with the gods: consciousness, culture and the dreaming brain*, 207.

¹³⁷ Townsend J.B., “Shamanism,” in *Anthropology of religion: a handbook* (ed. Glazier S.D.; Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 431-32.

¹³⁸ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 113.

the spirit by possession or adoption, identification of the possessing or adopting spirit, acquisition of the necessary ritual skills, tutelage by the spirit and the real-life teacher, growing familiarity with the possessing or adopting spirit and ongoing ASC experiences.¹³⁹ He interprets the scene of the baptismal visionary experience of Jesus with respect to the above criteria.

As reported in the Gospels, Jesus meets John the Baptist, his teacher and guide, and becomes his apprentice in the call to be a holy man. In an ASC, Jesus sees the Spirit of God descending upon him, and he hears the voice from heaven announcing his identity, that is, a beloved son, who pleases the father (Mark 1:9-11). To deal with spirits, the holy man must be able to clearly see spirits, as well as other things, in an alternate reality. Jesus saw the Spirit in the form of a dove descending upon him, he was adopted and commissioned as God's beloved son, and called upon to be a holy man, a broker on behalf of God.¹⁴⁰ Immediately after the baptism, Jesus' encounter with Satan's temptation (Mark 1:12-13), and successful passing of this test, was another step towards becoming a shaman. Jesus demonstrated that he acquired the necessary ritual skills to deal with and control the spirit world.¹⁴¹ Pilch considers that the term "holy man,"¹⁴² in the Israelite tradition, fits into the category of "shaman," as one who was gifted with

¹³⁹ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 114.

¹⁴⁰ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 115.

¹⁴¹ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 116.

¹⁴² Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 110.

ASC experiences, the power to heal and the power over spirits. “Retaining the very same model under a different name does not change the fact that it is a shaman model.”¹⁴³

2.3 Understanding human behaviours and values from *etic* and *emic* viewpoints

In the discipline of cross-cultural psychology, *etic* and *emic* viewpoints or approaches are integral parts in studying human behaviour. *Etic* is a view from outside the system under study and *emic* is a view from within the system.¹⁴⁴

Following the research process, Pilch, among others, has also investigated the phenomenon of ASC in the ancient Mediterranean world, as reflected in biblical texts. He considers ASC, known *etically* as a trance or waking dream and *emically* as a vision, with respectful sensitivity to their cultural setting.¹⁴⁵

According to him, the processes of cross-cultural investigations and comparisons cannot be a direct, ethnocentric imposition of modern, Western psychological insights on ancient Middle Eastern peoples and their texts.¹⁴⁶ The reverse can also be acknowledged, since “viewing the rest of the world exclusively from the perspective of one’s own culture is known as ethnocentrism.”¹⁴⁷ To execute this, he incorporates a new set of tools and concepts from more than one discipline. Cultural anthropologists have demonstrated that altered states are a pan-human

¹⁴³ Craffert, “Alternate states of consciousness and biblical research,” 103.

¹⁴⁴ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 5-7.

¹⁴⁵ Pilch, “The transfiguration of Jesus: an experience of alternate reality,” 49.

¹⁴⁶ Pilch, “Psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to Interpreting the Bible in social-scientific context,” 115.

¹⁴⁷ Pilch, *The cultural dictionary of the Bible*, 160.

experience, across cultures, that occur and happen in similar ways, but with different local names. “One result of such ASC experiences is a reorganization of personality structure or a realignment of the individual toward his or her world.”¹⁴⁸ He notes that ASC experiences are not necessarily continuous, meaning that a visionary might move through various levels of awareness and even return to “normal waking consciousness.”¹⁴⁹

Drawing on contemporary, cross-cultural research into ASC, Pilch has opened a whole new way of seeing Jesus’ baptismal visionary experiences. The application of the social-science disciplines of cultural anthropology to these events enhanced a deeper understanding of the ancient world, which experienced God in the everyday phenomenon of trance. Cultural anthropologists have demonstrated that ASCs are pan-human experiences, across cultures, that occur and are reported on, in strikingly similar ways. These social-scientific insights sharpen understanding of the nature and function of Gospels about the instances of Jesus’ baptismal visionary experiences. How the first-century readers and hearers are likely to interpret religious ecstatic trance experiences, as reported in the Gospels, are explored with due regard for the cultural traditions that surround the ASC. In exploring the multiple dimensions of ASC, the common human ability to experience these visionary experiences is appreciated. Mark (1: 10) is referring to the *heaven*, either to the physical sky above the earth or to the realm

¹⁴⁸ Pilch, *Flights of the soul: visions, heavenly journeys, and peak experiences in the biblical world*, 185.

¹⁴⁹ Pilch J.J., “Ezekiel – an altered state of consciousness experience: the call of Ezekiel: Ezekiel 1 – 3,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its social context* (ed. Esler P.F.; London: SCM Press, 2005), 220-21.

of God beyond.¹⁵⁰ It is impossible to look into the realm of God, unless someone makes an opening for the visionary. Jesus is enabled to see the Spirit descending like a dove, because God has made an opening for him in an altered level of awareness. In the final stage of the ASC experience, the object the visionary sees, is often transformed into unusual beings and appears to be distortions of reality.¹⁵¹

The word “like,” above, is what Jesus saw, but it was not exactly like that. Anthropological research indicates that the content of trance experiences is vacuous.¹⁵² It is pictures without sounds and the visionary provides the sound, which, in its turn, originates in the latent discourse of a visionary’s culture. What Jesus heard, as in Mark 1:11, can be interpreted in social-scientific terms as constituted from the latent discourse of Jesus’ culture. His power over spirits puts Jesus in a higher social position than others.

To explain Jesus’ vision, Pilch uses the notion of ASC, which are real for those who experience them, and identifies the cultural aspects in the belief system of the Palestinian communities where Jesus lived. He utilises the insights gained from records about that culture, accepting the distinction between *mono-* and *polyphasic* cultures, and argues that Jesus’ world could be seen as belonging to the *polyphasic* culture.

¹⁵⁰ Pilch, “Ezekiel – an altered state of consciousness experience,” 211.

¹⁵¹ Pilch, “Ezekiel – an altered state of consciousness experience,” 214.

¹⁵² Pilch, “Ezekiel – an altered state of consciousness experience,” 212.

3 DAVIES' MODEL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS

3.1 Understanding ASC and spirit possession

Davies¹⁵³ uses the definition of spirit possession, given by the anthropologist Crapanzano, as “*any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit.*”¹⁵⁴ It is a form of trance state associated with a removal from the normal cues and rules of sociability, as the person is lost from his or her socially constructed self. From a psychological point of view, there are cases where a possessed individual will be conscious of his or her altered state and, for such individuals, the usual stream of consciousness has not been totally banished. Davies further explains it as follows:

Possession, then, is the substitution of an altered form of consciousness for an individual's normal form of consciousness, with the consequence that the identity of the individual is believed to have been replaced with the consciousness and identity of a possessing spirit. Accordingly, the social roles and expectations of the individual are replaced by social roles and expectations appropriate to the possessing spirit.¹⁵⁵

Davies believes that Jesus was possessed by the Spirit of God at his baptism, experiencing an ASC as, “an alteration in ego identity.”¹⁵⁶ When the spirit was active in him, Jesus believed he was transformed into the Son of God. Repeated occurrences of such experiences are classified in anthropology as possession-trance. The spirit-possession is a category of religious experience. It is “based on

¹⁵³ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 58-9.

¹⁵⁴ Crapanzano V., “Introduction,” in *Case studies in spirit possession* (eds. Crapanzano V., and V. Garrison; New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), 7.

¹⁵⁵ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 59.

¹⁵⁶ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 53.

the human potential for personality dissociation, explained intra-culturally as the entrance of a spirit-person into the body, in which the spirit-person takes over the body and the mind”¹⁵⁷ for a period of time. Commenting on the Gospel of Luke, Davies states that, “Jesus receives the Holy Spirit at his baptism and it stays with him throughout his life. Through the Spirit, he performs signs and wonders.”¹⁵⁸

Davies also insists that possession is a powerful psychophysiological experience that is so widespread in human cultures that the potential for the possession experience is part of the genetic inheritance of all people.¹⁵⁹ He brings the cross-cultural phenomenon of spirit possession to his analysis of the historical Jesus and argues that Jesus underwent possession at the baptism and during the episodes that followed. Jesus was violently driven (Mark 1:12) into the desert by the spirit and Crapanzano¹⁶⁰ reports that almost all spirit-possession cases stress the fact that the novice is unusually clumsy and must learn to be a good carrier for his spirit. The Holy Spirit is a form of experience that falls under the general category of spirit-possession.

Within the Christian movement, the standard spirit-possession theory, found virtually everywhere on earth, is the Holy Spirit as “an external person of a Spiritual nature, who comes into a human body and, to a considerable degree, temporarily takes over the mental and physical functioning of that body.”¹⁶¹ From

¹⁵⁷ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Davies, *New Testament fundamentals, Revised edition*, 162.

¹⁵⁹ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 60.

¹⁶⁰ Crapanzano, “Introduction,” in *Case studies in spirit possession*, 15.

¹⁶¹ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 22-3.

an outsider perspective, the Holy Spirit is a name given to a particular dissociative psychological experience that arises wholly from the internal mental functioning of an individual within a particular cultic setting.¹⁶² A voice from heaven is interpreted as the human experience of hearing a voice and a Spirit descending is also a human experience of psychological dissociation.

3.2 Davies' model of spirit possession

Davies' model of spirit possession follows that:

- a second person will be considered a different person from the first person,
- a second person will have an identity (a categorical label or a name) different from that of the first *persona*,
- the speech of the second *persona* will be different from that of the first *persona*.¹⁶³

This model is applicable to the sayings in the Gospel of John (John 8:23; 6:38; 3:31-34; 16:28; 9:5; 10:30; 14:6-7), where the Spirit of God spoke. It spoke through a human voice, through the voice of a person possessed by God's Spirit, and Jesus was one such person. This model is also applicable in most cases of demonic possession and multiple personality disorder. Davies claims that these principles are not modern theories, but were understood by the greater Greco-Roman culture. The author of the Gospel of Mark also understood the situation as prophetic spirit possession: "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not that you speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). This testifies

¹⁶² Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 23.

¹⁶³ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 188.

to the fact that Mark took for granted that undergoing traumatic circumstances, is to be possessed and, hence, it is an ASC experience. Mark's view is in line with contemporary anthropological concepts of possession and psychological understandings of multiple personality phenomena. If Jesus became possessed by God's Spirit at the time of his baptism, from a psychological and anthropological viewpoint, and taking into consideration the theory of possession attested to in Greco-Roman, Jewish and early Christian sources, the following must be considered:

- he had a second *persona* different from the *persona* "Jesus of Nazareth,"
- that second *persona* had a name or label different than "Jesus of Nazareth,"
- that second *persona* spoke in a manner different than "Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁶⁴

If Jesus had a second *persona* different from that of "Jesus of Nazareth," the audience could only have the knowledge of it if the second *persona* told them about it. This is what normally happens in conversation between a spirit-possessed persona and an audience.

3.3 Davies' explanations on encouraging the spirit possession by John the Baptist

Davies comments on the Gospel of Mark, remarking that it "is historically likely that ... John baptized Jesus, and that, on that occasion, Jesus believed he received God's Holy Spirit."¹⁶⁵ He states that John the Baptist encouraged psychological change in Jesus, worked to cause such change, and insisted on its necessity.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 189.

¹⁶⁵ Davies, *New Testament fundamentals, Revised edition*, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 91.

Mark reports one of the two instances of a *bat kól* as in Mark 1:11, during Jesus' baptism. Jesus, who comes to be baptized, repent his sins - as per the Baptist's call – and, afterwards, progresses to become the Son, the Spirit of God, as he received the Spirit of God. Jesus is labelled God, the “Father,” and God's Spirit, the “Son,” as his *alter-persona*.¹⁶⁷ A functioning personality is itself a reality, and an *alter persona* is just as “real” as a primary persona. If an *alter persona* is understood to be “Spirit,” the reality of “Spirit” is of the same order as the reality of a human person.¹⁶⁸ Depending on the philosophical perspective one takes toward the reality of an *alter persona*, Davies' line of thought leads to a historical Jesus, who, not only claimed to be the Son of God, but who really was the Spirit or Son of God, at least for some of the peasant Jewish people to whom he spoke. John the Baptist's interference, with threats, as in Luke 3:7-9 and Luke 3:16-17, caused the psychological change in Jesus. John the Baptist's call, in effect, meant the contrary to the affirmative statement to change from regarding themselves as acceptable and to start regarding themselves as damnable vipers (Luke 3:7), barren trees (Luke 3:9), and chaff (Luke 3:17). Then it really meant to change from regarding themselves as damnable vipers, barren trees and chaff and to regarding themselves as repentant, forgiven and acceptable to God. Many people, who generate alternative *personae* in religious contexts, are people who have first self-denigrated their primary *personae*. In this regard, Davies joins Prince, who holds: “The subject is visited by a brief ecstatic state with loss of ego boundaries, sometimes hallucinatory experience, a certainty that the experience contains valid

¹⁶⁷ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 194.

¹⁶⁸ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 204.

truths, and often the belief that the state is a manifestation of the divine.”¹⁶⁹ This means that spirit possession can occur during spontaneous religious experiences, in circumstances of heightened life stress, when in an ecstatic state, with loss of ego boundaries, and sometimes with hallucinatory experiences.¹⁷⁰

Davies draws upon scores of studies from the fields of psychology and anthropology and applies them to the Gospel narratives, concluding that Jesus was prone to self-induced possession by a spirit he called the Son of God. He understands the baptismal visionary experience of Jesus in terms of hallucinations, which are not real seeing and hearing. Davies’s views are a typical psychiatric way of looking at visions and psychiatry, a biomedical approach to the phenomenon. He employs a theoretical model of visions, with a focus on individual psychodynamics aimed at achieving personal and social goals. He makes use of the modern language of dissociation to analyse the visions and categorizes visionary experiences by means of psychiatric models. A deep desire, strong enough to make one think psychologically, can bring about the sense of a presence, while it really is just the experience of a powerful longing. He mentions the cultural framework of the ancient community Jesus found himself in, and the Jewish belief system, which shares the notion of *polyphasic* cultures and, therefore, his views of dissociation allow for such a cultural phenomenon. He also incorporates the cross-cultural phenomenon of spirit possession to his analysis of the historical Jesus figure and argues that Jesus

¹⁶⁹ Prince R.H., “Shamans and endorphins: hypotheses for a synthesis,” *Ethos* 10, no. 4 (1982): 418-19.

¹⁷⁰ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 93.

underwent possession at baptism, causing healing and episodic exorcism afterwards. Davies introduces modern psychological analysis to account for Jesus' possession as a response to John the Baptist's encouraging psychological change and alterations in ego identity.

4 DEMARIS' MODEL TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS

4.1 ASC linked to ritual activity

Anthropological studies show that possession trance, shamanism, ecstasy, and all related phenomena, fall under the rubric of ASC. They document human access to such states across the globe, including in the Mediterranean world, both present and past.¹⁷¹ Since the baptismal accounts reported in the Gospels can be attributed to the cultural consequences, it is widely accepted that the ritual actions of baptism of Jesus, by John, induced the ASC experience, in other words, both the visionary and auditory experiences. DeMaris states that a social-scientific approach cannot determine with much certainty the specific ritual that induced the occurrences reported in Mark 1:10-11.¹⁷² Jesus' baptismal vision has a stronger claim to historicity than the baptism itself. If the followers of Jesus had introduced the baptismal rite into the story of his possession, due to cultural stigma about spontaneous negative possession, baptism has no claim to historicity. "Scholars, more inclined to trust the reliability of the Gospel

¹⁷¹ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 137.

¹⁷² DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 138.

narrative, are ready to find some historical kernel in the narrative after Mark 1:9.”¹⁷³

They even insist on a psychological reality with regard to Jesus’ realisation of his identity and the events that followed in his career. For those who trust in the reliability of the historicity of Jesus’ baptism, the visionary experiences are more reliable than the ritual baptism itself. Balancing the two options mentioned above, “Jesus’ possession was positive, and not negative, came from its association with the ritual activity. Otherwise, it would have been hard to distinguish the demoniac from the person possessed by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁴

4.2 Spirit possession, a manifestation of ASC, as a model

DeMaris considers spirit possession, a manifestation of ASC, as an appropriate model to use to clarify the episode of Jesus’ baptism.¹⁷⁵ He states that Jesus’ baptismal scene, as described by Mark, fits well with the sequence of features in the study of spirit possession across cultures by Felicitas Goodman:¹⁷⁶

All religious communities, where the religious trance is institutionalized, have rituals to induce it, and those participating learn to react to them. The singing of a certain hymn or chant may do it; so will clapping, dancing, drumming, rattling, turning around one’s own axis, reciting a certain formula or prayer, glancing at a flickering candle or moving water, even smelling a certain fragrance, such as incense. There is hardly any limit to the types of stimuli that are suitable for induction.

¹⁷³ DeMaris, “The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach,” 139.

¹⁷⁴ DeMaris, “The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach,” 150.

¹⁷⁵ DeMaris, “The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach,” 146.

¹⁷⁶ Goodman F.D., *Ecstasy, ritual, and alternate reality: religion in a pluralistic world* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 37.

In the scene that follows Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences, there is a striking image of the Spirit driving or casting Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by Satan (Mark 1:12).¹⁷⁷ Only the Mark's Gospel version preserves the vivid description of a spirit outside Jesus entering him and subsequently controlling him but, the features and content of what he encountered are historically less certain.¹⁷⁸ Even though this has no historical reliability, as an ASC experience it resonates so strongly with parts of the Israelite religious tradition.¹⁷⁹ Jesus' community distinguished between good and bad possession, and they knew, traditionally, the instances of God's Spirit interfering in human activities. In a culture that allows for possession trance, individuals could certainly have experienced as reported in the narrative world of the Gospels.¹⁸⁰

DeMaris includes ASC, as well as spirit possession, in explaining Jesus' baptismal visions, in the light of Mark's Gospel accounts. In the first century Jewish context, popular culture can create pre-packaged images that could lead to conclusions of actually seeing or hearing such phenomena in real life. He employs anthropology and social science insights to clarify Jesus' baptismal visions. He sees possession by means of the model of possession trance, from a cross-cultural perspective. DeMaris understands that Jesus' visionary experiences at baptism are ASC experiences, but explained differently.

¹⁷⁷ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 147-48.

¹⁷⁸ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 148.

¹⁷⁹ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 148.

¹⁸⁰ DeMaris, "The baptism of Jesus: a ritual-critical approach," 147.

5 CONCLUSION

A critical analysis of the ways in which Pilch, Davies, and DeMaris interpret the visionary experiences of Jesus at baptism as ASC is given in this Chapter. Pilch opines that disciplines like anthropological psychology, and other models based on this kind of research, offer far more suitable tools for analysing the ancients in a reliable, cross-cultural fashion. For Pilch, psychological anthropology examines, among other things, the human experience identified as ASC.¹⁸¹ Davies interprets the spirit possession behaviour during Jesus' baptism from a secular, sociological, psychological and anthropological perspective. Since the contemporary psychology is monocultural in nature, it is a serious misinterpretation of biblical texts, since it neglects to employ other social sciences, notably Mediterranean and medical anthropology.¹⁸² His statements are psychoanalytical or psychiatric claims, which are superimposed on first century Mediterranean personalities. They also cannot be verified from the information that the Gospels provide. The approach offered by DeMaris differs a little from that of Pilch, because of their different views on the ASC accounts of the Gospels on Jesus' baptismal visions. DeMaris states the possibility that Jesus entered an ASC, without any ritual prompting, while Pilch considers the ritual of Jesus' baptism as an event that could have induced an ASC. Davies uses the state of *alter-persona* consciousness, defined as possession, which was induced at the time of the baptism of Jesus, as the source of the visionary experiences. The

¹⁸¹ Pilch, "Psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to interpreting the Bible in social-scientific context," 115.

¹⁸² Pilch J.J., "Review of Jesus the healer: possession, trance, and the origins of Christianity, by S.L. Davies," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (1997): 71.

three scholars use ASCs and argue distinct causes on the induction of the ASC during Jesus' baptism. Pilch introduces ASC to New Testament research and interprets various aspects of texts including Jesus' baptism accounts of visionary stories seen as ASC. Even though Davies employs spirit possession as a model from modern psychiatry, both Pilch and Davies have their theories rooted in cross-cultural anthropology, but they come from distinctly different perspectives. Both Davies and DeMaris use the term possession as an interpretive category, meaning the same thing in the case of Jesus' baptismal visions. Pilch and DeMaris both use the term ASC, which is an experience (though named differently) that belongs to Jesus' world, arguing that such experiences could have been historical. The three authors differ and disagree on some aspects, like the kind of ASC, and agree on other elements in their interpretations of Jesus' baptism stories as visionary events.

CHAPTER 5

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE THREE SCHOLARLY INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS ON JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS

1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Chapters, Jesus' visionary experiences during baptism, as claimed in the sources of the New Testament, are presented based on three scholarly interpretive traditions by modern scholars. These interpretive traditions are the three trends in research on the visionary experiences of Jesus, namely, interpreting them as literally, literary creations and ASCs. Scholars who interpret the events literally, describe them as actual events of Jesus seeing or having a vision and hearing a voice, since Jesus did experience some form of prophetic call-vision. Others who reject this interpretation, consider the event of seeing and hearing as literary creations or stories that were made up by the authors of the Gospels in order to offer a theological interpretation of the events. Still, some other scholars interpret the accounts in terms of an occurrence of an ASC, that is, as common human neurobiological phenomenon, which is a new trend in understanding the texts on these visions. Even then, there is no consensus or agreement between the different interpretations of ASC views in the matter of Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences.

In this Chapter, these views are summarised, critically analysed, compared and evaluated in terms of the way in which the visionary experiences are understood as actual events of seeing or, alternatively, made up accounts without any actual visual perception present, or as ASC events. The analyses include considering

the way in which the texts are seen, using comparative materials, and the use of parallels and insights from other disciplines. Finally, the results of the analyses of the different approaches will be compared on a meta-theoretical level, representing naturalistic versus humanistic paradigms to religious phenomena.

2 SCHOLARS WHO TAKE JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISIONS IN THE TEXTS LITERALLY

2.1 Features and characteristics of the literal approach

2.1.1 Literal reading of texts

Dunn, Meier, Marcus, Hurtado, Borg and Webb take the visions of Jesus at the baptism literally and accept the reports about actual visual experiences, as presented in the texts. They read the Gospels as reports on an event that really took place and accept it at face value. It is seen in the kind of debates that they conduct to see which version of the Gospels is correct. Many connect the dove with the hovering divine Spirit, as explained in Genesis (Gen 1:2).

Spiritual invasion occurred during Jesus' baptism and, consequently, Jesus' violent expulsion into the wilderness happened by the Spirit. Jesus finds himself outside, in a limited place between the angels and the wild beasts (Mark 1:12-15). When Jesus returns to the community, he cautions it about the arrival of God's sovereignty and insists that no one stands before this kingdom and the Spirit. In Luke's narrative, Jesus' baptism is shaped by a reflection on past experiences and the portrait of a young Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41-52) suggests a gradual learning process that prepared the way for the *epiphany* at the baptism. Matthew and Mark's emphasis on what Jesus saw, directs attention to the private and

immediate nature of the experience and the descent of the Spirit can also be understood as a trigger of Jesus' reflection on his selfhood.

2.1.2 Understanding of the visions at Jesus' baptism

The story of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus, and the voice from heaven, shape the idea of and interpretation of Jesus' identity as possessing the authority of God's Spirit. Jesus experienced key insights into his relationship with God, as Father, and the powerful activity of the Spirit crystallised within him. At baptism, the link between Jesus' significant experiences of his consciousness of sonship and Spirit were made. Jesus possessed a strong prophetic authority throughout the tradition about him, which demands a radical experience of divine encounter to explain its existence. The precise identity of the heavenly voice at the baptism confirmed to Jesus his sonship. The scholars understand Jesus' identity as authorised by God's Spirit and Jesus' self-understanding of God as Father literally. This is in line with the scriptural understanding of the scholars that the contemporary Jewish community was expecting the arrival of a *messiah* to save them from the hardships they have had to face due to poverty, illness and other ailments. John the Baptist sent his disciples afterwards to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:19). Then Jesus replied, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, ... the good news is preached to the poor" (Like 7:22). Scholars, who take the texts literally, consider this to be true.

2.1.3 The literal approach taking the visionary events as unique

The literal approach offers no parallels or does not compare these events with similar cross-cultural accounts, but take them as unique. They lack cross-cultural

comparison, because they do not compare Jesus' baptism to other such accounts. They do not invoke comparative material and do not think it is important to compare this account with similar accounts. They also do not use anthropological or any other comparative research to argue their cases. These studies are devoid of references to cross-cultural material or research.

This is also evident in the interpretations of these scholars in respect of the temptation narrative, which leads to understanding the identity of the possessed Spirit in Jesus at baptism. It narrates and visualises Jesus' personal and psychological struggles with the possessing Spirit, which is divine, because of the experiences of its overwhelming power. They follow the traditions from other instances in Israel's ancient history such as Saul's spirit possession, spiritual men who were taken possession of (Judg 6:34) or overcome by the spirit (Judg 14:19; 15:14; 1 Sam 10:6, 10; 19:23-24) or, judged to lack the spirit when he fails militarily (Judg 16:20; 1 Sam 16:13-14). The figures of Samson and of Saul suggest their failure can be attributed to the loss of their enthusing spirit.

There are references to the dove in the Old Testament, like Noah's dove in Genesis 8:9, illustration of the sweeping of the Spirit of God over the waters in Genesis 1:2, with the flight of a dove, and to the dove as the symbol of Israel. But Judaism did not recognise the dove as a symbol of the Spirit.¹⁸³ The story of Jesus can be located in the time of Roman history, as he received baptism in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (14 – 37 CE).¹⁸⁴ Through

¹⁸³ Schroer, *Wisdom has built her house: studies on the figure of Sophia in the Bible*, 134.

¹⁸⁴ Amphoux C., "Three questions about the life of Jesus," in *Handbook for the study of the historical Jesus, Volume 4, individual studies* (eds. Holmén T. and S.E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3373.

engagement with diverse primary sources from the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the dove is interpreted as an omen and counter-symbol to the Roman eagle, which is a public portent of divine favour, election, and ascension to imperial power.¹⁸⁵ The dove is a bird omen of the transmission of power from father to son in the spirit of the pure, gentle, peaceful, and even sacrificial dove. It is also a contrasting symbol of fear or nonviolence, a long-suffering or even forgiving bird. Mark's narration characterises Jesus in comparison with the adopted Roman emperor, the most powerful man-god in the universe at that time. Jesus' cultural and religious background might have an influence in the choice of his career, after initiation through baptism, as a religious reformer, healer and teacher. The baptism is a sign that Jesus is an adherent of the preaching of John, who proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

2.1.4 The criterion of embarrassment as confirmation of the visionary events

In Mark 1:4-11, the baptism of the supposedly superior and sinless Jesus, by the supposedly inferior John the Baptist, is given. Matthew introduces a dialogue between the Baptist and Jesus prior to the baptism. The Baptist openly confesses his unworthiness to baptise his superior and gives way only when Jesus commands him to do so in order that God's saving plan may be fulfilled (Matt 3:13-17). This contradiction focuses on actions of Jesus that would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the first followers of Jesus. In order to

¹⁸⁵ Peppard M., "The eagle and the dove: Roman imperial sonship and the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1.9-11)," *New Testament Studies* 56, no. 4 (2010): 433.

convince that the events that followed literally occurred, Meier¹⁸⁶ spells out the criterion of embarrassment as confirmation of the decisions taken. The account closed with the visual image of the descent of the dove and the aural proclamation by a voice from heaven that Jesus is the “Son of God.” “To descend” is the meaning of the Hebrew *y-r-d*, which is the root of the word “Jordan;” and “dove,” in Hebrew *ywnh*, gives the name Jonas, an anagram both of *Ioan-*, the name of John, and of *Onia-* (Onias), the last legitimate high priest, who was deposed in 175 BCE.¹⁸⁷ A divine act of election is necessary to assume the function of “king of the Jews” and for Jesus, his baptism is just such an occasion. The image, “Son of God,” is a title of sovereignty borne by kings such as those of Alexandria, who are heirs to the Pharaohs.¹⁸⁸ Just as David had to win his kingly power, after he was anointed by Samuel, so Jesus receives investiture by John the Baptist, before he begin the struggle to achieve the right to exercise his functions. God loves with tenderness, passion, and impetuous enthusiasm that are the joyful news of the dove for Jesus. At the same time, the dove’s wooing invitation to return to the sensual divine love, is symbolic throughout Jesus’ mission. The dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, the descending Christ, and God the Father. The scholars following the literal approach consider the interpretations of the texts, in the context of the time of writing of the Gospels, as a true reflection of the

¹⁸⁶ Meier, *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus, Volume one: the roots of the problem and the person*, 168-99.

¹⁸⁷ Amphoux, “Three questions about the life of Jesus,” 3381.

¹⁸⁸ Amphoux, “Three questions about the life of Jesus,” 3382-83.

communications between John the Baptist and Jesus, even though they created embarrassment for some.

2.2 Highlights on the literal approach

The scholars who accept what actually happened as stated in the texts, believe that the actual presence of a dove and its descent as the Spirit-dove, brought about a significant cosmic experience for Jesus through the reception of the Spirit of God at baptism. These scholars accept what Jesus heard, as mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus himself heard the words and saw the vision with what John the Baptist witnessed in the Fourth Gospel, as correct. These scholars do not question the meaning of “visions” or “seeing” and take references to Jesus’ vision during the baptism as references to actual seeing. They most often do not even discuss or consider the possibility that these could have been visions and not visual perceptions. They take the texts literally and support the events, like Jesus’ baptismal visionary experiences, as actual events that happened.

3 SCHOLARS WHO TAKE JESUS’ BAPTISMAL VISIONS AS LITERARY CREATIONS

3.1 Features and characteristics of the literary creations approach

3.1.1 Understanding of the visions as literary creations

The scholars who see Jesus’ visionary experiences during baptism as literary creations, display certain features about the texts. They ascribe to the view that the Gospels are not reports about events, but creative ways in which Jesus’ followers came to terms with certain features about his life. Sanders, Crossan, Miller and Strijdom, see the texts on Jesus’ baptism visions, without accepting their truth claims, but comparing them as similar to mythological literary

creations. They consider the event of seeing and hearing the dove-Spirit, as a literary creation by the authors of the Gospels, to interpret them theologically. The reports on Jesus seeing a dove/Spirit and hearing a voice are not considered historical events, but as made up stories. They also think that the encounter with the devil in the desert is a mythological creation. The visionary experiences cannot be demonstrated by evidence and argument, as they are literary creations.

In the Gospel according to John, the visionary experience of John the Baptist is reported as his witnessing of the event. John the Baptist claims, as a witness, Jesus' identity as the Son of God through his own visionary experiences. The scholars, who view the texts as literary creations, consider the words of John witnessing the Spirit coming down and remaining on Jesus, as the formulation of the author of the Fourth Gospel. They also claim that Jesus had visions on occasion, with the possibility that his baptismal visions involved one of that kind. In the Synoptic Gospels, this vision is attributed to Jesus and, in John 1:29-34, the vision is of John, not of Jesus.

3.1.2 Use of comparative materials supporting the literary creations view

Comparing materials from different sources, these scholars claim that the texts about Jesus' baptism by John, is one of the surest things known about them both, but the reports about the actual event of seeing the dove and hearing the voice are literary creations by the authors of the Gospels. According to the Synoptic Gospels, the vision of the descent of the Spirit was followed immediately by another sequence of visions. The Spirit leading Jesus out into the wilderness, is compared to the Jewish traditional holy men, like Moses and Elijah, who were separated in remote locations beyond the domestication of reality provided by

culture and human interchange. This vision quest in a desolate desert area, for a period of extended solitude and fasting practices, produce changes in consciousness and perception. Jesus' dialogue with the Baptist, in Matthew's Gospel, reports Jesus' abstract knowledge of himself prior to his baptism. This indicates that his subsequent experience is influenced by the previous, conscious reflections on his identity. Though Matthew and Mark describe the descent of the Spirit as Jesus' private experience, Luke presents it as probably seen and heard by everyone present. Hence the contrasting experiences in the reports on Jesus' baptismal visions were not actual events of seeing and hearing, but literary creations. The Jewish people of the time were expecting a *Messiah*, to deliver them from the Roman rule. This approach claims that the *Messiah*-ship was bestowed upon Jesus by his followers, which contributes to the interpretation of these events as literary creations.

3.2 Comparison of the literary creations and the literal approaches

Scholars, who consider only the actual baptism of Jesus by John as an authentic event, take the visions, including the narrations on Jesus' spirit trip to the desert reported in the Synoptic Gospels, as mythological additions. Historical evidences are sought by those who interpret them as literary creations from the oral traditions that existed during the time of the authors of the Gospels. They consider the texts as made up stories, or literary creations, from their own imaginations. Scholars who accept Jesus' visionary experiences at the baptism, followed by the testing in the wilderness, literally consider these as real events, which are not ordinary seeing/hearing. The versions in the Synoptic Gospels are typical accounts of reports as real events and, according to John's Gospel, as

witnessed by John the Baptist. In their world-view, visions and auditions are as real as ordinary seeing and hearing, but they are not ordinary seeing/hearing.

Scholars, who accept these visions literally, suggest that the reports by those who experience the visions are accepted by everybody and such experiences are possible in the Israelite tradition.

4 SCHOLARS WHO SUGGEST JESUS' BAPTISMAL VISION AS ASC

4.1 Features and characteristics of the ASC approach

4.1.1 Understanding of the visions with cultural sensitivity

ASC scholars interpret the visions as cultural events. The scholars, who suggest Jesus' baptism visions as ASC, see visions in a different way than the scholars in the above sections, and they invoke cross-cultural material and research. They start with insights gained from comparative materials and they do not read texts literally or as fiction, but with cultural sensitivity. They do not think the texts are about actual events or simply fictitious accounts, but accept that these are accounts about cultural events. They understand the difference between the visions, as actual human experiences and visual perceptions. In their view, what happened at Jesus' baptism, was that the Gospels reported on a cultural event. Such events have certain features like ASC experiences. The different scholars differ among themselves on how best to understand such events. Pilch observes that in the prevalent circum-Mediterranean culture, communication with Spirit took place in a mystic state, through vision and audition, as at Jesus' baptism, which was normal in the socio-centric biblical world. He uses the states of

consciousness, which are real for those who experience them, and the cultural aspects of the Palestinian communities where Jesus lived.

DeMaris suggests that, from a cross-cultural perspective, Jesus' baptismal vision has the character of an ASC, which anthropologists call possession trance. He includes ASC, as well as spirit possession, to explain Jesus' baptismal visions, based on Mark's Gospel accounts. He states the possibility of Jesus entering an ASC, without any ritual prompting, while Pilch considers the ritual of John's baptism as the event that induced an ASC.

Davies uses studies from the fields of psychology and anthropology and applies them to the Gospel narratives, deriving from this that Jesus was prone to self-induced possession by a Spirit he called the Son of God. Davies understands the baptismal visionary experience of Jesus in terms of hallucinations, which are not real seeing and hearing. He makes use of the modern language of dissociation, in reference to the visions, and categorises visionary experiences by means of psychiatric models. He introduces modern psychological analysis to account for Jesus' possession in response to John the Baptist's encouragement for psychological change and alterations in ego identity, bearing in mind that both Jesus and John the Baptist are first-century Mediterranean personalities.

Davies' views on psychological understandings of multiple personality phenomena are different from those offered by Pilch and DeMaris. He attributes this phenomenon as an example from the *monophasic* culture, interpreting such ASC experiences as hallucinations due to pathological factors. In the socially differentiated community structures of the circum-Mediterranean communities of the first-century CE, Jesus' followers accepted what happened to Jesus as

baptismal visions. This is due to the community's *polyphasic* cultural context and this played a role in the reporting of these events.

4.1.2 Use of comparative materials supporting the ASC view

The first-century hearers and readers were likely to interpret the religious ecstatic trance experiences of Jesus, as reported in the Gospels, together with the cultural traditions that surround ASC events. Modern scholars, who consider the baptism visions of Jesus as an ASC, use different terminologies from that used in anthropological literature. The terms “ASC,” “dissociation” and “possession” refer to similar phenomena and, often, they are merely different terms to describe the same instance of human experience described by means of different perspectives. Even though Davies employs spirit possession as a model from modern psychiatry, both Pilch and Davies have their roots in cross-cultural anthropology. Both Davies and DeMaris use the term “possession” as an interpretive category, which has the same meaning in the case of Jesus’ baptism visions. DeMaris, however, sees possession by means of the model of a “possession trance,” allowing for a cross-cultural perspective. Pilch and DeMaris use the term “ASC,” which belongs to Jesus’ world, arguing that such experiences could have been historical. Their reconstructions belong to the realm of interpretive discourse that treat visions differently, alleviating it from the mere content reported on, in the Gospels.

For Pilch, human consciousness is capable of a wide horizon of potentials that each culture shapes into a fixed and stable state, which adapts the individual to survive in the particular culture’s consensus reality. In a culture where spirits were a normal part of the consensus reality, a variety of spirits, both good and

bad, intervene in the daily life of human beings. Jesus was led into the wilderness by a good spirit, where a malicious spirit tempted him and confirmed his sense of identity. For Pilch, ASCs are real experiences and culturally plausible veridical events.

Davies explains that the standard spirit possession theory finds the Holy Spirit, as an external person of a spiritual nature, who comes into a human body and temporarily takes over the mental and physical functioning of that body. From an outsider perspective, the Holy Spirit is the name given to a particular dissociative psychological experience that arises wholly from the internal mental functioning of an individual within a particular cultic setting. DeMaris considers that the ritual action of baptism triggered the spirit possession experience of Jesus in an ASC, describing a spirit outside Jesus entering him and subsequently controlling him.

The use of cultural anthropology and other sub-disciplines, like psychological anthropology and cultural psychology, by these scholars, together with interdisciplinary coordination, opens up a different tradition to interpreting Jesus' baptism visions. Not all brain systems function in the same way and so culture will not take hold of them in an identical fashion. The development processes that shape each individual include a host of other forces and embrace all dimensions of human neural activity including emotion, perception, cognition, motor control and skill acquisition. Even though the three scholars base their interpretations on the ASC concepts, the disciplines in which they are specialised influence their views on Jesus' baptism visions.

4.2 Comparison of the ASC views with literal and literary creations approaches

The scholars invoke aspects like the characteristics of *mono-* and *polyphasic* cultures and ASCs, as significant elements in their interpretations, which is different from the literal and literary creations traditions, in order to make sense of the baptism accounts in the Gospels. The literal interpretations of the texts and the new developments in understanding them, by means of insights from comparative material on the reality of *mono-* and *polyphasic* cultures, as displayed in anthropological research, have common factors underlying them. This offers insights into things like visions and other ASC experiences by also making use of comparative material and relying on cross-cultural research. They use ASC models that some traditional New Testament interpreters have never even considered before. Even though some of their explanations on the ASC models differ from one another, it is better to read the texts cultural sensitively than reading them literally.

Pilch uses the theoretical model of ASC and understands them differently from Davies and DeMaris, who use different models on which they base their interpretations. Pilch uses ASC by applying it to the shamanic model and suggests that the baptismal visionary experiences are culturally plausible, veridical and real events. Due to the ASC experience, in regard to Jesus, there is reorganisation of the personality structure and such experiences are not necessarily continuously moving through various levels of awareness.

For Davies, Jesus possessed the Spirit of God at his baptism and experienced an ASC as an alteration in ego identity. When the Spirit was active in him, Jesus

believed he was transformed into the Son of God. As Van Aarde¹⁸⁹ noted, within the circumstances of experiencing a fantasy homecoming in God's kingdom, Jesus probably had an imaginary reality, which the Spirit of God created. This brought about his altered consciousness of encountering the care of a Heavenly Father. ASC models assume visions to be neuro-cultural phenomena, while other scholars, who view them as literary creations, see them as mythological. Davies claims that experiencing possession evokes a feeling of euphoria, often followed by a feeling of worthlessness and this experiential flip is often attributed to a *deus ex machina*.¹⁹⁰ Such ASC experiences often involve those in the community who feel that they occupy a status in the community, due to poverty or other factors, and those who are exploited by the upper classes. In the communities where possession trance or other forms of institutionalised ASC exists, there has to be a differential diagnosis,¹⁹¹ a decision as to whether the person's behaviour has a religious origin. If so, it must also be decided whether it is of a positive (socially valued) or negative (socially abhorred) kind. If the individual is to be restored to an ordinary life, traditional societies generally provide rituals of healing for negative possession. In biomedical terms, the person is temporarily disabled, dysfunctional, and suffering from a disorder of a dissociative type. Davies does not agree that Jesus' visionary experiences at the baptism are actual events of seeing and hearing; instead, he identifies it as hallucinations due to dissociative

¹⁸⁹ Van Aarde A., *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as child of God* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2001), 76-7.

¹⁹⁰ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 93.

¹⁹¹ Bourguignon E., "Religion as a mediating factor in culture change," in *Religion and mental health* (ed. Schumaker J.F.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 265.

psychological transformation. In regard to Jesus' visionary phenomena, the community members interpret his experiences in both positive and negative ways. His followers regard him positively, but his opponents criticize him. In the light of the modern neurobiological explanations of ASC, the effects of how cultural aspects impact on the community's evaluation of ASC experiences are more appropriate than the texts being literary creations.

5 A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF THE THREE SCHOLARLY INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS OF THE VISIONS IN TERMS OF META-ANALYSES

5.1 Caretaker versus critical interpretations of the visionary accounts

The three different trends in regard to visions research display features that can be linked to the wider trends in religion research. In order to comprehensively analyse Jesus' baptism visions, a meta-analytical reflection is made on the literal, literary creations and ASC views. In the study of religion, an analytical distinction between caretaker¹⁹² and critical modes of inquiry is made. Scholars, who speak for religions and traditions, are considered as caretakers or ideological managers. Some caretakers add the step of attempting to establish the truth of what subjects or informants claim,¹⁹³ and they are classified, by Craffert, as critical caretakers,¹⁹⁴ who test, evaluate and reject the truth of the claims or descriptions made by religions. Caretakers and critical caretakers disagree only

¹⁹² McCutcheon R.T., *Critics not caretakers: redescribing the public study of religion* (New York: State University of New York, 2001), 17, 142-51.

¹⁹³ Taves A., *Religious experience reconsidered: a building-block approach to the study of religion and other special things* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 89.

¹⁹⁴ Craffert P.F., "Caretakers, critics, and comparativists: a meta-analysis of historical Jesus research," in *Journal for the Study of Religion* 25, no. 2 (2012): 113-14.

when it comes to deciding whether the claims and concepts of religions should be supported or rejected. In this study, the concepts of caretakers and critical caretakers can be replaced by the trends of literal and literary creations views, respectively. The interpretations that promote a caretaker option display similar features, whether they take the accounts as literal or as an ASC experience, as understood by Pilch. There is not that much difference between the approach by Pilch, who uses ASC to explain the event as an alternate reality experience, and scholars who see the accounts as literal.

The critical caretakers' views are consistent with those scholars who consider the texts on visionary experiences as literary creations. The critical caretakers prefer the term, "comparativists,"¹⁹⁵ by Craffert, a term used widely in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary analytical tools. As an attempt to bridge the sciences and the humanities, the third trend of ASC views in this study can be categorised as comparativists. The ASC views of Davies and DeMaris fit into this category of scholars. This category forms an antithesis to the first two categories of caretakers (literal views) and critical caretakers (literary creations views). There are scholars, who support and take the texts literally (caretakers), those who reject the texts as literary creations, questioning them and purifying them from false claims (critical caretakers), and those who subject the texts to comparative analysis and place them within larger theoretical frameworks like ASC (comparativists).¹⁹⁶ These options are present in the interpretations of the

¹⁹⁵ Craffert, "Caretakers, critics, and comparativists: a meta-analysis of historical Jesus research," 114.

¹⁹⁶ Craffert, "Caretakers, critics, and comparativists: a meta-analysis of historical Jesus research," 115.

visions by the selected scholars and show that the three trends display particular features of the options given above. The meta-analysis is not overt in interpretation, but is harvested from the scholarly positions explained in the previous Chapters. Jesus' baptism visions in the texts are interpreted, analysed, explained, and compared to establish its credibility through the trends in literal, literary creations and ASC experiences. The interpretations have a certain implicit objective of either promoting or critically engaging data. Hence, academics can act either as advocates for or critical of an interpretive tradition. As Slingerland¹⁹⁷ points out, the traditionally sharp divide between the humanities and natural sciences is no longer viable if the researchers on both sides of the former divide become radically more interdisciplinary. The above interpretations promote the naturalistic and humanistic explanations discussed below.

5.2 Instances of naturalistic and humanistic approaches in the different views on visionary experiences

5.2.1 Naturalistic approach to religion

The literal meaning of “nature,” which is derived from the Latin word *natura*, refers to birth, character, constitution, or the course of things. It is the creative and regulative physical power, which is conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena.¹⁹⁸ The theory that claims natural causes and laws explains everything in nature is attributed to the naturalistic approach to religion. For many scholars, religion is not of a natural

¹⁹⁷ Slingerland E., *What science offers the humanities: integrating body and culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xiv.

¹⁹⁸ Murray J.A.H. (ed.), *The compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1900.

kind, but is a complex cultural concept that is handed down traditionally. Nature can behave in extraordinary ways when psychical phenomena like ASC experiences occur real to the person concerned. The biocultural approach to religion, developed by the anthropologists Winkelman and Baker, states that, “Religious altered states of consciousness have a biological basis in the overall dynamics of our nervous system and consciousness.”¹⁹⁹ It is explained, from both scientific and cultural perspectives, that such experiences are completely natural occurrences, due to the ability of human beings to create culture. They develop the capacity for religious thought and practice as it is a natural condition of human beings to have religions.

5.2.2 Humanistic approach to religion

Humanistic thinkers believe in science as a way people can achieve their greatest potential and such ideas place great importance on thinking and reasoning as a way in which people can be fulfilled. Traditionally, humanists explain events by identifying human actors, attributing mental states such as intentions and goals, and matching their behaviours with these states.²⁰⁰ Many scholars assume that there is a fundamental divide between the natural sciences and the humanities such that the sciences are about explanation, while the humanities seek to interpret. The split between explanation and interpretation is best resolved by

¹⁹⁹ Winkelman M. and Baker J.R., *Supernatural as natural: a biocultural approach to religion* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 85, xxii.

²⁰⁰ Asprem E. and Taves A., “Explanation and the study of religion,” in *Method today: beyond description and hermeneutics in religious studies scholarship* (ed. Stoddard B.; London: Equinox, in press), 16. Online: <http://www.occult-minds.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Asprem-Taves-Explanation-and-the-Study-of-Religion-Method-Today-Stoddard-ed.pdf>.

recognising the broad agreement in both the biological and social-scientific literatures. The special sciences of biology, the neurosciences, and psychology can be used for explaining socio-culturally-informed human behaviours.²⁰¹ Even the disciplines in the historical sciences cover the vast majority of the sciences and the humanities. Their co-dependent factors help to explain some typical events, like visionary experiences. Hence, the study of humankind and human affairs, within a system that concentrates on common human needs and seeks rational ways of solving human problems, requires reconsideration in the light of the humanistic approach to religion.

5.2.3 Naturalistic versus humanistic explanations of the visionary accounts

The categories of naturalistic and humanistic explanations describe different approaches in the study of religion. These approaches display parallels in the study of the visionary accounts. Seeing the accounts on the visionary phenomena as an ASC does not necessarily translate into a naturalistic explanation of the accounts. Even though Pilch tried to employ naturalistic explanations to the ASC experiences, it did not go all the way, since his understanding of the ASC is not purely naturalistic. His explanations on an alternate reality was a humanistic one. Naturalistic causal theories of religion offer (reductionistic) explanations based on language or discourse (literary and cultural theories), collective processes (social theories), mental processes (cognitive theories), and/or biological processes (evolutionary theories).²⁰² ASC experiences, in the context of religious

²⁰¹ Asprem and Taves, "Explanation and the study of religion," 2.

²⁰² Asprem and Taves, "Explanation and the study of religion," 4.

experiences, are also known as the neuroscience of religious experiences,²⁰³ which is a part of a larger body of literature that addresses the biology of ecstasy.²⁰⁴ The visionary experiences are treated by most of the modern scholars, in contrast to scholars holding literal and literary creations approaches, as neurocultural phenomena known as ASC compared to cross-cultural examples and insights.

Davies and DeMaris see them as truly naturalistic phenomena, which are different from those interpretations by the scholars that promote the humanistic interpretation. Comparative materials show that such perceptions are found among all people of the world and are often mingled with cultural lore and beliefs. Visions are normal neural functions that appear naturally and display certain features that are different from hallucinations when ill or psychotic. Collectively such perceptions are described by anthropologists as ASC. They are related to mystical experiences and are often encountered in ritual settings where transcendence is sought. When seen in this light Jesus' visionary perceptions during the baptism become comparable to many other instances of perceptions that occur without external stimulation, but which occurs neurologically. Taves establishes that people with unusual cognitive abilities exist within the general population,²⁰⁵ who make use of the mental abilities of the human mind.

²⁰³ Beauregard M., "Neuroscience and spirituality – findings and consequences," in *Neuroscience, consciousness and spirituality* (eds. Walach H., S. Schmidt, and W.B. Jonas; Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 57-73.

²⁰⁴ DeConick A.D., "Naturally supernatural," *Religion, brain & behavior*; 21 March 2018, (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 3. Online: <http://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2018.1429011> (cited 11 May 2018).

²⁰⁵ Taves A., *Revelatory events: three case studies of the emergence of new spiritual paths* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 8-9.

Cognitive approaches can help to explain uniformity and consistency in religious phenomena with reference to the deep architecture of cognition itself, in the role that mentality and embodiment play in concept building.²⁰⁶ The visionary experiences reveal relevant beliefs within Jesus' community of followers and in the local environment as well as several key points in a historical process of belief formation.²⁰⁷

Pilch followed Malina,²⁰⁸ who introduced the concept of intellectual model building for interpreting biblical texts using "kitbashing," which describes the process of taking a number of individual models and constructing a new model from the useful parts of those other models. It contains a highly selective collection of social science models, put together, with a view to surfacing some of the broader dimensions of the implicit meanings found in the behaviour portrayed in and represented by the New Testament writings. It is intended to stand at a level of conceptualization that provides for easy cross-cultural comparison.²⁰⁹ Evidence indicates that psychological processes are shared characteristics through the species. Yet, they are nurtured, shaped, and modified by a variety of forces like ecological, cultural, and social factors. The common processes make comparisons possible, but the variations discovered by cross-cultural comparisons should be accommodated. The introduction of psychological analysis to the

²⁰⁶ DeConick A.D., "Soul flights: cognitive ratcheting and the problem of comparison," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 17 (2017): 87-8, 110-12.

²⁰⁷ Asprem and Taves, "Explanation and the study of religion," 18.

²⁰⁸ Malina B.J., *Christian origins and cultural anthropology: practical models for biblical interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), iii.

²⁰⁹ Malina, *Christian origins and cultural anthropology: practical models for biblical interpretation*, 205.

account of Jesus' possession experience, is a response to John the Baptist's call to people for repentance and change.

Historical reconstruction of the ancient world relies heavily on plausibility and probability to do its work and to make its case. In examining spirit possession in a cultural context, the analysis neglects the social aspects and places too much emphasis on possession's textual aspects, relying too much upon the assumption that images and other sensations, like sound, are texts. Combining the symbolic, psychological and social aspects of the phenomenon, is presenting more holistic accounts of the spirit possession. For this purpose, orientation of the social sciences toward patterns and scenarios are used on the occurrence of Jesus' baptismal visions. In regard to Jesus' baptism visions, it is evaluated that the ASC views offer the best interpretations, better than both the literal and literary creations views of the texts. In interpreting the contexts concerning Jesus' baptismal visions, the cultural aspects and the belief system of the first century Jewish community in the Mediterranean part of the Roman Empire is considered. The literal understanding of Jesus' baptismal visions has an impact on the belief of the person concerned, considering the characteristics of *polyphasic* communities in this context. Those scholars, who reject them, consider Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences as cultural creations. The scholars who suggest that these are ASC experiences interpret them in terms of modern scientific understanding of human consciousness as biological and cultural phenomena.

The three trends identified above are seen as the replications of what is going on in the study of religion. Collaboration of naturalistic and humanistic approaches provide the visionary experiences of the historical event of Jesus'

baptism as answered by the various scholars who follow the different trends in research on religious experiences.

6 CONCLUSION

The critical analyses of the three scholarly interpretive traditions on the visionary experiences of historical Jesus at baptism are summarised in this Chapter. The main scholarly views on Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences are spread among the approaches of literal, literary creations and ASC views. Many anthropologists have used their material on spirit possession to expound upon theories of cultural aspects or to extract social meaning. Scholars seeking biological explanations of spirit possession consider the physiology of the trance state. Many of them suggest that possession states alter brain waves as a cross-cultural experience due to the biological phenomena. The visionary experiences of Jesus are explained by modern scholars by integrating the physiology of the trance state and the contingent socio-cultural phenomena. The sociology and symbolism of spirit possession can be incorporated into the human body's physiochemical essentials through the psychological results developed during the process.

Based on the cultural and historical backgrounds of Jesus, in the first century Palestinian context, the baptismal visionary experiences are considered as ASC by the modern scholars in this field. During the spirit-possession experience, the followers of Jesus found that the second *persona* of Jesus, as the Son of God, is different from that of the first *persona* of Jesus, gauged from the conversations mentioned in the Gospels. Jesus' possession, as his experience of the kingdom of God, claims that Jesus offers the kingdom of God to others as a trance experience,

not a possession.²¹⁰ Anthropological studies show that possession trance, shamanism, ecstasy and all related phenomena fall under the category of ASC, which document human access to such states across the globe in all cultures. During this state of co-production, consciousness arises in a uniquely human sense involving potentially profound self-awareness and reflection. Jesus lived in a *polyphasic* culture, where such experiences (attributed ASC) impacted on people's lives and are accepted and cultivated. The ASC approaches accept Jesus' visionary phenomena as real culturally experienced events. All the three different approaches do not really differ much, because the literal views of the believers are literally created by the authors of the Gospels from the oral traditions of the time. The modern scholars interpret the same experience, understanding the connections between the cultural belief systems and the human consciousness neurobiologically. Since the theories in the natural sciences and humanities have common areas for interpretation, it is appropriate to explain human behaviour in both the naturalistic and humanistic approaches to religion. In the context of historical Jesus' baptismal visionary experiences, it is concluded that the literal views of scholars complement the ASC views, due to the fact that the real vision is what the brain interprets the sensations neurobiologically.

²¹⁰ Davies, *Spirit possession and the origins of Christianity*, 150-53, 163.

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