



# A Heavenly Wedding on the Banks of the Jordan!

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST. JACOB OF SERUGH



**Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty**

THE GLORIOUS FEAST OF EPIPHANY

11 TOBE 1737 A.M - JANUARY 19, 2021

# **A Heavenly Wedding on the Banks of the Jordan!**

The Baptism of Christ according to  
St. Jacob of Serugh

**First Edition**

**January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Preparation and Commentary

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## **A Unique Heavenly Wedding!**

St. Jacob of Serugh imagines how Christ went to the River Jordan where crowds of people would gather from multiple places to repent of their sins and accept baptism from St. John the Baptist. But what a difference between them and Him! They come in repentance and mourn over their sins, and He is the Messiah, the Lord, the King of Kings. He has come to hold a joyous wedding feast that includes all nations, not just one, and excludes no one.

### **The Groom prepares the Wedding by the River Jordan in the Wilderness**

The multitudes came to John in order to be washed from their weaknesses, their abominations, and the corruption that had befallen them from idolatry and spiritual adultery. They carried the stench of the burnt offerings that they offered to the idols, and therefore, the Bridegroom poured the water of baptism on them that they may immerse themselves in it, and so that by His Holy Spirit, He may replace their stench with His marvelous heavenly scent. *He Himself descended to the River Jordan to cover His bride with His righteousness in the womb of baptism, so she would become the Father's daughter, the incarnate Word's bride - He who is the King of kings - and the Holy Spirit's temple.* Indeed, it is a unique and glorious heavenly wedding banquet!

### **St. John the Baptist summons and adorns the bride**

As the crowds rallied around St. John the Baptist, St. Jacob of Serugh refers to them as the "daughter of destitute parents" because she had deviated from the worship of God, the Grantor of heavenly treasures, surrendered herself to Satan and become like a beggar and a destitute one.

This "daughter of destitute parents" came to the Baptist, the Groom's friend. The Groom called John to preach before he had even been conceived in the womb of St. Elizabeth, and he was to be the forerunner and baptizer who prepares the way for Him (Mark 1: 2). The Baptist summoned the multitudes to enjoy the divine treasure with his call: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2) The Baptist urged the young girl (the human race) to adorn herself with repentance and rejoice in her faith in the Groom, the king to come.

### **The Prophet Isaiah, the Bride's Teacher**

The crowds recognized the character of St. John the Baptist whom Isaiah had prophesied about, saying: "'Comfort, yes, comfort My people!' says your God.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill brought low. The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth;" (Isaiah 40: 1-4, Matthew 3:3).

The multitudes became assured of his identity and perceived that despite his life in the dry wilderness, his words were exceedingly rich. He looked humble, but his words resounded powerfully in everyone's ears. He owned nothing but preached vigorously about the heavenly treasures from above.

### **The Church assumed the Groom was *John***

The bride approached the Groom's friend and he washed, purified, cleansed, and sanctified her with his preaching of repentance and his declaration of the coming Bridegroom. She stood in amazement at his attractive personality, thinking that he is her Groom, her Betrothed! At the time when the true Messiah remained hidden from her eyes in His incarnation, she assumed that John - the servant - was the king himself.

The Groom's friend was sincere in his service and loudly he cried out, "I am not the bridegroom!" He wanted to turn her eyes away from him and to the Bridegroom with his words: "whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose" (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1: 7; Luke 3: 16). He preserved the supremacy of his Lord and clearly confessed, "He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me" (John 1: 15).

### **The Church and the Baptist await the True Bridegroom**

Hearing John's frank and candid words, many of those seeking the truth and longing for the Messiah Savior stood alongside him. Their eyes and hearts eagerly sought the coming Bridegroom. Many were ready to welcome the true Bridegroom, but what are His signs?!

John's testimony about his Master, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1: 9), raised numerous questions in the depths of their hearts. Yet no one dared to ask him publicly: How do we know who the Bridegroom is?!

St. Jacob of Serugh says that just as the incarnate Word of God came to reveal His love to His bride, the forerunner prepared her to stand by the waters and await Him with open arms, so she will be ready to receive Him when He comes forth from His baptism.

## **John awaits the Bridegroom**

Alongside all the other hearts ablaze to receive the true Bridegroom of whom John spoke, *the latter himself would raise his eyes to heaven during all baptisms, waiting to see and hear a testimony from heaven to the Bridegroom.* John realized that the Bridegroom was present, standing among the multitudes, and he inflamed the hearts of the crowds with yearning for Him!

## **Adorned in Repentance, the Bride and Guests receive their white garments from the Holy Spirit**

St. Jacob of Serugh contemplates the crowds as they immerse themselves in the waters of the Jordan to receive John's baptism of repentance. They receive an incomplete washing and partial purity because this baptism has not yet been made perfect despite its importance. Although they come out of the water adorned with the beauty of repentance, they are still naked and await the Messiah who will grant them spiritual garments, white garments, which symbolize the purity and glory that the heavenly Groom offers to His bride and makes her holy!

## **Why did the Groom seem to be late?**

As St. John started to baptize and the crowds gathered around him, it might seem as though the Bridegroom was late. *Why such a delay?*

1. In order to give John the opportunity to preach about Him and inflame hearts with longing to see the Bridegroom.
2. So that John may await Him at the riverbank until the Bridegroom who is hidden among the crowds reveals Himself.
3. St. Jacob of Serugh says that the waters of the Jordan surged with intense emotions and earnestly awaiting the coming Groom. When the river heard John's testimony, its waters overflowed and welcomed the Bridegroom! Silence then reigned after John's testimony, as though the river was wondering how Christ would be baptized in it. If we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Christ or the Feast of the Divine Theophany (Epiphany), the saint says that the river itself rejoiced in such a unique and wondrous event.
4. The river's exuberance expressed the joy of the feast as its waters overflowed in expressive silence. *The Holy Spirit kindled its running streams and its waters were inflamed with the Holy Spirit's fire, not to sanctify the Holy Christ but to be prepared to embrace Him and become itself sanctified and able to birth children of God.*

5. John realized what was happening to the waters, that they were being prepared to receive the Bridegroom and His sanctification. That is why he cried out among the crowds and drove them back from the riverbank so that only the Bridegroom would descend in it. He also withdrew his hand so as not to lay it over the holy Bridegroom's head.
6. The crowd withdrew to make way for the Bridegroom so that He would come down alone in the River Jordan, being the only Bridegroom.

### **John and David teach the Church about the Bridegroom**

John announced to the church that this is her Bridegroom who takes away the sin of the whole world by offering Himself as a sin offering on her behalf. Similarly, King David the prophet picked up his harp and played a song at this wedding ceremony: a song that joyously recounts the secret of his joy. David sang what had previously been prophesied in Psalm forty-five (Psalm 44 LXX). *John testified about the Groom's person and David summoned the bride to unite with Him*, saying: "Listen, O daughter, Consider and incline your ear; Forget your own people also, and your father's house; So the King will greatly desire your beauty; Because He is your Lord, worship Him." (Psalms 45:10-11)

### **John Refuses to Baptize Christ**

Christ approached St. John the Baptist who drew his hands away from the Fiery One. How can straw approach and baptize a divine flame? How can the fleshly baptize the heavenly?

John did not expect that the One who sent Him forth would come Himself to be baptized! He immediately bowed his head in awe and reverence and confessed, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" The Baptist had thought his task was only temporary until the appearance of the holy One who will then baptize instead of him. After all, it would only be appropriate for him to leave this job to the powerful One who had sent him.

When Christ requested to be baptized, the Baptist was astounded. How can the King of kings ask for something like that from a lowly man? Why does the perfect One ask to be baptized?! He is One without sin who grants forgiveness, why does He need baptism? He is the heavenly High-Priest and the King of Kings! He is the One who sanctifies high priests, establishes kings, and sanctifies sinners! What can the insignificant River Jordan offer to the Creator of heaven and earth? The Baptist trembled and was humbled by the Lord's humility.

## **Christ is Baptized to heal Adam**

The Lord Christ is never in need of anything because He is perfect in Himself and is not dependent on anything outside Him, St. John the Baptist realized. However, Christ's love is what brought Him to the world corrupted by sin. His desire is to find His image that humanity had lost. *This is the pearl of great price that He wishes to restore back to humanity that had been corrupted by sin.* He desires to clothe humanity with His righteousness in place of their nakedness, and it was His love that compelled Him to descend into the depths of Hades, seeking to restore His pearl to God the Father. It is His heart's desire! This way the Savior will restore Adam and his descendants to their inheritance.

## **The Grace that summoned the Lord to Birth summons Him to Baptism**

We should not be surprised that Christ accepted baptism for our sake. In His tenderness and humility, the Word of God accepted to become an infant and descend into the Jordan for baptism. *Though John thought that he would be honoring Christ by refraining from baptizing Him, he would have honored Him much more by preventing His incarnation in the first place!* He who descended to the virgin's womb and became man came down into the waters of the Jordan and was baptized. The Word of God accepted the path of the incarnation and completed the way as a man even though while He is God in truth.

## **Christ affirms that Water Requires Sanctification**

According to the words of Christ, St. Jacob of Serugh explains that our Christ was not in need of anything, but went down to the river to be baptized for the following reasons:

1. Humankind was in need of His baptism, because when the Holy One descended to the waters of the Jordan to be baptized, He sanctified baptism and opened the path of holiness to those who will believe in Him.
2. Believers need a weapon to resist the devil in their warfare against him. By the baptism of the Lord, He made of baptism an arsenal of spiritual weapons by which the believers could arm themselves in their battle against the devil.
3. By His descent, He established Himself as the leader of the battle against Satan and transformed the believers into brave warriors and heroes.

4. In baptism, water is transformed into flames as the Holy Spirit recreates us in the image of our Creator. The believers become imprints of the Holy Creator, and His image is inscribed upon them instead of their corruption<sup>1</sup>, for by their sin they had become the devil's property and had carried his image within them.
5. In baptism He was buried and raised, granting His believers immortality by the power of His resurrection.
6. Through Him the womb of baptism becomes fertile, giving birth to the children of God the Father, by whom the world is renewed.

### **How can I baptize You like the rest, O Baptizer of All?!**

In the conversation that took place between Christ and St. John the Baptist, as envisioned by St. Jacob of Serugh, the Baptist says the following:

1. I had previously spoken with the multitudes approaching me to prepare them to be a bride for the Light. The bride's Groom is her Lord who comes to baptize her with the Holy Spirit and fire, and she is earnestly waiting for this baptism by Your hands! How can *You* be baptized by *me*?
2. I fear lest the masses think that I am lying to them or think that You are imperfect and in need for forgiveness, when You are the One who forgives sins!
3. I have learned the ritual of baptism of sinners, so what kind of ritual do I practice when I baptize You? Do I baptize You in the name of the Father when You are one with Him, inseparable from His bosom? Do I baptize you in the name of the Son, and You are the Son, the sanctifier of the water? Do I baptize you in the name of your Holy Spirit, and You are one with Him? How do I practice the ritual in the name of one of the three Hypostasis, as if I were to divide them while they are an inseparable and indivisible Trinity?

### **The Fiery Coal descends to be washed in the Waters!**

St. John the Baptist was trembling and silent, and allowed the Only-begotten Son of God to be baptized according to His will, and bowed down to Him. John trembled at the ineffable mystery and sensed the river's exuberance. *Just as Elizabeth had felt the joy of her baby John before the incarnate Word, so did John feel the Jordan's joy when the fiery Holy One descended into it.* He realized that

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matthew 22:15-22

the waters of baptism had become like a heavenly fire burning across generations. The baptism of this wondrous One astonished John just as it amazed the heavenly ones. It was as though lightning had surrounded Him in the water.

❖ And while the son of barren parents was trembling on account of all this,  
Then he let the Son be baptized according to His wish.  
He approached trembling, adored while confessing, reached Him while  
being shaken. He was shaken and terrified but the power, that would not  
fail him, supported him.

The Holy One came, and reached the waters to descend to be baptized,  
And his fire kindled among the waves and inflamed them.

The river leaped for joy in the pure womb of baptism,  
Just as John in Elizabeth towards his Lord.

The waters were inflamed by the lightening flames  
Because the Living Fire ad come for the baptism to be washed by them.  
It [the Living Fire] sets the ages on fire and casts its flame into the fountain  
and the glow from it kindled the river in holiness.

The ordinary water was mixed with the splendor of holiness.  
Because from the Holy One mercy had gone out and kindled them.

*Coal of fire came down to be washed among the rushing streams  
And sprinkled there the fieriness of its holiness.*

The Flame came and took off the garments that it was wearing  
And descended to place fire in the water of baptism.

The heavenly beings marveled at that ablution of the Flame  
when its glorious body was rinsed to sanctify the waters.

The rushing streams of water were mingled with rays of light  
and the river had been set on fire with the brightness that dwelt in it.

The tips of the waves were tossed about by the currents  
and the lightnings of flame surrounded it from all sides.

An amazement and a great wonder struck the creation  
when the Flame descended to be baptized by John.

The whole air grew warm and became inflamed in a holy manner

because the Son of the Holy One descended for baptism though He was not lacking.<sup>2</sup>

**St. Jacob of Serugh**

### **The Wondrous Divine Celebration of the Heavenly Groom**

When the Lord Jesus Christ descended into it, the River Jordan resembled a majestic heavenly ceremony.

1. Clouds of light sprang up and gathered over the River Jordan *as though they desired to become the glorified Bridegroom's bridal chamber.*
2. Mists gathered around Him like the veils of His royal palace, and they greeted Him when He came out from the river.
3. The Father spread glory and splendid lightning in the air to declare the glory of the Bridegroom, His Only Begotten Son.
4. Gorgeous colors appeared all around the river.
5. The Father's voice filled the heavens and declared that the Bridegroom is His Beloved Son.
6. His Holy Spirit, being inseparable from Him, came upon Him in the form of a dove and affirmed that the Father's voice refers to the Lord of Glory, Jesus, as though *the Holy Spirit is the Father's finger which points to His beloved Son.*
7. As the Mosaic law requires the testimony of two or more witnesses, the Father and Holy Spirit testified to Him.

### **The Church asks David to interpret his psalm (Psalm 77: 16-17)**

Such a magnificent scene! The utmost heights are harmonized with the uttermost depths! From the heights the Father's voice resounded and announced the glories of His Son, and in the depths the waters surged and overflowed. Before this glorious sight, the church invites the prophet David, the sweet chanter of Israel, to sing the praises of the wedding feast. She asked him to speak about the wedding banquet clearly, because there is no longer any room for symbols.

David recited his psalm (Psalm 77: 16-17) and sang: *"The waters saw You, O God; the waters saw You, they were afraid; the depths also trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies sent out a sound; Your arrows also flashed about."* Zechariah

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, translated by Thomas Kollamparampil, CMI. Rome: (Centre for Indian and Interreligious Studies, and Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997), FH VI.

the prophet joined David the psalmist and declared the Bridegroom to be 'the East' or 'the Sunrise'. His rays spread in all directions because He is the Sun of Righteousness.

### **John stretches his hands upon Christ the Fiery Flame**

The heavenly hosts wondered within themselves: How could this handful of straw be stretched out over the head of consuming Fire?! How could such a hand not burn even though we prostrate before Him in fear and trembling? The hand of clay moves while the heavenly ones glorify Him with all their hosts.

- ❖ The flame descended to be baptized by the dust that His hands had fashioned.

**St. Jacob of Serugh**

### **This is My Beloved Son**

The Father Himself spoke and not through His creation, the One who has no human tongue nor speaks a human language. The Father was not ashamed to speak of His only Son who took the form of a slave but sang a beautiful melody that was never uttered before, singing of the affection of His fatherhood towards His Beloved Son.

- ❖ Heaven was torn open and the Father proclaimed about His Beloved.  
The Spirit shone forth and stood there to bear witness concerning the Only- Begotten.  
The Father himself truly spoke personally  
so as to indicate that His Son was genuine.  
A new word was heard among the gathering,  
The exalted voice, the like of which was not again spoken,  
*A melody that has never been sown in the ears of men,*  
*A fearful resonance that by itself made its voice heard.*  
He did not speak like that word on any other time,  
Because He did not have another son in any other place.  
The Mighty One thundered to express His love for His Son among the  
crowds.  
To announce to them that He is the true Son.  
The affection of the Fatherhood was greatly stirred towards the Only-  
Begotten,

And it (the Fatherhood) had uttered to show that He was his Beloved.<sup>3</sup>

**St. Jacob of Serugh**

### **The End of the Levitical Priesthood in John, and the Beginning of the New Priesthood in Christ**

Christ did not receive a priesthood in the waters of baptism, for His heavenly priesthood was not extrinsic to Him. Rather, His baptism ended the role of the Levitical priesthood, and He handed a new priesthood to His disciples so that they might practice priesthood through Him.

No priest had ever been king in the Old Testament, because priests had been from the tribe of Levi while kings from the tribe of Judah. Melchizedek, the king of Salem and the priest, had been a symbol of Christ because his father and mother were unknown.

The Levitical priesthood and David's kingship were preparing the way for Christ, the Heavenly Priest and King of Kings. **The two were perfected in Him, not because He was in need but for the sake of humanity, so that humanity might know Him through their symbolism of Him.**

- ❖ This is the reason that called Him to come for baptism;  
so that the dominion of the priests should be concluded in Him...  
The Father gave the deposit to Moses on the mountain  
and sent His Son who received it from John in the water.  
It was handed down by the tribe of Levi,  
and the Lion's Whelp of the house of Judah arose and carried it from him  
(John)...  
*The kingdom proceeded with the priesthood and rested upon Him,  
While He is the High Priest and the King of kings.*  
The kingdom came from the house of David and poured out upon Him  
While His kingdom is much richer than the sea.  
Blessed is He who came and was baptized by His envoy as it pleased Him.  
He is the one who sanctified baptism; to Him be glory.<sup>4</sup>

**St. Jacob of Serugh**

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH VI.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH VI.

❖ From one step to the next, He [the Lord Jesus] walked,  
like a merchant of *life* who distributes it among the dead.  
*In the first step He dwelt in Mary*  
and was born to visit the world as man  
*The second step was baptism:*  
and He dwelt in it to clothe warriors with armor.  
John became a voice in the wilderness to prepare the way,  
and opened a door to restore humankind back to God's house ...  
John came to arrange the bride's betrothal to the Son of God  
and to wash away her uncleanness.  
He immersed her into the water, and washed her with repentance to be  
pure,  
so she could see the Bridegroom, the King.  
He cleansed her in the river and removed her shame  
lest the Bridegroom sees her dirty, for He loves beauty.  
*With baptism he made her pure and chaste,*  
*then he brought her to the bridegroom when she was holy.*  
Thus the son of the Levites rushed to the river  
to prepare from the water the bride adorned with beauty ...  
He spoke about the greatness of the King her Lord,  
and unceasingly preached of His heavenliness ...  
Every day he would kindle her heart with love that she may long to Him,  
but the Bridegroom was hidden, and the bride did not recognize Him.  
*She learned from John how great and glorified He is, that Christ is hidden,*  
*and that the whole wilderness is ablaze with the desire to behold Him.*<sup>5</sup>

**St. Jacob of Serugh**

Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

The Glorious Feast of Epiphany

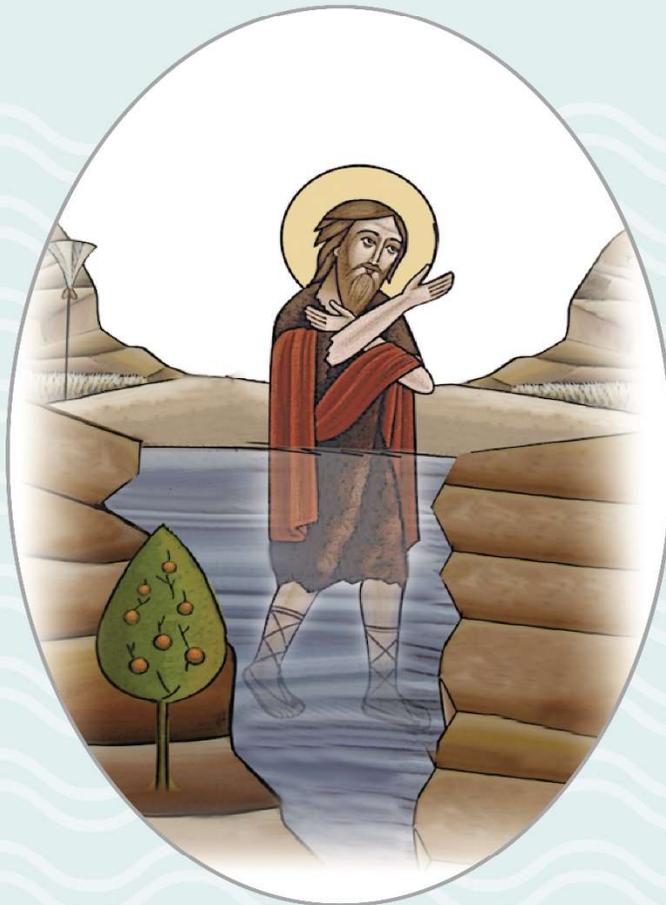
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<sup>5</sup> Jacob of Serugh, *Tarjama men Al-Suryania Ila Al-Arabeyya Wa Derasa Ala Myamer Al-Malfan Mar Ya'coub Al-Serugy (A Translation from Syriac to Arabic and Study on the Mimre of the Teacher Mar Jacob Al-Serugy)*. Translated by Behnam Sony, Part One (Baghdad, 2003), Homily 7.



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**2021**