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Matthew 3:17—Quoting God: Why the Gospels

Differ

One of the only times that God speaks directly in the New Testament may be found in the stories of Jesus’s baptism. But what God says in Matthew differs slightly from what God says in the other two Synoptic Gospels.

Matthew 3:17	Mark 1:11	Luke 3:22
And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”	And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”	And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Though the English is the same in both Mark and Luke in the NRSV, the Greek uses different prepositions: a more literal translation might read “with you” in Mark and “in you” in Luke.

The more significant difference, however, is that in Matthew, God speaks about Jesus in the third person, apparently informing John and others gathered as to the identity of the one who had just been baptized. In Mark and in Luke, *God speaks to Jesus in the second person*, informing him of his identity—or confirming that identity.

Scholars have tried to interpret these modes of divine revelation (*about* Jesus or *to* Jesus) in light of the Gospels’ christological understandings.

Augustine (354–430)

The Bishop of Hippo rightly discerned that Bible readers might be troubled by this apparent discrepancy. One would think that, if ever there were a time for precision, it would be in citing the words of God spoken directly from heaven. But the bishop assured readers that such precision is unnecessary because the verses all mean the same thing:

Whichever of the Evangelists may have preserved for us the words as they were literally uttered by the heavenly voice, the others have varied the terms only with the object of setting forth the same sense more familiarly, so that what is thus given by all of them might be understood as if the expressions were: "In You I have set me good pleasure," that is to say, "by You I am doing what is my pleasure."

So, the second-person account is to be preferred. And all three of the evangelists might have done better to say "by you" rather than "with whom," "with you," or even "in you."¹

Did God Speak Greek?

Augustine leaves unanswered the question of what language God actually spoke. If it were Greek (the language in which all three Synoptic record the saying) it is unlikely that John, Jesus himself, or any of the bystanders would have understood. If God spoke in Hebrew or in Aramaic, then the issue becomes one of variant translations.

1. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:119–20.