

The Baptism of Jesus



*The Baptism of Christ, Juan Fernández de Navarrete, "El Mudo" |
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¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John tried to prevent him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus said to him in reply, “Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed him. ¹⁶ After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened (for him), and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (and) coming upon him. ¹⁷ And a voice came from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

The Ministry of John The Baptist

The story of Jesus in Matthew 3:1–4:16 is bracketed by John the Baptist’s ministry.

- *In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea (and) saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (3:1-2).*
- *From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (4:17)*

John prepared the way for Jesus and his ministry. Where John’s proclamation is that the kingdom is “right around the corner,” Jesus announces that the kingdom is here in the person of the Messiah, the Son of God. The “inauguration” of the in-breaking of the kingdom (*kairos*) into Time (*chronos*) occurs at the baptism of Jesus which serves as the occasion for the coming of the Spirit and the Father’s approval of his beloved son.

And all of this is then immediately tested by Satan (4:1) in the periscope that follows our text. There Matthew continues to show Jesus as the fulfillment of the Covenant – where Israel failed in the desert, giving into temptation, Jesus is obedient and faithful to his Father. Tested, Jesus then becomes the

“new Moses” announcing far more than the promised land – announcing the presence of the Kingdom of God.

That Jesus was baptized by John is undoubtedly a historical fact. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus received from John a baptism connected with the forgiveness of sins. It is inconceivable that the early Christians, who held Jesus in such high esteem, would have invented a story in which Jesus received something from John and that this reception would involve the baptism of repentance.

Matthew uses this scene to bring the adult Jesus onto the narrative stage for the first time, to present him and his mission to the reader in terms of his own Christology. By bringing Jesus into the on-going story of John (3:1-12) Matthew preserves the continuity of salvation history from the OT through John to Jesus. It is clear that the continuity is at the initiative of Jesus.

The gospel text naturally divides into two parts: (1) the discussion that precedes the baptism, and (2) the scene following the baptism when *he came up from the water* (v.16). Within the first division there is one question which begs to be answered – why did Jesus receive the baptism of John? The ancillary context is “....Jesus had no sin, and so had no need for baptism – did he?” Within the second division is the more basic question – “What does all that happened – the voice from heaven, the coming of the Spirit – what does it mean?”

John and Jesus in Dialogue

As John the Baptist mysteriously appeared in the wilderness, so too Jesus. John appeared proclaiming: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (3:2). It was a very public appeal to which people responded: “*Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins*” (3:5–6.) Jesus appears on the scene and Matthew makes it clear that Jesus’ purpose is to be baptized by John (v.13).

These verses are found only in Matthew: “*...to be baptized by him. John tried to prevent him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?’ Jesus said to him in reply, ‘Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he allowed him*” (vv.13b-15). It seems as though John has recognized the nature of Jesus’ mission. Matthew gives us no clue of the means by which John recognized Jesus (it is Luke who reveals the family connection between Mary and Elizabeth). The intention of Jesus to be baptized ignites an oppositional tone in the dialogue between John and Jesus. Clearly John tries to dissuade Jesus from being baptized at John’s hand. The verb (*diakoluo*) is imperfect, implying a continued action in the past (“was preventing”); in other words, it could have been an extended argument.

What gave John pause? At a minimum John recognizes Jesus as the one “*coming after me [who] is mightier than I*” (3:11). At the level of operative culture, it is not John’s place to baptize Jesus. That being said, it is not clear that John is aware of the full nature of Jesus or his mission (cf. 11:3). Later Christians would raise the specifically theological question: why does the sinless Son of God submit to John’s baptism? John is clear that his baptism is associated with repentance (v.2), that people were acknowledging their sins (v.6) and were required to show the fruit of their repentance (v.8). Perhaps this is on John’s mind – what is clear is that John did not view his baptism as worthy of or appropriate to Jesus. In any case, Matthew makes clear that John is not superior because he had baptized Jesus.

Jesus’ baptism is not a prefiguring of Christian baptism, it is not a gateway to prepare people for baptism in Spirit and fire (v.11). What is it then? In this first public appearance in Matthew’s narrative, Jesus is identifying himself with the faithful remnant of people who recognize their own sinfulness and their dependence upon the mercy of God. This becomes the active symbol of Christian life viewed as a relationship with God through God’s chosen people. It was this relationship which John’s baptism demanded (cf. 21:32), and which now requires Jesus to identify himself with the

penitent people of God in order to fulfill his mission. So Jesus regards his baptism among repentant Israel as a necessary step in his accomplishment of God's purpose of salvation – to *fulfill all righteousness*" (v.15).

All Righteousness

Righteousness (*dikaíosynē*) is a complex concept rooted in the Hebrew *sedeq-šēdāqā* and *mišpāṭ*. In short, as used by Matthew, *dikaíosynē* refers to right conduct before God. This is the consistent usage in Matthew. Jesus is baptized so as to do what is right with God (3:15). The hungering and thirsting of 5:6 is for a right state before God. Yet this righteousness is God's gift (6:33). It is to be sought with his kingdom. It brings persecution (5:10). It includes the practice of piety (6:1). The way in which the Baptist came is that of right conduct (21:32).

Boring (Matthew, *New Interpreters Bible*, 160) comments on the phrase:

Both righteousness and fulfillment are key Matthean theological themes. Righteousness here means, as often elsewhere, doing the revealed will of God. Here, fulfill seems to mean simply "do, perform," and the meaning is that it is necessary for both John and Jesus to do God's will, which includes the baptism of Jesus. The plural "us" links John and Jesus together as partners in carrying out God's saving plan (11:2-19).

The First Temptation of Christ

Brian Stoffregen has an interesting insight about righteousness as "do, perform" what God requires of us.

John, by trying to prevent the baptism, tempts Jesus not to do all that God requires of him. He tempts Jesus to assume his proper position now: to be the more powerful one; to baptize with the judgmental Holy Spirit and fire; to meet John's need. I don't think that these are too dissimilar to the devil's temptations that occur immediately after the baptism (4:1-11) -- temptations for Jesus to use his power now, for his own glory; and avoid his emptying and eventually the pain and suffering of the cross.

What does God require of Jesus? Is it just the baptism? I think that baptism is only part of the picture of Jesus identifying with sinful humanity: the Sinless One is baptized for the forgiveness of sin; the Holy One eats/fellowships with unholy sinners; the Immortal One dies on a cross as a criminal. It is part of the emptying of himself -- the God who becomes truly human.

In fact, the "emptying," occurs even earlier in Matthew. We have been told that the child has been conceived from the Holy Spirit. We have been told that "Jesus" will save his people from their sins. We have been told that he will be called "Immanuel" -- God is with us. What happens to this very special child after his birth? He has to flee for his life. The one, who will save his people, has to be saved from Herod. The one who is "God-with-us" has to flee from the Promised Land. He (and his parents) are acting as people who have been emptied of power.

This thought is highly reflective of Philippians 2:6-11 in which Jesus empties himself "*becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.*" This passage from Philippians strongly echoes Is 53:12 which speaks of the "Suffering Servant" of God – one who does what is right before God and thus fulfills all righteousness.

The Baptism of Jesus

The scene is filled with eschatological overtones. The heavens are opened, a voice comes from heaven, the Spirit is given. The Judaism of Jesus' day tended to regard all of these elements as the revelatory gifts of God that happened in now-past OT times and that no longer occurred. But they also believed those signs would reappear in the "last days." What becomes clear is it is not the baptism that is

central to Matthew's narrative, but the events that follow. Those events reveal the beginning of the long awaited eschatological events of salvation.

Different scholars will give varying accents and background to the three signs – mostly surrounding the idea of *fulfilling all righteousness*. In Jesus' baptism, he and John fulfilled the OT by revealing the Messiah to Israel. This baptism, an inauguration of Jesus' ministry to Israel, led immediately to OT fulfillment in that the Spirit, as a dove, came upon the Messiah and the Father endorsed his Son in the voice from heaven. In baptism, Jesus as the servant proclaimed and exemplified the righteousness envisioned by the prophets. Additionally he identified in baptism with the repentant righteous remnant within the nation of Israel (Mt 3:5–6). His baptism reveals his humility and anticipates his ministry to lowly but repentant people..

The Spirit

The Baptism, with all its import and significance, is followed by a quite revelatory event: “... *and behold, the heavens were opened (for him), and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (and) coming upon him.*” (Mt 3:16).

The opening of heaven is familiar elsewhere in the NT as an expression for a visionary experience occurring in John, Acts, and Revelation. In the OT, perhaps the significant parallel is Ezekiel 1:1. Standing beside a river, Ezekiel sees heaven opened and receives a vision and hears God's voice commissioning him for his prophetic role, later giving him the Spirit (Ezek 2:2). In Isaiah 63, the prophet pleads with God to tear open the heaven, come down, and save his people. There is ample precedence for the opening of heaven to be the prelude to the divine communication and the giving of the Spirit.

The descent of the Spirit of God echoes the well-known messianic prophecies in Isaiah which say that God will place his Spirit upon his chosen servant. As R.T. France points out, this does not mean that before now Jesus has been without the Spirit, since Matthew has attributed his birth to the Spirit (1:18, 20). But now as the Spirit descends on Jesus, He is visibly equipped and commissioned to undertake his messianic mission. (*Matthew, 121*)

One wonders if Mathew also has in mind the hovering of the Spirit above the water of creation in Genesis. Does Matthew understand Jesus' baptism as a “new creation,” a genesis? The word “genesis” is the word and idea with which Matthew begins the genealogy (1:1, 18).

When the Spirit comes upon people in Acts it is evident in their subsequent behavior, speaking in tongues and preaching boldly rather than in any visible “descent.” But such is not the case at Pentecost. (Acts 2:2–3) when we read of both audible and visible phenomena, wind and fire. The Baptism of Jesus is the only occasion when we hear of the Spirit appearing in visual, corporeal form, “*like a dove.*” Is there an OT precedence for this? There is certainly no direct connection, but some scholars think that perhaps Matthew has in mind a “fusion” of water, new creation, and the flood narrative when all begins again with Noah sending out the dove. Interesting, but speculative.

The Voice

“*And a voice came from the heavens, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’*” (Mt 13:17). The voice from heaven speaks the words that are repeated at the scene of the Transfiguration (Mt 17:5) and reveal God's proclamation of Jesus' full identity. After Jesus' acceptance of John's baptism as the will of God for him, God declares his pleasure because of the obedience and more fundamentally, declares the unique relationship between God the Father and his Son.

The words of the declaration are usually understood to be derived from one or both of Isa 42:1 and Ps 2:7.

“Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased.” (Isaiah 42:1) and goes on to say that God has put his Spirit upon him, which links closely with what we have seen in v. 16.

“You are my son; today I have begotten you.” (Ps 2:7) in which God addresses his anointed king

The echo of both passages lend themselves to Matthew’s focus of fulfillment passages. While his primary fulfillment focus will be Jesus as the One to come, greater than Moses, Matthew is attentive to other fulfillments: son, servant, king.

As R.T. France points out: “God is not quoting the OT, nor setting a puzzle for scripturally erudite hearers to unravel. He is declaring in richly allusive words that this man who has just been baptized by John is his own Son in whom he delights. From this point on Matthew’s readers have no excuse for failing to understand the significance of Jesus’ ministry, however long it may take the actors in the story to reach the same christological conclusion (14:33; 16:16; 26:63–64). It will be this crucial revelation of who Jesus is which will immediately form the basis of the initial testing which Jesus is called to undergo in 4:1–11: “If you are the Son of God ...” (4:3, 6). And there, as in the account of the baptism, Jesus’ sonship will be revealed in his obedience to his Father’s will.” (*Matthew*, 124)

What does this mean?

As already mentioned, Matthew’s primary focus is not on the baptism, but on the events that follow: the heavens opening up, the descent of the Spirit and the voice of God. But let’s return for a moment to consider the meaning of John’s baptism. John’s baptism was not a sacramental baptism, but rather was a preparatory, symbolic, prophetic action. It was a sign of repentance (Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:4), a ritual preparation for the coming Messiah, a public acknowledgment of one’s desire to turn away from sin, and a way of awakening Israel to expect God’s imminent saving act

Jesus’ baptism was not because He needed purification. He did not become holy by the waters. Rather, He made the waters holy by entering them. (*cf.* St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Ambrose, St. Thomas Aquinas) By descending into waters used for repentance, Christ prepares them to become the instrument of rebirth. In this He was baptized to reveal Himself as Messiah and sanctify the waters for Christian baptism.

Importantly, Jesus identifies Himself with humanity. John’s call for repentance was a call for the people to remember that they were people in Covenant with God. His wilderness ministry called them to the Jordan River at the spot where the people first crossed into the land promised in the Abrahamic covenant. They are called to return to the beginning, reenter the land, and once again be a covenant people. By his baptism, Jesus shows that he stands with the covenant people.

But at the water’s edge it is revealed that he is the Son of God and thus at the same time is the maker of the Covenant, the means by which God has chosen to redeem us. At the water’s edge Jesus inaugurated His public ministry, fulfilled all righteousness and so began the saving plan of the Father.

Notes

Matthew 3:13 to be baptized: Jesus’ arrival at the Jordan to be baptized by John led to a brief discussion between John and Jesus before John agreed. The verbal structure of the verse in Greek makes clear that Jesus came with the specific intention of receiving John’s baptism.

Matthew 3:14 *John tried to prevent him*: prevent (*diakoluo*); this is the only occurrence of this word in the NT. The related word *koluo* is used once in Matthew at 19:14 where the disciples are preventing little children from coming to Jesus. Both these “preventative” measures reflect the culture of the time: learned teachers didn’t associate with children and inferiors didn’t baptize superiors. In both these instances, the opposite of “preventing” is *aphiemi* = “allowing,” “letting it happen.” This is also the word commonly used for “forgiving”.

Matthew 3:15 *it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*: in this gospel to fulfill usually refers to fulfillment of prophecy, and righteousness to moral conduct in conformity with God’s will. Here, however, as in Matthew 5:6; 6:33, righteousness seems to mean the saving activity of God. To fulfill all righteousness is to submit to the plan of God for the salvation of the human race. This involves Jesus’ identification with sinners; hence the propriety of his accepting John’s baptism.

Matthew 3:16 *the heavens were opened (for him)*: new possibilities of communication between God and humankind (cf. Ezek 1:1; 2 Macc 3:24 ff; Jn 1:51; Acts 7:55-56; 10:11; Rev 11:19; 19-21-21)

Matthew 3:16 *the Spirit of God descending like a dove*: lit. “like a dove does.” The phrasing echoes the Spirit of God moving upon the water (Gen 1:2) another symbol of new communication between God and humankind

This sign parallels the ‘call’ of many of the Old Testament prophets. Mark’s account, and less clearly Luke’s, suggests that it was a purely private experience; John (1:32–34) indicates that John the Baptist at least saw *the Spirit descending like a dove*, though the accompanying revelation to him was not the divine pronouncement recorded in the Synoptics. Matthew’s account is similar to Mark’s. The third-person form of the proclamation (“this is my beloved son” in v. 17) suggests a public revelation, but this is hard to reconcile with the fact that Jesus’ Messianic status was not publicly stated throughout his ministry, and was only grasped by his closest disciples much later (16:13–20); Matthew therefore, while assimilating the words to those at the transfiguration (17:5), probably intends them to be understood as addressed to Jesus only. The whole focus of the account is on Jesus’ ‘commissioning’, not on a public revelation of his mission.

Matthew 3:17 *a voice from heaven*: The third symbol of new communications between God and humanity. ***This is my dearly loved Son.*** The heavenly voice confirms and interprets the import of the heavenly vision of the Spirit’s descent. The words of the heavenly voice express the Father’s approval of the Son (cf. 17:5) in words blending the suffering servant motif from Isa 42:1 with the sonship motif of Ps 2:7. The servant motif interprets the baptism by which Jesus identified with the righteous remnant of Israel. The sonship motif recalls the unique circumstances of Jesus’ conception and infancy (1:16, 18–25; 2:15) and sets the scene for Satan’s tests (4:3, 6). The sonship motif also implies Jesus’ Davidic connections (1:1; cf. 2 Sam 7:13–14; Ps 89:27).

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