WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST?

By Alvin Lam

Introduction

One of the common records among the Four Gospels of the New Testament is the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (Mk. 1: 9-11; Mt. 3:13-17; Lk. 3: 21-23). Although the Gospel of John did not describe the incident, its reference gave clear indications that the apostle John knew of Jesus’ baptism. The submission of Jesus to the baptism of John seemed paradoxical as He who is presented as sinless throughout the New Testament made a seemingly voluntary submission to a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Even Edersheim remarks: “Nowhere in rabbincic writings do we find any hint of a Baptism of the Messiah, nor of a descent upon Him of the Spirit in the form of a dove.”

To the Christians, Jesus’ baptism is as much a puzzle now as it was to John the Baptist then when he asked, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” The puzzle is further complicated by the fact that often in Churches, believers are exhorted to be baptized so as to “follow the Lord in baptism,” as if the believer’s baptism has the same significance as Jesus’ baptism. Gundry, for example, applies this event in Matthew 3 to exhort Christians not to delay baptism when he writes: “ἀπτόμενος implies instantaneousness. That, in turn, emphasizes the significance of Jesus’ baptism as a model for Christian baptism: converts are not to delay this first step on the way of righteousness.”

Even Martin Luther believes that Jesus “allows himself to be baptized for our example and our comfort.” No New Testament writer seem to have indicated any relations between the two baptisms. Hagner thinks the real point of the passage in Mt. 3:13-17 is “not the baptism of Jesus but the threads of continuity and discontinuity between John and Jesus.

---


3. See Charles C. Ryrie, Basic Theology (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1986), 421. While explaining the importance of baptism, Ryrie cited Jesus’ baptism as a reason for its importance. Though he did clarify that Jesus’ baptism was entirely different from Christian’s, nonetheless one still have the impression that a believer should be baptized simply because Jesus exemplified it in obedience to the Father’s will.


Only through contact with the forerunner can Jesus be launched into his own ministry. That contact and the formal beginning of Jesus’ ministry are filled with theological significance. Even if this is true, the question as to why Jesus was baptized has not been answered. This paper seeks to understand the reason Jesus was baptized by taking into account some of the theological emphasis of Matthew since his account states Jesus’ conversation with John the Baptist. Also, a look at the ministry and message of John the Baptist, and the various views offered as plausible answers to the question at hand. The last section will be an attempted suggestion for the reasons for Jesus’ baptism.

**The Theological Emphasis of Matthew’s Gospel Considered**

As Gromacki states, “The content and organization of each canonical book reflect some definite purpose behind its writing.” Matthew is no exception. The very first purpose of Matthew’s gospel is to identify Jesus Christ as “the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt. 1:1). This is fundamental to every other theological emphasis in Matthew’s writing. For it is this identity of Jesus that determines such matters as fulfillment, righteousness, authoritative exposition of the law, eschatology and ecclesiology. Also Matthew seeks to present Jesus Chris as the fulfillment of the Old Testament hopes. Hence the extensive quotations from Old Testament passages. No doubt that Matthew, along with Hebrews, is the ‘most Jewish’ book in the New Testament.

Matthew places a great emphasis on the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ in his gospel. The book contains extensive discourse materials and the information is arranged logically rather than chronologically.

**Righteousness in Matthew's Gospel.** In the New Testament, the word δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosyne) appeared most often in Matthew and Pauline epistles (17 times each). A major emphasis in Matthew’s gospel is the doctrine of righteousness. In

---


8Hagner’s statement is true only in light of the notion of continuity and discontinuity between John and Jesus. Since Jesus’ appearance on the scene, John’s prominence started diminishing. John anticipated it, and willingly acknowledged that he must decreased so that Jesus might increase (Jn. 3;30). The Baptist had accomplished his task as a forerunner now that the Messiah had appeared on the scene.


Matthew, righteousness relates to those who continue in the will of God without any suggestion of merit but as pure gift of God (Mt. 3: 15; 5: 6; 6: 33).\textsuperscript{13} John’s ministry was described to have come “in the way of righteousness” (Mt. 21: 32). Contrary to rabbinic Judaism where righteousness was identified with conformity to the Law, Matthew highlighted the fact that nobody had any claim upon God, “And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’, for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham” (3: 9). The conflict between John, the Pharisees, and Scribes arose because John declared that God’s calling of men was in the nature of free gift and nothing to do with just rewards (Mt. 21: 32). This infuriated those who fancied that they were in the way of righteousness (23: 27f). Keener elaborates:

To tell Jewish people that they had to be baptized or repent the same way non-Jews did would have been offensive, because it challenged the prevalent Jewish belief about salvation. Most Jewish people thought that if they were born into a Jewish family and did not reject God’s law, they would be saved; John told them instead that they had to come to God the same way that non-Jews did. The point of John’s baptism is that everyone has to come to God on the same terms.\textsuperscript{14}

Hence these Pharisees and Scribes did not submit to his baptism.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, Matthew’s emphasis of righteousness points to the fact that “the righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees (5: 20) affects the whole person, transforming not just external behavior but also the disposition of the heart as well (5: 8).”\textsuperscript{16} Jesus taught that the truly justified ones are those who have acknowledged their sins and placed their trust in God for forgiveness and his righteousness, not those who trust in themselves as righteous because of their moral deeds (5: 36 cf. Mk. 21: 7; Lk. 18: 14; 23: 28 cf. Lk. 16: 15; 18: 9).\textsuperscript{17} Hence righteousness according to Matthew is an outward manifestation of that invisible disposition of the heart.\textsuperscript{18}

**Fulfillment in Matthew’s Gospel.** Another interesting feature of Matthew’s Gospel is his use of the theme of fulfillment. Saucy remarked: “Matthew’s stress on the


\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid}, 360.


\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Idem}.
fulfillment theme for Jesus is well known from his formulaic usage of πληρώματος in 1:22; 2: 15, 17, 23: 4: 14; 8: 17; 12: 17; 13: 35; 21: 4; and 27: 9.” This is noteworthy since Jesus mentioned “to fulfill all righteousness” in Mt. 3:15. Also, this is an essential key to all Matthew’s theology as he sees in Jesus God’s purposes have come to fulfillment.

The Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew’s Gospel. Another distinct feature in Matthew’s Gospel is that he rarely uses the phrase “kingdom of God’ but “kingdom of heaven’ instead. While in passages where Mark and Luke refers to the “kingdom of God,” Matthew chose to use “kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 13:31; Mk. 4:30; Lk. 4:13:18). In all likelihood, Matthew deferred to the common practice among the Jews the common practice of avoiding the divine names of by substituting other terms such as “heaven.” It should be noted the phrase “kingdom of God” is normally synonymous to “kingdom of God.”

Gundry writes:

basileiva may denote a sphere of rule or, as here the rule itself. Heaven does not indicate the sphere of rule, but its source. In particular heaven stands for God. Since among the evangelists only Matthew has ‘heaven’ for “God’ in the expression, and that nearly always, we may presume Jesus ordinarily spoke of the kingdom of God and Matthew paraphrased with τῷ ὄντα τὸν ὄνταν τῷ.

That the proclamation of John the Baptist that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand refers to the coming person of Jesus is to be noted in light of John’s ministry.

The Ministry of John the Baptist Pondered

The task as a forerunner. John performs the rite of baptism which was unique to his own day. Unlike the Qumran sects whose baptism was self-administered, John performed the baptism personally and was thus called, “the baptizer.” Also, John’s baptism

---

19Mark Saucy, 177.
20R. T. France, Matthew, 38.
21David K. Lowery, A Theology of Matthew, 36.
22John F. Walvoord, Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 30. Walvoord holds that the Kingdom of God only include true believers who are born again. Whereas the kingdom of heaven include all who profess to be subjects of the King. He also draws a three-fold distinction in the use of the term “Kingdom of Heaven.” (1) In John the Baptist’s ministry, the Kingdom of Heaven is in the person of the King, Jesus Christ, which was presented to Israel and the world. (2) In Mt. 13, the Kingdom refers to the rule of God over the earth in the hearts of the believers during this resent age when the King is absent. This is a mystery because this concept was not revealed in the OT doctrine of the kingdom. (3) The climatic form of the Kingdom will be when Christ returns to set up the Kingdom of heaven on earth.
23Robert H. Gundry, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co.,1982), 43. Gundry goes on to suggest that He also thinks that Matthew prefers heaven to God to avoid his readers from inferring that God the Father rules to the exclusion of the Son.
was a once-for-all act. His function as the forerunner was similar to the Oriental courier who preceded his monarch to proclaim the king’s coming and the necessity of the citizens preparation for his coming. The Synoptic Gospels all cited Isa. 40: 3 indicating that John was the man prophesied by Isaiah to be the forerunner of the Messiah (Mt. 11:10, 14; Lk. 1: 76; 7: 27). By stating Mal. 3:1 Mark was pressing the point that Israel was not anticipating the Messiah’s coming when the forerunner appeared. John’s task was to prepare the people in terms of moral behavior and outlook. Metaphorically speaking, “to make the path straight” is to speak of the removal of obstacles to the Lord’s coming. Hendriksen suggested that it means to provide the Lord a ready access to the people’s hearts and lives by the clearance of obstacles that have been strewn in the path of their lives. As important as the task of a forerunner might be, John’s significance lay only in his relation to Jesus, that wherever John is mentioned in the gospel it is to throw light on the mission of Jesus. Hence, John’s preparatory work is to provide the setting for the commencement of Jesus’ public ministry.

The message of the forerunner. To prepare the people for the coming kingdom John has to call on the earthly people of God to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom of Heaven is at hand because the King is coming. As far as John is concerned, the baptism is for those who have repented, and through a changed conduct they would escape the impending judgment. John’s water baptism do not confer remission of sins. It merely confirmed outwardly what had transpired inwardly - namely, repentance. Walvoord writes: “It is clearly not Christian

---

24 Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 191993), 457, 492, 513. Concerning the Qumran baptism, it was “non-initiatory, for one was admitted to the water only after taking the oath of membership. The roots of the Qumran practice were in the Old Testament washing for purification. It was presumably self-administered, as were the Jewish washing, although we have nothing explicit on this.”


26 For the discussion between Malachi and Isaiah passages, See Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 430. “Malachi was addressing a people who have no right to its claim of blessings, and Malachi is implying that the covenant people were not looking for their God.”

27 Robert L. Thomas, & Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, 33. “To receive the Kingdom promised them by the OT prophets, Israel’s people need to repent. John’s baptism then identified the remnant that had achieved such moral preparation.”

28 Eugene Merrill, 430.


baptism, as it does not signify initiation into the body of Christ. It is rather a religious rite, signifying their confession of sins and commitment to a new holy life, such as was proper for Jews in the old dispensation.\textsuperscript{32} This baptism is devoid of any nationalistic or legal righteousness, but required a turning from sin to God.\textsuperscript{33} Such proclamation was rather revolutionary for the Jews had always thought that salvation was for all of them, and some proselytes. And the advent of the Messiah would be a time of joy and judgement - joy for the Jews and judgement for the Gentiles. John broke the concept and announced that God had no intention to reserve the kingdom only for Abraham’s children, and that the axe is not reserved for the wild olives only.\textsuperscript{34} Hence, the entrance to the Kingdom is based upon one’s repentance. Plummer writes:

It might almost be said that John had excommunicated the whole nation, and would re-admit none to communion, unless they professed, not merely sorrow for their sins, but resolution to break off from them and start afresh. As a token of this solemn change of life, he plunged them under the water, to bury the polluted past, and then made them rise again to newness of life.\textsuperscript{35}

Hence, John rejected the Pharisees and Sadducees’ desire for baptism when these religious people were trying to do was to show the world how ready they were for the Messiah though they had not repented (Lk. 3; 7-8).\textsuperscript{36}

Repentance, from John’s perspective, is more than a legal observance whereby forgiveness is obtained by means of fasting, prayer and legal traditions of Judaism. Rather, John’s preaching of repentance is similar to the OT prophets’ radical demand for “a once-for-all commitment to God, and a ‘turning’ of one’s whole self to the fulfillment of his will.” Carson elaborates further: “Repentance is neither simply feeling sorry for one’s sins, nor a merely intellectual change of mind about them. It is a radical change of direction, a transforming turn around of the entire person. It involves the will and thought and emotion and action, and issues a ‘fruit in keeping with repentance’ (3: 8).”\textsuperscript{37} Such call to


\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid}, 39.


\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid}, 21-22.


repentance carries with it a great sense of urgency in light of the coming kingdom.\textsuperscript{38} Saucy writes: “repentance conditioned the whole kingdom proclamation.”\textsuperscript{39} Hence, while John’s ministry exhorts the people to repent from their sins, it also look forward to the imminent coming kingdom.\textsuperscript{40}

\section*{The Various Views Concerning Jesus’ Baptism Offered}

Not a few discussions has been made in light of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. Some views offered are listed in the various broad categories, including some aberrant ones. Varied as the views may be, most of them can be categorized under these broader headings.

\textbf{Aberrant Views Offered.} As early as AD 190, Theodotus taught that at baptism, Jesus became the Christ and received power for his ministry. Yet Jesus was not fully God until his resurrection. At some point between baptism and resurrection, God adopted Jesus. Theodotus was eventually excommunicated by the Roman Church.\textsuperscript{41} The Ebionites held that Jesus as a human possessed unusual gifts of righteousness and wisdom. He was the predestined Messiah, whom Christ descended upon at the baptism in the form of a dove. This was to be understood as the presence of God’s power and influence within the man Jesus, and that at the end of his life, Christ withdrew from him. Thus Jesus was merely a man whom God’s power resided and was active in him with extraordinary degree.\textsuperscript{42}

Another view states that Jesus’ baptism indicates his acceptance of his life as a mission of continuous self-giving.\textsuperscript{43} Another suggested that “Jesus came apparently in
simple submission to the religious call of John. It was after he had been obedient that he had the vision and came to understand the work God wanted him to do."^{44}

However, Jesus’ baptism was not an inner experience but an objective reality. John’s words and Matthew’s perception clearly indicates that the experience was an objective reality (Jn. 1:33; Mt. 3: 16). All the spectacular phenomena does not mean that Jesus was previously uncertain of his calling or of himself. Rather it reveals the fact that the Trinity was involved in this special event in the life of Jesus the Messiah. No uncertainty ever arise during those three years of Christ’s public ministry (Mt. 14:23; 1: 1-5; 26: 39-46; Lk. 22:43; Jn. 12: 27-28).^{45}

**Induction as John’s Disciple.** Badke proposed the notion that Jesus’ subordination to John’s baptism was for the purpose of becoming a disciple of the Baptist. That Jesus began as a disciple of John, while the Baptist himself also helped in the process the former’s rise to greatness by announcing that Jesus was the Coming One. And that John was busy gathering disciples to turn them over to Jesus.^{46} Cullmann, likewise, entertained this notion suggesting that Jn 3:22 refers to a period when Jesus himself was still a disciple of John the Baptist when He began baptizing converts.^{47} However, in the Gospel of John, it was specified that Jesus did not baptize but left it to his disciples (4: 2). Morris answers: “We do not read of Jesus as baptizing in any other Gospel than this, and from 4:2 we learn that the actual baptizing was carried out by the disciples, not by Jesus in person.”^{48}

**Anticipation of His baptism of death.** One of the most commonly held view, which essentially states that Jesus submitted himself to John’s baptism in anticipation of his baptism of death as the Servant of God who must suffer vicariously for his people as mentioned in Isaiah. The emergence from the waters of baptism is deemed as Jesus’ intended figure of his death.^{49} Cullmann states:

---

44Baptism” The Expository Times 104: 3 (Dec. 1992), 82.


46William B. Badke, “Was Jesus A Disciple of John?” Evangelical Quarterly 62:3 (1990), 201, 204.


49Oscar Cullmann, Baptism in the New Testament, 15-22. Cullmann seem to have read the significance of Christian baptism back into Jesus’ baptism: “The parallelism between ‘being baptized’ and ‘dying with Christ,’ whose origin goes back to the life of Jesus at His own Baptism by John in Jordan, is traceable through the whole of the New Testament and is not limited to Rom. 6. 1ff.” Donald A. Hagner, “Matthew 1-13,” 57. Hagner disagrees. He thinks it’s Jesus’ way of showing solidarity with his people in their need.
Jesus, on the contrary, at the very moment when he is baptized like other people hears a voice which fundamentally declares: *Thou are baptized not for thine own sins but for those of the whole people. For thou are he of whom Isaiah prophesied, that he must suffer representatively for the sins of the people. This means that Jesus is baptized in view of this death, which effects forgiveness for all men. For this reason Jesus must unite himself in solidarity with his own people, and go down himself to Jordan, that ‘all righteousness might be fulfilled’. . . . Thus the Baptism points forward to the end, to the climax of his life, the Cross, in which alone all Baptism will find its fulfillment.*

Johnson likewise holds that John’s baptism of Christ foreshadows His death, and Calvary is His baptism in death. Gaebelein states: “baptism means death and resurrection. He had no sin, but came to be the substitute for sinners, and so he takes in the very beginning their place, the sinner’s place in death.” Morgan suggested that Christ was baptized in the consciousness of sin. He writes: “He was baptized as a repenting soul. His also was a baptism of repentance. His also was a baptism of the confession of sins. In that hour He repented, He confessed sins. But the repentance was not for himself, the sins were not his own.” Likewise, Hendriksen holds that Jesus “did, after all, have sin, namely ours.” and that Jesus was baptized as one having sins (ours), and that John’s baptism would be meaningless if it were not so.

Moreover, Jesus said that the act of baptism is “fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” which cannot involve a shared death. John the Baptist was a forerunner not the co-messiah. Carson argues that “in this Gospel, righteousness is not used to refer to what Christ by His death secured for others, but to life and conduct that conform to God’s will.” The “us” is not royal “us” but both Jesus and John who must fulfill righteousness entirely.

Arguing against the view that Jesus’ was baptized in anticipation of his death, White writes:

---

50 Ibid, 18-19.

51 S. Lewis Johnson, J., “Baptism of Christ” BibSac (July 1966), 228.

52 Arno C. Gaebelein, The Gospel of Matthew (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1910), 74-75. Like others who hold the substitutionary view of Jesus’ baptism, Jesus’ statement in Mk. 10: 38 is deem a confirmation of this position.


The idea of Christ’s vicarious baptism appears nowhere in the New Testament; His vicarious death is everywhere, but the consequence drawn from it is that they who truly believe need not die. The logic which builds upon vicarious baptism demand that all be baptized is hard to follow. The theory is altogether precarious, brilliantly but unconvincingly supported, and historically unnecessary.\(^{57}\)

Another view presented by McDonnell suggested that Jesus’ baptism at Jordan: is merged with his descensus into Sheol, with the waters in terror and the inhabitants of the deep in dread, an attempt to bring the cosmos to testify that the baptism of Jesus is not a naked sign, but redemptive symbol. Into the very domain of death life enters and conquers the gods of death. With divine freedom Jesus extends his victory to the just from the days of Adam -patriarchs, prophets, and the holy ones -living a shadowy, neutered existence in Sheol.”\(^{58}\)

To McDonnell, this Jordan/descensus is not a religious abstraction, but a proclamation of the power of Christ. However, it is difficult to see the relationship between Eph. 4: 8-10 and Jesus baptism.\(^{59}\) Also, in the Greek usage of the vocabulary of baptism, the imagery speaks of one being overwhelmed by disaster or danger. Both Jesus and his disciples were familiar with the rite of John’s baptism, and Jesus intended in Mark 10: 38 to convey the picture of his impending death on the cross as a messianic fulfillment. The context in Mark 10: 38 has nothing to do with Jesus’ baptism at Jordan.\(^{60}\) Concerning Mt. 10: 38, Wessell states: “Baptism is a symbol of a deluge of trouble.”\(^{61}\)

One must remember that Jesus did not take upon Himself the sins of the world until his death on the cross.\(^{62}\) Paul states: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Gal. 3:13). Again in Eph. 1: 7 Paul writes: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.”

**Inauguration into the Priestly Ministry.** Based upon Luke 3: 21-22, this view sees


\(^{59}\)See Peter O’Brien, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 293-296. Three views listed relating to this passage, but the context is Christ’s ascension in reference to his giving of spiritual gifts to the Church.


\(^{62}\)Isa. 53: 12; Rom. 5:8-10; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24; Rom. 4:25;1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4.
Jesus’ baptism as an inauguration of his priesthood. Proponents of this view associated some basic features mentioned in Jesus’ baptism as reasons for such view: Luke’s mentioning of Jesus’ age as thirty, the locale associated with a river, and the attendant elements were the opened heaven, a voice, and the spirit. Therefore, the event is linked to Ezekiel’s inauguration into the priestly ministry in Ezek. 1:1 “Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.” Also, the fact that the priestly setting was seen at the start of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ concern with fulfilling correct ritual (2:22-24), and the Temple emphasis gave further support to this view. Chafer states:

It is significant that when Christ came to be baptized, it is declared, “Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age. (Luke 3: 23). Such a detail is not added without meaning, and, when reviewing the Mosaic law, it is discovered that the male child who would enter the priesthood was not eligible to do so until he was thirty years of age (cf. Num. 4:3), and from the added fact that there was no other public ministry to be entered which prescribed its age limits. It is reasonable to conclude that the baptism of Christ has to do with His consecration to the priestly office.

However, Jesus was not set apart to be a priest after the order of Aaron, but that of Melchizedek’s (Ps. 110: 4). The priesthood is limited to the tribe of Levi, and family of Aaron. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. The appointment to the order of Melchizedek took place only upon Jesus’ resurrection. Only then can Jesus be inducted into his priestly office. Broadus states: “He had no connection whatever with the priestly line, and he did not do the work of a Jewish priest.”

The Significance of Jesus Baptism Reasoned

Christ’s baptism is significant for the following reasons:

---


65 Alex T. M. Cheung, “The Priest as the Redeemed Man: a Biblical-theological Study of the Priesthood,” 269-272. However, Cheung also highlighted some of the dissimilarities by pointing out that OT priests practiced total separation of holiness from uncleanness, Jesus touched unclean persons and made them whole. Jesus also deliberately healed on the Sabbath, contrary to the Mosaic law.


To identify publicly with John’s Ministry. Jesus said to John, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” By so doing, He authenticates John’s ministry and message. Recognizing John’s baptism has as its source from heaven (Jn. 1:6), Jesus’ submission to John’s baptism is His recognition of John’s mission. Blomberg seemed to concur when he notes, “in so doing, Jesus identifies with and endorses John’s ministry as divinely ordained and his message as one to be heeded.” This “us” renders great doubt upon the theory that the righteousness refers to Jesus’ death. John’s message has eschatological implication since his message states that the kingdom of heaven is at hand is true because the King is already here. Also, fulfilling of righteousness has sometimes been stated as Jesus fulfilling every command of the Scriptures, and baptism being one of them. Yet one must also remember that John’s baptism was originally for repentance, not for righteousness. That Jesus became aware of his Messiahship only upon baptism is unacceptable. John’s reaction against Jesus’ baptism, and his acknowledgment of the Person of Jesus, and the unworthiness of baptism for Him ought to show that if John knew the superiority of the One requesting baptism, how could Jesus not realized his messiahship? Nonetheless, John’s attempt to prevent this baptism was unsuccessful. The phrase “tried to prevent” in NASB was translated from the word diekóleüen meaning “trying to prevent.” Yet Jesus’ reply of “ἀφες ἐφετεί” was a command that implies a sense of


71D. A. Carson, Matthew, 107.

72R. H. Gundry, Matthew, 43. He also thinks that Matthew prefers heaven to God to avoid his readers from inferring that God the Father rules to the exclusion of the Son.

73D. A. Carson, Matthew, 108.

74D. A. Carson, God With Us, 25.; Ibid, “Matthew” EBC, 107. Matthew here focuses on the testimony of the Father and the Son’s sinlessness, not John’s testimony. However, in the Fourth Gospel, John’s testimony is very important.

something that was desired (voluntaries), attempted (conative), or at the point of almost happening (tendential).  The nuance of this verb in Mt. 3: 15 implies something in progress but not complete or was attempting (unsuccessfully).


81*Idem*.

would in due course accomplish.\textsuperscript{83}

Consistent to his name, Immanuel (יְהוָה מֵאָדֹם), which is found only in Matthew’s Gospel underlines the reality that in Jesus none less than God came right where the people are (1:23).\textsuperscript{84} Also true at the end of this Gospel is the same promise that He will be with them to the end of the age (28: 20).\textsuperscript{85} Thus, Jesus began his public ministry by identifying Himself with them in their need through the waters of baptism.\textsuperscript{86} Beasley-Murray was right to draw the distinction between the concept of solidarity and substitution:

When the baptism of Jesus is included under the latter category, Jesus is thought of as taking the place of the sinner; when the former category is employed, Jesus is viewed as taking a place alongside the sinner. Admittedly there is a vicarious aspect even in the idea of Jesus establishing a solidarity with the people, but this is inherent with the very notion of a Messiah Who acts on behalf of His people.\textsuperscript{87}

Morgan states aptly: “He who had no sin to repent of, took His place among those who had sin to repent of.”\textsuperscript{88}

\textbf{To commence his ministry as Messiah-Servant of the Lord.} The public ministry of Jesus commenced only upon the supernatural event that took place immediately following his baptism. In the synoptic gospels, the voice from heaven declared in Luke 3:22, “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.” This affirmation is linked to several Old Testament passages. The first phrase “my beloved Son” alludes to Psa. 2: 7 which identifies Jesus as the Messiah. While the last phrase, “in you I am well-pleased” identifies Jesus as the Servant as seen in Isa. 42:1.\textsuperscript{89} Wessel sees this as a fusing of the concept of the Messianic king of the Coronation Psalm of 2: 7, and the Lord’s Servant of Isaiah 42: 1.\textsuperscript{90} That Jesus, identifying with this Servant, took his stand with his people, by


\textsuperscript{82}D. A. Carson, \textit{God With Us}

\textsuperscript{83}R. T. France, 80.

\textsuperscript{84}G. R. Beasley-Murray, 57.

\textsuperscript{85}Ibid, 57-58.


\textsuperscript{88}Walter W. Wessel, Mark in \textit{EBC} vol 8, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. Co., 1984), 622. The main emphasis, according to Wessel is the unique sonship of Jesus to God. For discussion of servant concept see Donald Guthrie, \textit{New Testament Theology} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), 258-268. See F. Duane Lindsey, “The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42: 1-9” \textit{BibSac} 139: 553 (Jan-Mar 1982): 12-27. The anonymous servant of Isaiah 42:1-9 can be neither Israel nor Cyrus nor any other person other than the royal Davidic Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.”
“identifying Himself with them and their repentance in baptism in their obedience to the
baptism of John, and through his sinlessness fulfilling that which they could not.”91

That Jesus is the Messiah-Servant can be seen from the four Gospels. Although
Matthew never specifically call Jesus a “Servant,” yet consistently, he showed Jesus the
Messiah as One who was also a servant. For example, Matthew applied the text of Isaiah
42: 1-4 to Jesus’ healing ministry (Mt. 12: 18-21). Likewise in Mt. 8: 17 Matthew cited Isa.
53: 4 with regards to Jesus’ healing ministry.92 Even Jesus in his first sermon (Lk 4: 18-19)
included the quotation of Isa. 61:1-2a and 58: 6 that showed his own perception of his
own identity and task as Messiah-Servant.

**The testimony of His Sonship.** Integral to the baptism of Jesus is the fact that all
four gospels stands united in testifying that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus did not become
the Son only when he was baptized. Rather, his baptism is an affirmation of his sonship to
the Father.93 Lane states:

Jesus did not *become* the Son of God, at baptism or at the transfiguration; he *is* the
Son of God, the one qualified to bestow the Holy Spirit. The rending of heavens, the
descent of the Spirit and the declaration of God do not alter Jesus’ essential status,
but serve to indicate the cosmic significance of Jesus’ submission to the Servant-
vocation and affirm God’s good pleasure in his Son.94

Mawhinney also writes: “The baptism presupposes Jesus’ Sonship, but it initiates
his public ministry. Jesus did not become God’s Son at the baptism. He already is the Son
of God who at his baptism embarks upon his eschatological office as the Messiah the
Servant of the Lord.”95

Liefeld noted that “the words ‘love’ and ‘well-pleased’ convey the idea of choice
and special relationship.”96 Jesus’ relationship to the Father is very important because it is
the ground and basis for his election into the messianic office.97

---

53:11ff.


93For discussion against Adoptionism, see James R. Edwards, “The Baptism of Jesus According to the Gospel of
Mark” *JETS* 34: 1 (March 1991), 55-57.


95Allen Mawhinney, “Baptism, Servanthood, And Sonship” *WTJ* 49 (1987), 42.


97George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 164. “This also includes a hint of the fact that the messianic
office is to be carried out in terms of the servant of the Lord.”
Conclusion

The baptism of Jesus is significant because it authenticates His public ministry as well as identifying who He really is. Jesus’ baptism occurred not for the sake of the Jews then only but also for the present believers that all might know that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah who came to seek and to save that which was lost.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


___________.. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL:


