THE BAPTISM

All four Gospels share the baptism of Jesus by John in the waters of the Jordan River. In fact, there is no small tension that Jesus participates in this event and identifies with those who also participate in John's call of baptism.

Truly, the baptism of Jesus serves as a connection and transition from the work of preparation through John to the appearance of the one who brings fulfillment.

The only account that stands between the arrival of Jesus at the Jordan where he is baptized and the inauguration of his ministry is the temptation narrative in the wilderness.

The outline for Matthew's record of the baptism can be divided as follows:

1) the arrival of Jesus,

2) the conversation between John and Jesus,

3) the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus after his immersion and the heavenly voice.

The events of the baptism then, are the center of attention in Matthew's narrative rather than the baptism itself. Thus, the central point of the passage are the threads of continuity and discontinuity between John and Jesus.

Only with a connection with the *forerunner* can Jesus be launched into his own ministry.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.
Matthew 3:13

Matthew begins this section with the word "*then*" which he often uses to connect the present passage with the previous.

The Greek renders the verse stating that *Jesus arrived* which Matthew uses to connect the inauguration of Jesus's ministry with the inauguration of John's ministry.

In those days <u>John arrived</u> preaching in the wilderness of Judea.
Matthew 3:1

Then <u>Jesus arrived</u> from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.
Matthew 3:13

John arrived preaching in an Old Testament manner about repentance, preparing the way for the One to come whom he announced. Now Jesus arrives as that One, bringing salvation to the repentant and judgment to the calloused.

It's interesting to note if Matthew used Mark as a source for his Gospel, that he omits *Nazareth* from his text.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.
Mark 1:9

Perhaps the reason for his omission here is that he already mentioned it in 2:23 as the place where Jesus was taken to live in fulfillment of Scripture. Its inclusion here, however, would seem to have been a place to strengthen his point.

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.
Matthew 3:13

The wording *to be baptized by him* is only recorded by Matthew in this way and reveals the austere force of Matthew's narrative, setting the scene for the conversation between Jesus and John that will follow.

But John tried to prevent him saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?"
Matthew 3:14

The strong wording suggests that John was not prepared for this turn of events. Indeed, he tries to hinder the request of Jesus. John understood his own need to be baptized by Jesus but seems to have misunderstood the importance of his own baptism to the ministry of Jesus.

Matthew does not tell us what caused John to recognize his own need to be baptized by Jesus and his reluctance to baptize Jesus. What Matthew does relay to us is the implication that John recognized Jesus as the one whose way he had been preaching about and preparing.

This is the conclusion Matthew desires his newly converted to Christ Jewish followers to understand. Since this Gospel was most likely written in the 50's or 60's AD, these Jewish readers would have in all probability, already broken ties with the synagogue as hostility between Judaism and the fledgling faith were already arising, Matthew, therefore, would have an invested interest in them grasping Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament typologies and prophecies.

Did John and Jesus meet before this recorded event? The Gospel's record them as cousins so the answer could be yes. John's protest to baptize Jesus might suggest that they had previous connections which is why John could object so strongly. John's Gospel suggests that the two quite possibly did not know each other, but this could be more to do with the *"Lamb of God"* designation rather than any prior familiarity.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"
Matthew 11:3

Despite the seeming uncertainty of the query here, it suggests John recognized Jesus as Messiah.

John's reluctance doesn't stem from a lack of faith but from a lack of full understanding. How can the messenger who has used baptism to prepare the way for the coming Messiah also be the one to baptize the Messiah whose way he prepared?

It would seem only natural that the One who baptizes with the Holy Ghost and fire would be the One to baptize the messenger who prepared his way baptizing with only water.

If we give it thought, John's reluctance and words are exactly what we would expect him to say.

Jesus replied to him, "Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then John yielded to him.
Matthew 3:15

The answer Jesus gives is one of Messianic authority as witnessed by the imperative *"Let it be"* which carries the idea of refuting John's reluctance – *John tried to prevent / Do not prevent.*

"Let it be so now"

Ironically, at the same time the imperative is delivered with a softer meaning with the words *for now.* In other words, John's reluctance is given approval in that Jesus' submission to John's baptism is *for now.* Once he inaugurates his ministry, such would be an impossibility.

Jesus implies that this baptism is *right and proper* for the rightness of it accomplishes God's will. In other words, there is a *divine necessity* that this action take place.

In this scene, Matthew paints an historic intimacy between Jesus and John, one that can be traced back into the pages and millennia of the Old Testament record.

These two men have a unique function to fulfill that will indeed *fulfill all righteousness.*

Righteousness is a key concept in Matthew – he uses it seven times – and is preeminently the goal of discipleship. It is closely associated with the coming Kingdom.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Matthew 5:6

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.
Matthew 6:1

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all of these things will be added to you.
Mattthew 6:33

John's appearance to make preparation is described by Jesus as his coming *"in the way of righteousness."*

For John came to you <u>in the way of righteousness</u>, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.
Matthew 21:32

The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say from heaven, he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'
Matthew 21:25

Matthew's use of *righteousness* has been the cause of much disagreement. Some argue that all seven occurrences of it in Matthew regard God's demand upon humanity for proper conduct before Him.

In regard to humanity, there is truth in this. But is that what Jesus is really aiming at? After all, in context of Matthew 3, the *righteousness* he speaks of is being accomplished between John's and Jesus's action.

Certainly, there is no divine commandment either in the Old Testament or in the Gospels to submit to John's baptism. Submission to such a baptism then, cannot be construed as an act of righteousness. Neither can it be thought of as fulfilling all righteousness.

Matthew, as do all the evangelists, has a salvation-historical perspective. Therefore, it would seem to be incorrect to think that his idea of righteousness here means purely a moral goodness before God.

More likely Jesus seems to imply by his use of the word *righteousness* in this context, the accomplishment of *the will of God,* which includes God's saving activity. That is, by the baptism and its main focus – *the accompanying anointing by the Spirit* – John and Jesus together *("for us")* inaugurate the fulfillment of God's saving purposes, *the saving activity of God.*

Only by His very literally standing-in with His people will they see the saving activity of God completely brought about.
F. D. Coggan

We could also see the *"fulfill all righteousness"* as referring to Jesus fulfilling all Old Testament prophecy as the submissive Servant. This Servant though not a sinner in himself, takes upon himself the sin of the world thereby establishing a righteousness in what had become corrupt.

In this act of baptism, John effectively and obediently brings his preparatory mission to its close. The *arrival of Jesus* on the scene at the Jordan signals the accomplishment of the Old Testament prophetic word with the transition to the Promised One.

Jesus is baptized not *because* he shares our need but *in order* to share our need.

"I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.
John 1:31

In this act of baptism, Jesus obediently submits to the will of the Father.

"Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Thus, in his first words in the Gospels, Jesus refers to the fulfilling of God's will in nothing less than the establishing of the salvation he has promised through what now begins to take shape.
G. Barth – Tradition, 137-41

Why does Jesus need to be baptized by John at all? Certainly not because he is a sinner nor to identify with John's movement. No, but to show his solidarity with his people in their need. The Messiah is a representative person, the true embodiment of Israel, not only as King but as righteous servant. Thus, he identifies with his people fully and obediently acting out the role spoken of him, receiving the Spirit in order to accomplish his mission. That mission and that identification with his people ultimately leads to his death as the Servant on behalf of his people.

Dale Brunner rightly sees Jesus' baptism as his first miracle – the miracle of the Incarnate God's humility.

She will bear a son, and you shall his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.
Matthew 1:21

And when Jesus had been baptized, he came up immediately out of the water. And look, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove might, and coming upon him.
Matthew 3:16

Jesus submits and is immersed. There is speculation that Jesus did not stay in the water in confession of sins but arose immediately. Matthew then lets us know that after he rises from the waters, the next events in his narrative take place.

the heavens were opened to him

This is a common Old Testament metaphorical expression.

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, <u>the heavens were opened</u>, and I saw visions of God.
Ezekiel 1:1

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence.
Isaiah 64:1

It refers to key episodes of revelation and provision.

And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."
Acts 7:56

and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.
Acts 10:11

And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.
John 1:51

Matthew clearly wants his readers to understand that it is God who is the active agent in the opening of the heavens.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not indicate whether the crowds witnessed this event, but the silence most likely reveals that they did not. In John's Gospel, however, the Baptist is clearly a witness to the supernatural event.

And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained (coming to rest) on him."
John 1:32

Matthew likely uses this as an allusion to the Servant passage of Isaiah and the Righteous Branch of the same prophet. The age about to be inaugurated is preeminently the age of the Spirit.

Behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.
Isaiah 42:1

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
Isaiah 11:2

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.
Isaiah 61:1

Jesus was from the Holy Spirit from his conception as Joseph was told in the dream.

> *But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the holy Spirit."*
> *Matthew 1:20*

> *The present anointing, however, has to do with the formal inauguration of his ministry, marked by the baptism and its aftermath, which is itself based on the dual pattern of the king's coronation and the servant's commission.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 58*

The Spirit is described here as *descending like a dove*. The reference to the Spirit being like a dove is mentioned in all four Gospels and it is important to understand that this is not metaphorical.

Luke says it descended in *bodily form like a dove* (Luke 3:22), and John tells us that the Baptist was witness to the Spirit's descent (John 1:32). Matthew only gives Jesus himself as witness to the Spirit's action but in any case, we have a literal descent of the Spirit upon Jesus recorded.

The Old Testament parallels are significant.

1) the rabbi's likened the Spirit's brooding over the waters to a bird nestling her young. In this sense the dove/Spirit here signifies new creation.

> *The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*
> *Genesis 1:2*

2) Parallel to the dove that returned to Noah's ark, the dove signifies the end of judgment conveyed in John's message, and the beginning of an age of blessing in the Presence of the Promised One.

> *Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. And he waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew the waters had subsided from the earth.*
> *Genesis 8:8, 10-11*

Of these two interpretations, the former seems to convey Matthew's meaning more accurately.

> *and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*
> *Matthew 2:17*

In verse 16 we are told *"behold, the heavens were opened to him"* which leads to the Spirit's descending on him and connects us here with the voice from heaven lending affirmation as to the identity of the one who has received the Spirit.

The voice is obviously divine and terminates the silence after 400 years since the return from exile. But Matthew means something that transcends rabbinic allowances and expectations. With the presence of the Messiah, the spirit of God is again abundantly active. The voice not only conveys approval of the one baptized but the authority of divine directness.

Matthew is using Psalm 2 in this verse to designate the importance of the Person being baptized.

The king says, "I will announce the LORD'S decree. He said to me: You are my son. Today I have begotten you."
Psalm 2:7

Mark and Luke follow the Psalm by quoting it as a direct statement made from the Father *to* the Son. Matthew alters it so that the Father speaks not directly *to* the Son, but *of* the Son. By doing so Matthew places Jesus in the position as the subject of the entirety of Psalm 2: the anointed, thus Messianic King. Jesus now anointed by the Spirit through this ceremony of inauguration (which in Psalm 2 is the coronation of the King), is about to enter into his ministry where the nations shall become his heritage.

Matthew has already set up this affirmation of the *Son* as messianic king earlier in his Gospel.

"Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel."
Matthew 1:23

and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord has spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."
Matthew 2:15

Matthew does not want readers to entertain the idea of adoption here. Jesus is now marked out formally as the Son of God who begins his work. This already was Judaism's expectation.

I will raise up your seed after you, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom 11forever. I will be to him as a father, and he will be to me as a son": He is the shoot of David who will stand with the Interpreter of the Law, who 12[will rule] in Zion in the latter days, as it is written, "And / will raise up the booth of David which is fallen": He is the booth (or branch) of 13David which was fallen, who will take office to save Israel.
4QFlor 10-14

The Unique Son, the Anointed One, the Triumphant King and the Humble Servant has arrived by the witness of John the Baptist and the approval of the Divine voice of the Heavenly Father.