

The Character Analysis of Jesus in the Matthean Baptism^{*}

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Abstract: The present paper aims to analyze Matthew's main character Jesus in the baptism narrative by comparing the Gospel of Mark (Mk 1:9-13//Mt 3:13-17). This character may well differ from that of the "Jesus of history" who actually lived in first quarter of the first century CE, and who is not our direct concern here. Based on the well consent two source theory, which explains the closely related literary among the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke), we shall try to illustrate that this character Jesus does have his own humanity, including thoughts, experience and character traits.¹ By contrast, this humanity of Jesus is more hidden in Mark.

Key words: Jesus; Matthew; baptism; character

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1. Introduction

Generally, scholars discuss theological or ecclesiastical aspects of this baptism story. They pay less attention to the humanity of Matthew's Jesus as a character.² In fact, any character in a text has multiple aspects, which are embedded in the text itself and can be observed. In comparison to the same scene in Mark, one can observe that Matthew makes some redactional changes and interpolations. Based on these observations, we discover that Matthew as author crafts four aspects of his main character: Jesus' decision, his relation to John, his adoption to God's sonship and his own conception about baptism. We shall discuss them one by one.

2. Decision Disclosure

Matthew exemplifies Jesus Christ as a human being in the baptismal narrative by articulating Jesus' own

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¹ Although the humanity of a person belongs to modern psychology, we are not going to apply any specific psychological model or perspective in establishing our hypothesis.

Examples of applying psychological models to understanding Jesus include, Fritz Kunkel, *The Creation Continues — A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1946). He applies Jungian psychology to interpret Jesus' baptism and temptation in Matthew. See also John A. Sanford, "Kunkel's Psychology and the Bible", in: Sanford (Ed.): *Fritz Kunkel: Selected Writings — Edited with an Introduction and Commentary*, New York/ Ramsey: Paulist, 1984, pp. 333-352.

² For examples, Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus I* (EKK; Düsseldorf, Zürich & Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger & Neukirchener, 1985-2002), p. 54, relates the need of retelling the Jesus' story to the self-understanding of the Matthean Church (ecclesiastically). W. D. Davies & D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew I* (ICC 1,1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), pp. 321-323, present eight theological interpretations.

decision to leave Galilee and to go to the Jordan for baptism. This disclosure is evident if the two narratives in Mark and Matthew are compared.

Mark 1:9 simply connects two events with the conjunction (καί): Jesus' departure from Galilee and his baptism by John at Jordan (ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦςκαὶ ἐβαπτίσθη). Mark merely reports that there were two events. Whether they are chronologically connected is unclear, and there is no reference to causality. The very high frequency of occurrence of this καί (79x) in chapter one does not suggest any specific or concrete meaning in connecting the two events. Jesus' purpose in leaving Galilee is sparingly seen in this narrative of Mark. As a result, the character of this Jesus in Mark's literary presentation is plain and flat.³

Matthew follows the topographical structure of Mark, from Galilee to Jordan.⁴ But if we consider Mark and his report of the action of Jesus' leaving Galilee, we could not assert from Mark's text that Jesus' action necessarily leads to his arrival at the Jordan, both topographically and chronologically. Matthew now redacts καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη of Mark and changes it to το τοῦ βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ in Mt 3:13, which is now constructed as the Greek articular infinitive, expressing the purpose of the subject.⁵

Insodoing, Matthew elucidates Jesus' decision to leave Galilee, with the purpose of going to the Jordan to receive John's baptism. Such an elucidation implies three dimensions about Jesus' journey from Galilee to the Jordan:

(1) Jesus' departure from Galilee has a clear destination: the Jordan. He does not simply wander around Galilee or Palestine.

(2) Jesus' departure from Galilee has a well-defined purpose: Baptism. His trip is not a part of random behavior.

(3) Jesus' arrival at the Jordan has a definite target: John. He does not randomly pick up anybody as his mentor, and/or baptizer.

From these three considerations above, we may conclude that Matthew presents this Jesus in terms of human characteristics. Matthew introduces the idea that Jesus is the decision maker with regard to his path ahead. We could further assert that Jesus would probably have heard of John and his teaching before his trip. This provides a hint to us that there would be some kinds of relation between Jesus and John, even prior to the baptism.

3. Relation Disclosure

Most scholars focus on the theological aspect between Jesus and John.⁶ Yet, it is generally understood that the role of John in the Synoptics is to be the forerunner for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Matthew's Jesus has decided to follow John by receiving his baptism, naturally and logically his teaching too. Apart from the baptismal scene, we note further that Jesus' behavior and teaching in Matthew are highly influenced by John after the baptism. On the behavioral level, we shall discuss two interpolated verbs: ἀκούσας

³ Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 9-12, distinguishes the characters in a story into three types: "round, flat, stock", possessing "all, few, one" traits of a person respectively. According to Kingsbury's model, Matthew's Jesus is relatively "round", and Mark's Jesus is then "flat".

⁴ The place Nazareth in 3:13 omitted (// Mark 1:9) is to be understood as Jesus grew up there before going to the river Jordan (2:23).

⁵ Blass, F. and A. Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), §390: "The infinitive of purpose". (1) In the NT it has become common again (from Homer) in a wide sphere with a variety of verbs of motion, and is the equivalent of a final clause.

⁶ For example, John P. Meier, "John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel", *JBL* 99 (1980), pp. 383-405 aims at "the special theological significance which Matthew's gospel assigns to John the Baptist", p. 383.

(having heard) and ἀνεχώρησεν (withdrew) in Mt 4:12. On the didactic level, we shall discuss the summary of the proclamation of both Jesus and John in Mt 3:2 and 4:17.

The Behavioral Level:

Matthew's Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee after John's imprisonment, similar to Mark. Mark simply narrates two events of John's imprisonment and Jesus' return to Galilee, without any obvious correlation, though a chronological sequence could perhaps be assumed.

In 4:12, Matthew introduces the aorist participle ἀκούσας to connect the two events. This tells us that they are no longer two separate events, but now the chronological sequence is visibly made clear by Matthew. This ἀκούσας provides further information by enriching the scenario narrating the relation between Jesus and John. First, it creates room to incorporate Jesus' desert experience, with Jesus' departure after John's baptism now being documented. Second, during the time of their separation, John engages in some activities, which lead to his imprisonment. By using this ἀκούσας, Matthew undoubtedly indicates that someone has told Jesus this news, which means that Jesus does have some companions at that time. Jesus is not alone even before his ministry is documented.

This Jesus, as shown above, is interested in acquiring John's news personally; and he is concerned about his baptizer John. He is also a person living among others. This Jesus in Matthew is explicitly humanized.

Matthew subsequently uses ἀνεχώρησεν in 4:12 to describe Jesus' behavior after hearing John's imprisonment. Jesus' withdrawal (ἀνεχώρησεν) to Galilee for his ministry does have a reason — John's imprisonment.

In order to understand this Jesus' behavior, we shall examine the use of the verb ἀναχωρέω, which is one of Matthew's favourite words, which he uses 10 times in comparison to Mark's single usage.⁷ Matthew inherits and preserves its only usage in Mark: Jesus escapes from the killing threat of the Jewish religious leaders (Mk 3:6-7//Mt 12:15). He adds the use of this verb to report Jesus' journey to Tyre and Sidon after Jesus comes in conflict with the leaders (Mt 15:21).

In the Infancy Narrative, Matthew employs this verb four times to describe the wise men or Joseph avoiding the political pressure or even persecution from Herod or his son Archelaus (Mt 2: 12. 13. 14. 22).

Finally, Matthew applies this verb to Jesus' response to John's imprisonment (Mt 4:12) and death (Mt 14:13). On both occasions, ἀναχωρέω with respect to Jesus could probably induce both meanings in the Matthean context: reflection and escape/withdrawal. After John's two tragic events, the political atmosphere is uncertain and depends on the decision of politicians or authorities. On the one hand, as John's disciple or pupil, Jesus could also be affected, and he might need to escape from the pressing political situation and withdraw from the current location thereafter. On the other hand, Jesus could also need time by himself for reflection, to digest John's fate and possibly to plan for the next step of his mission.

The insertion of the verb ἀναχωρέω in this Matthean context about John enriches our understanding of these two events from a political background, and adds to our understanding of Jesus as a person living in a real political society, and Matthew implicitly describes that Jesus' withdrawal is related to John.

⁷ Among the 10 occurrences, 8 are related to Jesus' own action except Mt 9:24; 27:5. Besides Matthew and Mark, this verb occurs three more times in the whole New Testament (Joh 6:15; Act 23:19; 26:31). Deirdre Good, "The Verb anachōreō in Matthew's Gospel" in *Novum Testamentum* 32, 1 (1990), pp. 1-12, studies it for the first time. She wants to use it and to establish the three-fold pattern of fulfillment hostility/withdrawal/prophetic in Matthew. But, she fails to observe its double meanings created by Matthew, as our discussion below shows.

The Didactic Level:

In the discussion above, we have assumed that Jesus agrees and receives John's teaching while accepting his baptism. Next, we will discuss this in greater detail.

Matthew employs the same wordings, “μετανοεῖτε· ἡγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν” for both Jesus and John as their summary proclamation (3:2; 4:17). At first glance, readers naturally have the impression that their two proclamations are identical, at least, both of them come from God. However, a closer look at the texts leads to the question of whether both messages are actually the same.

Matthew's literary device makes it possible to think that Jesus follows and develops John's teachings. Matthew expands the idea of “repentance” in the narrative and in Jesus' mouth (Mt:7 vs Mk:3),⁸ similarly that of the theme of “fruit” of a tree.⁹ The agricultural metaphor of John's proclamation occurs in the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43), uniquely among the Synoptics. However, Matthew deletes John's compelling tone of the ax lying at the root of the fruit-bearing tree (Mt 3:10 and //) in Jesus' own teaching, so that the pressure of God's punishment is subtly reduced, which makes a significant difference between Jesus' teaching and John's.¹⁰

Why does Matthew use the identical phrases as the summary of the preaching of both John and Jesus if their proclamation does not mean the same?

About a century ago, Ernst von Dobschütz (1928) offered an excellent explanation to this parallel from a literary perspective, suggesting that this is the rabbinic teaching method of Matthew, which aims at a catechist function.¹¹ Many commentators note this parallel, but rarely go beyond this parallelism. It seemed that Dobschütz had already sufficiently explained all the parallel features in Matthew. However, he overlooked the relationship between Jesus and John. Together with the different content in their teachings, Dobschütz's exegesis especially in this case is seen to be insufficient.

Rarely amongst commentators, Joachim Gnilka sees the point beyond the literary perspective and thinks that Jesus does not detach himself from John.¹² From the plot of the pre-ministry narrative, readers note both summary teachings and thence are impressed that Jesus follows and inherits John's teaching. This teaching of Jesus, though further developed in the Gospel, does have its origin rooted in John the Baptist. Alone Matthew discloses this deeper relation between Jesus and John.

4. Adoption Disclosure

The whole baptismal scene includes a heavenly voice, announcing God's sonship of the newly baptized Jesus in all three Synoptic Gospels.¹³ We simply call this heavenly phenomenon an adoption.¹⁴ In Mark, this adoption seems private to Jesus alone. Scholars nowadays seem agreed that this event is a private one in Mark.¹⁵ Matthew

⁸ The figures show the frequency of both verb (Mt:5 vs Mk:2) and noun (Mt:2 vs Mk:1). It is understood that Luke develops this theme much more intensively, 9x for verb and 5x for noun. See Kurt Aland et al, *Concordance to the Novum Testamentum Graece* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987).

⁹ Matthew uses 19 times (Mk:5; Lk:12).

¹⁰ Mt 7:19 does have the 'tree' and 'judgment' together, but the tone here is rather different from that of John's.

¹¹ Ernst von Dobschütz, “Matthäus als Rabbi und Katechet” in *ZNW* 27 (1928), pp. 338-348.

¹² Joachim Gnilka, *Das Matthäus-evangelium* 1 (HThKNT; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1988), p. 100, “Nicht löst er [Jesus] den Täufer ab, der schon Gleiches tat”.

¹³ The Gospel of John (1: 29-34) does narrate the baptismal scenery, but without the baptism.

¹⁴ We do not intend to enter into the Christological debate of the Arian Adoptionism.

¹⁵ For example, a recent work on the historical Jesus makes the same statement without given any discussion. Bartosz Adamczewski,

redacts and converts it into a public event, so that all people recognize Jesus' adoption by the heavenly voice.

The baptismal scenes in Mark and Matthew, except for some wording, are basically the same: after Jesus has received John's baptism, he sees the heaven open and hears a voice there from (Mt 3:16f // Mk 1:10f). However, there are three redactional changes that Matthew makes to Mark. They are: ἰδοὺ from εἶδεν; ἰδοὺ as insertion; and οὗτός ἐστιν from σὺ εἶ. We shall analyze these redaction changes one by one.

(a) (ἰδοὺ ... εἶδεν) from (εἶδεν ... εἶδεν)

Mk: εἶδεν ... τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα

Mt: ἰδοὺ ... οἱ οὐρανοὶ καὶ εἶδεν τὸ πνεῦμα

While Mark uses the aorist εἶδεν once for both seeing the heavens and the spirit descending, Matthew preserves the same aorist only in the second part of the sentence, and inserts its imperative form ἰδοὺ for the first part.

After Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens are open/are torn apart. At this point, Mark describes that Jesus saw (third singular aorist) the heavens torn apart prior to the voice from heaven addressing him directly; and he saw the spirit descending into (εἰς) him. From the literary perspective, the third singular verb says merely that the subject, Jesus, sees; it does not tell us whether the primary readers in the story see or not.¹⁶ Yet, the focus remains on the subject.

Matthew introduces ἰδοὺ, which is regarded as a non-Greek element often with Semitic origin, to express his "solemn and dignified style". Therefore it functions as "an interjection with acute accent" in Matthew's baptismal scene.¹⁷ It could hardly make sense to say that this ἰδοὺ is designed merely for Jesus, or both Jesus and John exclusively.¹⁸ The very nature of this verb is to arouse the attention of the readers, no matter be it in the level of the primary, intended, or interested readership, which corresponds to the characters in the story, to the first audience of the Gospel, or to the audience today respectively. Therefore, all the audience notes the heavens are opened; and εἶδεν τὸ πνεῦμα could not exclude them from seeing the spirit descending on Jesus.

(b) ἰδοὺ as insertion in Mt 3:17

Next, Mark introduces a voice out of the heavens (φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν) with this Semitic expression occurring before the content of what the voice said is given. Matthew now inserts again the same ἰδοὺ prior to the voice of the heavens. This solemn imperative functions in the same way to arouse the attention of all the surrounding characters in the story. Mark's version does not intend to convey any information whether the audience hears the voice or not; Mark simply introduces its appearance. Following this plot, Jesus in Mark hears the heavenly voice, which could be derived from the previous aorist (he saw). However, all the characters in Matthew's story are drawn by this voice which comes out of the heavens. All people including Jesus are presented as listening to this heavenly witness.

(c) οὗτός ἐστιν from σὺ εἶ

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus hears the voice from heaven, "you are (σὺ εἶ) my beloved son" after emerging from the water. This is a direct speech addressing him, declaring his sonship of God, whose status will

Hypertextuality and Historicity in the Gospels (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 18.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, some still want to say that the characters in Mark do not know about the descent of the Spirit at this point. Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 18-19.

¹⁷ Blass & Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, §4 and §101 under ὁπάω.

¹⁸ We must note that ἡμῖν referring to both Jesus and John in its context. However, it can also be understood as referring to the audience in the story or even to the general or any interested readers today.

be tested in the following narrative of the Temptation.¹⁹ Matthew changes this direct speech to an indirect speech, “this is (οὗτός ἐστιν) my beloved son”, whereas Luke keeps Mark’s direct speech. An indirect speech has an introductory function and purpose. The Matthean redaction clearly conveys the message that now heaven announces and introduces Jesus as the beloved son of God.²⁰ In this vein, we may regard this event a public theophany or testimony to Jesus.

William Wrede (1901) interprets this direct speech at the beginning, which connects to but contrasts with Mark 9:7 and 15:39, as the start of the whole literary construction of the Messianic secret in Mark. Mark keeps the inner world of Jesus Christ to himself, in particular, his messiahship or sonship of God, especially at the beginning of the narrative. The basic framework of Wrede’s classical theory, however, cannot be maintained here in Matthew.²¹ Matthew further emphasizes this sonship of God through Jesus’ obedience and submission to God, which will be shown in the Temptation.²² The private and direct address to Jesus in this statement in Mark is now made public in Matthew.²³

In short, all these three redactions of Jesus’ baptism show that Matthew intends to create a new scene: this Jesus is not alone when the heavens open and the spirit descends as in Mark, and Jesus no longer hears the heavenly voice speaking directly to him alone. Matthew’s insertion of the imperative “behold” twice and the alteration of the heavenly voice into introductory speech now make this previously private event a public one, or as some suggest, a public theophany.²⁴

¹⁹ Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God’s Son. (Matt. 4: 1-11 & Par.): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash* (Coniectanea Biblica, NT Series 2:1; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1966). Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U. K.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 138, even puts “God’s calling must be tested” as a sub-title.

²⁰ So, both Ulrich Luz’s and Davies/Allison’s extensive commentaries on Matthew note that this change of the speeches “makes the event more public” (Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 339), particularly, “to John the Baptist and to the crowd”, and consequently to the Christian community behind the Gospel of Matthew” (Luz, *Matthew I*, 214). Luz further explains that the subtle change of introductory speech in Matthew corresponds to a theme in Matthew, “God with us” (Matt 1:23; 28:20).

²¹ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (J. C. G. Greig transl.; Cambridge/ London: James Clarke, 1971; German original 1901).

²² This is the idea that Luz, *Matthew I*, 144, advocates firmly.

²³ At this point, it is interesting to note the position of Jack D. Kingsbury, [*Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 13f.], who firmly maintained that Jesus’ baptism was a “private affair”, but not a public one. The main clue he presented was the use of τότε (then) right at the beginning of Mt 3:13. He believed that this temporal adverb functioned to remove this narrative chronologically from its previous one; the crowd surrounded John was no longer present during Jesus’ baptism. And there was also no reference to the audience at all in the entire text of Mt 3:13-17. As he himself also admitted that the use of τότε is imprecise, we can also deliberately and differently say that Jesus appears in the Jordan while John is just in the midst of completing his work as Matthew describes previously in 3:1-12. Similarly, there can also be no time lapse between the two events. If the phrase, “in those days” (3:1), does signify a separation of the present text from the previous one chronologically, then the τότε in 3:13 is a relative mild conjunction for the purpose, and is not to be over-emphasized for its clear cut distinction here.

J. H. Moulton, *Grammar of the New Testament Greek 3* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 341, with Aramaic origin usage; Matthew uses this adverb 90 times while the sum of the other three canonical Gospels is only 52 times. Blass & Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, §105 and §459 (2): the main function of this adverb of time is “zur Einführung des zeitlichen Nachfolgenden”, which is slightly different from the English version.) Besides, we can also interpret the use of παραγίνεται both for John’s and Jesus’ appearance in the river Jordan as creating a similar and parallel atmosphere for both events, but there must not necessarily be any chronological implication at all. Yes, Kingsbury is correct in noting that there is no reference to the audience in Jesus’ baptism. However, the lack of mentioning does not necessarily mean that there is no audience at all (an argument from silence). Above all, Matthew follows Mark’s plot, narrating Jesus’ baptism in John’s sermon to the people. If there is no special obvious literary signal, one cannot simply assert Jesus and John are suddenly alone in the river Jordan. If the main clue, the (τότε), has other interpretations, then Kingsbury’s assertion of no other audience behind the scene of Jesus’ baptism may not be sustained.

²⁴ Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 134; John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel-Theological Inquiries* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 58. Adamczewski, *Hypertextuality and Historicity in the Gospels*, takes it for granted that Mark’s is a public event, 18-19. There are nevertheless different voices as to whether the audience did see and hear the vision, see for examples, C. B. E. Cranfield, “The Baptism of Our Lord — A Study of St. Mark 1.9-11”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955), 53-63, here 58. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision — Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 41, n.19. Ben, III Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 150f.

To sum up, Matthew makes these three redactional changes in the baptismal scene. Although the changes are relatively slight at the literary level, their combined meaning is significant. This redaction builds up a public announcement of Jesus' sonship in Matthew: Mark's Jesus seems to be alone to see, to hear and to receive the direct speech of the heaven. If Wrede is correct, this vision applies to Jesus' private event in Mark. With his redactional changes, Matthew publicizes this 'private event', not simply to the primary readers in the story level, but more important to the intended readers.

5. Conception Disclosure — The Baptismal Dialogue (Mt 3:14f)

Among all the canonical Gospels, only Matthew allows Jesus to explicate himself by interpolating a dialogue of Jesus with John before the baptism. In the dialogue, John first expresses his unworthiness to baptize Jesus; their seniority is to be reversed instead. Only after Jesus' insistence could John baptize him.²⁵ Jesus replies, “ἄφες ἄρτι, οὕτως γὰρ ἔστιν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην”.

We will first examine the brief deficiency in scholarly discussions in the past; we will then discuss some literary devices in Matthew's dialogue that develop the characterization of Jesus, including Jesus' understanding of the events and his character traits.

There are two major issues arising from the accounts of Jesus' baptism: (1) the reasons for Jesus' baptism and (2) Christians' ethical behavior relating to Jesus' fulfilling all righteousness.

(1) The issue relating to the reasons for Jesus' baptism arises from Mark 1: 4f, where John the Baptist urges the people to repent by confessing their sins. Jesus, like others, has accepted John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. A logical question could arise, whether Mark's Jesus did confess his sins while accepting John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Davies and Allison collect some eight possible explanations for why Jesus was baptised. This shows readily that there is no distinctive and decisive reason for Jesus' receiving baptism. Among all the eight explanations, Davies and Allison accept seven of them but reject one, which is exactly the logical question we have just raised.²⁶ At present, we are not interested in the issue per se, but discussion continues.²⁷ Nevertheless, on the narrative level, Matthew allows Jesus to express himself directly.

(2) Concerning Christians' ethical behaviours, scholars have opposing views in understanding Jesus' reply to John, “it is appropriate for us to fulfill all righteousness”. The focus is whether followers of Jesus need or need not “do righteousness”. From a conceptual or theological perspective, scholars could understand the fulfilment of all righteousness as “Jesus' fulfilling prophecy”, which stands perhaps closer to the text because Matthew associates the word “fulfil” closely with the idea of fulfilling prophecy.²⁸ Since the heavenly voice is drawn from Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1, Jesus' fulfilment could mean fulfilling the Scripture.²⁹ Therefore, Jesus had fulfilled all righteousness,

²⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Studies in Biblical Theology No. 1. London: SCM Press, 1950), 18-20, further thinks that Jesus' baptism typified his death (Mark 10:38 and its parallel).

²⁶ Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 321-323.

²⁷ See for examples, Eric K C Wong, “Was Jesus without Sin? An Inquiry into Jesus' Baptism and the Redaction of the Gospels”. *Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1997), 128-139. He tries to establish that the question “whether Jesus was without sin” existed when the Gospel of Matthew was composed. Craig A. Evans, “Historical Jesus Studies and the Gospel of Matthew”, in: *Methods for Matthew* (Methods in Biblical Interpretation; Cambridge et al.: CPU, 2009), 118-154 does use Jesus' confession during baptism as the concrete example illustrating the Criterion of embarrassment for critically evaluating the authentic Jesus of history, 140. Kunkel, *The Creation Continues*, 33-35 (German edition) thinks that Jesus did confess during his baptism, which is marked as the turning point of his life.

²⁸ Cf. Mt 1:22; 2:15,17,23; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54,56; 27:9.

²⁹ John P. Meier, *Law and the History in Matthew's Gospel* (AnBib 71; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976), 76-80, who examines all the 16 occurrences of the word “fulfil” in Matthew and comes to this result. Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 325-327, give a brief

including regulations, requirements, commandments and law. Even though this interpretation could be agreeable, its implications with regard to Jesus' followers differ greatly. (a) Christians do not necessarily observe the law and its regulations any more because Jesus has already fulfilled all righteousness for them through faith. This understanding stands close to Paul's teaching of righteousness, especially "justification by faith" (Gal 2: 16; Rom 3:28). (b) Jesus' action has set up a model for his followers, which means, Christians have to do righteousness as Jesus does.³⁰ How we understand these two polarized interpretations is not our concern here.³¹ However, if we interpret the issue from a literary or narrative perspective, we will have a unique understanding of "fulfilling all righteousness", as we will see below.

Next, we will discuss the significance of the baptismal dialogue, which shows how Matthew presents Jesus' understanding and his character traits.

5.1 John the Baptist's Unworthiness

John is a famous teacher at the Jordan, whose pupils include Pharisees, Sadducees and the Jerusalemites before Jesus' request for baptism. He has already been an established teacher in the desert, probably with some charisma. Now, in Matthew, John expresses special respect for Jesus, saying that Jesus should baptize him instead. At this point, the status of John and Jesus is to be reversed. This reversal of the teacher-pupil relationship is a strange phenomenon. It makes room for us to assert that, for Matthew, John has some understanding about Jesus prior to Jesus' request. John should also regard Jesus as a respectable person.

John's unworthiness to baptize Jesus shows that Jesus is not an ordinary person. This saying of John harmonizes well with the Q tradition in the previous baptismal scene, where he says prior to Jesus' arrival: "I am unworthy to untie the sandals of the one who comes behind me", and "I baptize you with water; he will baptize you with holy spirit and fire" (Mt 3:11 // Lk 3:16).³² On the narrative level, Matthew discloses John's thought with regard to Jesus' status. Now, he uses John's mouth to describe John's thought, and we expect the same applies to the main character, Jesus.

5.2 Allow Me Now

In response to John's objection, Jesus insists on being baptized by him, replying with ἄφεξ ἄρτι (allow me now). It is an idiom of permission.³³ Matthew conveys a clear message to the readers that John could baptize Jesus only with Jesus' permission to do so. Jesus is in no way submissive to John. And this action is also said to be within the present moment ἄρτι. Nevertheless, Jesus receives John's baptism, with the rationale, "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness".³⁴

summary of some six understandings of "fulfilling righteousness" in Matthew.

³⁰ Similarly, Luz, *Matthew I*, 142f. E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthaeus* (KEK, Sonderband; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), 50-51, thinks that Jesus did not alone fulfil all righteousness in the baptism, but the baptism was rather an example of Jesus' fulfilling righteousness. Also G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit* (FRLANT 82; Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), p. 180.

³¹ For a detailed discussion on these two possible but opposite interpretations of Jesus' fulfilling all righteousness, see For further discussion on the concept of "fulfillment", see Eric KC Wong, *Interkulturelle Theologie und multikulturelle Gemeindeim Matthaeevangelium - ZumVehaeltnis von Juden- und Heidenchristenimersten Evangelium* (NTOA 22; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Freiburg Schweiz: Universitaetsverlag, 1992), who advocates for a double possibility of these two polarized interpretations, which belongs to the intercultural theology of Matthew.

³² Some scholars believe that this valuation by John was probably established in the post Easter period, after people had recognized Jesus' significance and role as superseding John's. Martin Dibelius, *Jesus* (C. B. Hedrick & F. C. Grant transl; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949), p. 77; compare further Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 323; Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 71-80.

³³ DBF §364:1-2. Matthew favors putting adverbs after imperatives, see DBF §474:3, see 5:13; 1:18; 18:16; 19:20; 26:53, 65; 27:42f. Cf. Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 324.

³⁴ Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 321-323, gather eight possible solutions to the problem that Jesus submitted to John's baptism.

This shows us three hidden pieces of information:

(1) Jesus determines to be baptized by John, which reinforces his decision to leave his home in Galilee. This supports our suggestion above relating to Jesus' "Decision Disclosure".

(2) Jesus' reply demonstrates one of his traits: he insists on what he thinks should happen, even in the face of objections. This event is not an individual case. This trait appears all along in his ministry when confronting the Jewish authorities.

(3) Meanwhile, this shows also that John may not understand or may have some misunderstanding about why Jesus wants the baptism. Therefore, Jesus needs to explain it with the following sentence.

5.3 It Is Appropriate for Us to Fulfill All Righteousness

Now Jesus explains to John that, "it is appropriate for us to fulfill all righteousness", where Jesus' conception and traits are further perceived.

(1) "It is appropriate" is Jesus' answer to John, who feels it is inappropriate to baptize Jesus. Jesus is sensitive in comforting John's humility or shamefulness as one who is subordinate.³⁵

(2) The pronoun ἡμῖν in the dialogue between Jesus and John primarily refers to both Jesus and John.³⁶ Jesus' use of word ἡμῖν makes an impression to the readers that John will also participate in fulfilling all righteousness. This ἡμῖν makes them become companions. Jesus is willing to incorporate John in such an action.

In the past, most scholars regarded ἡμῖν as purely a Matthean redaction. They discussed it but found it difficult to understand at the story level. This leads many commentaries to consider and to accept its alternative meaning, which then refers to the intended readers. Matthew redacts it and makes Jesus as a model for the readers, that is, the Christians in the next generations.³⁷ However, in doing so, commentators have overlooked the immediate meaning of ἡμῖν in the story.

Now our interpretation offers not only an alternative for understanding ἡμῖν at the story level, but also implies that Jesus' relation with John is extremely deep.

(3) Jesus' answer suggests that he has not yet fulfilled all righteousness before his baptism, so he determines to leave Galilee for baptism at the Jordan by John. As a Jew, he should have been practicing all religious rules and rites. Obviously, he knows that he has missed something, and he now finds his satisfaction from John.

(4) Now John has already shown he is sub-ordinate to Jesus. It is not necessary for Jesus to explain to John the reasons for his own baptism, but he chooses to expose his own conception of this act. This act of Jesus displays that he is a considerate person.

(5) Furthermore, Jesus' explanation demonstrates another one of his traits: he is not authoritative, but communicative.

(6) Jesus is not a conformist, but rather dares to oppose John's conception of baptism. Indeed, Jesus boldly replaces John's "forgiveness of sins" by "fulfilling all righteousness".

If the nature of John's baptism aims at forgiving sins as in Mark, Matthew redacts the baptismal scene. First,

³⁵ Of course, one may think of more possibilities of understanding the relationship between Jesus and John, see further Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew — A commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 51. However Jesus wants to relinquish his honor to embrace John's shame. This is especially true when the society emphasizes much 'honor and shame' in traditional Mediterranean culture. See Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 131.

³⁶ So Davies & Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 325.

³⁷ Similarly, Luz, *Matthew I*, 142f. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthaeus*, 50-51, thinks that Jesus did not alone fulfil all righteousness in the baptism, but the baptism was rather an example of Jesus' fulfilling righteousness. Also Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit*, 180.

Matthew obliterate the phrase εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (for the forgiveness of sins), the predicate of John's baptism as in Mk1:4, and relocates it to the context of the Eucharist in Mt 26:28, attiring it with some mystical color. Such a literary change does eliminate any possible allusion or association relating to Jesus' sinfulness arising from John's baptism in Mark's version.

Second, Matthew interpolates the dialogue to lay down the practice of Christian baptism, as a criterion for joining the community behind the Gospel of Matthew in terms of sociological function. This is especially clear when the risen Lord commissions the eleven to baptize all nations in order to make them disciples (28:18-20).

(7) In Mark, Jesus' first statement relates to the preaching of the kingdom of God (1:15). Now, Matthew inserts "fulfilling all righteousness" as Jesus' first words in the baptismal scene, even prior to God's announcement of his sonship. The purpose is to introduce Jesus' version of this specific conception of righteousness. The word and theme of righteousness is a famous teaching of the Matthean Jesus, and only in Matthew does Jesus himself utter these words. This concept is even given prior to his first proclamation summary (Mt 4:17). Righteousness marks the yardstick measuring people's sins for repentance. It is the minimum criterion for entering the kingdom of God (higher righteousness than the Pharisees'; 5:20). This shows that Jesus' righteousness is not something abstract but is supported by concrete behaviour.

Matthew places all the seven occurrences of the "righteousness" in Jesus' mouth (3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32) exclusively³⁸, which displays obviously that this Jesus is now presenting his own new understanding of it. Among them, 5:10, 20; 6:1 clearly refer to human acts.³⁹ For example, the Matthean Jesus demands his audience (the primary readers), and subsequently Matthew's audience (intended readers) to do righteousness better than that of the Scribes and Pharisees (5:20), as a condition of entering the kingdom of heaven. Righteousness in 21:32 describes a way, on which people may walk.⁴⁰ Those who seek and thirst for righteousness (5:6; 6:33) or suffer for righteousness' sake will be awarded (5:10). Therefore, Matthew's Jesus lays down the new definition of fulfilling righteousness, which points directly to human behaviour.

Therefore, Matthew's Jesus is not simply a thinker but a doer. He redefines ethical behaviour as the appropriate means of fulfilling all righteousness.

To sum up, the baptismal dialogue conveys a clear message that Matthew's Jesus has a higher rank than John. His commitment to John's baptism is in order to establish a model for later generations. Among the canonical Gospels, Matthew is the only one that chooses to allow Jesus to explain himself and his action in the narrative. Apart from theological disputes on "fulfilling all righteousness", this interpolated dialogue additionally discloses Jesus' understanding and his personal traits.

6. Conclusion

If we only had the Baptism story in Mark but not in Matthew (or not in Luke as well), we would have missed the following information about Jesus:

- (1) Jesus himself determines to go to John in order to receive his baptism.
- (2) Jesus' baptism is free from the association of forgiveness of sins.
- (3) John tries to object Jesus' baptism.

³⁸ Besides Matthew, it appears only once in the Magnificat in Luke 1:75 in the whole Synoptic Gospels.

³⁹ Luz, Mt I, 142.

⁴⁰ Only at the conceptual level could R. Mohrlang, (*Matthew and Paul — a Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984)) say that the concept of righteousness of Matthew and Paul are not opposed to each other.

- (4) The reason for Jesus' baptism is in order to fulfil all righteousness, and not for the forgiveness of sins.
- (5) Jesus does not need to be subordinated to John.
- (6) Jesus' sonship of God is made public by the heavenly voice.
- (7) The strong relation between Jesus and John remains hidden.
- (8) With regard to Jesus' humanity, his experience, thought and traits are unclear.

Following Mark's sequence, Matthew further tells two things: (1) Jesus then changes his career to be a preacher of the kingdom of God (a big decision)! (2) Between the baptism and the career change, Jesus goes to the desert. Jesus' deed of going to the desert is a very human deed. Apart from its religious dimension, Jesus in that state needs a period of quiet to authenticate God's calling and to prepare for his future ministry.

If our discussion above is accepted, Matthew does have a specific conception and direction in crafting Jesus' character. Even though this paper limits itself to a discussion of Jesus' baptism, which is only one text in Matthew that we have discussed as an example of Matthew's literary art, we can still discover much detail of this main character Jesus' inner world: his experience, thoughts and traits. Matthew articulates Jesus' humanity, apart from his divinity. These human characteristics include Jesus' own decision to go to the Jordan, his relation to John, his adoption to God's sonship and his conception about the baptism.

Through the character analysis of Jesus given in this paper, we discover that Matthew's specific crafting gives us a new image of Jesus Christ. To what extent this new image of Jesus is creative or historical, is to be discussed further. If more information about this character Jesus is found embedded in the Gospel of Matthew, this could perhaps open another door to investigating the Jesus of history implicitly.

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