Commentary and Lesson on Matthew 3:1-17

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I. THE IDENTITY OF JOHN.

A. John the Preacher.

The introductory verses (1-3) accentuate John's preaching, not his baptizing. In v. 1 the activity described is "preaching"; the words "the Baptist" simply identify the one who preaches (contrast Mk 1:4, "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism"). V. 2 summarizes his message. V. 3 (describing John in the words of Isaiah) speaks of "a voice calling in the desert." To be sure, the following vv. describe John's baptizing activity; but Matthew places greater stress upon the meaning of the rite than upon the rite itself.

B. John and Elijah.

1. The interpretation of Jesus. In Mt 11:14 Jesus identifies John as "the Elijah who was to come." Cf. 17:10-13, and Lk 1:17, of John's going forth "in the spirit and power of Elijah."

2. Matthew's description. "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist" (3:4a). Cf. 11:14 and of 2 Kings 1:8, "[Elijah] was a man with a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist."
3. John's reticence. Nowhere in Mt or in any other gospel does John identify himself as Elijah. Indeed, in Jn 1:21 he positively denies that he is Elijah. John concentrates upon the figure of his expectation, not his own self-identity. Of himself he says, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert..." (Jn 1:23, quoting Isa 40:3) - which accounts for Matthew's use of this prophecy (3:3).

4. The basis of comparison. Unlike Elijah, John does no miracles. It is in his capacity as preacher that John is identified as the latter-day Elijah. As "covenant prosecutor" he fearlessly confronts authorities both secular (as Elijah confronted Ahab, so John confronts Herod) and religious (as Elijah confronted the prophets and priests of Baal, so John confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees). But the main reason Jesus thus interprets John, is that John heralds the coming Day of Yahweh - thus had the OT prophesied about Elijah (Mal 4:5-6; 3:1; Mt 11:10).

II. THE PREACHING OF JOHN.

A. The Announcement of the Kingdom. 3:1-2.

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"

1. "The kingdom of heaven." a. "of heaven." Contrast Mk 1:15 (cf. Mt 4:17), "the kingdom of God." Matthew's language (i) respects Jewish sensibilities (but see 12:28 for "the kingdom of God"), and (ii) stresses "the majesty of God's universal dominion" (Gundry, 43; cf. 6:9; 11:25). b. "The kingdom." The Greek word for "kingdom," basileia, points fundamentally to God's rule or reign, not to the realm over which he rules. Where God's will is done, there his kingdom comes (see the parallel in 6:10).
2. The nearness of the kingdom. John announces the imminent dawn of the kingdom. In one sense, God's rule is everlasting (Ps 97:1, "The LORD reigns"). But Mt 3:2 prophesies that God is about to make what is his by right (de jure), his in fact (de facto). When this happens, then God's will shall indeed be done on earth as in heaven (6:10), and justice shall be finally established (cf. 5:6). In short, this prophecy is eschatological in character - the Last Days are about to be inaugurated, the Day of the Lord is about to arrive. Exactly when it arrives, is a question we keep in mind as we progress through Mt.

B. The Call to Repentance.

The nearness of the kingdom calls for a certain response: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." What does true repentance entail?

1. A change of mind. The Greek word for repentance is metanoia, literally "a change of mind." Those who take John's preaching seriously, are reoriented in their thinking. Their whole outlook is changed once they believe what he says about the nearness and the demands of God's Rule.

2. A change of heart. Altered thinking leads to a change of heart, which opens one to receiving John's "baptism with water for repentance" (3:11). The change of heart is expressed in v. 6, "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." Without genuine acknowledgment of sin, the baptism is meaningless.

3. A change of life. Just how genuine has been the change of mind and of heart, is demonstrated in resultant conduct. John exhorts, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8), an aspect of John's preaching more fully developed in Lk 3:10-14).
4. The condition of "the Pharisees and Sadducees" (3:7).

a. Who were they? They represented the two leading religious sects in the Judaism of the day. See Appendix A).

b. Did they receive John's baptism? The phrase *epi to baptisma autou*, v. 7, means literally "to his baptism." Some have suggested that they simply came as observers "to where he was baptizing" (NIV) and did not receive the baptism (considering that it did not apply to them); cf. Jn 1:24 for a Pharisaic inquiry into John's activities. (Note that Matthew has already recorded the people's confession and baptism, vv. 5-6.) I think it more likely that the above phrase is intended as equivalent to "coming to be baptized," that the Pharisees and Sadducees in question did receive the baptism to signal that they (perhaps they especially) were ready for the coming of the Kingdom of God. V. 11a ("I baptize you") most naturally embraces them.

c. Had they truly repented? This is the critical question. The words of John immediately following (3:7b-10), indicate that their reception of water baptism was an empty, meaningless, ostentatious ritual unless they produced "fruit in keeping with repentance" (3:8a, cf. v. 10b). John perceives, as Jesus was to perceive, the strong tendency to hypocrisy (the disharmony between the outer action and the inner motive) in the religious leadership of the day (cf. 6:1-18; 15:7; 23:13-15). The ostentation that Jesus was to denounce (6:1-18) may have been at work at the Jordan: even a confession of sin can bespeak spiritual pride. Given the special danger among such people, of a rite of repentance without content (how can one really repent if he does not consider himself a sinner?, cf. 9:11-13), John seeks to jar the Pharisees and Sadducees out of their false sense of personal and national security (v. 9), and into spiritual awareness, by using the
strongest possible language: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (v. 7b). Snakes are pictured as slithering away from a grass fire (Gundry, 47). John uses this term of address, because snakes are venomous and destructive. This is an apt metaphor for those whose hearts are poisoned with evil, and who spread evil throughout the nation (so powerful an influence did the religious leaders exert upon the general populace).

C. The Promise of One to Come.

What does 3:11-12 disclose about the figure of John's expectation?

1. His identity. He is clearly a human figure ("whose sandals I am not fit to carry," v. 11). But he is also a man in whom God is uniquely at work. Cf. 3:3 (the quote from Isa 40:3), "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." It is for the coming of Yahweh that John prepares (cf. Lk 1:76). Cf. also Mt 3:12, language suggesting that the coming One possesses the nation ("his threshing floor," etc.). Now note Mal 3:1 ("'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me...,,' says the LORD Almighty") vis-a-vis NT usage, e.g. Mt 11:10 ("'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you""). In 11:10, God the Father addresses God the Son. But the name "Yahweh" (as noted) applies with equal validity to both the Father and the Son. John the Baptist prepares for the coming of Yahweh, for God the Son. Perhaps we cannot be certain whether the Baptist believed Jesus to be God incarnate or (instead) a man in whom Yahweh was uniquely active (but see III. below). But in any case Matthew presents Jesus as God incarnate. The figure of John's expectation is "God with us" in the full ontological sense.
2. His mission. The coming One is pictured as a **baptizer**, v. 11. The figure of v. 12 (of a farmer **harvesting** his crop) helps explain the meaning of the baptism.

   a. The recipients of the baptism: the whole nation. The "you" of 3:11b most naturally refers (like the "you" of v. 11a) to all those who have come to John as representatives of the whole nation (cf. v. 5). Like John, the coming One is sent to baptize all Israel.

   b. The nature of the baptism: a refining judgment. If the "you" of 3:11b means (representatives of) the whole nation, then the words "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" are a twofold reference to the comprehensive process (rather than to the experience of the righteous and the wicked respectively). John here speaks of the Spirit's work in terms of fire; i.e., it is a purgative, refining work upon the whole nation, designed to cleanse Israel of sin and prepare them to meet God when the Kingdom is inaugurated (cf. Mal 3:2ff., of Yahweh's refining of the priesthood). This process is illustrated by the clearing of the threshing floor, v. 12.

   c. The results of the baptism: salvation and damnation. The refining work affects individuals in one way or another, depending on whether they heed John's message (v. 2). Those who repent of sin will be like "wheat gathered into the barn." Those who do not, will be like chaff that is burned "with unquenchable fire." There is both **judgment** and **grace** in the coming holocaust. As in the case of the "sign" in Isa 7, Messiah's coming brings both wrath (cf. v. 7b) and grace. **Note:** This prophecy finds fulfillment for the saved, with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2; note the reference to "tongues as of fire," v. 3). **Jesus** baptizes in or with the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). This timing of the baptism with the Spirit's coming explains the language of Jn 3:26; 4:1-2 (the
disciples' baptism is an extension of John's; Jesus' own baptizing work is yet to come).

III. JESUS'S EXPERIENCE AT THE JORDAN.

A. The Baptism of Jesus.

Jesus comes in order to be baptized by John (3:13).

1. John's reticence. "But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (v. 14). This statement is significant for what it reveals about John's view both of Jesus and of himself.

a. John's view about Jesus. I believe John's statement reflects his awareness of Jesus' Messiahship, that he identifies the figure before him as the figure of his expectation (vv. 11-12; cf. also Lk 1: it is likely that John's parents instructed him concerning the meaning of his and of Jesus' births). Knowing Jesus to be the Messiah, John cannot imagine his receiving "a baptism of repentance." I take Jn 1:31-34 to mean either that John receives public confirmation of existing convictions about Jesus, or (more likely) that the baptism and the voice from heaven reveal to him that the Messiah is divine, "the Son of God," 1:34b.

b. John's view about himself. Interpreting the first part of John's statement in light of the second, I take the meaning to be, not that John needs to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire (such an individualizing of that baptism seems out of place, if the interpretation offered under II. C. 2. is correct), but that it is he, not Jesus, who should receive the "baptism of repentance." (There is no record that John himself ever received John's baptism.) John recognizes that he too needs to repent of sin in face of the coming
wrath, if he is to be among the saved (those "gathered into the barn").

2. Jesus' insistence. "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented" (3:15). For what purposes does Jesus seek baptism?

a. Affirmation of John's ministry. By receiving John's baptism, Jesus affirms the validity of what John is doing. We should not exclude the possibility that Jesus sat under John's teaching for a time (but who could say how long?). In this regard, note that Matthew's opening summary of Jesus' preaching (4:17) is identical to his summary of John's (3:2). John's contribution to Jesus' message should not be minimized. But Jesus' main reason for seeking baptism lies elsewhere.

b. Identification with sinners.

(i) The nature of the baptism. John baptizes "with water for repentance" (v. 11a). Astonishingly, Jesus the Savior submits to - indeed, insists on - receiving a baptism defined this way. This is a remarkable expression of his identification with those whom he came to save (1:21). In Dorothy L. Sayers' plays The Man Born To Be King, Mary Magdalene says: "The Master's the only good man I ever met who knew how miserable it felt to be bad. It was as if he got right inside you, and felt all the horrible things you were doing to yourself" (Play 12).

(ii) The absence of a confession. It is noteworthy, however, that Matthew does not include Jesus among those (3:6) who confess their sins as they are being baptized. (Paul identifies Jesus as sin, not as a sinner; cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:3.)
(iii) The meaning of 3:15. The "us" refers to these two men, Jesus and John, and to the event in which they are now together to participate. What are we to make of the words "to fulfill all righteousness"? One reasonable view (taken e.g. by Tasker, Matthew, 51): "It becomes us to comply with all that God requires of us," i.e., with all that is right in his sight for the completion of my mission. Cf. TDNT 6: 294, "By having Himself baptised by John Jesus fulfils a requirement of the divine will manifest to Him." But we must take this thought one step further, and identify more precisely what is right on this occasion. Given Jesus' acceptance of this kind of baptism, together with the ensuing words from heaven, we should interpret v. 15 in light of Isa 53:11b, "By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." It is by bearing their iniquities that He shall provide the basis for their justification (cf. Rom 3:21-31). God's Servant is dedicated to doing what is right in God's eyes. Isa 53 tells us what that "right" is - an atoning sacrifice for the justification of the ungodly. This participation in a baptism for sinners is the first step toward, and an anticipation of, that action whereby he takes his people's sins upon himself in an atoning sacrifice. Writes Leon Morris, "At this moment Jesus set himself to fulfil that righteousness that meant justifying sinful men" (The Cross in the New Testament, 41). Cf. G. E. Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, 184, "The righteousness he would fulfill [Mt 3:15] is probably that of Isaiah 53:11." Cf. Jn 1:29. This point leads to the next.

c. Foreshadowing of his death. In Lk 12:50 Jesus says of his death: "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" Baptism by immersion is a kind of drowning. Perhaps we are to view Jesus' baptism at the Jordan (probably by immersion) as a foreshadowing of his atoning death.
B. The Aftermath of Baptism.

What happens upon Jesus' ascent from the water, is just as significant as the baptism itself. Here at the threshold of the ministry, Matthew describes a magnificent scene in which all members of the Trinity participate (cf. the Trinitarian formula in 28:19).


   a. The dawn of peace. That the Spirit descends in the likeness of a dove is meant, I believe, to recall the aftermath of the flood and God's sending a dove as a signal of the end of chaos and the return of peace. The dawn of the Kingdom of God brings shalom to the people of God. Cf. Isa 9:6, "the prince of peace."

   b. Power for service. The very Spirit by whose power Jesus had been conceived in Mary's womb (1:20), now anoints Jesus for the manifold needs of his forthcoming ministry. Already in 4:1, "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." Cf. 12:28, where Jesus explains that he casts out demons by the Spirit of God. This motif is especially strong in Lk (4:1, 14, 16). Cf. also Jn 1:32 ("I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him"); 3:34 ("For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God; to him God gives the Spirit without limit").

2. The voice of the Father, 3:17.

   a. The Father's appointment. The Father draws upon two passages from his own prior revelation.

      (i) Ps 2:7. In 2:6-7 we read: "'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.' I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to
me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'" The Father thus declares Jesus to be a kingly figure - a theme introduced already in Mt 1 (see the earlier comments on Jesus as "son of David").

(ii) Isa 42:1, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight." (Cf. Mt 12:17-21, where Isa 42:1-4 is quoted and applied to Jesus' healing ministry.) This combination, established in the Father's own declaration, is of great significance. Jesus is presented as a regal figure who exerts his rule by serving his subjects, who wins their allegiance by giving himself for them.

b. The Father's approval. The Servant-King is the Father's beloved, the One in whom his heart delights. This expression of approval ("whom I love," "with him I am well pleased") is to be seen in light of the fellowship within the Godhead, that relationship of unspeakable intimacy and love (cf. Mt 11:25-27; Jn 1:18). But it is also to be seen in light of that which Jesus has just done - namely, to seek baptism, to interpret it as he has done (3:15), and thus to signal his willingness to identify with sinners and thereby to fulfill the task which the Father has appointed for him. Cf. the commentary on Mt 26:36-46.

**SUGGESTED TEACHING OUTLINE**

MAIN IDEA: John’s ministry prepared the people and Jesus for the coming of the kingdom of God.

I. John’s identity (3:1-6)
   A. A preacher of the kingdom of God (3:1-2)
   B. Elijah signaling the coming of the kingdom of God (3:3-4)

II. John’s preaching (3:1-12)
A. Announcement of the kingdom (3:1-2)
B. Call to repentance in preparation for the kingdom’s coming (3:2,5,6,8)
C. The coming one who brings the kingdom (3:11-12)

III. Jesus at the Jordan (3:13-17)
A. Jesus’ baptism (3:13-15)
B. Aftermath of Jesus’ baptism: power and authority to bring the kingdom (3:16-17)

SUGGESTED STUDY OUTLINE

MAIN IDEA: John’s ministry prepared the people and Jesus for the coming of the kingdom of God.

I. John’s identity (3:1-6)
   A. A preacher (3:1-2)
   B. Elijah (3:3-4)
      1. According to Jesus (Matt. 11:14; Luke 1:17)
      2. Matthew’s description of John (3:4)
      3. John’s reticence (John 1:21)
      4. Basis of comparison:
         a. Covenant prosecutor (3:2,3,6-12)
         b. Herald of day of the Lord (3:3,10-12)

II. John’s preaching (3:1-12)
   A. Announcement of the kingdom (3:1-2)
      1. Kingdom of heaven (3:2)
      2. Nearness of kingdom (3:2)
   B. Call to repentance (3:2,5,6,8)
      1. Change of mind (3:6,8)
      2. Change of heart (3:6,8)
      3. Change of life (3:8)
      4. Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7-12)
         a. Baptized (3:7,8,11)
b. Repented? (3:7-10)
c. The coming one (3:11-12)
   1. Identity (3:3,11)
   2. Mission: baptize (3:11-12)
      a. Recipients of the baptism: the whole nation (3:11)
      b. Nature of the baptism: a refining judgment. (3:11-12)
      c. Results of the baptism: salvation and damnation (3:12)

III. Jesus at the Jordan (3:13-17)
   A. Jesus’ baptism (3:13-15)
      1. Jesus comes in order to be baptized (3:13)
      2. John’s reticence (3:14)
         a. John’s view of Jesus (3:11-12,14)
         b. John’s view of himself (3:11,14)
      3. Jesus’ insistence (3:15)
         a. Affirmation of John’s ministry (3:6,7,11)
         b. Jesus’ identification with sinners (3:2,6,8-11)
            i. Nature of baptism (3:11)
            ii. Absence of confession (3:15)
            iii. Fulfill all righteousness (3:15)
         c. Foreshadow of Jesus’ death (Luke 12:50)
   B. Aftermath of Jesus’ baptism (3:16-17)
      1. Spirit’s descent (3:16)
         a. Dawn of peace (3:16)
         b. Power for Service (3:16)
      2. Father’s voice (3:17)
         a. Appointment (3:17)
            i. King (1:1-25; 3:2)
            ii. Servant (12:17-21)
         b. Approval (3:17)
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. At what point in Jesus’ life did Matthew locate the events of chapter 3? Is this timing significant? Why or why not?

2. What was the content of John’s preaching? How did John’s preaching relate to Jesus’ ministry in purpose? How did John’s preaching relate to Jesus’ ministry in content?

3. How does Matthew’s identification of John with the calling voice affect your understanding of the person of Jesus? How does Matthew’s identification of John with the calling voice affect your understanding of Jesus’ mission and work?

4. Why did Matthew describe John’s clothes and diet? How are these things important to the narrative?

5. How did confession and repentance prepare people for the coming of the kingdom of heaven? How did John characterize the kingdom of heaven?

6. What does the coming of the kingdom of heaven have to do with making the Lord’s paths straight? How does one make the Lord’s paths straight?

7. Why did John respond so harshly to the Pharisees and Sadducees? Would you have been so harsh with people who apparently responded positively to your preaching of the kingdom of God? Did he doubt their sincerity? If so, why? Does John’s warning to the Pharisees and Sadducees apply to modern audiences? If so, how?

8. Who are or what is the “trees.” Does the ax and fire metaphor refer to a refining process, or to ultimate judgment? Does the winnowing fork metaphor refer to a refining process, or to ultimate judgment? Who is to be refined or judged in these metaphors? Defend your answers from the text.

9. What does it mean to be baptized “for” repentance? How does Jesus baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire?
10. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? Did he have to be baptized “for repentance”? What does it mean to “fulfill all righteousness”? 
11. To whom did the voice from heaven belong? What significance attached to the dove and the voice? 
12. How do the events in the first half of the chapter set the stage for those in the second half? What do you think Matthew’s main point in this passage was? How can you tell? Does your answer account for all the little details Matthew mentioned? Do you think every detail is significant? Why or why not? 
13. How do the events in this chapter relate to the events in chapters 1 and 2? How do they anticipate the events in chapter 4? How do they contribute to Matthew’s overall meaning and message in this gospel? What about these events was so important that Matthew decided to include them in his gospel? 

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Did Isaiah actually prophesy anything about the kingdom of heaven/God? How can John’s message be substantiated from Isaiah’s prophecies? 
2. Where and why did John get the idea to baptize people? 
3. When did/does/will the kingdom of heaven actually come?