

“TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS”: WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

DUANE LITFIN*

Abstract: *When John the Baptist resisted baptizing Jesus, Jesus responded with a single-sentence explanation of why his baptism was necessary. His response was so cryptic and enigmatic that it has puzzled interpreters ever since, and none of the interpretations proposed through the centuries has received universal acceptance. This article weighs the two interpretations most commonly offered today, finding both to be overly dependent on theological speculation and insufficiently supported by the biblical text. The article then sets forth a more straightforward alternative that is at once less conjectural and more exegetically and theologically satisfying.*

Key words: *John the Baptist, John’s baptism, Jesus’s baptism, righteousness, fulfill, Christ’s obedience, fulfillment of prophecy, identification with sinners*

Where, exactly, in the biblical canon do we first discover a sentence attributed to the earthly Jesus? For many, even mature students of the Bible, the answer comes as something of a surprise. It surprises first because, having never thought about the question, they have no ready reply. Then, upon recalling this first dominical sentence, they are surprised anew to find themselves puzzled about its meaning. Countless others through the centuries have shared their puzzlement.

THE FIRST SENTENCE

The first dominical sentence in the Bible is found in Matthew 3:15.¹ Its historical setting is the ministry of John the Baptist. According to Matthew, this last of the prophets (11:9–15) came “preaching in the wilderness of Judea” (3:1), announcing himself as the messianic forerunner predicted in Isaiah 40:3. The Baptist’s urgent message—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2)—prompted a strong response from the people. “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (vv. 5–6).² Yet according to John, this was only the beginning. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming

* Duane Litfin is President Emeritus of Wheaton College, 501 College Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187. He can be reached at Duane.Litfin@wheaton.edu.

¹ Were it a question of chronological priority, not canonical precedence, the earliest words would be those spoken by the twelve-year-old Jesus to his parents in Jerusalem (Luke 2:49). The sentence recorded by Matthew would then be second, representing the earliest recorded words of the adult Jesus.

² Scripture translations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 11).

It is at this point that Matthew introduces the figure of Jesus: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him" (v. 13). Given his insight into Jesus's identity, however, John was reluctant to comply. "I need to be baptized by you," he protested, "and do you come to me?" (v. 14). But Jesus insisted: "*Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*" (v. 15).

Isolated in a momentary desert exchange between Jesus and John, these ten words (in Greek) comprise an enigmatic sentence that is unique in Scripture. No other gospel reports it;³ nor is it echoed elsewhere in Scripture. Not even its subject matter—Jesus's reason for seeking John's baptism—is hinted at by another biblical writer. Matthew's account of this cryptic exchange stands pristinely alone.

With so little to go on, several questions spring to mind. What did Jesus mean? Why would he, being sinless, seek John's baptism for repentance? In what sense would such a baptism be "fitting" for him? How would submitting to John's baptism fulfill any, much less "all" righteousness? Little wonder that the isolation and mystery of this sentence have prompted a wide range of speculative proposals as to its meaning. As Cullmann remarked, "Exegetes have always found [this sentence] difficult to explain."⁴

³ "Jesus' being baptized by John is one of the most historically certain events ascertainable by any reconstruction of the historical Jesus." John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 5 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 2:129. But the same cannot be said for this exchange between John and Jesus. Matthew 3:14–15 is clearly redactional, and not a few question its historicity. Their skepticism is primarily due to the dialogue's "very plausible origin in a specifically Christian difficulty." W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:323. That difficulty was embarrassment. Meier considers Jesus's baptism as the "prime example" of this problem (see "The Criterion of Embarrassment," *A Marginal Jew*, 1:168–71). The concern of Jesus's first-century followers was "either that receiving John's baptism—a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—brought into question the belief in Jesus' sinlessness, or else that receiving John's baptism suggested that Jesus was inferior to John." Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study*, JSNTSup 62 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 58. Thus, the claim is that Matthew (or his source[s]) invented this dialogue as "apologetic content" designed to combat these misperceptions.

The issues involved in this claim are complex and cannot be resolved here, other than to state the obvious: Though apologetics may have been part of Matthew's motive for including this dialogue, such a motive need not entail a lack of historicity. As Luz observes, Matthew 3:13–17 is merely a "continuation" of the narrative. "After Matthew in 3:1–12 has described the circumstances in detail—John, his baptism and his proclamation—only now the story really begins." Verses 13–17 bear "a close association with the preceding scene; indeed it actually is its climax." Whether the words of the dialog themselves "are the creation of the evangelist or go back to oral traditions is disputed and cannot be decided convincingly [*stringent entscheiden*] on linguistic grounds." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol 1: *Matthew 1–7* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 173–74; German original (1st ed.), Zürich: Benziger, 1985.

⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 18.

INTERPRETATIONS

Every attempt to expound Matthew 3:15 requires the interpreter to answer two related questions. First, why did Jesus seek John's baptism? Second, what did Jesus mean by his cryptic reply to John?

Davies and Allison provide synopses of some proposed answers. As to the first question, they rightly observe that Jesus's explanation of why he should be baptized “has scarcely cancelled further discussion. There has been no dearth of conjectures on the query.”⁵ They then list and document eight distinct possibilities, starting with the claim that Jesus was a sinful person who went to John to find forgiveness.⁶ This list, which the authors describe as “far from exhaustive,” already signals the historic confusion surrounding Jesus's baptism. Equally confused have been the answers to the second question, for which Davies and Allison provide a second list of seven possibilities.⁷

Davies and Allison's lists provide a handy—and oft-cited, if also incomplete—summary of the interpretations on offer in both the older and more recent literature.⁸ Both lists display the understandable abundance of conjecture noted earlier. Given the isolation and brevity of Matthew's account, interpreters have always been hobbled by a scarcity of exegetical cues, which has forced them into the realm of speculation.

Yet therein lies the problem. Each interpretation of Jesus's reply can be only as helpful as the speculation on which it is based. Over time, most of these speculative proposals have shriveled on the vine, showing themselves to be so idiosyncratic and devoid of biblical warrant that they have gained no significant following. For this article, therefore, I will set these failed proposals aside. This will allow us to narrow our focus to the two that appear to have retained the widest acceptance among modern commentators. The remainder of this article will explore these two options and then propose an alternative reading.

THE TWO MOST COMMON OPTIONS

Why did Jesus seek John's baptism? An impressive body of commentators argue that Jesus went to the Jordan for one or both of two interrelated reasons.

1. *To fulfill prophecy.* According to Davies and Allison, “The most convincing approach to the difficult phrase ... refers to Jesus fulfilling prophecy.”⁹ By submit-

⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 321.

⁶ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 321–22. For the most part their list “pass[es] over the patristic solutions to the problem, such as that Jesus wished to sanctify the waters of baptism, or to give an example to Christians, or to teach submission to priests” (322n57). For a survey of early church interpretations, see Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 325–27.

⁸ Similarly, John Nolland, “In Such a Manner It Is Fitting for Us to Fulfil All Righteousness’: Reflections on the Place of Baptism in the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, JSNTSup 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 73.

⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 326.

ting to John's baptism, says Turner, Jesus was "fulfilling biblical patterns and predictions about the Messiah," thereby fulfilling "all righteousness."

In Jesus's baptism he and John fulfill the Scriptures by introducing the Messiah to Israel. This baptism, as the inauguration of Jesus's ministry to Israel, leads immediately to biblical fulfillment in that the Spirit as a dove comes upon the Messiah (Isa. 11:1–2; 42:1; cf. Matt 12:18, 28) and the Father endorses his Son in the voice from heaven (Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1; cf. Matt 17:5). In baptism Jesus, as the Suffering Servant, proclaims and exemplifies the righteousness envisioned by the prophets. Fulfilling all righteousness implies that Jesus's baptism is a key event in unfolding everything that will eventually be entailed in rightly relating the world to God.¹⁰

This is a widely held explanation of Jesus's motive for seeking John's baptism. On close inspection, however, it exhibits some serious weaknesses. Its core vulnerability is its assumption—based on the appearance of the verb "fulfill" in Jesus's reply to John—that what Jesus had in mind were various biblical predictions about the Messiah that somehow required John's baptism.¹¹ This assumption deserves to be called into question on several counts.

First, there were no OT prophecies that so much as hinted that the Messiah must one day be baptized by his forerunner, thereby necessitating Jesus to present himself to John at the Jordan. The messianic passages typically cited are vague and general, referring at most to the important theophany that occurred *after* the baptism.¹² As Turner acknowledges, Matthew "says nothing about the baptism itself," but instead "passes over the baptism of Jesus quickly in order to stress two attest-

¹⁰ David Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 119.

¹¹ For example, see Craig A. Evans, "Fulfilling the Law and Seeking Righteousness in Matthew and in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Jesus, Matthew's Gospel, and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Graham N. Stanton*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner, Joel Willits, and Richard A. Burridge, LNTS (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 104; John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 76–80; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 327.

¹² Commentators commonly conflate the meaning of the baptism and the meaning of the accompanying theophany, as when Cullmann answers the question of what the baptism meant to Jesus with the claim that "the answer is contained in the event itself, namely in the proclamation of the heavenly voice" (*Baptism in the New Testament*, 15). Carson asserts that "Jesus' baptism and its attestation are of a piece and must be interpreted together" (*Matthew*, 137). But is this necessarily the case? The chronological connection is an obvious one, but is it also an intrinsic one? In other words, could the theophany have occurred apart from the baptism (as in Matthew 17:5)? Or the baptism without the theophany? If so, should the meaning of the theophany be automatically assumed to be the meaning of Christ's explanation to John? As Meier observes, "It is the theophany, and not John's baptism by itself, that reveals the truth about Jesus" (*A Marginal Jew*, 2:107). Using the theophany to explain Jesus's enigmatic reply to John ignores the obvious problem: As Jesus approached the Jordan, he as yet knew nothing of the coming theophany. Yet when John resisted, Jesus had ready-to-hand a convincing one-sentence explanation for why John should comply. The complex meaning of the subsequent theophany, therefore, should not be backloaded into verse 15. Indeed, as will be noted in our conclusion, the influence may run in the opposite direction. The sentiments Jesus expresses to John in verse 15, when rightly understood, may provide important insight into the theophany of verse 17.

ing events that pertain to biblical fulfillment: the heavenly vision (3:16) and the heavenly voice (3:17).¹³

Turner's observation about Matthew holds for the other gospels as well. The Gospel of John emphasizes the theophany but does not even mention Jesus's baptism, much less describe or explain it. Mark and Luke offer little more, with neither making the slightest effort to stress the event. Matthew and Luke bury the baptism in a single passive participle. Mark and Luke rush as quickly as language permits to what occurred next. Taken together, the three Synoptics could scarcely have referred to Jesus's baptism while giving it less attention. In this lack of focus on the actual baptism, in fact, these evangelists appear to have been reflecting the overall dearth of interest displayed throughout Scripture. Other than two merely chronological allusions in Acts 1:22 and 10:37, the remainder of the Bible is utterly silent on the subject of Jesus's baptism.¹⁴ Nowhere else in either testament does a single writer so much as mention it, much less portray it as a watershed moment pregnant with messianic meaning and significance.

Given this pervasive biblical silence, then, should commentators claim, as above, that it was the *baptism* that “inaugurated” Jesus's ministry?¹⁵ Was it the baptism that exemplified “the righteousness envisioned by the prophets”? Was the baptism itself “a key event in unfolding everything that will eventually be entailed in rightly relating the world to God”?¹⁶ The attesting events that followed the baptism

¹³ Turner, *Matthew*, 119.

¹⁴ Some have seen in 1 John 5:6–8 a vague reference to Christ's baptism, but this reading is tenuous and much disputed. For an extended technical examination rejecting this view, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 573–78.

¹⁵ Matthew does not link the beginning of Jesus's public ministry with either his baptism or its accompanying theophany. Instead, immediately following those attesting events both Matthew and Mark record Jesus's forty-day wilderness temptation (Matt 4:1–11 // Mark 1:12–13). Thereafter Matthew ties the initiation of Christ's public ministry to the arrest of John (Matt 4:12–17; so also Mark 1:14). Luke similarly situates the beginning of Jesus's public ministry in Galilee after the temptation (Luke 4:14). The only other references to the beginning of Jesus's ministry are indeterminate. Luke inserts Jesus's genealogy immediately following the theophany (Luke 3:23–38), prefacing it with these ambiguous words: “Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). In Acts 1:21–22, Peter speaks of “all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.” Yet in Acts 10:37–38 Peter portrays Jesus's public ministry as beginning from Galilee, subsequent to John's baptism. Taken together, these references seem to portray Jesus as being marked for his public ministry by the post-baptism descent of the Spirit and the voice from heaven, followed by an extended period of testing in the wilderness, followed by the onset of his public ministry in Galilee after John's arrest. None of these reports focus on the baptism as the specific event that inaugurated Jesus's ministry to Israel.

¹⁶ Daniel Bertrand studied almost one hundred references to the baptism of Jesus in the literature of the first two centuries. He concluded that the number and diversity of these references prove that Christ's baptism was widely discussed in all major doctrinal circles of the day. While the interpretations of the baptism Bertrand discovered were *multiples et variées*, they also demonstrated that the baptism itself was not particularly significant (*n'est pas primordial*) for any of these circles. According to Bertrand, none of the early sources, from the evangelists to the early Fathers, viewed the event as a pivotal soteriological event (*le pivot de sa soteriologie*). Daniel Alain Bertrand, *Le baptême de Jésus: Histoire de l'exégèse aux deux premiers siècles*, BGBE 14 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1973), 134–36.

Subsequently, debates about Jesus's baptism would loom large in 3rd- and 4th-century adoptionist controversies. Visual depictions of Jesus's baptism eventually became commonplace; see Gertrud Schil-

meet such criteria, but is there anything in Matthew's account to suggest that he attributed this sort of messianic import to the baptism itself?¹⁷

Despite the ubiquity of this "fulfillment of prophecy" assumption, the Scriptures nowhere imply that John's baptism was a predicted, mandated, or otherwise necessary part of Jesus's preparation for messianic ministry. Even as he attempts to provide a biblical basis for this necessity, France is forced to acknowledge the tenuousness of the case: "Some have seen here the influence of the Servant figure in Isaiah, who represents his people and bears their sins. This is not explicit, but may be hinted at in the term *righteousness*, which is a prominent feature in Isaiah 53:11, particularly as v. 17 will clearly introduce the Servant theme."¹⁸

But what if, as we will argue below, the term *righteousness* in Matthew 3:15 offers no such hint? Jesus was, to be sure, a representative figure, but this nuance is by no means obvious in Matthew 3:13–17. And even were it present there, its presence would not warrant the follow-up claim that this representative role somehow necessitated John's baptism. Even the ancillary claim that participation in John's baptism functioned as some sort of "anointment" of Jesus lacks biblical support.¹⁹ These claims are the products of interpretive speculation rather than any obvious teaching of Scripture.²⁰ Such claims can be brought to Matthew's spare account—and often are—but it is difficult to see how they can be derived from it.

Second, the "fulfillment of prophecy" interpretation appears to shift attention away from some useful information Matthew actually does provide. The issue Jesus's explanation addressed was not the *necessity* of Jesus's baptism but its *appropri-*

ler, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 2 vols. (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 1:127–43. According to Schiller, the earliest depictions of Jesus's baptism—typically funerary images found in catacombs or on sarcophagi—date from the early 3rd century in the West, and the 6th century in the East (132, 134). The details of these images vary considerably (one exception: "Immersion was the universal form of baptism until the fourteenth century" [141]) and were often highly symbolic. Consequently, as Jensen observes, "The discontinuities between the biblical narrative and the iconography have caused problems for interpreters." Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 15.

¹⁷ France rightly observes, "The significance of the baptism hinted at in vv. 14–15 is distinguished from the revelatory event which follows it, which takes place after Jesus has come out of the river." R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 121. The two events are intimately related, but as we will argue below, the significance of their relationship is of a different sort.

¹⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, TNTC 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 95.

¹⁹ Luke's Isaian reference (4:18) leaves the baptism conspicuously unmentioned. Compare the indeterminate chronology of Acts 10:37–38.

²⁰ These speculations commonly stem from two sources: (1) the essential meaning of John's baptism (considered on its own terms, apart from Jesus's baptism), and as previously noted, (2) the meaning of the theophany that followed the baptism. Even though no biblical author attempts to explain the meaning of Jesus's baptism—or perhaps the reverse, just *because* of this lacuna—commentators typically draw on these two sources to supply what is lacking. This has resulted in a variety of complex proposals about what Jesus's baptism must have meant. For example, compare the dueling views of Oscar Cullman (*Baptism in the New Testament*, 15–22) and G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 49–55. The reader of the New Testament is left to wonder: If Jesus's baptism, considered in and of itself, bore the sort of cosmic theological significance proposed by such convoluted analyses, why was the witness to that significance left, not to the biblical authors but to the conflicting conjectures of later commentators?

ateness (“fitting,” *πρέπον*). Similarly, Jesus’s explanation cited no messianic issue at all. The *δικαιοσύνη* to be fulfilled was not exclusive to Jesus; it pertained to John as well (“us,” *ἡμῖν*).²¹ The “fulfillment of prophecy” proposal draws attention away from both of these important nuances.

Third, and most importantly, this proposal misreads the important verb “fulfill” (*πληρώ*) in Jesus’s response. It is commonly recognized that *πληρώ* plays an outsized role in the Gospel of Matthew, being one of the evangelist’s favorite words. In particular, *πληρώ* is the key to the “fulfillment formula” Matthew employs fourteen times to link contemporary developments around Jesus to scriptural prophecies. In each instance, *πληρώ* (or *ἀναπληρώ*) speaks of the historical fulfillment of biblical revelation.²²

The “fulfillment of prophecy” interpretation mistakenly treats *πληρώ* in Matthew 3:15 as if it were part of this series; that is, as if Jesus is saying that his baptism is necessary to fulfill prophetic Scripture. But 3:15 does not belong to this fulfillment series. Hence, in his extended study of these “fulfillment formula” passages Ulrich Luz does not so much as mention 3:15.²³ This is because the verb *πληρώ* is used differently in 3:15. Jesus does not there assert that his baptism was necessary to fulfill scriptural prophecy. Rather, he asserts that it is the “appropriate” thing to do if both he and John are to “fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus surely did insist that his baptism was necessary, but it was required not by any specific passage(s) of Scripture, as the “fulfillment of prophecy” proposal requires, but by something else, something Jesus considered equally important.

2. *To identify with sinners.* Throughout his ministry, a prominent second interpretation argues, Jesus sided with transgressors over against the self-righteous. Thus when John came preaching repentance, Jesus, as the promised Messiah, was compelled to join the ranks of those who gathered at the Jordan for baptism. Says Douglas Hare:

Why would Matthew regard it as God’s will that the Messiah be baptized? The most likely answer to this question stresses Jesus’s solidarity with sinners. The one who will save his people from their sins (1:21) by submitting to a baptism of annihilation (20:22) must here consecrate himself to his vocation by joining the sinful multitude in the waters of the Jordan. As the one destined to be their lord and king he accepts the sacrament of the renewal of God’s people. In so doing, however, he takes the first step on the road to Calvary.²⁴

²¹ “Matthew himself does not develop the link between righteousness and messianic expectation.” Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 325.

²² That is, of specific prophecies (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 27:9), or of the Law and the Prophets (5:17), or of the Scriptures and the Prophets (26:56), or simply the Scriptures in general (26:54).

²³ Luz, *Matthew*, 156–64.

²⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 21. Similarly, Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 132; see also Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 18; Turner, *Matthew*, 119; Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 17–18 (cf. Ratzinger’s summary of the Eastern Church’s view of Christ’s baptismal identification with sinners, 19–20); Nolland, “In Such a Manner,” 73,

Those who take this view typically treat Jesus's baptism as a necessary preparation for his messianic mission. Hare sounds this note when he says of Jesus that he "must ... consecrate himself to his vocation" by submitting to John's baptism. Similarly, France argues that Jesus's baptism was a matter of obeying God's requirement. It was obedience to God that "now requires Jesus to identify himself with the penitent people of God in order to fulfill his mission. So Jesus regards his baptism among repentant Israel as a necessary step in his accomplishment of God's purpose of salvation."²⁵

By his identification with sinners, it is said, Jesus was demonstrating his humility. Tom Wright, for instance, draws a vivid portrait of Christ's meekness based on a suggested contrast between John's disturbing description of the Messiah's purpose in coming—"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt 3:11–12)—and the abbreviated simplicity of Matthew's introduction of Jesus: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him" (v. 13). John's startling account of the Messiah's ministry, Wright suggests, would seem to be preparing the reader for the dramatic appearance of some extraordinary figure. Instead, they "get Jesus."

A Jesus who comes and stands humbly before John, asking for baptism, sharing the penitential mood of the rest of Judaea, Jerusalem and Galilee. A Jesus who seems to be identifying himself, not with a God who sweeps all before him in judgment, but with the people who are themselves facing that judgment and needing to repent. Part of the challenge of this passage is to learn afresh to be surprised by Jesus. He comes to fulfil God's plans, not ours, and even his prophets sometimes seem to misunderstand what he's up to. He will not always play the music we expect.²⁶

The difficulty with this reading, again, is its scarcity of textual support. To compensate for this shortage, interpreters tend to resort to their imagination. Wright's portrait of Jesus's approach to John is a case in point. It conjures up a series of creative ideas: the thought that John may not have understood his own message; or that Jesus's take on John's message should be read as different from and preferable to John's; or that Jesus was intent on "sharing the penitential mood," thereby distancing himself from a judgmental God to identify with needy

75; Charles Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God*, WUNT 386 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 265; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993), 57.

²⁵ France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 94–95. "Jesus' baptism, like his impending death ... would be vicarious, embraced on behalf of others with whom the Father had called him to identify." Keener, *Matthew*, 132. See also Gerhard Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, ed. Gunther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinze Joachim Held (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1963), 138; R. E. Henry Uprichard, "The Baptism of Jesus," *IBS* 3 (1981): 187–202; John A. T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (Philadelphia: SCM, 1962), 160–61; Yri Norvald, "Seek God's Righteousness: Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (London: WEF, 1992), 101–2.

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One: Chapters 1–15* (London: SPCK, 2002), 21–22; similarly, Keener, *Matthew*, 131; Turner, *Matthew*, 119; Gary Yamasaki, *John the Baptist in Life and Death*, JSNTSup 167 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 95.

sinner. The problem is, little in Matthew's account supports any of these ideas. In fact, what information Matthew does provide works against them.

Consider, for instance, a Jesus who wished to be baptized by John so as to identify with sinners instead of “a God who sweeps all before him in judgment.” How would submitting to John's baptism have accomplished this? Those who gathered to John were there precisely because they had internalized John's warning and embraced his prophetic ministry.²⁷ The point of participating in John's baptism was not to distance oneself from John's dire message but precisely the opposite: it was to *identify* with John, thereby publicly demonstrating one's solidarity with his urgent call for repentance.²⁸ The idea that Jesus, in being baptized by John, was somehow “up to” something other than endorsing John and his prophetic word is not merely without support in the text; it works cross-grain to it.

The same is true for the idea that John's baptism was for Jesus an exercise in humility. The image of Jesus “standing humbly before John,” penitently petitioning the prophet for permission to be baptized, is nowhere to be found in Matthew's account. Beyond the bare statement that “Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him,” Matthew offers no description whatever of the encounter—other than to note that the prophet immediately recognized Jesus as the superior one. When John protested (humbly) that he was not worthy to baptize Jesus, Jesus proceeded to instruct him in no uncertain terms about why it was imperative that he do so. To which correction John immediately (and humbly) acceded.²⁹ “The verb used to describe John's response is the same verb used by Jesus in giving his instruction to John in the first place.... Jesus speaks, and John does ex-

²⁷ The actual meaning of John's baptism is a disputed issue we cannot explore here. For a sense of the several theories on offer, see Webb's summary of the sixfold “functions” of John's baptism (*John the Baptist*, 183–205). However one decides the issue, though, this much is clear: submitting to John's baptism by definition constituted a public endorsement of and identification with the prophet's divinely authorized message and ministry (compare Matthew 3:7–8 for the prophet's condemnation of those who sought his baptism with no such motive). Beyond this, John's baptism may have meant different things to different people. “One could have received baptism with more than one motive in mind.” Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 47–48. As Loisy observed, the forerunner's “baptism of repentance did not render guilty those who came without sin (*sans péché*) to receive it; a righteous man could submit to it to signify his intent to live purely, without confessing sins which he had not committed.” Alfred Loisy, *Les évangiles synoptiques* (Montier-en-Der: Ceffonds-Loisy, 1907), 405. In any case, John's “baptism could not be understood, and had no significance apart from the preaching of [his] message. Baptism was a symbolic act by which the essence of the message was dramatized in the experience of those who accepted the message.” Charles H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 113. In Jesus's case in particular, “By undergoing John's baptism, Jesus became a member of those who accepted John's proclamation.” Daniel S. Dapaah, *The Relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth: A Critical Study* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 89.

²⁸ Hence Schlatter speaks of the “full inner unity [*vollen inneren Einheit*] in which Jesus sees himself with the work of John, with regard to both its origin and content” (*Johannes der Täufer*, 81); similarly, see Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 148; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:8. “Our Lord's submission to the baptism of John constituted clear assent to John's authority, in respect both to his message and to his ministry.” Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 55.

²⁹ “Both the attempt of John to deter [Jesus] and his capitulation to Jesus' insistence exemplify the disciplelike qualities of humility and obedience.” Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 51.

actly what Jesus says.”³⁰ In short, Matthew appears to be portraying Jesus as the one in charge here, not John.

One must stipulate, of course, that Jesus was a model of humility in all he did. But what is there in Matthew’s account to justify establishing “humility” as the primary lens through which these verses are to be read? Wright speaks of a subdued “penitential mood” that Jesus took upon himself, but does Matthew so speak? If anything, Matthew’s account radiates a spirit of determination as a resolute Jesus—how many others had traveled all the way from Galilee?—publicly identifies himself with God’s forerunner over against the very opposition (“You brood of vipers!”) Jesus himself would soon endure. “Jesus and John stand together not only in common opposition of and rejection by the opponents of God’s will, but they also stand together as champions of the kingdom of heaven.”³¹ In the end, it must be said, like the “fulfillment of Scripture” proposal, the standard “identify with sinners” proposal is unduly indebted to imaginative conjecture.

AN ALTERNATE PROPOSAL

It seems preferable to seek a more straightforward reading of Jesus’s reply that avoids these several shortcomings: an interpretive proposal that (1) minimizes conjecture and supposition, (2) takes full advantage of the interpretive cues Matthew’s Gospel actually does supply, and (3) provides a satisfying answer to the “fulfill all righteousness” question. It is our contention that when John balked at baptizing Jesus, instead of Christ’s response leaving readers perplexed and dependent on conjecture, his brief ten-word reply, when carefully and contextually construed, provides the clearest of explanations for why Jesus wished to be baptized by John.

Though not coterminous with any of the proposals listed by Davies and Allison, the interpretation on offer here nonetheless collects several of their threads and, together with a reexamination of a series of prominent Matthean themes, weaves them into a construal of Matthew’s account that is both exegetically and theologically satisfying. It is exegetically satisfying in that, unlike its alternatives, it is lexically sound and contextually anchored. It is theologically satisfying in that it is minimally conjectural and maximally informative about Jesus and his motives.

1. *Lexical issues.* The development of this interpretation requires close attention, first, to the actual wording of Jesus’s sentence. It should come as no surprise that each of its ten words plays an important role in expressing his meaning. The lexical task is simplified, thankfully, by the fact that the first nine words are straightforward, with undisputed semantic ranges.³² For our purposes, they require no lexical heavy lifting.

³⁰ Yamasaki, *John the Baptist*, 98.

³¹ Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 35.

³² “Let it be so (ἀφίημι) now (ἄρτι), for (γάρ) thus (οὕτως) it is fitting (πρέπον ἐστίν) for us (ἡμῖν) to fulfill (πληρῶσαι) all (πᾶσαν).” Of these nine words, the infinitive *πληρῶσαι* might seem an exception to the claim of being undisputed, mainly because the finer nuances of *πληρῶω* have been widely debated. For our purposes, though, the claim can hold. Says Meier, “Obviously, the general meaning [of *πληρῶω*] is ‘to fill completely,’ ‘fulfill.’ But any attempt to become more specific plunges the exegete into a verita-

The sentence's final word, “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη), on the other hand, offers a striking contrast. Its rich semantic possibilities render it the leading source of confusion about Jesus's reply. The process of interpreting his response must therefore begin with a decision about the meaning of this important word.

A detailed survey of the semantic depth and complexity of δικαιοσύνη is not possible here.³³ Nor is it necessary. Our specific interest is the use of δικαιοσύνη in Matthew's Gospel, and on this tightly focused topic Benno Przybylski's monograph *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* effectively sets the table. Przybylski's goal was to resolve longstanding controversy over the meaning of “the Matthean concept of righteousness.”³⁴ In doing so he summarizes the two primary options.

Virtually all commentators agree that δικαιοσύνη plays a uniquely important role in the Gospel of Matthew. The word is, in fact, “characteristically a Matthean term.”³⁵ It occurs not at all in Mark and only once in Luke, while Matthew employs it seven times, all in redactional passages unique to him. Matthew's use of δικαιοσύνη is thus unparalleled in the other Synoptics and is essentially unbeholden to them.

While none dispute the importance of δικαιοσύνη in Matthew, commentators have long debated the word's meaning. As documented by Przybylski, some argue that righteousness in Matthew is to be understood in a quasi-Pauline sense of “God's gift to man.” Others claim that δικαιοσύνη refers to “God's demand upon man.” Still others stake out mediating positions between “these two aspects of righteousness.”³⁶

Why such disagreement? According to Przybylski, “the absence of consensus is largely because scholars have misjudged what in fact constitutes the appropriate background literature for the Gospel of Matthew.”³⁷ For Przybylski, the relevant backdrop is provided neither by the Old Testament nor the Pauline corpus, but by the “general intellectual milieu” of the Jewish-Palestinian society of Matthew's day. According to Przybylski, δικαιοσύνη was for Matthew a transitional term designed to bridge the teachings of Jesus to the Jewish-Palestinian society around him.

Przybylski's research was conducted under the supervision of E. P. Sanders, so its focus on contemporary Jewish-Palestinian backgrounds does not surprise. The book's exploration of the relevant issues is thorough and insightful, as is its discussion of each occurrence of the word in Matthew. For our purposes, though, Przybylski's most important contribution lies in the case he makes against “Pau-

ble whirlpool of conflicting interpretations” (*Law and History*, 73). Our discussion will avoid this plunge by assuming no more than the generally understood meaning Meier rightly calls the “obvious” one.

³³ Gottlob Schrenk's *TDNT* survey of the δικ- family of words occupies fifty-one pages, nineteen of which are devoted to δικαιοσύνη (2:174–225).

³⁴ Benno Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought*, SNTSMS 41 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2.

³⁵ Przybylski, *Righteousness*, 78.

³⁶ Przybylski, *Righteousness*, 1.

³⁷ Przybylski, *Righteousness*, 3.

linizing" Matthew's use of *δικαιοσύνη*.³⁸ Says he, "The Matthean concept of righteousness, in contrast to the Pauline one, is not a primary Christian theological concept. [It] ... is essentially a Jewish concept, used in a provisional way to provide a point of contact between contemporary Jewish religious understanding and the teaching of Jesus as Matthew understood it."³⁹

Przybylski argues that in Matthew's Gospel *δικαιοσύνη* is not portrayed as a means of "salvation." Much less does Matthew equate exhibiting *δικαιοσύνη* with salvation; Jesus could speak of the *δικαιοσύνη* of the scribes and Pharisees without any hint of salvific efficacy (Matt 5:20). In Matthew's Gospel, righteousness means, simply, *conformity to the expressed will of God*.⁴⁰ Is such conformity humanly possible? Provided the context is not "salvation," the answer must surely be yes. Human beings are obviously capable of obeying God; in fact, God holds them accountable for doing so. It is in this sense that Matthew uses the term *δικαιοσύνη*. To do the "right" thing—which is to say, to conform oneself to God's revealed will—is to exhibit "righteousness."

This general understanding of *δικαιοσύνη* serves well in each of the word's occurrences in Matthew. The term makes its first appearance in 3:15, to which we will turn below. But for the moment it is important to observe that this definition illuminates the remaining six Matthean occurrences as well. In each of these passages, understanding *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew's Gospel as "conformity to God's expressed will" rings true. This general understanding of the term (as used in Matthew's Gospel) has therefore gained wide acceptance among recent commentators,⁴¹ and it is the one, I will argue, that makes the best sense of Jesus's enigmatic response to John the Baptist.

2. *Contextual issues.* As we have emphasized, one of the prime reasons Jesus's reply to John has perplexed so many—generating, in turn, so much speculation about its meaning—is its apparent isolation. It appears in a momentary exchange between John and Jesus and then vanishes, leaving not a ripple elsewhere. In this sense, Christ's words are dramatically lacking in context. If, as Silva observes,

³⁸ "We must not introduce into Mt Paul's theology of *dikaioσynē*. It is quite true that Mt has too often been read in the light of Paulinism." Meier, *Law and History*, 77.

³⁹ Przybylski, *Righteousness*, 123.

⁴⁰ This is my summary statement. In Przybylski's own words, *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew refers to "proper conduct rather than to the gift of salvation" (*Righteousness*, 120); "conduct which is in agreement with the will of God" (95); behavior that comports with "the total will of God" (94), "proper conduct before God" (99), "the meticulous observance of the law" (84), "proper conduct according to the law" (121). Following Przybylski's lead, France summarizes the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew as "what is required" by God, or "the proper conduct which God expects of his people" (*Gospel of Matthew*, 119). Righteousness is "the accomplishing of God's will in its fullness." Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 56.

⁴¹ "A large number of scholars agree that righteousness refers to conduct which is in agreement with the will of God." Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew*, 95. Przybylski's "detailed discussion ... has firmly established this meaning," around which a "growing consensus" has developed. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 119n15; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 327; D. A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8: *Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 107; Evans, "Fulfilling the Law," 110–12; Luz, *Matthew*, 177; Roger Mohrland, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives*, SNTSMS 48 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 114; Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 73; Gundry, *Matthew*, 50–51.

“Context does not merely help us understand meaning—it virtually *makes* meaning,”⁴² this shortage of context would appear to be a major challenge to interpreting Jesus’s reply.

It may be that this dearth of context can be overstated, however. While his treatment of the exchange between John and Jesus is notoriously sparse, Matthew’s Gospel as a whole provides two contextual elements that often seem underutilized.

First, commentators tend to underplay the significance of John’s initial reaction to Jesus. Matthew describes those who approached John for baptism as gathering from “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan” (Matt 3:5), that is, from southern regions relatively close to John’s remote location. This assemblage is portrayed as a disparate group composed of those who gravitated to John in sincere repentance, along with hostile representatives of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who gathered for less virtuous reasons (3:7). This was the mixed audience to which John was accustomed. Until, that is, the day Jesus appeared. It was to reveal to Israel the greater one “who comes after me” that John “came baptizing with water” (John 1:31); this purpose alone would have precluded any thought in John’s mind of ever baptizing the greater one himself. Yet here was Jesus. The Baptist would likely have been startled by the approach of the very one, he may have suspected, about whose dramatic “winnowing” of Israel he had been preaching.⁴³

Immediately obvious to John would have been the fact that Jesus’s appearance was no accident. “Jesus alone comes from Galilee; everyone else is from Jerusalem or Judea or the region around the Jordan.”⁴⁴ His arrival required a demanding journey on foot of more than seventy miles. Given what John knew about the dramatic nature of the Messiah’s ministry, he would likely have been perplexed. What did Jesus’s unexpected appearance mean? If he is the mightier one who is to come “after me,” did this mean John’s forerunner role was now completed?

Matthew offers no description of Jesus’s actual approach to John, but he does record the Baptist’s befuddled reaction. John was shocked by the thought of baptizing Jesus, so much so that he essentially refused to do so. Though Jesus had as yet done no baptizing, John apparently assumed he was about to begin.⁴⁵ He therefore resisted the idea of baptizing Jesus and suggested a reversal of roles. According to Matthew, it was precisely this two-fold response—John’s resistance, combined

⁴² Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 139, italics his.

⁴³ So W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, AB 26 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 31. John’s immediate recognition of Jesus is sometimes assumed to conflict with the testimony of the Fourth Gospel, where John claims that he did not know Jesus prior to the theophany (John 1:31–33). Yet these claims need not be read as conflictual. When John said he did not “know” Jesus, he did not mean that he “did not know Jesus at all, but only that he did not know him as the Coming One.” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 151; similarly, Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 57. As for John’s “later question whether Jesus was ‘the one who comes’” (Matt 11:2 // Luke 7:19), that question arose “because Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that John expected, causing him to wonder if he had it right.” Bock, *Luke*, 1:135.

⁴⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 321.

⁴⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 56; Gundry, *Matthew*, 51.

with his proposal—that triggered Jesus’s ten-word response. Both elements must therefore be allowed to play a significant role in construing Jesus’s reply.

Second, if Matthew’s Gospel offers only a minimalist setting for Jesus’s words, pulling back for a wider perspective yields a different picture. In this broader sense Matthew’s Gospel provides a wealth of context for Jesus’s reply to John. This broader context takes the form of six interrelated Matthean themes, each of which converge in Jesus’s ten-word sentence. None of these themes are obscure or surprising; still less are they unique to Matthew. They are common biblical emphases that appear throughout Christ’s ministry as portrayed by all four Gospels. Relevant here, however, is their relative *prevalence* and *prominence* in Matthew’s Gospel. Once highlighted, the following six themes provide the larger Matthean context we need to construe the clear meaning of Jesus’s otherwise enigmatic reply to John.

1. *Conformity to the revealed will of God—in other words, “obedience”—was Jesus’s highest priority.* At his peak moment of testing in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus twice expressed the first—one might say, the only—priority of his life. He was determined to conform his life to the expressed will of God, whatever the cost: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (Matt 26:39, 42). Obedience to the expressed will of God was the principle by which Jesus lived and the core commitment he taught: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” he warned, “but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7:21). This was the priority, Jesus said, that marked his closest disciples. When informed that his mother and brothers awaited him outside, “stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (12:49–50). Indeed, it is those who are most committed to this principle who “will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (5:19).

This emphasis on obedience to God’s revealed will is one of Matthew’s primary themes. Says Ulrich Luz:

The most important observation [about Matt 3:14ff.] is that *Jesus’ sonship with God* gains from [these verses] a new accent that is determinative for Matthew. The Son of God is for him not only the one who was from heaven (cf. 2:15; 16:16f.; 17:5) but especially the obedient one who subjects himself to God’s will. This thought is so important to [Matthew] that he repeats it as the main idea in the following story of the temptation. Indeed, at the end of the passion narrative he presents once more the same interpretation of Jesus’ sonship with God (27:43; cf. 27:54).... Jesus is the obedient and humble one.... The uniqueness of Jesus in our text consists not so much in the preexistence, also not in the miraculous conception—which is not central for the evangelist—but in his unique obedience (*einzigartigen Gehorsam*).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Luz, *Matthew*, 180, italics his. Jesus is “the impeccable one who is impeccably obedient.... He stands for obedience to God’s will.” William G. Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 159.

2. *The Scriptures are the prime source for discerning God's expressed will.* The working premise Jesus expressed to Satan in the wilderness, itself drawn from Scripture, was this: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3). Where might one discover that divine word? Matthew, and Jesus as portrayed by Matthew, consistently associates it with Scripture: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet” (1:22); “As for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God” (22:31); “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him” (22:43). All together, “the Gospel of Matthew contains more than sixty explicit quotations of Scripture (at least twice as many as any other Gospel).”⁴⁷ In the following four themes this connection between God's expressed will and the sacred writings emerges as a prime Matthean emphasis.

3. *Multiple events surrounding Jesus's life and ministry were the fulfillment of God's scripturally revealed will and must unfold in precise conformity to that will.* As earlier noted, the verb “fulfill” (πληρώ, or ἀναπληρώ) is on prominent display in the Gospel of Matthew. It plays a key role in the “quotation” or “fulfillment” formula Matthew employs multiple times to link contemporary developments around Jesus to the biblically revealed will of God.

This Matthean emphasis presents a striking contrast to the other Synoptics. Luke uses πληρώ in this sense three times, none of which overlap with Matthew. Mark uses it this way only once (Mark 14:49 // Matt 26:56). In each of the other thirteen instances Matthew alone stresses the link between unfolding events and the scripturally expressed will of God. He twice portrays this linkage as temporal, as in the expression “then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet” (2:17). More often his assertions portray the events as occurring necessarily, which is to say, they transpired for the expressed purpose of fulfilling God's prophetically revealed will; for example, “all this took place to fulfill [ἵνα πληρωθῇ] what the Lord had said through the prophet” (1:22).

In one particularly revealing passage, Matthew shows Jesus himself insisting on the necessary character of prophesied events: they must unfold precisely as scripturally specified. On the night of his arrest, Jesus informed his disciples of what was about to occur. “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (Matt 26:31; Zech. 13:7). Peter rashly responded by protesting (twice) that he would never deny Jesus. He would stand with him even if it meant death. So it was that later that night when the mob arrived to arrest Jesus, Peter (cf. John 18:10) impulsively “reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.” In a response reported only by Matthew, Jesus rebuked Peter: “Put your sword back in its place.... Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way [πῶς οὖν πληρωθῶσιν αἱ γραφαὶ ὅτι οὕτως δεῖ γενέσθαι]?” (Matt 26:52–54). With that,

⁴⁷ Evans, “Fulfilling the Law,” 113.

Jesus turned to the company and said, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled [ἵνα πληρωθῶσιν αἱ γραφαὶ τῶν προφητῶν].”

Peter’s response to the crowd was a bravado attempt to stand by his earlier protests. Yet his recourse to physical force was misguided. If physical resistance were required Jesus could have called the angels to his rescue. But this sort of resistance would have falsified the Scriptures that predicted Christ’s abandonment and death. Jesus would not allow that to happen. For him, it was imperative that events unfold in careful conformity to God’s scripturally revealed will.

4. *Jesus was resistant to distortions or misrepresentations of God’s scripturally revealed will.* Jesus called for, and modeled, a meticulous—even “perfect” (Matt 5:48; 19:21)—obedience to God’s revealed will. This commitment in turn required him to challenge every misrepresentation of that divine will. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” Jesus explained to the crowd.

I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill (πληρῶσαι) them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (πάντα γένηται). Therefore whoever relaxes (ὅς ἐάν ... λύσῃ) one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches (ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ) them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:17–19).

In the wilderness Satan sought to entice Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus responded by citing Deuteronomy 8:3 to the effect that God wills humans to live according to his word, not their appetites. Shifting his strategy, Satan misapplied Psalm 91:11–12 in an effort to prompt Jesus to test God’s promise of protection. Jesus parried this distortion by citing the scriptural prohibition against putting God to any such test (Deut 6:16). Satan then “showed [Jesus] all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” To which offer Jesus replied, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’” (6:13). In each instance, Matthew portrays Jesus as intent on correcting Satan’s distortions of God’s scripturally revealed will.

In the same way, Jesus challenged the Jewish leaders for *their* distortions of God’s word (Matt 21:12–13). “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (23:23). These religious leaders were culpably responsible for mishandling God’s word by their obstinate neglect of what was written. “You are wrong,” Jesus declared, “because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (22:29). Hence Jesus’s repeated question throughout Matthew’s Gospel: “Have you not read?” (12:3; 12:5; 19:4; 21:16; 21:42; 22:31). In these instances Jesus drew on a range of biblical passages to correct the Pharisees’ false (15:1–8) and ill-motivated (23:1–7) readings of God’s scripturally expressed will.

Jesus consistently refused to allow the sacred writings to be misused so as to misrepresent God's will.

5. *God's scripturally expressed will included a detailed, divinely orchestrated plan for the life and ministry of Jesus.* All four Gospels detail God's long-revealed plan for the earthly life of Jesus. Among the Synoptics, however, Matthew's Gospel gives this divine script by far the most attention.⁴⁸ Matthew highlights no fewer than twenty-one aspects of this plan, each of which was long before revealed in the sacred writings (“law,” “prophets,” “Scripture,” that which is “written”).⁴⁹ Six other references show additional details of the plan being directly choreographed by the angel of the Lord, usually via dreams.⁵⁰ Taken together these multiple references display God's expressed will as involving a detailed script for Jesus's life and work.

It was a script, moreover, in which issues of *timing* and *sequence* played an important role. God's plan for his Son's life and work was to unfold through a specified series of events. These included circumstances related to Jesus's birth, his family's journeys to and from Egypt, events surrounding Herod and the Magi, the family's withdrawal to Galilee, the arrival of John the Baptist on the scene, the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, various aspects of that public ministry, Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, specific events of the passion week, and Christ's post-resurrection shift to Galilee. All these events were to occur in particular ways and according to a specified sequence.

6. *Jesus was aware of God's plan, at least in part, and was protective toward its timing.* Not even Jesus knew the full details of God's timetable, particularly as they related to “the end of the age” (Matt 24:3; 24:36; cf. 24:44, 50; 25:13). But Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for their failure to grasp what *could* be known of God's plan and its timing: “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (16:3). The nation's leaders were culpably responsible for their ignorance. Even the demonic realm was aware of God's timetable and feared it (8:29).

For his part, conversely, Jesus was highly attuned to God's plan. It seems to have been constantly on his mind, especially toward the end (26:18, 45), and he was determined to guard it from disruption. This is apparently what prompted his otherwise odd instructions to those he healed. To the man cleansed from leprosy, Jesus said, “See that you say nothing to anyone” (8:4); as for the men given their sight, “Jesus sternly warned them, ‘See that no one knows about it’” (9:30). Concerning the multitude, Matthew says: “And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known” (12:15–16). Even the disciples were to guard his identity: “He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the

⁴⁸ In his extended treatment of the quotation formula in Matthew (156–64), Luz observes, “The life of Jesus corresponds from the beginning to the plan of God to which Jesus is completely obedient.... The formula quotations of the Gospel of Matthew are ... the expression, intensified and made foundational, of a conviction which all of early Christianity shares: The Christ event is the fulfillment of Scripture.” Luz, *Matthew*, 162–63.

⁴⁹ Matt 1:22; 2:5, 15; 2:17, 23; 3:3; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 11:10; 12:17; 13:14, 34; 21:4, 42; 22:43; 26:24, 31, 54, 56; 27:9.

⁵⁰ Matt 1:20–24; 2:12–13, 19, 22; 28:2.

Christ" (16:20). After the Transfiguration, "as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded [the disciples], 'Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead'" (17:9). Jesus was determined to prevent God's timetable from being disrupted by a premature response from the general population.⁵¹

The issue of timing was especially important in the ministry of John the Baptist. Jesus was acutely aware of John's anticipatory role. When he later explained John's ministry to the crowd (Matt 11:10), he cited Malachi 3:1: "This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" John would come before, preparing the way for the one who would come "after" him (Matt 3:11; cf. 11:3). John's prophetic message announced God's timetable: the not-yet "kingdom of heaven" was nonetheless "at hand" (3:2). That kingdom will bring "the wrath to come" (3:7). Already "now" the axe is being laid to the root of the trees (3:10). When he "who is to come" arrives, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:11–12). Even the disciples' confusion about John's identity had to do with questions about God's timing (17:9–13).

The public appearance of John as the Messiah's forerunner was one of the divine timetable's most prominent markers. Eventually the forerunner role would be phased out and it would be time for Jesus to take center stage. But that time was not yet. When John's disciples pressed Jesus about why the Pharisees fasted but his own followers did not, Jesus explained the matter as an issue of timing: "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt 9:15 // Mark 2:20 // Luke 5:35).

JESUS'S REPLY TO JOHN

Each of the above emphases converge in Jesus's compact response to John in the wilderness. When combined with a properly Matthean understanding of *δικαιοσύνη*, these themes provide a natural and understandable meaning of Jesus's ten-word reply. Eschewing undue conjecture or supposition, one need only allow Jesus's words to mean what they plainly seem to say.

"Let it be so ..."

When Jesus approached John for baptism, it seemed to John inappropriate that the lesser figure should baptize the greater. Surely, he protested, their roles should be reversed: Jesus should baptize him. To this suggestion Jesus responded with a direct order. John should "let it be so" (*ἄφες*, aorist imperative of *ἀφίημι*,

⁵¹ For example, see John 6:15; or, conversely, John 7:30; 8:20. Other than the brief account of the precocious twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple reported in Luke 2:41–52, we know little of Jesus's life between his infancy and his arrival at the Jordan. But his determination to limit any premature notoriety even after he had gone public may shed light on how he had intentionally lived during his first thirty years. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:109. This point should not be overstated; for example, see Mary's expectations and Jesus's response in John 2:3–4, or Jesus's own partial explanation in John 4:44. But Jesus apparently lived his life in such a manner as to remain unidentified until "his hour" had come.

“to permit, allow”). It was necessary that John should accede to baptizing Jesus, for the reason he was about to explain.

“now; ...”

With this common word (ἄρτι) Jesus introduced the issue of timing: “at the present time,” or “for the moment at least.”⁵² Contrary to what John may have assumed, Jesus’s arrival at the Jordan did not signal an end to the Baptist’s ministry, but the opposite.⁵³ Jesus’s rationale for the appropriateness of his baptism hinged on the fact that God was not yet through with John. The divine timetable was still very much in its forerunner phase. For “now,” therefore, the spotlight must remain on John and his message. It was for this reason that Jesus had come to John in the wilderness: to express, by publicly (cf. Luke 3:21) participating in John’s baptism, his full solidarity with and support for the forerunner’s divinely ordained ministry.

“for thus ...”

John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus was based on the greater/lesser issue. Jesus is about to relieve him of that reluctance by shifting his focus to the more pertinent issue: conformity to the expressed will of God. Jesus introduces that shift with the words “for thus” (οὕτως γάρ), which is to say, “for, by your baptizing of me.”

“it is fitting ...”

Rather than John’s baptism of Jesus being inappropriate, as John had suggested, the truth was the opposite. Jesus being baptized by John was entirely appropriate, for the following reason.

“for us ...”

Jesus’s explanation focused on the present roles of both John *and* Jesus. John was certainly correct: Jesus was the greater figure and John the lesser. But for the moment, Jesus instructed him, this disparity was not the relevant factor. The more pertinent issue was God’s timetable.

At present John’s preparatory work remained unfinished. God was still using him to call Israel to repentance in preparation for the coming king. During this preparatory stage it was God’s expressed will—*expressed, that is, in the divinely authorized message of John, the last of God’s prophets*—that adult Israelites should seek out John and submit to his baptism, thereby demonstrating their embrace of the forerunner’s anticipatory message. Given his unqualified support for what God was doing

⁵² Jesus “does not attempt to correct John’s understanding that he is the eschatological judge. Instead, he addresses the issue of timing,” Yamasaki, *John the Baptist*, 97; “ἄρτι (= ‘for the moment at least’) is a Matthean favourite (Mt:7; Mk:0; Lk:0).” Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 324. “[Jesus] seems to recognize the anomaly of the situation, rightly pointed out (*justement souligné*) by John, and to view the present circumstance as an exception: valid in other times, the objection of the Baptist is not admissible on this particular occasion.” Jacques Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, rev. ed., 3 vols. (Paris: Gabalda, 1969–1973), 3:239.

⁵³ See Nolland, “In Such a Manner,” 74.

through the forerunner, therefore, the needful thing for the still-anonymous Jesus⁵⁴ to do was to obey this divine call by presenting himself to John for baptism. As for the baptizer, the appropriate thing for him was to comply by baptizing Jesus.⁵⁵

“to fulfill all righteousness.”

Reading *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew’s Gospel as “conformity to God’s expressed will” serves well in 3:15. According to Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees could be said to have their *δικαιοσύνη*, but their conformity to God’s will was at best partial and merely external (6:1). From the lips of Jesus, by contrast, his reference to “*all* righteousness” spoke of a *complete* conformity to God’s revealed plan;⁵⁶ in other words, in this instance, full compliance with every detail of God’s apparent will, including the avoidance of any missteps that might annul or disrupt it.⁵⁷

Contrary to the Baptist’s suggestion, Jesus could not at this point have shifted to the role of baptizer without doing violence to God’s plan. It was not yet time. His baptism of John would have with a single stroke cut John’s ministry short and precipitated his own, thereby preempting God’s timing. Not too far in the future the time would come for Jesus to emerge onto the public stage (Matt 5:12–17). Until that time, however, if they were to remain in full compliance with God’s current will, it was imperative that both John and Jesus continue in their present roles.⁵⁸ The proper thing for Jesus to do, at least for now, was to remain incognito while submitting to John’s baptism. For his part, the proper thing for John to do

⁵⁴ “Jesus comes from Galilee to John, as one among many, and is baptized by him.” Luz, *Matthew*, 176. Similarly, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:120; Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 16.

⁵⁵ See John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 226; cf. Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, 3:240.

⁵⁶ Only Matthew reports Jesus’s comments about there being degrees or gradations of *δικαιοσύνη* (Matt 5:20). “‘All righteousness’ implies a quantitative concept of righteousness that fits 5:20.” Gundry, *Matthew*, 50. Cf. Matt 19:20–21; 28:20; Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew*, 85–87.

⁵⁷ “‘To fulfill all righteousness’ means *to complete everything that forms part of a relationship of obedience to God*.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 81, italics his. “The mission of Jesus, like that of the Baptist, involves doing all that is right [*tout ce qui est juste*]. The use of *πληρώω* adds a nuance: it is appropriate that this practice be perfect [*parfait*], that Jesus and John go to the end in submission to the divine will. They must fully observe all that is part of their mission, and observe it in an irreproachable manner.... Jesus adds a detail [*précision*] that marks his entire subordination to the divine will: like John and with him, he intends to accomplish perfectly [*parfaitement*] all that God asks of him. This obedience would lack something if he did not submit to John’s baptism, or if John refused to grant it to him.” Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, 3:244.

⁵⁸ All righteousness here refers “to the entirety of the divine will as the Matthean Jesus interprets it.... ‘All righteousness’ does not *consist* in the baptism by John, but the latter only belongs to it.” Luz, *Matthew*, 178, italics his. So also Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew*, 93; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 325.

This is the point seemingly lost on Hagner, who rightly interprets *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew as “the accomplishing of God’s will in its fullness,” but then argues that because “there is no divine commandment either in the OT or in the Gospels to submit to John’s baptism ..., submission to that baptism ... can hardly in itself be thought of as an act of righteousness. And even more difficult is the idea that it can be thought of as fulfilling *all* righteousness” (*Matthew 1–13*, 56). While, as we have argued, there were no scriptural commands that required Jesus to be baptized by John, Jesus nonetheless plainly understood that it was God’s present will that all faithful Israelites should participate in the forerunner’s baptism. In this light, Jesus’s single-minded determination to “accomplish God’s will in its fullness”—that is, to fulfill *all δικαιοσύνη*—was more than enough to send him to John at the Jordan.

was to continue his present ministry—not least by baptizing the still-anonymous Israelite who had come to him from Galilee.

This reading of Matthew’s account retains a strong and obvious connection between John’s proposed reversal of roles and Jesus’s explanatory response, thereby avoiding the flights of imagination that so often attend the interpretation of this passage. It is in fact worth asking which of the more intricate theological construals of Jesus’s meaning could the prophet himself—in the moment, and without further exposition by Jesus—have even found intelligible? Yet, according to Matthew, John instantly apprehended Jesus’s meaning and acceded. This too speaks in favor of the more accessible reading we have proposed here.

CONCLUSION

When Jesus approached John for baptism, the Baptist resisted, viewing it as inappropriate. Instead, John proposed, Jesus should be the one to baptize him. The following is an expanded paraphrase of our proposed construal of Jesus’s reply:

John, you need not hesitate to baptize me. Nor would it be appropriate for me to baptize you. It is not yet time for me to be revealed in this way to the nation. For now, God has purposed that the focus must remain on you and your preparatory role. You and I must therefore be careful to avoid anything that might disrupt or preempt that purpose. God is at present calling all faithful Israelites to come to you and, as an expression of their heartfelt acceptance of your divinely appointed message and ministry, to submit to your baptism. It is fitting, therefore, that I as a faithful Israelite should do so. At present you are still heaven’s man of the hour and I unreservedly support what God is doing through you. So let us proceed with my baptism. In doing so both of us will be living out even in this detail our determination to live in full conformity to God’s revealed will.

This construal of Jesus’s reply is distinguished by its straightforwardness. Unlike more exotic alternatives, it is based on neither interpretive conjecture nor ideas imported from elsewhere. It is grounded in the actual language and context (both near and far) of Matthew 3:15. In the near context this interpretation reads Jesus’s ten-word reply exactly as Matthew presents it: a direct response to John’s resistance. More broadly, it construes Jesus’s explanation as a distilled expression of six biblical priorities that Matthew’s Gospel explicitly and repeatedly attributes to Jesus.

According to this reading, then, what Jesus says must be “fulfilled” is not, as in Matthew’s standard “fulfillment formula,” specified biblical prophecies. No prophet had ever foretold Jesus’s baptism. What multiple prophets did foresee, though, was God’s carefully orchestrated plan for the introduction of his Son to the nation, a plan that included a prominent forerunner who would go before the Messiah announcing his arrival (cf. Matt 21:25). We do not imagine that Jesus had in mind anything approaching calendar dates for either the conclusion of John’s role or the public initiation of his own. (In the end, the two ministries overlapped—see John 3:22–24; 4:1–2). Rather, at the Jordan Jesus need only have understood that God’s timetable did not yet involve his being revealed to the nation. For the moment therefore, there could be no reversal of roles. Jesus must remain

an anonymous—"under the radar," so to speak—faithful Israelite; John must continue in his public role as the divinely appointed baptizer. This was in fact why Jesus had come to John in the first place: not to preempt him but to express, by receiving his baptism, his unreserved solidarity with John's divinely ordained message and ministry. Only in this way, by John baptizing Jesus, could both figures, in their present roles, fully conform themselves to the divine will.

Finally, throughout this article we have observed Matthew's emphasis on Jesus's obedience. Mark and Luke paint a similar portrait, but John's Gospel in particular stresses this theme. What sustained Jesus—his very *food*—was "to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). Said he, "I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (5:30); "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (6:38). It is a note one hears throughout Jesus's life. From his earliest years (Luke 2:39) to the mature Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Son "learned obedience" (Heb 5:8) in order that "by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19).

But if Jesus was eager to please his heavenly Father by his filial obedience, it is certain that his Father was equally pleased to receive that obedience. This accord may supply insight into the theophany that followed Jesus's baptism. We have argued that the meaning of that theophany should not be automatically backloaded into verse 15 as the meaning of Jesus's response to John. More legitimately, it may be that Jesus's explanation to John should be read forward into the theophany.

If, as we have emphasized, Jesus's response to John constituted a strong expression of his heartfelt determination to conform himself in every possible way to the will of the Father, it may have been this very expression that elicited the heavenly declaration that followed. This observation by no means undermines the standard messianic/eschatological/soteriological implications of the divine declaration,⁵⁹ but it does serve to reinforce our reading of Jesus's reply to John. When, in that reply, Jesus emphasized his absolute commitment to obeying every dimension of God's revealed will, and then demonstrated that commitment by publicly submitting to John's baptism, it was perhaps this very expression of the Son's singular priority that drew heaven's delighted response: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For example, see Matthew 12:17–22.

⁶⁰ So Luz, *Matthew*, 180.