

Baptism According to Matthew 3:13-17 and the *Martutuaek*'s Rite

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ABSTRACT

This study examines if the story of Jesus' baptism according to the Gospel of Matthew 3:13-17 is read and interpreted by someone who knows the rite of *martutuaek* in the tradition of Batak Toba's community. Baptism is one of the special ceremonies used to accept and enter outsiders into a particular community or group as full members with all their obligations and rights. This ceremony is called "initiation". The word "initiation" comes from the Latin terms "*inire*" or "*initiare*," which mean: to enter or join into a group; or also accept someone into a group. *Martutuaek* is an initiation rite in the Batak Toba community, while Matthew 3:13-17 narrates Jesus' baptism. The dialog between Jesus' baptism and *martutuaek* would be fruitful in interpreting the Scriptures hermeneutically. Culture can pave the way for contextually sharpening Scripture, and Scripture provides illumination and fulfillment for culture. The *martutuaek*'s rite can be seen in the light of Jesus' baptism according to Matthew 3:13-17. However, for Christians, as the Scripture's text, Matthew 3:13-17 has a higher position than *martutuaek* since it is about God's revelations.

Key words: Baptism, water, name, hope, preparation, sanctification, fulfillment.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

This article is about to discuss baptism according to the Gospel of Matthew 3:13-17 in comparison with the *martutuaek*'s rite. In the Batak Toba's community, there is an initiation rite called *martutuaek*. The *Parmalim*¹ community still practices it today. For them, the *martutuaek*'s rite is an obligation to be fulfilled when a son or a daughter is born. *Martutuaek* is the ceremony of taking a baby to the river or shower to be bathed. This rite is carried out after the baby is 7–21 days old.²

The dialog between Scripture and culture is interesting and should be studied. There is a similar theme in Matthew 3:13-17 and the *martutuaek*'s rite, that is, initiation or baptism. In the tradition of the Catholic Church, baptism is seen as a law that must be carried out by everyone who will become a member of the ecclesial community. Likewise for the Batak Toba's community, as practiced in the *martutuaek*'s rite, there is an initiation ritual for a baby.

B. Problem Formulation

This study explores the answers to the following questions: What are the parallels and differences between Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13-17 and the *martutuaek*'s initiation rite? What is the meaning of the baptism received by Jesus when it is interpreted by someone who practices the *martutuaek*'s tradition?

II. RESEARCH METHODS

The method used in this study is to analyze the Scripture's texts in two stages, namely exposition and actualization. Exposition is an explanation of the Scripture's texts by looking at the original text's environment, historical background, context of speech, and the author's intent for the reader. In this stage, interpretation is understood as the objectification of text, which is carried out through analysis with a synchronic approach as well as a diachronic approach.³

¹ *Parmalim* is the revitalization and systematization of the Batak Toba religion, with Si Singa Mangaraja as its "highest priest."

² Bungaran Anthonius Simanjuntak, *Upacara Kelahiran pada Masyarakat Batak Toba* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1985), p. 61.

³ Wilhem Egger, *How to Read the New Testament. An Introduction to Linguistic and Historical-Critical Methodology* (United States of America: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), p. 65.

In the synchronic approach, the text is viewed as part of a structure that has elements (verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.) that are related to one another. This approach provides direction for finding relationships between words' elements in texts, and relationships between texts' elements in passages and other passages. Synchronic approaches include linguistic-syntactic analysis, semantic analysis, narrative analysis, and pragmatic analysis.⁴

The diachronic approach is used to understand the text by tracing other sources that underlie or illuminate it. The mutual relationship between the text in the Holy Scriptures and the source text helps to find a deeper understanding of the text. The text has a historical background, namely the background of the Old Testament or the situation of the religious life of the early Christian community.⁵

After explaining the text with a synchronic and diachronic approach, the next stage is actualization. This stage presents the meaning of the text of the Scriptures for today's readers. In this actualization section, the text of Matt 3:13-17 will be compared with the initiation rite in the Batak Toba tradition, namely *martutuaek*.

III. DISCUSSION

A. Textual Analysis of Matthew 3:13-17

Based on the linguistic-syntactic analysis, it was found that the verb "baptize" or "baptized" is a key word in Matthew 3:13-17. It occurs three times, more than other verbs used in the passage. It is related to "to fulfil" and "a heavenly revelation from God". When John "baptized" Jesus, they had "fulfilled" all of God's will (v. 15). After Jesus was "baptized", the heavens were opened, and He saw God's Spirit descending upon Him like a dove (v. 16), then a voice was heard from heaven (v. 17). If John did not "baptize" Jesus, they did not "fulfil" God's will, and the heavens were not opened, nor did the Spirit of God, like a dove, descend on Jesus, and there was no voice from heaven.

Through semantic analysis, it is found that John's baptism was an act of repentance. John baptized in water, a sign of repentance. However, Jesus came to John to be baptized not because He was a sinner. John's baptism of Jesus was a baptism of fulfillment of God's will. The word "fulfil" in the Gospel of Matthew means "to maintain" or "perfect" in the sense of bringing something to a new perfection. The word can be understood as "righteousness," which means truth, and in Greek it is written *dikaio synê*, which means "truth."⁶

In the Gospel of Matthew, the word *dikaio synê* occurs many times (Matthew 5:5,10,20; 6:1,33; 21:32). In all of these texts, *dikaio synê* is defined as a new and radical allegiance to God's will and basically refers to conformity with the norms of moral perfection as God's will. By carrying out God's will, man becomes righteous (*dikaio*). In the context of the baptism administered by John the Baptist, *dikaio synê* refers to God's special plan/will, which must be fulfilled by Jesus: be in solidarity with sinners to save them.⁷

After John baptized Jesus, the heavens opened and the heavenly revelation occurred. This event describes an important moment in the life of Christ. The Spirit who descends upon Jesus symbolizes His anointing as Israel's Messiah. This event marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry that would redeem mankind and the start of a new world and a new creation. With the Spirit falling upon Jesus and God speaking of Him as the One "with whom I am well pleased", God declares Jesus to be "My Son." This declaration launches Jesus' messianic mission.⁸

In the Gospel of Matthew, the theme of baptism occurs in 3:1-12; 3:13-17; and 28:16-20. John's baptism in 3:1-12 was a baptism of repentance. It is stated in v. 2: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Then, the Gospel narrates: "They were being baptized by him in the Jordan River,

⁴ Wilhem Egger, *How to Read the New Testament...*, p. 69.

⁵ Wilhem Egger, *How to Read the New Testament...*, p. 155

⁶ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew: Catholic Commentary and Sacred Scripture* (United States of America: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 69; cf. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (United States of America: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), p. 159.

⁷ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew...*, p. 159; cf. Stefan Leks, *Tafsir Injil Matius* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003), p. 80.

⁸ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew...*, p. 70.

as they confessed their sins” (v. 6). In telling about John the Baptist, the Gospel of Matthew describes him as being similar to Jesus: John’s exclamation in 3:2 is similar to that of Jesus in 4:7; John’s sermon in 3:10 is similar to that of Jesus in 7:19; the parable that John tells in 3:12 is the same as that which Jesus told in 13:30. The final similarity is that the term used by John to refer to the Pharisees and Sadducees, “the brood of vipers” (3:7) is the same as the term Jesus used, “the brood of vipers” (12:34).⁹

After completing His mission in the world with the resurrection from the dead, Jesus sent His disciples to go to all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:16). This mission is very close to the baptism that Jesus received in the Jordan. Baptizing people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:16) means baptizing them as Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River (3:13-17).¹⁰

Through a diachronic approach, it is found that the Jordan River is not only the place of Jesus’ baptism but also, as written in the Old Testament, the site of various important events: the Israelites crossing the Jordan River to the Promised Land (Jos 4:18); the Prophet Elijah ascending into heaven (2 Kings 2:6-11); the healing of a leper named Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1-14). Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13-17) is a unique event since it calls three divine names: a voice from heaven [the Father], the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ baptism is an initiation and an inauguration of Jesus’ messianic mission. The inauguration came from God, who sent His Spirit upon Jesus (3:16), and a voice from heaven, who says, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (3:17).¹¹

B. Martutuaek’s Rite

Martutuaek is an initiation rite practiced by the Batak Toba community, especially the *Parmalim* community. It is the rite when parents, accompanied by community members, bring their baby, who is 7-21 days old, to a spring or shower to be bathed, and then they give the baby a name. This rite is also often known as the *mampe goar* ceremony (giving a name).¹²

There are three stages in the *martutuaek*’s rite: *mardebata*, *lao tu mual*, and *maralaman*. *Mardebata* is a ceremony honoring *Debata Mulajadi Nabolon* and *Pomparan Si Raja Batak*. *Mardebata* is carried out at the family’s house by the baby’s parents. In the *mardebata* there is a *datu* who leads offering prayers, cuts offering chicken, and offers offerings in the form of prayers. *Datu* prays that the *martutuaek*’s rite will go well. Then, *lao tu mual* is a procession of leaving for the spring. The *datu*, as the leader of the ritual, walks in the front row, swings his sword to the right and to the left, and chants a *mantra* to expel evil spirits that might interfere with the ritual. The final stage is the *maralaman*, which is the ceremony of naming the baby.

There are three symbolic meanings in the *martutuaek*’s rite, namely: human effort to unite with the Divine, purification, and hope. The effort to unite with the Divine is symbolized by the *martonggo* (prayer) and the laying of *pelean* (offerings) on top of the *piramide* delivered by the leader of the rite. Purification is symbolized by *manguras*¹³ (cleansing) by sprinkling the baby with water. Hope is symbolized when the baby is placed on an *ulos ragi idup* (a symbol of hope for life, longevity, and fertility for the baby) and is given a name (*mampe goar*).

C. Matthew 3:13-17 and the *Martutuaek*’s Rite

In this section, biblical texts about Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:13-17 are read and interpreted by someone who knows and practices the *martutuaek*’s tradition. There are similarities and differences between them that help us hermeneutically understand the deep meanings found in Matthew 3:13-17 and in *martutuaek*’s rite, as seen below.

Water

⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol.1. (Texas: Words Book Publisher, 1993), p. 46; cf. David L. Turner, *Matthew* (United States of America: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 113.

¹⁰ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew...*, p. 401.

¹¹ David L. Turner, *Matthew...*, p. 118; cf. Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew...*, p. 61.

¹² Bungaran Anthonius Simanjuntak, *Upacara Kelahiran pada Masyarakat Batak Toba...*, hlm. 61.

¹³ The word *manguras* comes from the word *uras* which means to clean or purify. The ingredients used for *manguras* are clean water, bane-bane (fragrant flowers) and banyan branches placed in a clean white cup.

Water is one of the elements seen in Matt 3:13-17 and the *martutuaek*'s rite: John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River, and in the *martutuaek*'s rite, a baby is carried at a spring or shower. In the Old Testament, water is a source of life and fertility; it can purify people from the stains of sin, heal diseases, and drive away evil spirits. Someone who comes into contact with corpses (Sir 34:30), a leper, or an unclean animal, which renders them unworthy before God, must be cleaned and purified with water. Purification can be done by sprinkling water over the body or head of the body that has contacted unclean objects, or it can also be done by bathing in the river.¹⁴

Water is also understood as a source of life. In the story of creation, the Spirit of God hovers over the water (Gen 1:1). The Garden of Eden had four springs of water, signifying a full and perfect life (Gen 2:10-14). The prophet Zachariah prophesied that living water would flow from Jerusalem (Zec 14:8). When Jesus met the daughter of Samaria at Jacob's well, He said, "Whoever drinks the water that I give him will never thirst" (John 4:14).¹⁵

The Batak people consider water — rivers, lakes, or oceans — as a source of life, fertility, and lifesaving. They believe that a place called *Aek Sipitu Dai* in *Limbong, Pusuk Buhit*, is a source of holy water. From the roots of a shady Jawi tree, a large spring emerges at the foot of the sacred mountain *Pusuk Buhit*. Its water is seen as the most efficacious for washing away all dirt, stains, and evil. It is also believed to be able to cure diseases and enhance the brilliance of life. In the *martutuaek*'s rite, water is used to sprinkle babies as a symbol of purification.¹⁶

The procession to the spring where the *martutuaek*'s rite is carried out reminds of Jesus' arrival at John in the Jordan River to be baptized. However, the Jordan River is not only a place of baptism but also symbolizes new life. There were particular events in the Jordan River: the Israelites crossed the Jordan River to the Promised Land (Jos 4:18), a leper named Naaman the Syrian was cleansed (2Kings 5:1-14), and Elijah ascended into heaven so he could live with God in heaven (2Kings 5:1-4). In his Baptism, Jesus also received new life, namely the inauguration of His messianic mission (Matthew 3:17). Likewise, it may be interpreted that the spring in the *martutuaek*'s rite is not only a place of ceremony but also a symbol of new life and new hope.

Harmony and Fulfillment

In the Gospel of Matthew, before John baptized Jesus, he baptized many people in the Jordan River (3:1-12). John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. Before baptizing, John exclaims, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near" (v. 2). Then, "while confessing their sins, they were baptized by John in the Jordan" (v.6).¹⁷ However, the reason Jesus came to John to be baptized (3:13-17) was not because he was a sinner. John's baptism of Jesus was a baptism of fulfillment of God's will. The word "fulfil" means "to maintain" and at the same time "perfect" in the sense of bringing life to a new perfection. After Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened, and there was a heavenly revelation. It marks an important moment in the life of Jesus Christ. The Spirit that descends upon Him symbolizes His anointing as Israel's Messiah. Thus, the baptism signifies the beginning of Jesus' ministry to preach the Gospel for a new world and a new creation.¹⁸

Unlike baptism in Matthew 3:13-17, the *martutuaek*'s rite is an attempt to unite with *Mulajadi Nabolon* and to establish harmony with nature as in the beginning by purifying the baby from all kinds of evil and sin. The *martutuaek*'s rite purifies the person so that they return to the way they were at *Pusuk Buhit*: pure and filled with happiness. It bears in mind "paradis bahari," status of "innocent" in the past. This purification is seen in the act of *manguras*, which is to purify the baby from all elements that disrupt his or her life. Water has the power to decompose and eliminate what is dirty and, at the same time, to purify something so that it returns in a new one.¹⁹

¹⁴ David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 904

¹⁵ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 564.

¹⁶ Anicetus B. Sinaga, *Dandang Bakti: Inkulturasi Teologi dalam Budaya Batak* (Medan: Bina Media, 2004), p. 27.

¹⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13...*, hlm. 45; cf. David L. Turner, *Matthew...*, p. 105.

¹⁸ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew...*, p. 70; cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday) p. 6.

¹⁹ Donatus Tarihoran, *Makna Simbolik Ritus Martutuaek Dalam Masyarakat Batak Toba* (Pematangsiantar: UNIKA St. Thomas Fakultas Filsafat, 2006), p. 62.

The *martutuaek's* rite reminds us of a situation that is holy, pure, and full of happiness. However, this situation has been felt in the past, like in *Pusuk Buhit*. The baptism in Matthew 3:13-17 could shed light on the *martutuaek's* rite. The holy, pure, and blissful situation cannot only be experienced in the past. The baptism invites us to see an experience in the future, namely, in the Kingdom of God, where Jesus is a way to arrive there. Moreover, Jesus' baptism is an inauguration of His messianic mission. That mission is to redeem mankind from sin. Because of the redemption, man and woman and their world become holy, and they look forward to eternal happiness in the Kingdom of God.

Preparation for Baptism

Each activity must be prepared in advance. There is no activity that immediately runs without preparation. Likewise with baptism in Matt 3:13-17 and the *martutuaek's* rite. Jesus' baptism was prepared by John the Baptist (3:1-12). It is told that before baptizing Jesus, John first baptized many people in the Jordan River. John's appearing in the desert (v.1), his "call to repentance" and "preparing the way for the Lord" (v.2) were prophesied in Isaiah 40:3, "A voice of one calling: In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God!" John was used by God to prepare the way for Jesus through baptism.²⁰

In the *martutuaek's* rite, the preparations carried out are *mardebata* to honor the *Debata Mulajadi Nabolon* by giving offerings in the form of prayers. In addition, during the procession to the shower, a ritual is carried out to expel evil spirits in which the ritual leader shakes his sword left and right while chanting a *mantra*. Then, when they arrive at the spring, the leader will pray (*tonggo* and *manguras*) to sanctify the place where the rites are performed. The place of the rites must be sanctified to distinguish between profane and sacred areas, as well as to ward off various evil forces that are around the spring.²¹

The explanation above leads us to find similarities between baptism in Matthew 3:13-17 and the *martutuaek's* rite. Both of two bring a theme of preparation. The preparation deals with an action to purify ways and situations before carrying out baptism or *martutuaek's* rite. *Martutuaek* reminds us to give some thought to the importance of holiness and cleanliness on the way to the Divine. But as a preparation, the sanctity in *martutuaek* is outside a person: the street (neighbourhood) and the place where the rite is performed. In this case, Matthew 3:13-17 provides information that man and woman themselves must first be holy. People must repent and be baptized (John 3:6) on their way to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Naming a Child

In both the baptism in Matthew 3:13-17 and the *martutuaek's* rite, there is a ritual of giving a name to someone. In the *martutuaek's* rite, there is a *mampe goar* (giving names). This event is held in the yard (*maralaman*) after returning from the spring. In Matthew 3:13-17 there is an account of the giving of a name to Jesus. After being baptized, Jesus immediately came out of the water, and at that moment, the heavens opened and He saw the Spirit of God like a dove descending on Him. Then a voice was heard from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). God directly gave the name to Jesus. That name is "My Son, My Beloved Son, Son of God."

The *martutuaek's* rite reminds us of naming as in Matthew 3:13-17. However, giving names in the *martutuaek's* rite involves parents, the leader's rite, and people who come to the rite. In Matt 3:13-17, when God calls a name for Jesus, there are John the Baptizer and people baptized by him in the Jordan River. The moment of God giving a name to Jesus gives us light to see that the giving of a name and the name given to the baby in *martutuaek* could be in relation to the Divine.

Hope in a Child

In the baptism according to Matthew 3:13-17 and in the *martutuaek's* rite, it is laid a hope in a child (Jesus and the baby).

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his messianic mission to redeem mankind and the world from sin. In Jesus, there is a new hope for all mankind. "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). His public life began with his baptism. After the baptism, he

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13...*, p. 45; cf. David L. Turner, *Matthew...*, p. 105.

²¹ Anicetus B. Sinaga, *Dendang Bakti: Inkulturasi Teologi...*, p. 318

preaches, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near” (Matthew 4:17). Moreover, he is “one mediator between God and men” (1 Timothy 2:5).²²

In the *martutuaek*'s rite, hope is expressed when the baby is placed on the *ulos ragi idup* and is given a name (*mampe goar*). Wearing *ulos ragi idup* symbolizes hope for life, longevity, and fertility. By placing the baby on *ulos ragi idup*, the baby is expected to gain perfection, get along intimately with *Mulajadi Nabolon* and obtain happiness. The Batak Toba people also believe that the name contains a hope. The baby given a name (*mampe goar*) is expected to behave according to the expectations of the parents in that name²³ and that the baby could be a blessing to his or her family.

Matthew 3:13-17 sheds light on the fact that the fullness of hope and blessing are found in Jesus Christ. With his baptism and inauguration of the messianic mission, he becomes a blessing to everyone. He offers his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Matthew 26:26-28). He loves the Father (John 14:31) and his disciples (John 13:34). He gives hope and saves everyone.

IV. CONCLUSION

Initiation functions to maintain order in the process of accepting new members. In the Church there is baptism based on the Scriptures, and in Toba Batak culture, there is *martutuaek* which is carried out by *parmalim* adherents. Scriptures and cultures can be compared to enrich one another. Even though the Holy Scriptures, as God's revelation, are placed in a higher position in dealing with culture, Christians are challenged to have a dialogue between the two. This is the important point that this study aims to achieve.

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²² Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew ...*, p. 71; cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan ...*, p. 6.

²³ Donatus Tarihoran, *Makna Simbolik Ritus Martutuaek...*, p. 68.