



Baptism in the New Testament: Origins, Formulas, and Metaphors

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The writers of the New Testament, it is often said, assume that all Christians have been baptized.¹ Baptism is the rite of initiation into the Christian community, and everywhere the New Testament seems to take it for granted that those who belong to the community have been baptized. Questions arise, however, when we encounter the various formulas and metaphors for baptism—and when we ask about the actual origins, or at least the possible theological and cultic backgrounds, of Christian baptism. This essay is an attempt at a brief survey of the issues.

I. ORIGINS

The question of the origins of Christian baptism was pursued ardently by members of the history of religions school in Germany. Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920), for example, claimed that earliest Christianity contained a host of elements from pagan Hellenism, and he spoke of Christian baptism as a sacramental act that arose out of analogous initiation rites within Hellenistic mystery cults.² That view,

¹Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951-55) 1.39; C. F. D. Moule, *Worship in the New Testament* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961) 47; and Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 47.

²Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 157-58, 191. The first German edition of this work appeared in 1913.

however, has now widely been put to rest. The work of A. D. Nock can be cited in this regard, for he traces rituals of death and rebirth in gentile Hellenism to the second century of our era,³ and no earlier, arguing that for the origins of Christian baptism “it is...not necessary to look outside Judaea.”⁴

Looking about in Judea, however, is a big assignment. Can the origins of Christian baptism be traced to analogous customs in the Old Testament? Yes and no. Yes, in the general sense that there are washings of various kinds prescribed for various persons on various occasions, such as the self-immersion of Naaman seven times into the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:14) and a host of ritual washings (Exod 40:12; Lev 11:32; 15:11, 13; 16:4; Sir 34:30). Yet these acts are not understood to be initiatory rites in the sense that Christian baptism is. Nor can one find an adequate antecedent for the practice of Christian baptism in the ritual washings at Qumran. To be sure, there are passages in Qumran texts that speak of ritual baths,⁵ as well as in the writings of Josephus concerning the Essenes.⁶ Further, it is clear that a form of bathing was a prospect for the person being admitted into the community.⁷ It seems, at first glance then, that the

Qumran community practiced a form of baptism. But that impression fades as soon as it is realized that the passages in question speak of daily lustrations, not an unrepeatable ritual (or sacramental) act.⁸ In fact, the Qumran text that actually prescribes the order of events in the admission of persons into the community does not mention bathing at all.⁹

More common today are two somewhat competing views concerning the origins of baptism. The one is that the antecedent is to be found in so-called “proselyte baptism,”¹⁰ a practice well attested in rabbinic sources from antiquity.¹¹ Along with circumcision for males and their acceptance of the Torah as a way of life, an immersion in water was a requirement for the full entrance of proselytes into the people Israel, probably signifying a cleansing from gentile uncleanness, and the only requirement for women (along with minimal acquaintance with the law). The problem with this view is that literary evidence for proselyte baptism is

³Arthur D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 66.

⁴Ibid., 60.

⁵*The Rule of the Community* (= *Manual of Discipline*, 1QS) 3.4-5, 9; 5.13.

⁶Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.129; 2.138.

⁷*The Rule of the Community* (1QS) 5.7-13; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.138.

⁸Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.129. Opinion is divided. That the Qumran community did practice a form of baptism is affirmed in the work of Frank M. Cross, *The Ancient Library at Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961) 95 and 234. On the other hand is the view of Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran: Theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 245: “In Qumran the washing was not an unrepeatable occurrence, which marked admission into the fellowship, but was a daily routine.”

⁹*The Rule of the Community* (1QS) 6.14-23.

¹⁰Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 24-40; and Albrecht Oepke, “Βαπτισμ,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964-76) 1.535-36.

¹¹See several references in George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1927-30) 1.331 (note 5).

relatively late. The earliest clear attestation is a reference to the practice by Epictetus (ca. A.D. 50-130).¹² Beyond that there are traditions in the *Mishnah* claiming that the first-century schools of Hillel and Shammai debated matters associated with proselyte baptism.¹³ The probable conclusion to be drawn is that, although the evidence is not firm that proselyte baptism antedates the rise of Christianity, it is most unlikely that the Jewish practice would have been established after Christians had already begun baptizing.¹⁴ The sequence must have been the other way around, i.e., Jewish proselyte baptism rose prior to Christianity’s own initiatory rite.

The alternative to looking to proselyte baptism as background is to hold that the sufficient antecedent of Christian baptism was the baptismal activity of John the Baptist.¹⁵ The parallels are striking: both have strong eschatological associations; both are associated with conversion and forgiveness of sins; and both are received passively (no one baptizes himself or herself). Moreover, John’s baptism clearly antedated Christian baptism; it was endorsed by Jesus’ own baptism; and some of John’s disciples apparently became Christians, which would have favored adoption and adaptation of a baptismal rite in earliest Christianity.¹⁶

It is not necessary, however, to make an exclusive choice between proselyte baptism and John’s baptism as the antecedent to Christian baptism. What is fascinating, even distinctive,

about John is that he called upon the people of Israel—not just gentile would-be proselytes—to undergo baptism. By so doing he was saying, in effect, that even the people of Israel are not prepared for God’s kingdom; they are as gentiles, in need of repentance and rebirth. It can be concluded, then, that Christian baptism is immediately related to John’s baptism, but then John’s is a prophetic adaptation of proselyte baptism. All of this belongs to the background of Christian baptism. But of course *backgrounds* do not finally account for *origins*. There must have been some other distinctive factor. What that was can be teased out only by looking at the actual formulas used from the beginnings of Christianity.

II. FORMULAS

The baptismal formulas within the New Testament vary, even with the same writer. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew the risen Christ commissions his

¹²Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.9.21. There seems to be an allusion to repentance and baptism of proselytes also in the *Sibylline Oracles* 4.162-70, but it is not precise, and the date usually assigned to this writing (late first century A.D.) is even less certain.

¹³*Pesahim* 8.8; *Eduyoth* 5.2.

¹⁴Cf. A. Oepke, “Βαπτω,” 1.535; and Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1985) 26.

¹⁵R. Bultmann, *Theology* 1.40; Nils A. Dahl, “The Origin of Baptism,” *Interpretationes ad Vetus Testamentum Pertinente Sigmundo Mowinkel Septuagenario Messae*, ed. N. A. Dahl and A. S. Kapelrud (Oslo: Forlaget Land og Kirke, 1955) 36-52; Gerhard Barth, *Die Taufe in frühchristlicher Zeit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 37-43; and Lars Hartman, “Baptism,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1.585.

¹⁶L. Hartman, “Baptism,” 1.585.

eleven remaining disciples to “[baptize] into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19). Yet Peter—one of the remaining eleven—is portrayed right away by Luke on Pentecost as calling upon his hearers, saying: “Be baptized...into the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38; cf. 10:48), rather than into the triune name. At other places in Acts there is a slight variation: Paul baptizes “into the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5; cf. 8:16). In his own letters Paul speaks of his readers as “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:3) or simply “baptized into Christ” (Gal 3:27). At one place he says that they are “baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13).

Although the trinitarian formula in the Gospel of Matthew appears to be the earliest of all (enunciated by Jesus shortly after his resurrection), in point of fact the letters of Paul are earlier literary productions, and Acts was probably written about the same time as Matthew. These sources give witness to baptismal formulas which are “second article” (into Christ) only. And since it is difficult to imagine that first-century Christians would dispense with a trinitarian formula in favor of a purely christological one, the latter must be considered earlier, and it appears to have been more widespread. Eventually the trinitarian formula became prominent and then virtually universal; it is well attested in second century sources.¹⁷ In any case, it is undoubtedly the formula used in the community of Matthew near the end of the first century, and it can be considered an expansion of an earlier, purely christological one. Beyond that it is impossible to know how early or how widely the formula was used.

One of the most puzzling aspects about certain formulas is the use of the word “name”

(“baptized into the name of Jesus,” etc.). What would that word signify? Although the details cannot be recounted here, the materials and arguments brought forth by Lars Hartman are helpful. He maintains, in sum, that the use of the word provides for the rite “a definition, a phrase which mentioned the fundamental reference of Christian baptism which distinguished it from all other rites.”¹⁸ In short, although Christian baptism was inspired by baptisms in the movement of John the Baptist and perhaps also by proselyte baptisms, the formula “into the name of Jesus,” etc., distinguished this baptism from the others. Those of Jewish heritage baptized into the name of Jesus were thereby distinguished from other Jews who did not make a christological confession, and those of gentile heritage who were baptized were added to them—rather than to the company of those who underwent proselyte baptism. Although it was based on earlier models in Judaism, Christian baptism must have come about in connection with the earliest proclamation of repentance (continuing the work of John the Baptist and Jesus, who was baptized), conversion, and the manifestation of the Spirit in the

¹⁷*Didache* 7.1-3; Justin, *Apology* 1.61; and Tertullian, *On Baptism* 6, 13; *Against Praxeas* 26. The use of a purely christological formula by certain Arians, however, is attested by Socrates Scholasticus (ca. A.D. 380-450) in his *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24.

¹⁸Lars Hartman, “‘Into the Name of Jesus’: A Suggestion concerning the Earliest Meaning of the Phrase,” *New Testament Studies* 20 (1974/75) 440.

lives of believers. Baptism into Christ, or into the name of Jesus, thus became the mark of one’s identity. To say anything more goes beyond the evidence available.

III. METAPHORS

Among the several metaphors used in connection with baptism, the most radical is dying, used by Paul (Rom 6:3-11) and the writer of Colossians (2:12) along with related terms (crucifixion, burial). The passage in Romans is set within an exhortation. Having just declared that, in the history ranging from Adam to Christ, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (5:20), Paul asks whether that means, in effect, that grace should be helped along by sin in the present. Of course the answer is no. Paul makes use of a series of contrasts. On the one hand, there is the event of baptism, a historical event in a person’s life. On the other hand, there is the eschatological existence in which and toward which the Christian lives. The verbs in the first set are all aorists; those in the second either exist within purpose clauses or are expressed in future tense. The first set is a list of death-related metaphors; the second is a set of exhortations and promises:

The Baptismal Event (Metaphors)

We were buried with Christ into death;

We were united with Christ into a death like his;

Eschatological Existence

We are now to walk in newness of life.

We shall be united with Christ in a resurrection like his.

The Baptismal Event (Metaphors)

Eschatological Existence

Our old self was crucified;

We are now free from sin's enslaving power.

We died with Christ;

We shall live with Christ.

Baptism takes place at a particular moment in a person's life and in a particular place. But it is also the occasion on which that person is delivered over and incorporated into Christ. The believer now belongs to the new era of the risen Christ and is no longer under the dominion of sin. The person baptized into Christ, belonging now to the era of the Messiah and of the Spirit—poured out in the messianic era as promised (Joel 2:28-29)—is endowed with the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).

Water evokes metaphors of washing, drinking, drowning, and flood. Yet not all these metaphors are commonly used. In 1 Peter 3:20-21 baptism is called the “antitype” (ἀντίτυπος) of the flood of Genesis 6-8. The flood, which destroyed many, was the means by which a few were saved; baptism “now saves you,” says the writer in one of the most explicit statements of the saving benefits of baptism in the New Testament. This is the only passage in the New Testament that can also be cited as containing a possible metaphor for drowning in connection with baptism. As for drinking as a metaphor, Paul speaks of all who have been baptized into Christ as those who have been “made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). But the metaphor is not developed; indeed, it would be virtually impossible to do so, since water is used externally in baptism rather than drunk by the one baptized. The only water-related metaphor that is truly exploited by New Testament writers is

that of washing. It appears in such passages as Acts 22:16; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5; Heb 10:22; indirectly at 1 Cor 6:11 and 1 Pet 3:21; and perhaps at John 13:8, 10. This metaphor may well have associations with ritual cleansings within both Judaism and Greco-Roman cults. In any case, the metaphor carries with it the view that the person baptized is cleansed from sin and, in connection with the christological confession, is thereby set within the company of the people of God (=sanctified).

There is one other set of metaphors used frequently in connection with baptism, and that is a cluster of terms having to do with rebirth or regeneration. The terms used are “born from above” (John 3:3),¹⁹ “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), “washing of regeneration (παλιγγενεσία),” “renewal (ἀνακαίνωσις) by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), “born anew (ἀναγεννώω)” (1 Pet 1:3, 23), and “born of God” (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 18). Again, these metaphors may well have parallels in both Jewish and gentile religious traditions. All the passages cited here are in relatively late writings of the New Testament. Yet they are more precisely rooted in the prior claim, as expressed already by Paul, that in baptism there is an end to one's former life, a dying with Christ (Rom 6:3, 5, 8); this is then the threshold of a renewed life—the “newness of life” and being “alive to God” that Paul talks about (Rom 6:4, 11).

This cursory review does not cover every possible metaphor. There are still the metaphors of putting on Christ (Gal 3:27), being enlightened (Heb 6:4; 10:32), being circumcised “with a

circumcision made without hands” (Col 2:11), and being sealed (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13). But these stand at the periphery. The major metaphors for baptism in the New Testament are of three kinds: dying and rising, washing, and rebirth.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The use of so many metaphors for baptism reminds us that it is difficult, even impossible, to come up with one theology of baptism in the New Testament. The problem is complicated when we raise questions about the origins of baptism and the variety of baptismal formulas. But the foregoing discussion demonstrates that the initiatory rite common to all Christians marks a radical transformation of self-understanding in the life of the person baptized. Crucified, dead, and buried with Christ, washed and thereby sanctified, reborn—all of these signify an end of one’s old self, ruled by forces hostile to God, and the beginning of a new life. Those who have been baptized into Christ belong to him and his destiny. Set within the era of the Messiah, the one who is baptized is empowered by the Spirit to live in newness of life. And to help spell out what that newness looks like, there is much said concerning the conduct expected of the baptized (e.g., at Matt 28:20; Rom 6:2, 4, 11; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 4:22-23; Col 3:1-17; 1 Pet 1:22-25; 1 John 3:9, etc.). But that goes beyond the scope of our survey.

¹⁹The NRSV has such a rendering, which is an improvement over “born anew” (RSV) or “born again” (KJV). Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70) 1.130-31.

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