

BAPTISM AS CHRISTIAN INITIATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

The sacrament of Baptism is the foundation of Christian life and ministry. The Church calls on all the baptized to live out their baptismal vocation. Because Christian life is a lifelong living out of one's baptism, it is extremely necessary that Christians understand what the New Testament says about it. This article examines the meaning and practice of baptism in the New Testament by looking at its historical antecedents, by comparing it with the baptism of John, and by looking at the variety of metaphors employed by the early church to explain the practice.

INTRODUCTION

The post-Vatican II is truly an era of baptismal consciousness. Speaking at a March 2014 conference on the laity, Pope Francis recalling the teaching of the Second Vatican Council emphasized that by virtue of their baptism all the lay faithful "are protagonists in the work of evangelization and human promotion."¹ In preparing for the fifth centenary of the coming of Christianity to the Philippines (1521-2021), the Philippine bishops designated 2014 as the "Year of the Laity". In their pastoral letter *Live Christ, Share Christ*, the Philippine bishops said, "This year especially celebrates both the sacrament of Baptism by which all the faithful become God's sons and daughters and the sacrament of Confirmation by which they become witnesses of Christ to others."² The Church has called on the lay faithful to live out their baptismal vocation to enable them to be the leaven of the love of God in the society they are in. Indeed, baptism is the foundation of Christian life and ministry. Christian life is a lifelong living out of one's baptism.³

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¹ See the message of Pope Francis on March 7-8, 2014 conference, held at the Pontifical Lateran University, with the theme, "The Mission of Lay Christians in the City," March 7, 2014, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-says-laity-are-protagonists-in-church>.

² Fr. James H. Kroeger, MM, "Celebrating the Year of the Laity," *CBCP News*, accessed December 9, 2013, <http://www.cbcnews.com/cbcnews/?p=29514>.

³ James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), 195.

The Church has developed a rich theology of baptism. What does the New Testament (NT) say about baptism? This paper examines the meaning and importance of baptism in the NT, by looking at the historical antecedents of baptism, by comparing the baptism of John and Christian baptism, and by describing the many metaphors used to explain baptism in the primitive church of the first century.

WATER ABLUTIONS

Water and its symbolisms are ambivalent. It is a powerful natural symbol of purification, life, and death. "Water ablutions are often connected with childbirth, puberty, removal of taboos, and death."⁴

As Symbol of Purification. Most people wash themselves at the beginning of the day, and "this probably always has a ritual aspect of washing away the darkness of the night and the chaos of dreams, enabling us to feel good about the coming day."⁵ The idea of ablution as ritual purification has prevailed in many religious traditions. The Hindu religion, for instance, has made ablution at the beginning of each day mandatory. Purificatory ablutions were held prior to the performance of a sacred rite or entering a holy area. No Moslem enters a mosque for prayer without first washing their faces and their hands up to the elbows, and to wipe their heads and their feet to the ankles (*Sur. V, 8*). The Shinto priests of Japan wash their bodies before interacting with the *kami* (Shinto gods). Catholics bless themselves with holy water at the entrance of churches. Shortly before his coronation, the Egyptian Pharaoh washed his face in the water of the River Nun, in that way purifying him for his filial relationship with the gods.⁶ The Jewish High Priest, on the day of *Yom Kippur* (Atonement), bathed both before and after his offering (*Lev 16:4, 24*). Jewish rabbis wash their hands before praying.

The washing away of external impurities became symbolical of the cleansing of the heart. Sin is regarded as pollution, a disease that may be washed away by bathing. To cite some examples: The Incas of Ancient Peru, after confessing their sins, bathed in a river. The Vedas, the most sacred scriptures of Hinduism, believe that sin may be removed by invoking the gods of water (Varuna and Trita) who have the power to wash it away. In modern India, it is thought that the waters of the Ganges possess the power to cleanse the darkest sinner. The Moors considered that misfortune could be removed by ablutions.⁷ This is also true of the Hebrew

⁴ Thomas M. McFadden, "Ablution," *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, vol. A-E, eds. Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O'Brien, Consuelo Maria Aherne (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Publications, 1979), 10.

⁵ Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to the Sacraments* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 84.

⁶ The River Nun was believed to be the place where the sun god had washed.

⁷ The Moors were the medieval Muslim inhabitants of Morocco, western Algeria, Western Sahara, Mauritania, the Iberian Peninsula, Septimania, Sicily and Malta.

people who used water for the cleansing of impurities (e.g., leprosy, contact with a corpse or unclean objects).

As Symbol of Life. Water has life-giving qualities as it brings about growth, fertility, regeneration, and restoration. Water is often a sign of life; many times it represents life. It is thus essential to the life of vegetation, animals and humans. Wells and springs are symbols of life and healing. Among primitives, rivers, springs, and wells were regarded as the abodes of deities. For them, water seemed to be a holy element so that to bathe in it meant to impart to oneself something of its divine life and power.⁸

As Symbol of Death. Water has likewise destructive power as demonstrated in floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, and storm surge destroying crops, homes, properties, and people. When the Super Typhoon Haiyan, one of the strongest storms recorded on the planet, hit the central Philippine province of Leyte on November 08, 2013, it pushed a massive storm surge of up to 23 feet (7 meters) that resulted to the death of some 7,361 people and left more than 100,000 people homeless. This deadly storm surge reminded us of the primeval power of water. In the Old Testament, water was the symbol of “chaos” (Gen 1) and of “death” (Gen 6).⁹ Indeed, “the formlessness and force of water in a storm at sea or at a raging river make it a fitting symbol of chaos.”¹⁰ The story of Noah reminds us that the flood destroyed the whole world as the watery chaos erupted (Gen 6). At the Red Sea, the Egyptians were destroyed and drowned: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea; and his picked officers are sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone” (Exod 15:4-5). Yet, for the Israelites, water was also a symbol of transition. Crossing the Red Sea, and later, the Jordan meant the way to freedom and the Promised Land.

In sum, the practice of ceremonial washing and bath, especially as a rite of religious purification, is widespread in many religions of the world.¹¹ Sacred places are always accompanied with water fountains to be used for the ceremonial cleansing of worshippers. As a symbol of life, water cleanses from all forms of impurities and defilements. The rites of immersion for purification were particularly

⁸ Maurice Canney, “Ablutions,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, accessed December 9, 2013, <http://www.world-religion.org/articles/a/a32.php>.

⁹ Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 74.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Harrington, “Baptism in Scripture,” *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990): 83-87, esp. 83. Harrington further explains, “In a religious setting water can symbolize powers in opposition to the creator God who imposes form and stability upon creation.”

¹¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2009), 25. According to him, this is proved by archaeological excavations of many sites revealing several sources of water, including fountains and pools for bathing.

common in the milieu in which early Christianity developed.¹² For Christians, the use of water in the initiation rite of baptism not only cleanses them from the defilements of sin, but also brings about a new birth in the spiritual order – a new person, a new creation, a new community.

THE VOCABULARY OF BAPTISM

The word “baptize” comes from the Greek verb βάπτω which means, “dip” or “immerse” in water. This verb is used in the NT only in the literal sense (e.g., Luke 16:24). From βάπτω is formed the intensive form βαπτίζω which in classical Greek was used in the literal sense of “dipping,” and in the figurative sense of “being overwhelmed” with suffering and miseries.¹³ Two Synoptic sayings suggest that Jesus spoke of his own death as a baptism (e.g. Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50). The rest of the usage of βαπτίζω in the NT has the literal technical sense of the religious ceremony of baptism. The noun βάπτισμα is only used in Christian literature, not used elsewhere, where it distinctively refers to the baptism of John or to Christian baptism.¹⁴ In the NT the verb βαπτίζω and the noun βάπτισμα are found one hundred times. In the vast majority of occurrences the verb and noun refer to the act of baptism in water and/or the initiation rite associated with this act.¹⁵

The NT writers assume that all Christians have been baptized. Jaroslav Pelikan states, “There is in the NT no account of the institution of baptism by Jesus Christ; rather, each time it is referred to it is already taken for granted as a constituent element of Christian faith and life.”¹⁶ In the same vein, Arland Hultgren maintains, “The New Testament seems to take it for granted that those who belong to the community have been baptized.”¹⁷ The Fourth Gospel makes baptism – not circumcision – the formal entrance rite into the covenant community: “Unless one is born of water and of Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). While

¹² See Lars Hartman, “Baptism,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 583-594, esp. 583; also Albrecht Oepke, “βάπτω, βαπτίζω κτλ.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964; repr. 1987): 529-546, esp. 531, who states that “there are many early examples of sacral water ceremonies in Babylon, Persia and India.”

¹³ See Oepke, “βάπτω, βαπτίζω κτλ.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1, 529-546; W. Bieder, “βαπτίζω κτλ.,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 1 (1990): 192-196; H. Mueller, “Baptism,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 54.

¹⁴ Hartman, “Baptism,” 583; Oepke, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1, 545. Thayer’s Lexicon lists three primary meanings of βαπτίζω / βάπτισμα: (1) to dip repeatedly, to submerge; (2) to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water; (3) metaphorically, to overwhelm.

¹⁵ Robert H. Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2006), 35-66, esp. 35.

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, “Baptism,” *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, vol. A-E, eds. Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O’Brien, Consuelo Maria Aherne (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Publications, 1979), 357.

¹⁷ Arland J. Hultgren, “Baptism in the New Testament: Origins, Formulas, and Metaphors,” *Word & World* 14/1 (1994): 6-11, esp. 6.

NT writers assume the practice and importance of baptism, they nevertheless do not offer us a coherent explanation of it. In fact, the NT reveals different theologies of baptism. As we shall later see, NT writers “ascribe a number of meanings to baptism, from death and resurrection to cleansing from sin, from regeneration to anointing.”¹⁸

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

Before going any further, a timely caveat given by Fr. Kenan Osborne is in order who states:

The New Testament, however, was not written in an historical vacuum, and baptism for the Christian community did not come from Jesus *de novo*. There is an historical *Sitz im Leben* for baptism, and the words of the New Testament which bring us the Word are meaningful only in this contextualized framework.¹⁹

Where then do we anchor the origin(s) of Christian baptism? Scholars had keenly pursued the question of the origins of Christian baptism.²⁰ Many answers have been proposed.

Mystery cults. The German NT scholar Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920), representing the history of religions research at the beginning of the twentieth century, claimed that Christian baptism is a sacramental act that arose out of analogous initiation rites within Hellenistic mystery cults, like the Attis and Mithra cult.²¹ This view, however, did not gain much support and has now been put to rest. For one thing, very little do we know about the rites of the mystery cults since they kept their “mysteries” all to secret. Indeed, Arthur D. Nock has fittingly argued that for the origins of Christian baptism “it is...not necessary to look outside Judaea.”²²

¹⁸ Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 77-78.

¹⁹ Kenan B. Osborne, *The Christian Sacrament of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist* (New York / Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 51.

²⁰ For instance, the history of religions school in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century devoted much time to this question.

²¹ Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 157-58, 191. The first German edition appeared in 1913. According to James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 445, “One of the main features of this research was the conclusion that the earliest Christian sacraments were not simply paralleled in the contemporary mystery cults, but also influenced by their equivalent rites. In particular, the deduction lay to hand that initiation into cults of dying and rising gods provided the explanation for Paul's assumption of his readers' familiarity with the motif in their own case: ‘Do you not know that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?’ (Rom 6:3).”

²² Arthur D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 66. See Gunter Wagner's *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries*, published in 1963 in German, English translation 1967, who supports the disproving of any dependence by early Christianity on the Graeco-Roman mystery cults.

Jewish concepts and practices can provide us with a more likely immediate context for Christian baptism.²³ But looking inside Judaism is still recognized a huge task.

Jewish ritual washings. Can the origins of Christian baptism be traced to similar customs in the Old Testament? In the OT one finds washings of various kinds prescribed for various persons on various occasions. The Torah prescribes a host of ritual washings as part of rites intended to end ritual uncleanness brought about by contact with unclean objects (Lev 11-15). An unclean person who does not cleanse himself shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly (Num 19:20). Before the priests approached the altar of God, they were required, on pain of death, to wash their hands and their feet to cleanse them from the soil of common life (Exod 30:17-21). Aaron washed with water before putting on the holy garments and consecrated as priest (Exod 40:12-13). The prophet Elisha ordered the Aramean Commander Naaman to immerse himself seven times into the Jordan River (2 Kgs 5:10). According to the late Fr. Daniel Harrington, "Ritual washings were so familiar to OT writers that they used them in metaphors, thus endowing them with moral and spiritual dimensions (Pss 24:4; 51:7) and in some cases eschatological overtones (Ezek 36:25; Zech 13:1)."²⁴ Take a look at these passages:

Isa 1:16-17 – Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Jer 4:14 – O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness so that you may be saved. How long shall your evil schemes lodge within you?

Ezek 36:25 – I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

Ps 51:7 – Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

In later OT theology one finds the connection between washing and eschatology being established. Osborne explains, "The beginning of the messianic age would recapitulate the experiences of the exodus period, which included a passing through the red sea, or water."²⁵ Surely, there are recorded events in the Jewish scriptures

²³ See Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 60; F. Gavin, *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments* (New York: KTAV, 1969).

²⁴ Harrington, "Baptism in Scripture," 83.

²⁵ Osborne, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation*, 52. Red Sea or Reed Sea? Some scholars have adopted the idea that the Israelites took a central route and crossed a shallow lake north of the Red Sea called the Reed Sea. The term in Hebrew is *yam suph*. *Yam* means "sea," and *suph* is generally thought to mean "reeds," "rushes" or possibly "seaweed." That is why some versions of the Bible call it "the Sea

that the NT and later Christian writers saw as types foreshadowing Christian baptism. Foremost of these were the flood (Gen 6:1- 8:22) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 14:1-15:21).

The many ritual immersion baths originating from Second Temple Period that have been discovered by archaeologists at several sites in the land of Israel (Masada, Qumran, Jerusalem) all point out to the fact that ritual immersions were widely practiced by the Jews. Yet, as Hultgren has observed, these ritual washings “are not understood to be initiatory rites in the sense that Christian baptism is.”²⁶

Qumran ritual washings. Another theory proposed as to the origin of Christian baptism is based on the ritual ablutions at Qumran. Again archaeology has informed us that the elaborate system of water channels found at Khirbet Qumran factually attest that ritual washings for purification was a regular feature of life within the Qumran community. Several passages in Qumran texts speak of ritual baths,²⁷ as well as the writings of Josephus concerning the Qumran people.²⁸ Ritual washings were practiced in the context of repentance and the community’s preparation for entering the eschatological community (1QS 3:4-9; 6:14-23; see 4:18-22). The *Community Rule*, for instance, hints that entry into the Qumran community was accompanied by a ritual immersion symbolizing the initiate’s interior life: “And when his flesh is sprinkled with purifying water, it shall be made clean by the humble submission of his soul to all the precepts of God” (1QS 3:8-9). At first glance, it seems the Qumran community practiced a form of baptism, but scrutiny of those passages in question reveal that they were speaking of daily cleansing routines, not of an unrepeatable, initiating ritual (or sacramental) act.²⁹ The Qumran text (1QS 5:7-15) refers to the daily immersion of full members of the community before the main meal was eaten in a state of ritual purity. Consequently, the ablution rites at Qumran did not include an initiatory baptism, but were rather Levitical washings related to ritual purity.³⁰

Jewish Proselyte Baptism. A more common view today espoused by some scholars as a possible precursor of Christian baptism is the so-called “Jewish proselyte baptism” (a practice well attested in rabbinic sources from antiquity, e.g.,

of Reeds" or "Reed Sea" instead of the Red Sea. See Mario Seiglie, “The Bible and Archaeology: The Red Sea or the Reed Sea?,” accessed December 12, 2013, <http://www.ucg.org/science/bible-and-archaeology-red-sea-or-reed-sea>.

²⁶ Hultgren, “Baptism in the New Testament,” 7.

²⁷ Take for instance, *The Rule of the Community* (= *Manual of Discipline*, IQS) 3.4-5, 9; 5.13.

²⁸ See Josephus *Jewish War* 2.129; 2.138.

²⁹ Hultgren, “Baptism in the New Testament,” 7; Osborne, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation*, 52.

³⁰ See Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Origin of Christian Baptism,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 35-57, esp. 40; also Mueller, “Baptism,” 56: “The bath of Qumran neither symbolized nor effected entrance into the community; it is not regarded as an initiation rite by the *Manual of Discipline*.”

b. *Yebamot* 46a-47b).³¹ This practice seems to have developed in connection with the expansion of Jewish communities living outside Palestine. Gentiles were generally considered to be ritually unclean and legally impure. This view was strongly upheld by the School of Hillel whose teaching influence was strongest in the last decades of the first century before Christ.³² Thus, in order for Gentile converts to become full-fledged Jews they were initiated by circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice:

by being circumcised a male was marked with the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, by being immersed in water he symbolically joined the Israelites who had passed through the Red Sea, and by offering sacrifice he accepted the law given to them at Sinai.³³

A female convert was required to undergo only ritual immersion. Proselyte baptism conveyed “the notion of a conversion to a new kind of life, which involved the proselyte’s acceptance of the ‘yoke of the Torah’.”³⁴ Its significance was related to the ideal of purity which animated the community. To be free from all impurity was necessary in order to share the life of the community, which was compared to a sanctuary.³⁵ Its salient features as a rite include being a once and for all ritual, witnessed by others, and being self-administered as a sign of inner transformation.

The puzzle that continues to haunt scholars is the date of the origin of proselyte baptism. The practice is never mentioned in the Jewish *Tanakh*, or in the Christian Old Testament. Everett Ferguson thinks that the date for the origin cannot be determined.³⁶ Some scholars (e.g., Hultgren, Oepke and Schiffmann) argue that the practice of proselyte baptism was widespread prior to John the Baptist and hence antedated the rise of Christianity.³⁷ Mueller reasons that it would be unlikely for the Jews to “have borrowed the practice of baptism from a sect [Christianity] they looked upon with animosity.”³⁸ If the practice of proselyte baptism is older than the time of

³¹ See, for instance, Joachim Jeremias, “Der Ursprung der Johannestaufe,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 28 (1929): 312-320.

³² Osborne, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation*, 53.

³³ Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 148.

³⁴ Andreas J. Kostenberger, “Baptism in the Gospels,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 11-34, esp. 12.

³⁵ See J. Delorme, “The Practice of Baptism in Judaism at the Beginning of the Christian Era,” in *Baptism in the New Testament: A Symposium*, trans. David Askew (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1964), 25-60, esp. 41.

³⁶ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 76; also Delorme, “The Practice of Baptism in Judaism,” 30; T. M. Taylor, “The Beginnings of Jewish Proselyte Baptism,” *New Testament Studies* 2 (1955/56): 193-198; Karen Pussey and John Hunt, “Jewish Proselyte Baptism,” *Expository Times* 95 (1984): 141-145.

³⁷ Hultgren, “Baptism in the New Testament,” 8; see also Oepke, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1, 535. For Lawrence H. Schiffman, proselyte baptism is dated before John the Baptist in order to explain his baptism and that of the early Christians (*Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism* [Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1985], 26). Hartman holds that proselyte baptism was introduced in Judaism sometime during the first century C.E. (“Baptism,” 583).

³⁸ Mueller, “Baptism,” 55; Delorme, “The Practice of Baptism in Judaism,” 31.

John, then the latter's baptism may be understood as a reinterpretation of that ritual. But if proselyte baptism came later than John, then it cannot be the source of meaning of his baptism.³⁹ Another conjecture proposed is that proselyte baptism developed in Judaism rather relatively late because the first scanty literary evidence for this practice cannot be dated prior to 200 C.E.⁴⁰ Yarbro Collins, however, believes that "the notion and practice of proselyte baptism seem to have evolved gradually, rather than been instituted *de novo* at a particular point in time."⁴¹ Its recognition by Jewish authorities likewise happened gradually. This is further affirmed by Scobie who holds that proselyte baptism was beginning to be recognized as an essential part of the initiation into Judaism around the end of the first and the beginning of the second century, although not yet recognized as such by all authorities.⁴²

Was proselyte baptism analogous to Christian baptism? G. R. Beasley-Murray is of the opinion that "while it cannot be proven that proselyte baptism directly influenced Christian baptism, the theology of conversion inherent in proselyte baptism and circumcision was an important factor in shaping Christian thinking on baptism."⁴³

The Baptism of John. "Since the late nineteenth century," says Yarbro Collins, "students of the New Testament have recognized that the history of early Christianity begins in an important sense with John the Baptist."⁴⁴ Scholars consider the baptismal activity of John the Baptist (in the Judean wilderness by the river Jordan) as the most influential antecedent to Christian baptism.⁴⁵ The fact that Jesus "was baptized by John suggests that the Jesus movement had its roots in the activity of John."⁴⁶ To understand the origins of Christian baptism, it is, therefore, imperative to recognize the nature of the baptism performed by John. It is partly correct to claim

³⁹ Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism," 42.

⁴⁰ Reginald Fuller, "Initiation in the New Testament," in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate*, The Murphy Center for Liturgical Research (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 7-31, esp. 8. Also Charles Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1964), 95-102.

⁴¹ Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism," 42.

⁴² Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 99.

⁴³ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 31; cited by Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 77.

⁴⁴ Yarbro Collins, "Origin of Christian Baptism," 35; see also Hendrikus Boers, *Who Was Jesus? The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

⁴⁵ According to Justin Taylor (*Where Did Christianity Come From?* [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001], 35), "A good place to start a search for the origins of Christian baptism is with John the Baptist." Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 78, considers John's baptism of Jesus as "the most decisive precursor of Christian baptism and also provides the basic framework in which we understand Christian baptism." Yarbro Collins, "Origins of Christian Baptism," 35, suggests that Christian baptism had its origin in the baptism performed by John. It is interesting to note that John is never called "the Baptist" in the Gospel of John. His role is to be a witness to Jesus.

⁴⁶ Yarbro Collins, "Origin of Christian Baptism," 35.

that Christian baptism also had its origin in the baptism performed by John. His baptism was linked with his mission, and baptism characterized his mission.

The Synoptic Gospels highlight John's call to a "baptism of repentance" – a distinctive terminology for John's baptism (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; also Acts 13:24; 19:4). Compliant with OT and Second Temple notions that immersions were concerned with cleansing from uncleanness, John's baptism had a purifying function. He called people to conversion through the cleansing of their sins and spiritual renewal – a return to God, a reorientation of one's life. His water baptism was closely bound to his eschatological preaching that looked forward to God's coming for judgment. People from everywhere who were seeking the assurance of deliverance in the Day of Judgment and of possessing the coming glory came to the Jordan to be baptized by him. As Albert Schweitzer notes, "This baptism of John was an act symbolical of the washing of sin. But it is also more than that: it guarantees the efficacy of repentance as a preparation for the outpouring of the Spirit, and for the Judgment."⁴⁷

The baptism of John ought not to be understood "merely in terms of ritual purification and religious observance, but as essentially moral and ethical," it is "set within a prophetic-apocalyptic eschatological framework which contrasts the impending divine judgment with the coming of the Messiah."⁴⁸ John's appearance, preaching, and baptism can be seen as one expression of the expectations of a future, definitive intervention of God which are reflected in some OT pseudepigrapha (*Jubilees* 1:22-25) and Qumran texts (1QS 4:18-23). Passages where ablution imageries are used both ethically and eschatologically are likewise found in Isaiah 1, Ezekiel 36, and Jeremiah 4 (and 31).⁴⁹ In some of these passages one finds longing to a time of repentance, when God will cleanse his people from evil through the Holy Spirit. John is portrayed in the gospels as a precursor or forerunner pointing ahead to Jesus the Messiah. The evangelist Mark (1:2-3), for instance, quotes Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to imply that John the Baptist is the messenger spoken of and Jesus is the Lord who is coming. Thus, John's baptism is seen as a necessary preparation for the "coming one," who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11-12). He saw himself not worthy to loosen the sandals of the one who was to come. The loosening of sandals and washing of feet in biblical times was said to be the job of slaves, and foreign or Gentile slaves. He must "diminish" at the arrival of Jesus over whom the Spirit descends and who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Finally, John's preaching and baptism was so electrifying and influential that communities at Alexandria and Ephesus lasted even after his death (Acts 19:1-4).

⁴⁷ Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery with a new foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 231.

⁴⁸ Kostenberger, "Baptism in the Gospels," 13.

⁴⁹ Bieder, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 1, 193, states: "John may have taken two ideas from the OT: the idea of ethical purification under the image of purification with water (Isa 1:16ff) and the expectation that God himself will execute the great tribulation in the end time (Ezek 36:25; Zech 13:1)."

Besides the NT, John's baptism is likewise extra-biblically attested by Josephus who referred to him as one "called the Baptist" (βαπτιστής). In Book 18 of the *Antiquities of the Jews*, the historian says,

... he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join his baptism. In his view this was necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior....⁵⁰

Did John simply take over or adapt any particular baptism from his milieu? H. Mueller avers:

From the middle of the 2d century B.C. until A.D. 300 there was a great deal of baptismal activity in Syria and Palestine, especially along the upper Jordan, among many different groups. But the different forms of ablution, whether the lustrations of Hellenistic syncretism, the baptism of the Mandaeans (a Gnostic sect of the Christian era), the baths of the Essenes, or finally, proselyte baptism of late Judaism, are insufficient to account fully for the baptism of John; they fall short of the ethical and messianic implications of his baptism.⁵¹

By way of comparison: In some ways, the baptism of John had certain similarities with the religious washings at Qumran: both involved in withdrawal to the desert to await the Lord; both were linked to an ascetic lifestyle; both demanded a conversion to God as a condition for the forgiveness of sin; both included total immersion in water; and both occurred, more or less, in an eschatological context.⁵² Yet, these features cannot be asserted to be unique to John and the Qumran community.

The differences of John's baptism from most of the Jewish ritual washings are likewise remarkable. While most Jewish ritual washings were repeated, John's baptism seems to have been a once-for-all-time affair. Unlike all of them, John's baptism was an administered rite and not a self-immersion. He directed his clarion

⁵⁰ Josephus *Ant.* 18.116-118; translation cited is by Louis H. Feldman in *Josephus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 9. 81, 83.

⁵¹ Mueller, "Baptism," 55. Even Schweitzer affirms that the significance of the John's baptism cannot possibly be derived from Jewish proselyte-baptism (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 232). Fuller, however, argues that "perhaps the best solution is to combine two of the theories already mentioned: John took over the baptism practice of Qumran or of the baptist sects in general and combined it with the prophetic idea of an eschatological cleansing before the end" ("Initiation in the New Testament"). To show some differences of John's Baptism from others: The lustrations and "baptisms" in the mystery religions were perceived of as working magically; the Jewish proselyte baptism was derived from a legalistic conception of uncleanness. Whereas John's baptism had an explicitly moral character, a visible sign of μετάνοια, a change of heart necessary for the remission of sins.

⁵² Yarbro Collins, "Origin of Christian Baptism," 41.

call to repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel, and not just to a segregated group of would-be proselytes who achieve righteousness by their strict separation from society. In effect, John the Baptist was warning that even the people of Israel are not prepared for God's impending judgment. His utterance about the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for baptism showed this: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matt 3:7). The Baptist saw himself "in the role of the ancient prophet Elijah, who had rebuked even the king and queen of Israel – Ahab and Jezebel – to their faces."⁵³ In brief, John's baptism was fastened to his eschatology; it was preparatory for the messianic work. His water baptism will give way to another baptism by One who will baptize with Holy Spirit.

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS IN THE GOSPELS

The baptism of Jesus serves as the transition between John's baptism and Christian baptism. Strictly speaking, it can be considered as an antecedent to Christian baptism, if not the foundation of Christian baptism.⁵⁴ The Synoptic Gospels record in some detail the unique event of the baptism of Jesus from the hands of John toward the start of his own public ministry (Mark 1:9-11; Matt 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22). There is no direct report in the Fourth Gospel, but the evangelist does record the tradition (1:29-34). "The fact that Jesus sought baptism by John," says Yarbro Collins, "is evidence that Jesus recognized the authority of John as an agent of God."⁵⁵ While all four evangelists relate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, they do so with slight differences (see Mark 1:9; Matt 3:13; Luke 3:3; 4:1; John 1:28; 3:26 ["beyond the Jordan"]).⁵⁶ These differences of details, however, can no longer be exactly reconstructed. There is no reason to contest the historicity of the fact that Jesus submitted himself to a ritual washing performed by John the Baptist. This is one of the most certain historical facts in the Gospel tradition. It can be presumed as well that Jesus, by accepting the baptism of John in its content and form, accepted its prophetic-eschatological significance. But for Jesus "eschatology was more orientated to the present time of fulfillment than to the future consummation."⁵⁷

⁵³ James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007), 128.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 99.

⁵⁵ Yarbro Collins, "Origin of Christian Baptism," 47.

⁵⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *A Christological Catechism: New Testament Answers*, New Revised and Expanded Edition (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), 39-43. While Mark (1:9) and Matthew (3:13-16) explicitly single out Jesus as being baptized by John the Baptist, in Luke (3:21-22) no agent is named ("When ... Jesus too was baptized"). In John's Gospel (1:24-34) too there is no mention that John baptized Jesus or even that Jesus was baptized. This is, however, implicit in the words addressed to John by him who sent him to baptize. There are other differences in detail in the gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus.

⁵⁷ Yarbro Collins, "Origins of Christian Baptism," 47.

While the other Jews came to the River Jordan to be baptized by John for the forgiveness of their own sins, the baptism of Jesus is understood quite differently. At his baptism Jesus is symbolically and actually commissioned as Servant of the Lord (YHWH), an echo of Isaiah 53:11, “where the servant of the Lord, though personally innocent, takes on himself the sins of others in order to obtain their justification.”⁵⁸ As noted by bible scholars, the baptism of Jesus was something of an embarrassment to the early Christian community. For this reason, in Matthew’s version of the event, he inserts a dialogue between Jesus and John to make clear that John is the inferior of the two. The highlight of Jesus’ baptism is not that he needed to repent of sin, but rather an occasion for the public revelation of his identity. By undergoing this rite, Jesus identifies himself completely with humanity. It is a theophany, i.e., a self-revealing of God in which Jesus is identified as “Beloved Son” and commissioned as the herald of God’s kingdom. Jesus is the one of whom Isaiah prophesied must suffer vicariously for the sins of others. The words, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11),⁵⁹ a combination of Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1, point to Jesus as both messianic king and suffering servant. The LXX rendition of Isa 42:1, 4 (“Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations...”) uses the term *παῖς* which could mean both “servant” and “son” – the two titles of Christ. Jesus understood his baptism as the vocation to be the suffering servant of God that would effect the forgiveness of sins for humankind. His baptism points forward to the cross, in which alone all baptism will find its fulfillment.⁶⁰ Christians have to constantly remind themselves that the accounts of Jesus’ baptism in the Gospels “are more concerned with presenting *that* event as the manifestation of God’s Son and Servant than as a model for Christian baptism.”⁶¹ In his baptism Jesus was publicly identifying himself with sinful humanity. His baptism was not simply an affirmation of his messiahship, but perhaps more importantly, a public declaration of his relationship as an obedient Son to the Father.

At his baptism Jesus likewise received the fullness of the Spirit manifested “like a dove” descending on to him. Again, Isaiah 42:1 reads: “I have put my Spirit upon him [the Servant of God]; he shall bring forth justice to the nations.” William Barclay describes the baptism of Jesus as a moment of equipment.⁶² Jesus is equipped with

⁵⁸ Taylor, *Where did Christianity come from?*, 37.

⁵⁹ In Matthew, the voice addresses the crowd: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). In Luke, like Matthew, it is directed to Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased” (3:22).

⁶⁰ Mueller, “Baptism,” 56. At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch explained that Jesus was baptized in order to purify the water by his passion (*Letter to the Ephesians* 18). Hence, “the water of baptism becomes a symbol of the redemptive death of Jesus, and in this way Jesus’ baptism is related to Christian initiation.” See Taylor, *Where did Christianity come from?*, 41-42.

⁶¹ Harrington, “Baptism in Scripture,” 84. Italics mine.

⁶² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, The Daily Bible Study Series, Revised Edition (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 18-20.

the Holy Spirit. The role of the Spirit in baptism as a dove “is the only feature of the baptism of Jesus mentioned in all four Gospels.”⁶³ It is this association with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5; 11:16) that makes Christian baptism different from John’s baptism.⁶⁴ That is why John’s water baptism is contrasted with Christian baptism which is associated with the Holy Spirit, and administered by one more powerful than he: “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). Again, Harrington expounds,

Although the fullness of the Spirit is reserved for the eschaton, baptism brings the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Rom 8:23). The present experience of the Spirit is also described as the “down payment” or “first installment” (*arrabōn*) of what will be in the future (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14).⁶⁵

Finally, Jesus uses the image of baptism in relating the life of his disciples to his own mission of self-expending love: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38).⁶⁶ After Jesus’ resurrection he entrusted the mission of baptism to his disciples (Matt 28:19). Those baptized “become participants in the life and love of the triune God in whose name they are baptized.”⁶⁷ Consequently, Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan can be viewed as the prototype of every Christian baptism, the “dominant model for Christian baptism.”⁶⁸

Did Jesus himself baptize? There is no hint in the Synoptic Gospels showing Jesus baptizing anyone. The Fourth Gospel, in contrast, depicts a different picture since it describes at one point that Jesus did baptize (see John 3:22f.), but this is corrected and denied in 4:2 by a later scribe. Tabor observes,

That Jesus was baptizing at all was clearly a problem for later Christians. He is not administering a “Christian baptism” in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” A later editor of John even added a parenthetical qualification: “although it was not Jesus who baptized but his disciples” (John 4:2). That type of interpolation is like a red flag telling us that someone is very uncomfortable here, even though the text plainly says that Jesus was baptizing and making disciples.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 103.

⁶⁴ Harrington, “Baptism in Scripture,” 85; also C. K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry, & Sacraments in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 58.

⁶⁵ Harrington, “Baptism in Scripture,” 85.

⁶⁶ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 282-283.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁶⁸ Kilian McDonnell, “Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan,” *Theological Studies* 56 (1996): 209-236, esp. 210.

⁶⁹ Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, 149.

Is John's account more historically reliable than the Synoptic Gospels? This has been a hotly debated issue. In Yarbro Collins' mind, "The appropriate conclusion seems to be that the Gospel of John is historically accurate on this point and that the authors of the other gospels were unaware of, or suppressed, the tradition that Jesus baptized."⁷⁰ No one is spoken of in the NT as having been baptized by Jesus. In light of the absence of references to baptism in the Synoptic Gospels, could it be that the baptizing activity of Jesus and his disciples is limited to the early stages of Jesus' ministry?⁷¹ In an encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus clearly stated the necessity of baptism for salvation: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. ...No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:3, 5). This indicates that Jesus was preaching and practicing that same baptism – the baptism of John. Again Tabor notes, "They were allies and there is no reason to think that either their message or their mode of operation differed."⁷² Moreover, if baptism was not valued as a necessity by Jesus, "one could not explain why, from the very outset, starting with Pentecost, the Apostolic Church preached the absolute necessity of Baptism for salvation, admonishing all to do penance, to believe in Jesus, and to be baptized (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12-13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47; 19:3-5)."⁷³ For Jesus, the baptism of John continued to be a ceremonial act which worked supernaturally.

Summing up: The fact that Jesus allowed himself to be baptized shows that he endorsed the baptism of John. The act also recognized the authority of John as an agent of God. The purpose of John's baptism was to reveal Jesus: "I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:31). John testified how he had seen the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and abide on Jesus.⁷⁴ As his baptism, God speaks directly to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). The baptism of Jesus provides the basis for the meaning of baptism as the ritual in which one becomes the child of God. Just as Jesus is God's beloved Son, so also the baptized person becomes a son or daughter of God. Ferguson states, "That Jesus was himself baptized and at least for a time along with this disciples practiced baptism would easily explain why the disciples in the post-resurrection period implemented this practice."⁷⁵ If we accept that Jesus and his disciples administered a kind of baptism similar to that of John's, this shows continuity between the baptism of John and early Christian baptism (e.g., the baptism to which Peter invited the Jews in Jerusalem on Pentecost in Acts 2). Hence it is claimed that Christian baptism is immediately and closely

⁷⁰ Yarbro Collins, "Origins of Christian Baptism," 48-49.

⁷¹ It is interesting to observe that even John's Gospel does not speak of Jesus' practice of baptism after he embarked on his own public ministry – a period following John's imprisonment.

⁷² Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty*, 149

⁷³ Mueller, "Baptism," 56.

⁷⁴ The coming of the Holy Spirit as a dove is the only feature of the baptism of Jesus that is mentioned in all four gospels.

⁷⁵ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 103.

related to, if not derived from, John's baptism.⁷⁶ Christian baptism can be seen as the fulfillment of John the Baptist's work. John baptized with water, but the Messiah to come would baptize the people in the Holy Spirit and in fire (Matt 3:11). The role of the Holy Spirit in baptism is well attested by all three Synoptic Gospels. The Spirit, so to say, is the greatest gift of Jesus in baptism. Lastly, as Susan K. Wood would say, Christian baptism is "inaugurated eschatology, the end time present now."⁷⁷

BAPTISM IN ACT OF THE APOSTLES

When did Christian baptism originate? The traditional view is that the practice of baptism in the early church was the result of the Risen Lord's command to baptize every one, as reflected in the Gospel of Matthew (28:16-20).⁷⁸ There are problems, however, with regard to the authenticity of this passage from Matthew. The command of the risen Lord has been shaped in light of the experience of the early church.⁷⁹ Those who assume that Jesus did not baptize have theorized that the early Christians reverted to the baptism of John and reinterpreted it.⁸⁰ Another plausible position is the unbroken continuity from the baptism of John, through the baptism associated with the activity of Jesus, to the baptism practiced by the early Christians. This assumption of unbroken continuity has its own merits as reflected in the Acts of the Apostles. First, "no replacement for Judas was considered if he had not been with the disciples from the time of Jesus' baptism (Acts 1:22)."⁸¹ This somehow shows the importance placed by the early church on baptism. Second, the meaning of baptism ritual that Peter exhorted during the Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 is so similar to the baptism of John. While new elements may have been added, however, the starting point is the same.⁸² Like John the Baptist, Peter called for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38b). If the baptism of John was a means of fleeing from the "wrath to come" (Matt 3:7), in like manner Peter admonishes his Jewish audience, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). People repented and submitted themselves to baptism as a fitting response. The two new elements in the meaning and function of baptism in Acts (2:38) are worth noticing: First, they were baptized "in the name (ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι)

⁷⁶ Osborne, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation*, 56: "Because of the many connections between John's baptism and Christian baptism, it is only fair to say that Christian baptism had its roots in the baptism of John."

⁷⁷ Susan K. Wood, *One Baptism: Ecumenical Dimensions of the Doctrine of Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 1.

⁷⁸ See Yarbro Collins, "Origins of Christian Baptism," 49.

⁷⁹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 415.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, the position taken by Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 233-234.

⁸¹ McDonnell, "Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan," 209. The "Twelve" (δώδεκα) proleptically represents the renewed people of God, the Church as the new Israel.

⁸² Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 236; Yarbro Collins, "Origin of Christian Baptism," 50.

of Jesus Christ,⁸³ which means surrender to Christ as the Lord and Savior, the only mediator of salvation; second, the association of baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the occasion of the outpouring of the Spirit, the eschatological pledge of God (Acts 2:17-21, 33). In a way, the baptism practiced by the early Christian community was nothing different from what it had been for John, i.e., it remained “an act which guaranteed the efficacy of repentance, as a preparation for the outpouring of the Spirit and for salvation at the Judgment.”⁸⁴ The Christian community took over the eschatological sacrament of John the Baptist. The authority of the Church replaced the position of John’s authority. Noting the difference between John’s baptism and Christian baptism, Wood explains,

John pointed forward toward the messianic time, while for Christian baptism the messianic kingdom has already come. Baptism admits a person to the kingdom of the Messiah, Christ. The baptism of John is solely a baptism of water; the baptism of the church confers the Holy Spirit, who belongs to the new age and the last days, the messianic time (Isa 11:2; Acts 2:17).⁸⁵

We shall not enter into the lengthy debate over the origin of the phrase ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι. Suffice it to say that its metaphorical meaning is that the baptized person belongs to Christ. The formula “in Jesus’ name” probably represents an earlier stage than the Trinitarian formula of Matt 28:19. Baptism is the acceptance of the proclamation about Jesus and about the nearness of the kingdom of God.⁸⁶ Its reception is an outward sign of faith in God through Jesus. Faith in Jesus is a necessary precondition for baptism (see also Acts 8:12-13; 16:31-34; 18:8; 19:4-5). In Acts, baptism is never simply a private matter because it involves incorporation into the covenant people of God, the Church, with Jesus as its center.

In Acts 1, the risen Jesus exhorted the Apostles not to leave Jerusalem until the “promise of the Father” has come: “...for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (v. 5). For the evangelist Luke, “Christian baptism was a rite involving the use of water, but normally accompanied by the gift of the Spirit and effecting entry into the people of God.”⁸⁷ The first fruit of the Pentecost event was the baptism of about three thousand converts (Acts 2:41). “The litmus test,” according to Stein, “that determines if a person is truly a Christian

⁸³ See, for instance, Acts 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5.

⁸⁴ Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 233.

⁸⁵ Wood, *One Baptism*, 4.

⁸⁶ As Gerhard Lohfink states: “The early Church understood baptism as Jesus had understood the coming of the *basileia*: as the absolute, gracious action of God given to baptismal candidates without any deserving on their part” (*Does God Need the Church: Towards a Theology of the People of God*, trans. Linda M. Maloney [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999], 208).

⁸⁷ Barrett, *Church, Ministry, & Sacraments*, 58-59.

in Acts is the reception of the Spirit (19:2; 10:47; 11:17-18).⁸⁸ It is clear in Acts that water baptism and the gift of the Spirit belong together. It is also assumed in Acts that baptism is the ordinary rite of initiation into the Christian community.⁸⁹ In the experience of becoming a Christian on that Pentecost event, says Stein, “five integrally related components took place at the same time, usually on the same day: repentance, faith, confession, receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and baptism.”⁹⁰

Acts, however, does not provide us with a clue to the exact mode of water baptism. Whether this is done by immersion, sprinkling with water, or pouring of water is not specified in Acts.

BAPTISM IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Because the genuine letters of Paul were earlier literary productions, this fact makes Paul a central figure in the study of Christian baptism. As Schnackenburg notes, “Paul is the first to give real impetus to the development of the theology of baptism in the primitive church.”⁹¹ Paul himself had received baptism (Acts 9:18), which goes to show that the rite of baptism existed prior to his conversion.⁹² “Since baptism existed prior to Paul’s conversion,” G. R. Beasley-Murray notes, “it is reasonable to view it as coexistent with the inception of the church.”⁹³ That statement concurs with the baptizing ministry of the apostles from the day of Pentecost on (Acts 2:37-41), among others. The “sacramental view of baptism was found by Paul already present in primitive Christianity, and was taken over by him.”⁹⁴ In Paul’s letters Christian baptism is a self-understood datum.⁹⁵ It is the regular means of becoming a Christian. Thus, Paul assumes that all believers in Christ have been baptized (Gal 3:26-28; 1 Cor 12:13). Although Paul had admitted to having baptized in his ministry (1 Cor 1:14-16), it was not the major thrust of his apostolic work (1 Cor 1:17).⁹⁶ This, however, does not imply that baptism was unimportant for Paul. In

⁸⁸ Robert H. Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 35-66, esp. 52.

⁸⁹ In other part of Acts, baptism likewise appears as the rite of initiation into the Church (see Acts 8:12-13, 16; 16:31-33; 18:8).

⁹⁰ Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 38.

⁹¹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, “Baptism,” *Sacramentum Verbi: An Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, Vol. 1, ed. J. B. Bauer (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 58.

⁹² The conversion of Paul is usually dated four years after the death of Jesus.

⁹³ G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne & Ralph Martin (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993): 60-66, esp. 60.

⁹⁴ Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 236.

⁹⁵ Paul’s use of the noun (βάπτισμα) and the verb (βαπτίζω) is relatively few. In 1 Cor, the verb occurs ten times (1:13, 14, 15, 16, 17; 10:2; 12:13; 15:29 [twice]).

⁹⁶ In comparison with preaching the Gospel, Paul is relatively depreciating the importance of baptism. The reason is situational. Paul “is fearful lest the Corinthians should think that, because he had carried out baptisms, he had baptized people into his own name” (See Barrett, *Church, Ministry. & Sacraments*, 64).

fact, baptism is “the most immediate facet of the gospel that drives Paul to preach.”⁹⁷ The Apostle frequently mentions the rite as an essential part of the believer’s journey of faith. For Paul, baptism involved a public act, probably a public confession (Rom 10:9); it constituted a “rite of passage” because those baptized are renouncing their old ways of life and committing themselves to a new way of life.⁹⁸ To accept baptism is to “walk in the newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Schnackenburg nicely summarizes it,

In his [Paul’s] churches all were baptized, and on this fact he built his teaching of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13, Gal 3:27f), which dominates his theology of the Church. He did not attempt to remove baptism to a distance from his theological construction, as if it were a foreign body, or to push it in a spare room, as it were; rather he was increasingly concerned to make it a corner stone of his Christ-related doctrine of salvation.⁹⁹

Paul’s teaching about baptism is multifaceted. He never refers to baptism as a purely external rite; rather, it is a life-shaping event at the heart of the Christian journey and ministry. Baptism gives shape to the identity of Christian people and connects them to one another and to lives of service. What did Paul do with baptism as initiation rite? Paul employs various metaphors and symbols, sometimes derived from OT images and events, to explain its significance. Among the many metaphors used by Paul (e.g., washing, anointing, sealing, putting on clothes, etc.), the most radical is the connection between baptism with the dying, being buried and raised with Christ. As Barrett explains, “he [Paul] has taken a rite used previously in the very simple sense of entry into and participation in the Christian fellowship and attached it explicitly to the death and resurrection of Jesus.”¹⁰⁰ Lohfink rightly affirms that it is impossible to speak of baptism without speaking of Jesus’ death.¹⁰¹ Just as Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan foreshadows his death, baptism for Paul is perceived as a baptism into the death of Jesus. Baptism symbolizes dying in Christ, a dying that leads to a newness of life. It signifies departure from an old mode of existence to beginning a new life:

Do you not know [ἀγνοεῖτε] that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised

⁹⁷ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 6.

⁹⁸ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 447.

⁹⁹ R. Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of Paul*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), 20-21.

¹⁰⁰ Barrett, *Church, Ministry, & Sacraments*, 67-68.

¹⁰¹ Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church*, 208.

from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4).¹⁰²

In baptism the believers are brought to Christ's death as they are made to share in what occurred once for all. The effect of this cruciform existence unites the baptized person intimately with Christ.¹⁰³ The baptized believer now belongs to the era of the risen Christ and no longer under the dominion of sin. The believer's union with the death-resurrection of Christ marks not only the end of the power of sin, but also brings about the "new creation," the new life in Christ: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17; see Gal 6:15; Rom 6). Barrett rightly observes that Paul "was certainly the most influential, and possibly the first, Christian to insist upon the connection between baptism and the death of Christ."¹⁰⁴

The typification of baptism as a cleansing bath is found most clearly in 1 Cor 6:11: "You were *washed*, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." The Deutero-Pauline letter to the Ephesians states that the church had been cleansed by the washing of water (τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος) with the word (5:26). The expressions "to wash" and "washing of water" are clearly referring to baptism. Baptism is characterized "as the symbol of and means of salvation for the washing away of and cleansing from sin."¹⁰⁵

Baptism binds one to Christ and the order of life represented by him. For Paul this is the most distinctive description of baptism. This is best reflected in Gal 3:27 where Paul describes baptism as "putting on Christ": "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (RSV). Putting on Christ requires putting off the old self with its evil practices (see Col 3:9).¹⁰⁶ Gal 3:26-27 also reflects a formula of the baptismal ritual where baptism is connected with another very characteristically Pauline phrase, ἐν Χριστῷ "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...." Union with Christ is "no more individualistic experience for Christians, but a corporate one, for through baptism a special union with all

¹⁰² According to Barrett, "Paul uses this [ἀγνοεῖτε] and similar expressions when referring to themes that his readers should have been familiar with, though he hears that they may have forgotten them. 'Do you not know?' has the sense, 'Surely you do know and cannot have forgotten altogether'" (*Church, Ministry, & Sacraments*, 69).

¹⁰³ Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 365, states "the Pauline expressions 'to die with Christ', 'to rise again with him', have their origin in the ceremony of baptism ... they bring with them a reminiscence of baptism and surround Christian life with a zone of experience, a deeply felt and considered contact with Christ who died and rose from the dead."

¹⁰⁴ Barrett, *Church, Ministry, & Sacraments*, 69.

¹⁰⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 397.

¹⁰⁶ The act of stripping of clothes for baptism and putting on clothes after baptism presents the symbol of "putting off" the old life without Christ and "putting on" the new life in Christ. See Beasley-Murray, "Baptism," 61.

Christians is formed.”¹⁰⁷ Baptism initiates believers into the Christian community: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greek, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). “Into one body,” means Christ’s church. In baptism God is creating “the eschatological people of God and continually adds new members to it.”¹⁰⁸

Paul insists to the Corinthians that they were baptized in the name of Christ, not in the name of the one who performed the rite, and hence totally belong to Christ (1 Cor 1:13, 15). Baptism ought not to be a cause of division so that each one claims: “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas.” Paul did not baptize the Corinthian Christians into a Pauline fans club. Baptism was not a rite of adherence to any religious leader (1 Cor 1:12-16), other than initiation and a consecration to Jesus Christ.

The rite of baptism bears witness to the Christian faith, and it is “effective only in the context of obedient faith which looked to but one *kyrios*, the Lord who was crucified.”¹⁰⁹ Would faith, apart from baptism, be sufficient to enable us to participate in the effects of the Lord’s death? For Paul, faith and baptism are inseparable in practice.¹¹⁰ There is no baptism without faith. Baptism, which ritualizes our dying and rising with Christ, calls for an adult commitment. Again, for Paul, the Holy Spirit is the enabler of faith: “... no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Clearly for Paul, it is the Spirit that “inspires the newly baptized Christians to call on God as Abba, Father. When they do so, they are expressing their new status as adopted children of God (e.g., Rom 8:15-16; Gal 4:6).”¹¹¹ The Holy Spirit is the eschatological gift of God given to all who are baptized (Eph 5:26-27; 1 Cor 6:11). For Paul, baptism is “not only a preparatory sacrament – as for John the Baptist – but a sacrament of fulfillment as well.”¹¹² This is particularly manifest through the relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit.

In Gal 3:6–4:7 one finds Paul’s earliest sketch of a baptismal theology where baptism figures “as the means whereby the Gentiles, who cannot be considered Abraham’s *sperma*, or heirs by blood of the divine promise made to him (cf. Gal 3:16), can claim to his inheritance.”¹¹³ Indeed, the Gentiles had no racial ties with Abraham. It was Paul who argued that Gentiles who are baptized in Christ are likewise Abraham’s descendants, because Christ is Abraham’s singular offspring

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Fitzmyer, *Pauline Theology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 66.

¹⁰⁸ Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church*, 208.

¹⁰⁹ Barrett, *Church, Ministry, & Sacraments*, 70.

¹¹⁰ See Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul*, 149.

¹¹¹ PHEME PERKINS, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction*, Third Edition (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), 103.

¹¹² Ridderbos, *Paul*, 399.

¹¹³ David Michael Stanley, “The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism: An Essay in Biblical Theology,” *Theological Studies* 18 (1957): 169-214, esp. 184.

(*sperma*). Baptism as a rite of initiation brings believers into the one community that knows no barriers. Baptism into Christ “equalizes all people, so that no one can boast of superiority because one is male or female, free or slave, Jew or Gentile.”¹¹⁴ Thus, in Christ, distinctions of race, class, and gender are irrelevant (Gal 3:8-29).

Finally, Paul describes baptism as a “circumcision of the soul in the Spirit” (Rom 2:29). True circumcision is not outward but an inner transformation, “a matter of the heart” (v. 29), which can only be accomplished by God. We can also say that Christian baptism is the NT fulfillment and replacement of circumcision: “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11). Roger Bullard in his commentary on the Letter to the Colossians writes: “*Circumcision* (beginning the life as a Jew) is a metaphor for cutting off our sinful nature (*the body of the flesh*). Baptism (beginning life as a Christian) is a metaphor for dying to sin and beginning a new life.”¹¹⁵ Paul in calling baptism a spiritual circumcision is affirming that it is the sign and seal of Christian faith, relating all believers to their father, Abraham (Rom 4:16).

OTHER NEW TESTAMENT METAPHORS FOR BAPTISM

There is another set of metaphors used in the NT in connection with baptism that has to do with rebirth and regeneration. Examples are “born from above” (John 3:3), “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), “renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), “born anew” (1 Peter 1:3, 23), and “born of God” (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1). The Letters of Peter also makes use of the symbolism of the deluge (in the days of Noah) in teaching about Christian baptism (1 Pet 3:20-21; 2 Pet 2:5). Just as the deluge was a saving act of YHWH, so Christian baptism is an experience of salvation.

FORMULAS OF BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Within the NT the baptismal formulas vary, even with the same writer. “The NT defines neither the exact rite of Baptism nor the exact formulas.”¹¹⁶ At the end of Matthew’s Gospel the risen Christ commands his remaining disciples to “baptize in

¹¹⁴ Osborne, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation*, 44. See also Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 32. Chauvet explains that according to the ordinary concept of the time, the barriers that separated the two parts of humankind are: the two parts of humanity (Jew and Greek), the two social structures (slave and free), the two sexes (women were subject to men).

¹¹⁵ Roger Bullard, “The Letter of Paul to the Colossians,” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, gen. ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2111.

¹¹⁶ Mueller, “Baptism,” 57.

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19).¹¹⁷ According to Raymond Brown, “The baptismal formula in the name of three divine agents was presumably in use in the Matthean church at this period, having replaced an earlier custom of baptizing in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16, etc.).”¹¹⁸ Yet Luke portrays Peter, one of the Twelve, as calling his hearers on Pentecost, “Be baptized into the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38), rather than into the triune name. Paul in his own letters speaks of his readers as “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:3) or simply “baptized into Christ” (Gal 3:27). At one place Paul says that they are “baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). The Christological formula seems to be taken for granted by Paul. Although the Trinitarian formula in the Gospel of Matthew seems to be the earliest of all, the letters of Paul were written earlier, and Acts was probably written about the same time as Matthew.¹¹⁹ As Hultgren rightly observes, “it is difficult to imagine that first-century Christian would dispense with a Trinitarian formula in favor of a purely christological one.”¹²⁰ Consequently, the Christological formula must be considered earlier and more widespread. Only eventually the Trinitarian formula became prominent and then practically universal as it is well attested in second century sources.¹²¹ The formula used in the community of Matthew towards the end of the first century can be considered an expansion of earlier, purely christological one. Beyond that it is impossible to know how early or how widely the formula was used. The formula “into the name of Jesus,” etc. distinguished Christian baptism from the others (like the baptism of John, or proselyte baptism).¹²² Baptism into Christ, or into the name of Jesus, thus became the mark of one’s identity.

CONCLUSION

Although the foregoing presented to us many possible historical antecedents of Christian baptism, most scholars claim that it is immediately and closely related to John’s baptism. Jesus’ baptism may be seen as a complement and fulfillment of John’s baptismal ministry. John affirmed to the crowd following him: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11). This was fulfilled in Acts 2:1-4. There are striking parallels between John’s baptism and Christian baptism.

¹¹⁷ The “great commission” of Mt 28:19 reflects the liturgical language imported from Matthew’s community of the late first-century church. The instruction is not only to make disciples, but also to incorporate them into the community through baptism.

¹¹⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 203.

¹¹⁹ Hultgren, “Baptism in the New Testament,” 9.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ See *Didache* 7.1-3; Justin, *Apology* 1.61; Tertullian, *On Baptism* 6,13

¹²² See Lars Hartman, “‘Into the Name of Jesus’: A Suggestion Concerning the Earliest Meaning of the Phrase,” *New Testament Studies* 20 (1974/75): 432-440, esp. 440. The Semitic expression “in the name of” (*lesem* in Hebrew, *lesum* in Aramaic) can mean, with respect to, for the sake of, and with thought for.

Both focus in the Messiah. While John's baptism pointed to the Messiah, who was to come, Christian baptism points back to the Messiah, who did come. What makes Christian baptism new is that the believer is baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit is now contemporaneous with the baptism by water.

The practice of Christian baptism and its meaning is unfolded in various images in the NT expressing the riches of Christ and the gifts of his salvation.¹²³ The variety of metaphors employed to explain baptism makes the task of coming up with one theology of baptism so difficult. In fact, the NT reveals different theologies of baptism; different levels of baptismal interpretation, some more primitive than others. The earliest theology of baptism is found in the Acts of the Apostles where the underlying theme is the forgiveness of sin. This cleansing in water for the forgiveness of sins is fundamental to all theologies of baptism. Paul in his letters offers us a more advanced and positive theological interpretation of baptism as union with Christ, as the Christian's participation in his death and resurrection. Thus, Rom 6:3-8 is a central reading in our Easter Vigil celebration. As Cullmann reminds us, "our individual participation in the death and resurrection of Christ results from Baptism."¹²⁴ Related with this theme is another Pauline theme, namely, that baptism is participation in the church, the body of Christ. Thus, baptism was an essential part of the overall experience of becoming a Christian in the early church (see Acts 2:38). Baptism was the first thing a Christian embraced after responding in faith to the Gospel. One who was baptized united himself with Christ (Rom 6:4-5) and put on Christ (Gal 3:27).

As much as it was in the early church, baptism remains a necessary initiation rite for Christians today. It expresses the person's new birth in Christ, his incorporation into his body (the church), his entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people, his solidarity with one another through Christ. Baptism is the basis of our common equality and dignity, the sign and seal of our common discipleship, making us members of the new people of God who profess in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5). The lay faithful's journey of faith is deeply rooted in baptism where each one becomes a sharer in the threefold mission of Christ as teacher, priest and servant. The task of new evangelization in the twenty-first century depends on the lay faithful's being fully formed of their baptismal vocation and mission of bringing the good news of Jesus to their own cultures and societies.

¹²³ See the 1982 theological statement of the World Council of Churches on Baptism entitled "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," as cited in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Theology Reader*, Third Edition (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 594-596.

¹²⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1950): 14.