



The Baptism of John

**Its Significance for the Understanding
of Christian Baptism**

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CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

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THE BAPTISM OF JOHN

ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

I. THE PROBLEM OF BAPTISM

One of the more difficult issues facing the church today is baptism. Men in the pastoral ministry in those denominations baptizing infants often have to face the incessant demands of people outside the church for it to be administered almost at the whim of those requesting it. In any event, baptism is administered often many years before the candidate comes to faith (if ever—realistically it must be said that the vast majority of those baptized as infants in our churches never show any sign that the prayer offered at baptism was effective). Those in denominations practising ‘believers’ baptism’, while not subject to the same demands from unbelievers, are not

immune from difficulty either. It is not impossible that, for them, baptism can be a mark of maturity, as if to say, baptism is a step of obedience which one takes, sometimes many years after becoming a believer.

The New Testament evidence points to neither of these extremes. Baptism does not anticipate conversion, neither does it follow it after a space of some time, either of catechizing or maturing. In the New Testament, baptism seems to be virtually identified with regeneration, as for example when Saul was instructed to 'Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins' (Acts 22:16).

An examination of church history is of little help in an attempt to come to some solution. It is easy to see how certain practices have arisen, and to judge them as wrong per se would show a profound lack of understanding on our part. But nevertheless we do find that our approach to the subject of baptism is significantly clouded by the practices in which we engage.

The purpose of this study is to approach the subject as far as possible without the preconceptions which our confessional theology and church practice impose upon us. Of course neutrality is not possible. My task is actually more complex because I was in fact brought up in a Baptist Church and consequently baptized by immersion as a seventeen year old believer, only to find subsequently that the Lord led me into the Anglican ministry. Far from simply being able to see both sides and so be 'objective', I find that I am pressured by both to justify both. So, for the present, the aim is not to justify any position at all. I do not wish to defend any position because simply we might all be wrong. Only a careful and, as far as possible, unbiased examination of Scripture will help us to come to a conclusion.

II. THE SEPTUAGINT

Our word 'baptism' is a transliteration of the Greek *baptisma*, which is properly the result of the act to *baptizein*, as distinct from *baptisma*, which is the act itself. However widely *baptisma* and *baptizein* may have been used in the New Testament, in the LXX the noun is entirely absent and the verb is used only twice.

The verb *baptizein* is used in II Kings 5:14, where Naaman 'went down and was baptized [*ebaptisato*] in the Jordan'. The other use of the verb is in Isaiah 21:4 where it is said that 'h' *'anomia me baptizei*—'horror has appalled me'. Neither of these instances is, however, 'baptism' in the New Testament sense.

There is another word used some nineteen times in the LXX, *baptw*, which is almost always translated in the R.S.V. as 'dipped'. We can conclude that in the use of this word also there is no approximation to the New Testament practice of baptism.

III. RITUAL WASHINGS

We have said that the New Testament uses two related nouns, *baptisma* and *baptismoz*. The former is the word used for 'baptism'. The latter is used three times only, in Mark 7:4, Hebrews 6:2 and 9:10. In Mark 7:4 and Hebrews 9:10 the reference is clearly to ritual cleansings under the Old Covenant, and we see from Mark 7:4 that these were not necessarily bodily cleansings either, 'and there are many other traditions which they observe, the *baptismoz* of cups and pots and vessels of bronze'.

In Hebrews 6:2 the reference is not so clear: ‘with instruction about baptism¹’. The R.S.V. translates it as ‘ablutions’, while the R.V. translates the phrase as ‘of the teaching of baptisms’. By doing so, the R.V., although accurate, retains the ambiguity, but gives the marginal (i.e. preferred) translation of ‘washings’. It does seem likely that this is a reference to the ritual washings of Judaism (cf. e.g. Exod. 19:10; 30:18–20; Lev. 15:8; etc.). In New Testament times, ritual washing was a significant feature of the life of many in Judaism, particularly among the more rigorous Essenes. The ‘baths’ are quite prominent in the excavations at Qumran, and also at Masada which was by no means an Essene establishment.

It may be, then, that these ritual washings provide some sort of antecedent to the new Testament practice of baptism. However, the dramatic quality of the New Testament practice is quite distinct from the legal stipulations of the Old Testament and of later Judaism. Furthermore, it is conspicuous that the New Testament uses an entirely new word (*baptisma* is unknown prior to the New Testament) to describe baptism, and the (slightly) more common *baptismoz* to describe the Old Testament ritual washings.

It is concluded from what we have said concerning the particular use of the words, and from what we know of Old Testament practices, that there are no definable antecedents to New Testament baptism in the Old Testament.

IV. CIRCUMCISION

It is not at all uncommon to hear circumcision described as the theological antecedent to baptism, and in particular to the

baptism of infants.¹ Notions of ‘covenant’ are brought forward to justify the practice but, without at this point going into detail, it ought to be said that this type of argument is guilty of ignoring the essential nature of the New Covenant. Just as one became a member of Israel and an inheritor of covenant blessings by birth, so one becomes a member of the people of the New Covenant by birth, but it is re-birth; one must be born of the Spirit and not of the flesh (John 1:12–13; 3:3–8). Under the Old Covenant, the physical sign of the physical kingdom was circumcision. Under the New Covenant, the sign of the spiritual kingdom is itself spiritual, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30).

In terms of the covenant, the line is drawn directly from circumcision to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Even if New Testament water baptism does relate in some way to the baptism with the Holy Spirit, as it certainly does (see Matt. 3:11 etc.), it still provides no antecedent for New Testament baptismal practice in the rite of circumcision. This, of course, is obvious from the total failure of the New Testament (and indeed in Galatians it is total refusal!) to make the connection.

V. THE BAPTISM OF JOHN

If it is true that the canonical history of Israel provides no discernible antecedent for baptism, how are we to explain the remarkable appearance of John the Baptist? The New Testament virtually commences with a practice which we have not previously encountered but which is presented, for John at

¹ Even if it was the antecedent, it would still not explain the New Testament practice which, in form, is so completely different.

least, as a very sensible and appropriate activity. There is no hint that the crowds found John at all quaint. On the contrary, almost the whole social spectrum is represented in his audience which was present 'epi to baptisma (for the baptism Matt. 3:7), baptisqhnaï (to be baptized Luke 3:7).

Our approach from this point will be to examine Matthew chapter 3 (and its parallels) with the aim of understanding the role of John the Baptist. This is necessary if for no other reason than that John himself, as well as Jesus, regarded the work of John as in some way preparatory and possibly even definitive for the work of the Messiah (cf. Matt. 3:1-2; Acts 1:4-5; 11:16; etc.).

Verse one: John is introduced by his title 'o BaptisthV (the Baptist). Mark calls him 'o Baptizwn (the Baptizer). It is conspicuous that neither Matthew nor Mark mention the birth of John. As far as their narratives are concerned, John is simply introduced without any word of explanation. This is in contrast to Luke who, in 3:2, calls him 'John the son of Zechariah'.

The titles used by Matthew and Mark are no doubt intended to indicate the immediate association of the man with his main activity from the very beginning. However, it is conspicuous that in the angelic announcement to Zechariah and in Zechariah's later prophetic outburst (Luke 1:13-17; 1:67-79) it is the content and not the form of John's ministry which is paramount. John's work was principally one of proclamation.

Verse two: John's message was simple: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. Repentance is literally 'a change of mind'. Of course the lexicon meaning of the word does not exhaust the meaning of John's exhortation. To repent

is to actively repudiate all that is ungodly in the past and all that is associated with it in the present, which by implication means that all the past and all the present comes under judgement since there is no point at which sin is not pervasive and active.

Clearly, the other side of the coin to repentance is faith. If men and women are brought to repentance, that is to repudiate all that is ungodly in their lives, there is no alternative than to cry out to God for forgiveness and to trust Him totally. Hence Paul said, 'For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death' (II Cor. 7:10). If it is genuine repentance, that is a gift (Acts 5:31; 11:18), then by it God is 'shutting men up to faith' (cf. Gal. 3:23).

The reason for John's appeal is the imminent appearing of the Kingdom of Heaven. For those who do not repent it will be a day of wrath (v. 7) and that day is already dawning (v. 10). John's message is, then, one of great urgency.

Verse three: The reason John speaks as he does is that he is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy: 'A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" ' (40:3).

We must for a moment consider Isaiah's purpose, which at first sight seems somewhat different from John's. John is warning of coming judgement, Isaiah is prophesying coming salvation.

C. H. Dodd, in his famous little book, **According to the Scriptures²** makes the significant point that the method of biblical study employed in the New Testament

² Fontana, London, 1952.

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included first, the *selection* of certain large sections of the Old Testament scriptures, especially from Isaiah, Jeremiah and certain minor prophets, and from the Psalms. These sections were understood as *wholes* and particular verses or sentences were quoted from them rather as pointers to the whole context than as constituting testimonies in and for themselves . . . it is the *total context* that is in view, and is the basis of the argument. ³

We must, then, examine the context of any Old Testament quotation or allusion, and in particular, by Matthew's reference to Isaiah 40:3,⁴ the first five verses of Isaiah 40.

When we examine Isaiah 40 and then measure the ministry of John against it, we conclude that Matthew's application of Isaiah 40:3 to John is not primarily with the aim of making John a harbinger of judgement. The primary reference is that not judgement but deliverance is coming. The voice in the wilderness is preparing the afflicted people for a new exodus, and so he is speaking as the deliverer's prophet. The coming of the kingdom may mean a day of wrath for the impenitent, but for 'poor in spirit' it is a rich blessing (5:3).

How does someone 'prepare the way of the Lord' or 'make straight in the desert a highway for our God'? The answer, according to Isaiah, is by a radical change (40:4):

'Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.'

John's word for this radical transformation is 'repent'. John the

³ P. 126, emphasizes his.

⁴ Luke quotes vv. 3–5, Mark conflates Isa. 40:3 with Mal. 3:1, and in John 1:23 it is John the Baptist who applies Isa. 40:3 to himself.

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Baptist and the prophecy of Isaiah are then in complete harmony.⁵

Verse four: John's preparatory, prophetic role is reinforced by his appearance. He is obviously in the prophetic line of Elijah (II Kings 1:7–8). His food was indicative of a desert dweller. (Some have suggested that John's desert experiences were associated in some way with the Qumran community—certainly they were in the same general area—and adduce theological similarities as proofs. Nevertheless there are significant dissimilarities also.)

The similarity of John the Baptist to Elijah was more than physical. In what is probably the final prophetic utterance of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:1–6, there is a reference to the reappearance of Elijah:

'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.' (vv. 5–6)

To understand John the Baptist, therefore, it is necessary to

⁵ This is in contrast, e.g. with Claus Westermann, among others, who said, 'Although we must therefore resign ourselves to the fact that "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" as applied to John the Baptist does not exactly correspond to the Old Testament text which it cites, the quotation, with its differences from the original, has nevertheless something to tell us. It shows us that, as a general rule, in dealing with citations of the Old Testament in the New, we must never set the New Testament version, its precise wording and meaning, directly over against the Old Testament original, but must take account of the whole road over which, through translation and other processes in tradition, the words of the Old Testament had travelled up to the point where they took on the meaning given them in the New', Isaiah 40–66, Old Testament Library (S.C.M., London, 1969) p. 37f. Westermann's approach means, of course, that exegesis is always dependent on 'scholarship', since the history of translation and tradition will not be the area of expertise for most who read the Scriptures.

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understand also what Malachi is saying concerning the reappearance of Elijah. He is saying that the covenant has largely been broken (cf. Jer. 31:31ff.) and that one is coming who represents the God of the covenant:

‘Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?’ (Mal. 3:1–2)⁶

For those who persist in disobedience, that day will come as a day of destruction:

‘Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.’ (3:5)

‘For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.’ (4:1)

The similarity to John the Baptist’s words in Matthew 3:12 can hardly be overlooked.

For the faithful, the dawning of the day of the Lord will be a rich delight:

‘But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down

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the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.’ (4:2–3)

It is this note of healing, rejoicing, and deliverance from the wicked that we have already observed in Isaiah’s prophecy. The messenger tells of coming deliverance. But the coming deliverance is not for those who presume on the goodness of God. On the contrary, the messenger has this to say:

‘Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.’ (Mal. 4:4)

God’s command, through his Elijah, is that Israel should return to the covenant and resubmit itself to the statutes and ordinances. Thus, John the Baptist was like every other prophet whom God had sent to Israel; his task was to recall the people to the covenant. It made little difference that the prophetic voice had been silent for about four hundred years; the role which John was fulfilling already had its parameters clearly defined.

Verse six: The crowds did more than hear John; they responded to his call by being baptized. Their baptism was closely associated with his preaching. Mark says that John was ‘preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (1:4). The command to repent was at the same time a command to be baptized.

It is also noted that the baptism of the crowds was accompanied by the confession of sins. But is the relationship of baptism and the confession of sins a necessary one or is it conditioned by other factors?

If we recall that the central feature of Elijah’s ministry

⁶ Recall Mark’s use of this passage in reference to John the Baptist (Mark 1:2).

(according to Malachi) was to call people to submission to the law of Moses, then we may perhaps draw the conclusion that the fundamental feature of the baptism which John was administering was not the confession of sin but submission to the law. This does not exclude confession, but it does relegate it to a secondary role; that is, (i) baptism is submission to the law of Moses, and (ii) confession of sin is an obligation upon those whom the law condemns. It is the law and not baptism which requires confession!

A brief return to the subject of antecedents is due here. Though there may be no canonical antecedents to New Testament baptism, there may quite possibly be some extra-canonical evidence, namely in the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism. F. F. Bruce says,

A further analogy to John's baptism may be sought in the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism. A gentile who was converted to Judaism had to be circumcised (if he was a male) and to offer a special sacrifice in the temple (while it stood), and also to undergo a ceremonial bath. The date when this bath or self baptism was instituted is disputed, but as it was a matter of debate between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel it must have antedated the fall of Jerusalem and goes back at least to the beginning of the Christian era. Some members of the school of Hillel went so far as to maintain—for the sake of argument, but hardly in practice—that it was by this baptism rather than by circumcision that a gentile became a Jew.⁷

Oscar Cullman, writing of proselyte baptism, says,

It may be held as certain that John the Baptist is involved in this practice; but at the same time he introduced the

⁷ New Testament History, (New York, 1969) p. 156.

revolutionary and—in Jewish eyes—scandalous innovation, that he demanded this baptism not only from heathen but from circumcised Jews . . .⁸

This means that John was treating all and sundry as outside the covenant. No one has the right to claim membership of the covenant people on the basis of physical descent (cf. Matt. 3:7–9). Furthermore, John was saying that submission to the law of the covenant will always result in consistent actions (Matt. 3:8), 'Bear fruit that befits repentance'.

Verse ten: Because of the impending arrival of the Kingdom, baptism may not be postponed with impunity.

Verse eleven: Submission to the law of Moses and hence to the God of the covenant, as expressed in baptism, is not the conclusion of the affair; it only prefigures the baptism which the coming one, the Lord (v. 3), will administer. The precise meaning of baptism 'with the Holy Spirit' is not spelled out here. Apart from the various prophetic references to this work of the Spirit in the Old Testament, we do not know what 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' looks like until it actually happens to Jesus and then later, at Pentecost, to the new people of God.

VI. BAPTISM AS SUBMISSION— THE ILLUSTRATION

If our conclusion about baptism as submission to the law of Moses is correct, then we ought to expect to see future

⁸ Baptism in the New Testament, Studies in Biblical Theology No. 1, (S.C.M., London, 1950) p. 62.

baptisms corresponding to the pattern. Matthew immediately provides us with an illustration (the illustration) in 3:13–17, the baptism of Jesus.

Verse fifteen: Why was Jesus baptized? If the essential feature of baptism was confession of sin and repentance (however much they may be essential to John's proclamation) then clearly Jesus ought not to have been baptized. Some have suggested that Jesus simply identified himself with those he came to save. But surely that involves a certain amount of deception; he was not a partaker of sinful flesh and the point of identification was not here but at the Cross, when he bore the sin of the world.

The solution lies in the nature of baptism as signifying submission to the law of God. To the guilty, it goes without saying that this implies repentance and confession with a view to the forgiveness of sin; to Jesus, quite naturally it need imply no such thing. Indeed, we would be quite shocked to read that Jesus was baptized 'confessing his sins'.

Jesus' baptism refers only to his complete submission to God. Jesus submitted to the redemptive plan and purpose of God which was to be worked out through him. Furthermore, Jesus is 'Israel my son' who alone is God's 'faithful covenant partner'.⁹ Thus Jesus said, 'it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness'. Baptism does not 'fulfil all righteousness' nor is it, at this point in any event, an act of special obedience. That which 'fulfils all righteousness' is the total submission of Israel (in Christ) to the demands of the covenant.

It ought also to be kept in mind that submission, although

⁹ cf. Matt. 2:15, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son', which in Hosea 11:1 refers to Israel, while here it directly refers to Jesus; of course, both are true.

calling on a person for holiness, also brought him into the operative sphere of forgiveness where that was needed (Exod. 34:6–7 etc.).

One further instance can be presented to confirm the conclusion that baptism refers to submission; this time, however, as an indication of the operation of the New Covenant. In Acts 2:21 Peter quotes the prophet Joel, 'And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'. To call on the name of the Lord implies submission to that name. However, Peter's conclusion to his 'sermon' is, in Acts 2:36, that 'God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified'. The Lord to whom submission must be made is none other than the crucified Jesus. Only one response is possible to those in fear of judgement (Acts 2:37, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'), namely, 'Repent, and be baptized' (Acts 2:38), i.e. submit. This time, though, submission is not to the law of Moses but to the Lord Jesus.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is not at all hard to see, then, how it is that in the New Testament baptism is immediately associated with conversion. As the expression of submission to the Lordship of Christ it is the expression of conversion and rebirth. In Romans 6:1–11, Paul's argument concerning Christian holiness is based on the fact that baptism brought one into the saving action of Christ. It was, of course, not the action per se, but 'the obedience of faith' which it represented which was the effective element.

If baptism is, then, the expression of submission and is thus immediately associated with conversion, it is hardly

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likely that the practice of 'using' baptism as a means of drawing someone into the life of the church could be a true use of baptism. By this is meant that administering baptism in response to the request of parents or other family members, when those members parents and family members give no evidence of conversion, in the hope that by so agreeing to their request some long term ministry may occur, may be well meaning but hardly fits the pattern which we have seen in the Scriptures. If baptism is to have the dynamic role today which it has in the New Testament, then the church, and in particular those who have the responsibility of administering baptism, must again give to baptism the significance which submission to the Lord of the church requires.