

CHAPTER 5

HISTORY OF BAPTISM THROUGH NT TIMES

Derivation of *baptism*

The English word *baptism* is a transliteration of the Greek word βάπτισμα *baptisma*, and therefore is found only in the NT and in translations of the LXX. It is not found in our English OT. The parallel Hebrew words will be studied under the section on the mode of baptism. The NT and LXX words related to *baptism* are as follows:

βαπτίζω *baptizo*, “baptize,” the cultic term (NT 80x; LXX 4x)

βάπτω *bapto*, “dip, dye” (NT 3x; LXX 18x; cf. LXX words βάμμα *bamma* and βαπτός *baptos*, meaning “dyed”)

βάπτισμα *baptisma*, “baptism” (NT 22x; not in LXX)

βαπτισμός *baptismos*, “baptism, washing” (NT 4x; not in LXX)

βαπτιστής *Baptistes*, John the “Baptist, Baptizer” (NT 14x; not in LXX)

Institution of Christian baptism

To be called a sacrament, an ordinance must be instituted directly by God (or Christ).

Jesus instructed his disciples to baptize during his earthly ministry, but that baptism was similar to John’s baptism.

Distinctive Christian baptism was instituted by Christ after his resurrection, before his ascension:

- 1) This institution is implied by the longer ending of Mark, when Jesus was at table with his disciples (Mark 16:14-16).

- 2) The primary institution of Christian baptism was with the eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee (Matt 28:19). Some suggest that there were over 500 present on that occasion (cf. 1 Cor 15:6).

Matt 28:19, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Baptisms mentioned in the NT, based on OT regulations

We will now survey the various forms of baptism, leading up to and including Christian baptism.

While baptism itself was not commanded in the OT, one of the underlying themes of baptism—ritual washing or cleansing—occurs frequently in the OT. Three times the NT uses Greek words used for baptism, and links them to some practice derived from the Mosaic code.

Hebrews 9:10

“They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings-- external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”

The term “various ceremonial washings” is διαφόροις βαπτισμοῖς *diaphoroiis baptismois*, using the masculine noun βαπτισμός *baptismos*.

The best texts omit the word “and” after “washings” (UBS {A} rating), thus equating these washings with “external regulations.”

These washings are identified in Heb 9:13-14 as “the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean.” They are contrasted with the blood of Christ, which will “cleanse our consciences.” The Greek words for “sprinkle” and “cleanse” are ραντίζω *rantizo* and καθαρίζω *katharizo*. Peter links these two concepts in 1 Pet 1:2, “by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.”

The two OT passages the author of Hebrews refers to are these:

Lev 16, Day of Atonement
Num 19, the red heifer

Mark 7:4

“When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.”

This passage refers to the Pharisaical interpretations of Lev 15, which mentions ceremonial defilement of people, utensils, beds, and clothes. People, utensils, and clothes are to be washed (e.g., Lev 15:4, 6, 9, 12, etc.; cf. Mishneh *Kelim*, “Vessels,” pp. 604-49).

There is a textual variant in Mark 7:4, with some texts including κλινῶν *klinon*, “of beds.” But this word is missing in **p**⁴⁵, **Ⲛ**, and **B**; it is included in the UBS text in brackets, with a {C} rating.

Greek words relating to baptism occur twice in Mark 7:4:

“Unless they wash,” ἐὰν μὴ βαπτίσωνται *ean me baptisontai* (aor. middle subjunctive of *baptizo*; literally, “unless they baptize themselves”)

“The washing of cups, pitchers and kettles,” βαπτισμοὺς ποτηρίων, κ.τ.λ. *baptismous poterion*, etc. (literally, “baptisms of cups, pitchers and kettles”)

This ceremonial “baptism” of the Pharisees is described in verses 2-3. Before eating, especially after possible contact with unclean people, the Pharisees would wash (νίπτω *nipto*) their hands “with the fist” (πυγμῆ *pugme*). This ceremony was performed by pouring water over cupped hands, supposedly washing away defilement. The precise mode of this ceremony is somewhat obscure, but it is clear that only the hands and possibly the forearms actually contacted the water (v. 2; cf. *TDNT* on *pugme*).

Luke 11:38

“But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.”

Here the aorist passive form of the verb *baptizo* is used: ὅτι οὐ πρῶτον ἐβαπτίσθη *hoti ou proton ebaptisthe* (literally, “that he was not first baptized”).

Comparing the similar passage Matt 15:2 = Mark 7:5, it appears that the same ceremonial washing of the hands is referred to by the expression “baptize oneself,” or the passive “be baptized.”

Jewish proselyte baptism

The baptism of proselytes to Judaism is not required in the OT, but developed during the intertestament period. This practice is not specifically attested before A.D. 70, but it is generally conceded to have begun by the time of Hillel and Shammai (Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 320-21; Edersheim, *LTJM*, App. 12, “On the Baptism of Proselytes,” 2:745-47; Israel Abrahams, “Pharisaic Baptism,” *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, 1:36-46)

The OT term גֵּר *gēr* was changed in meaning from “sojourner” to “convert,” and the Jews became very anxious to make converts to their particular understanding of ritual purity (Matt 23:15).

The Talmud specifies the requirements for proselytes: (1) circumcision, (2) baptism, and (3) offering a sacrifice. The baptism ceremony was required for both men and women. The proselyte was to be completely washed in a water-bath, the size of which was to be large enough for a complete immersion. Prior to the ceremony, the proselyte must cut his hair and nails; and he must be completely naked during the baptism. The proselyte baptized himself, with the elders watching; in the case of women converts, the elders would wait on the other side of a curtain. It is assumed by most scholars that the mode of proselyte baptism was immersion, although this is not specifically stated in the records.

Ritual washings at Qumran

The community at Khirbet Qumran, on the northwest corner of the Dead Sea, apparently consisted of an Essenic sect, which lived there from 100 B.C. until A.D. 67.

There are three sources of evidence concerning the ritual washings of this group:

Archaeology of Qumran

At the n.w. corner of the ruins a stream flows through a cistern, which has stairs and a drain hole in the wall. The cistern is large enough for immersion, but scholars question the use of the cistern; Menahem Mansoor suggests that the stairs simply enabled the people to reach the level of the water in the dry season (*The Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 17).

Similar cisterns, apparently used for ritual washings, and conforming to Talmudic standards, have been discovered at Masada (Yigael Yadin, *Masada*, pp. 164-166).

Zadokite document (or Damascus document)

A large number of manuscripts was discovered in a geniza of an old synagogue in Cairo. These MSS are dated 6th to 8th centuries A.D. Among them is the Zadokite

document, also called the Damascus document. More recently, fragments of this document have been discovered at Qumran in the various caves.

One regulation of this document concerns ritual purification:

“Concerning purification with water: Let not a man wash in water that is filthy or not enough for covering a man. Let him not purify in it any vessel. And any pool in a rock in which there is not enough covering, which an unclean person has touched, its water is unclean like the water of a vessel” (translation of Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 359).

This document gives these rules for cleansing with water:

- 1) Water must not be in a vessel
- 2) Water must not be dirty or touched by someone unclean
- 3) Water must be enough to cover a man

Manual of Discipline (Rule of the Community)

This document was found in the Dead Sea caves. The appropriate section is translated by Burrows as follows (*DSS*, p. 373):

“Everyone who refuses to enter God’s covenant, . . . He will not be purified by atonement offerings, and he will not be made clean with the water for impurity; he will not sanctify himself with seas and rivers or be made clean with any water for washing. Unclean, unclean he will be all the days that he rejects the ordinances of God, not being instructed in the community of his counsel.

“But in a spirit of true counsel . . . and in the submission of his soul to all the statutes of God his flesh will be cleansed, that he may be sprinkled with water for impurity and sanctify himself with water of cleanness.”

The Manual of Discipline states that no amount of water can cleanse someone outside their covenant; but that for one in the covenant, he can have his flesh cleansed by sprinkling of water for impurity, water of cleanness.

Apparently those at Qumran shared the concept of Jewish proselyte baptism: that ritual purity was essential, but separate from moral purity or spiritual rebirth. Josephus shared this view in his evaluation of John the Baptist (*Antiquities* 18:5:2).

John’s baptism

John was described before he was born as one who would turn many in Israel from their sins and would, in the power of Elijah, prepare people for the Lord (Luke

1:16-17). John was to be a prophet, who would prepare the way for the Messiah, and would declare the people's forgiveness (Luke 1:76-79).

Some scholars have suggested that John's baptism was learned at Qumran (cf. Luke 1:80); but the differences between John and the sect at Qumran appear too great (F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, pp. 153-54; Millar Burrows, *DSS*, pp. 328-29, *More Light on the DSS*, pp. 56-63, esp. 59-60).

We would prefer to place the origin of John's baptism in divine revelation. He was instructed by God, in the tradition of the OT prophets.

An outline of John's career

(1) Baptizes in the Jordan valley (in Peraea, Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:1-15; John 1:19-28)

- Mentions judgment was near (Matt 3:10)
- Mentions that he baptized with water, to repentance and forgiveness (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:4)
- Contrasts himself with Christ, who would baptize with the Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11)
- Great numbers baptized (Mark 1:5; cf. Acts 19:1-5)

(2) baptizes Jesus in Jordan (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34)

- Jesus baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15)
- God testifies to Jesus' messiahship

(3) John moves and baptizes near Samaria, at Aenon near Salim (John 3:23-36)

- For location, see F. F. Bruce, *NTH*, p. 159; this biblical statement agrees with archaeological evidence, W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 247
- "Much water" = ὕδατα πολλά *hudata polla*, "many waters" in Jn. 3:23. This is the expression for many wells or fountains (אֵינַן *ayin*). Water was necessary for the large crowds and their animals; cf. G. Dalman, *Sacred Sites and Ways*, p. 89.

- John 3:25, baptism raised a discussion concerning purifying (καθαρισμός *katharismos*), suggesting OT rituals
- (4) probably after brief stay in Samaria, John returns to Peraea, to baptize in the Jordan
- (5) John is arrested in Peraea, and held in the Peraean fortress of Machaerus (Matt 14:3-4; Mark 6:17-18; Luke 3:19-20)
- While there, John witnesses to Herod Antipas (Mark 6:20)
- (6) Because of John's arrest, and perhaps strife between their disciples (John 3:26; 4:1-2), Jesus moves north through Samaria (John 4) and into Galilee for his Galilean ministry (closer to Herod Antipas; Matt 4:12; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:14; John 4:1-3)
- (7) From prison John sends disciples to Jesus to confirm that he was the Coming One (Matt 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23)
- (8) John is beheaded by Herod (Matt 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29; Luke 3:19-20)
- Later Herod thinks John raised (Matt 14:2; Mark 6:16; cf. Luke 9:9)
- (9) John as Elijah
- Following Mal 4, the Jews expected Elijah to return before the kingdom would be established. While John himself denied that he was the actual Elijah (John 1:19-21), Jesus said that John filled that role, but because the nation rejected John and Jesus, Elijah would still come again (Matt 11:14; Matt 17:10-13 = Mark 9:11-13).

Baptism of Jesus and his disciples

Jesus himself did not baptize, but his disciples did (John 4:2). Jesus' disciples baptized in Judea, while John was baptizing near Samaria (John 3:22). There was a great response (John 3:26; 4:1). There is no further mention of Jesus' baptizing after John was arrested. Apparently Jesus' baptism was identical to John's, and consequently was

withdrawn when the nation rejected John (cf. Acts 19:3-5; cf. Tertullian *On Baptism*, ch. 11 [ANF 3:674]).

Christian baptism

Instituted by the risen Christ (Mt. 28:19)

Carried on by the apostles and early disciples:

- Apostles and disciples (Acts 2:38, 41)
- Philip (Acts 8:12-13, 36, 38; v. 37 not in Greek)
- Ananias (Acts 9:18; 22:16)
- Peter and perhaps other disciples (Acts 10:47-48)
- Paul (Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Cor 1:14, 16)

General practice of the church:

All the verses above

Cf. other verses, e.g., 1 Cor 1:13 (assumes they were baptized)

1 Cor 1:13, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?”