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# THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

*by Rev Professor J.C. O'Neill*

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If we had only the Gospel of John and could trust its evidence implicitly, we would answer the question about the origins of Christian baptism simply thus. The Jews expected that the prelude to the time when the Messiah would reign in triumph would be marked by the appearance of 'a Baptist'. This 'Baptist' would be either the Messiah himself or a second Elijah or the prophet (1.25). John rejected these specific designations and said he saw himself as 'A voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord' (1.19-23). Perhaps he believed he was an angelic messenger incarnate; that is a tradition of interpretation that Origen knew (Comm in Joh ii.31 (25) GCS 10.189-90: prayer of Joseph).

Jesus was probably baptized by John; the most natural interpretation of the saying that John saw the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and abiding on him is that this occurred at baptism.

Jesus himself was a Baptist (3.22; 4.1) and his disciples also baptised, in this presumably following the example of John the Baptist's disciples. The statement in John 4.2 that Jesus himself did not baptize but his disciples did probably means what the Syriac Sinaiticus makes it mean: Jesus himself was not the only one who baptized but his disciples did also. The statement seems to be a blunt negative (not this but that), but we know the common idiom found in the Old Testament and other Jewish writings by which this expression conveys the idea: not only this but that (e.g. Gen 45.8). The Syriac translator was familiar with the idiom and translated accordingly.

Against John we have to set the massive silence of the Synoptics; none of them mentions any baptizing by Jesus or his disciples. Matthew ends with the command of the risen Lord to baptize, while Luke-Acts first mentions Christian baptism at Pentecost, in Peter's speech. Presumably large numbers of those who heard Jesus had been baptized by John and John's disciples, but

whether Jesus and the disciples baptized during the ministry of Jesus we are not told. Crowds are fed, not baptized.

Nevertheless the evidence of Paul in 1 Corinthians seems to support John's assertion that Jesus baptized. The people who say 'I am of Paul, I of Apollos, I of Cephas' were probably baptized by Paul and Apollos and Cephas or by their followers. (Paul thanks God he only baptized Crispus and Gaius, giving the least possible occasion for founding a sect or sub group.) The natural conclusion would be that those who said 'I am of Christ' had been baptized by Jesus Christ himself. Paul simply reminds his readers that Christ bears a privileged position as a Baptist because it was Christ who was crucified for those who were baptized, and even though they were baptized by Paul or Apollos or Cephas they were baptized in the name of Christ.

But if Jesus baptized, surely we should expect to find evidence in the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus told his disciples to baptize?

The argument from silence is notoriously tricky. For example, Colin Hickling has recently argued that although Paul himself 'almost certainly...takes it for granted that all those to whom he writes have been baptized' (250), 'the balance of probability weighs ... against [his]... having been baptized' himself (257-9). Hickling's reason for saying this is that Paul surely would have mentioned his baptism, when speaking on oath about his 'total independence, as a Christian, from any Christian predecessor or contemporary': 'receiving baptism is, after all, *receiving* something' (258). I wonder. Would not someone who assumed all Christians were baptized have had to explain the reason he was not baptized, if that were the case? Are we entitled to brush aside the report that Ananias baptized him (Acts 9.18; 22.16), and would his baptism by Ananias have at all weakened his case for independence in the first chapter of Galatians?

The lack of any explicit reference to baptism in the mission charge to the disciples is nevertheless extraordinary, if it were indeed assumed that they would baptize. The mysterious command to wipe off the dust from their feet as they left cities that did not accept the message made me wonder if the dust needed wiping off because the missionaries had not been able to stand in any water in that place in

order to baptize families that received them with fear and joy as ambassadors of the coming messianic kingdom (Matt 10.14; Mark 6.11; Luke 9.5)

Perhaps Matt 28.28 is another small tell-tale indication that the disciples had previously baptized before Jesus' death. If preaching to 'all nations' means preaching to the Gentiles and baptizing them, that would imply the disciples had already baptized Jews and would presumably continue to do so.

It might be objected that my view assumes that people who came to believe that Jesus was Messiah could have been active in their new allegiance on the strength of John the Baptist's baptism; some of the apostles seem to have been baptized by John and then, without further ado, to have become disciples of another Baptist, Jesus.

That certainly fits the account of Apollos at the end of Acts 19, he had been baptized by John the Baptist and preached Jesus; all he needed was a little more instruction before becoming an accredited missionary. However, it does not fit the account of the twelve disciples Paul is reported as meeting in Ephesus who had received John's baptism but who did not know about Jesus and who had not received the Spirit. They were baptized and had hands laid on for the reception of the Spirit (Acts 19.1-6). This is a difficult passage on any showing. My only suggestion is to conjecture that a scribe who wanted to deepen the contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist changed the word ἐπίστευσαν in Acts 19.5 to ἐβαπτίσθησαν. If my conjecture is right, the original text says that the twelve had not heard that the Holy Spirit foretold by John had been given (see the reading of D in 19.2), and had not heard John speak of Jesus. When they heard about the giving of the Spirit and about the identity of the one who John had preached was to come they believed and Paul laid his hands upon them so that they received the Spirit.

To those who say, John the Evangelist made up the idea that Jesus baptized in order to demonstrate to the later followers of John the Baptist that Jesus did what their master did and did it more successfully, I ask in return: Would it not have been more effective to say that John the Baptist was inferior to Jesus because he baptized foretelling Jesus, a Jesus who did not have to baptize foretelling anyone?

To those who say that John's Gospel reports that Jesus baptized for a time, when he was John the Baptist's disciple, but then he stopped, I ask. How could the tradition remain silent about the reason for the *volte face*? (This is quite as good an argument from silence as I have been concerned to rebut.)

The question of whether or not Jesus baptized is of secondary importance. The question for us is what went before Jesus and John, not just what went before historically in the way of forerunners (if, indeed, there were any) but what went before in the way of expectations. Here John gives us a valuable clue in his list of the typological significance John's questioners thought would attach to anyone who appeared as a Baptist, a baptizer. A Baptist would be the Messiah, Elijah or the prophet. John himself allowed for another possibility, that a Baptist would be a Voice Crying in the Wilderness.

The reference to the prophet is particularly interesting. I presume the reference is to 'a prophet like unto me' of Moses' speech in Deut 18.15.20 referred to in Acts 3.22, 7.37. But is not this just the typological parallel Paul seems to know when he writes in 1 Cor 10.1-2 that our fathers were all under the cloud and they all went through the sea and they were all baptized 'into Moses' in the cloud and in the sea? The idea of passing through the sea occurs in another New Testament passage referring to baptism, in 1 Peter 3.20b-21a. David Cook has shown that we should translate something like this: the forbearance of God was waiting expectantly in the days of Noah, while an ark was being prepared "into which a few, that is eight persons, came safely through water" (77). Cook refers us to the rabbinic tradition concerning Gen 7.7. 'R. Johanan said: [Noah] lacked faith; had not the water reached his ankles he would not have entered the Ark' (Bereshith Rabbah, ed Wünsche, Leipzig 1880; Midrash Rabbah ed Freedman and Simon, London 1939, i.252-3). We remember that baptism in the early church was by affusion, the candidates standing in water up to the ankles (von Campenhausen). Compare the passage in the Shepherd of Hermas which talks of the moat that surrounds the heavenly tower. The Shepherd asked the Lady, 'Why has the tower been built on the water, Lady?' She answers, 'Hear, then, why the tower has been built upon water'. It is 'because your life was saved and shall be saved through water (διὰ ὕδατος)', that is, presumably by the one

who is saved going to the tower through water as Noah went to the ark through water (Hermas, Vis 3.3.5). Compare the enigmatic references to being saved 'through water' in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (T.Asher 7.3).

There is a further allusion to baptism that in one vivid flash lights up a whole set of ideas connected with the prophetic sign. When Jesus is asked for chief seats at the right hand and the left, he replies (as reported in Mark 10.38) in the enigmatic words, 'Can you drink the cup that I am drinking or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' There is a similar word in Luke 12.50: 'I have a baptism with which to be baptized and how I am constrained until it is accomplished'. He can assume that baptism is connected with death. More than that. He assumes that the baptized escape death because the Baptist suffers a real death. Can that assumption have been current at the time of Jesus, or are we to believe that this is a creation of later theologians who have provided Jesus with a saying that embodies the idea that baptism is a symbol of death with its counterpart in the real death of the one in whose name believers are baptized? The difficulty in the theory that these two verses are the creation of theologians is that they simply assume that the noun 'baptism' and the verb 'to baptize' refer to martyrdom rather than seek to create a new significance for a rite already well known through the activity of John the Baptist.

The sayings presuppose that the baptism by a Baptist of those who do not have to die ties the baptized to the baptism of a figure whose baptism consists of dying. The same phenomenon meets us in Paul. Paul does not speak as a theologian who wants to create a new connection between a well known rite (baptism) and a hitherto unconnected fact. He assumes that the connection between baptism in the name of Christ and Christ's death is old and fundamental: 'Or are you ignorant of the fact that those of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death?' (Rom 6.3).

Were there any supposed Baptists before John?

There are plenty of references in Jewish literature of our period to lustrations and religious washings. Josephus as a young man became a zealot (ζηλωτής), a devoted disciple, of Bannus who lived in the desert, wore clothes made from leaves and bark, lived on wild vegetation, and bathed himself in cold water day and night for

purity's sake (Vita 11). Presumably Josephus bathed himself as did his master, yet he never suggests that Bannus was a Baptist who baptized others. Similarly, the Sibylline Oracles 4.162-170 speak of the need for repentance: 'Abandon daggers and groanings, murders and outrages, and wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers.' Perhaps we have here a transferred epithet, meaning wash your bodies perpetually in rivers. In any case SibOr 3.591-3 seems to speak of continual acts of self-purification; the righteous are 'always sanctifying their flesh with water'.

E.P. Sanders has reminded us of the prevalence of stepped pools for immersion cut into the bedrock of Palestinian houses (222-229). These ritual baths were not for a Baptist to use in order to baptize others; they are baths into which those seeking purification immersed themselves. Self-immersion has nothing much to do with the origins of baptism, for baptism needs a Baptist. That is the reason why proselyte purification is unlikely to have anything to do with the origins of Christian baptism, for proselytes immerse themselves. Two (or three) teachers were present as witnesses for the men, but there is no baptism involved. Furthermore, proselyte baptism was only for Gentiles (Lohfink 41-2).

There is no doubt that a member of the community described in 1QS took part in daily acts of self-purification (1QS 3.4-7; Josephus BJ 2.129,138); archaeological work has uncovered stepped cisterns far too numerous for ordinary drinking and washing, and that confirms the evidence in documents belonging to the community and in reports of well-informed outsiders like Josephus. But did a Baptist baptize a new member of the community at the point when he was allowed to share the waters? This is much disputed, but the reference to sprinkling with lustral water in 1QS 3.9 at least raises the possibility that someone, a Baptist or the disciple of a Baptist, first sprinkled the new member before that member entered the flowing water in the cistern for the first time. The unexpected verb "to sprinkle" (*nzh*) is used in the next column of the Manual of Discipline (1QS 4.21). The passage speaks of how God has set an end to the existence of perversity which at the time of visitation he will destroy for ever. Truth will arise, and God will cleanse by his truth all wicked works of men. This cleansing will be by the Spirit of Holiness and God 'will sprinkle over them the Spirit of Truth as

lustral water'. These are those chosen by God to share all the glory of the Man (presumably the second Adam) (1QS 4.18-23).

Now here is a significant fact. The verb 'to sprinkle' used here (*nzh*) is the verb used in the Servant Song that begins at the end of Isaiah 52 (Isa 52.15): 'So shall he sprinkle many nations' - a translation not now favoured because so unexpected with an object 'nations', but one which the Qumran sectaries must have found possible, since they used the verb of lustrations with water. The idea of sprinkling to cleanse is found elsewhere, of course (Ezek 36.25; 43.18), but the verb of the Scrolls is the verb used of a Baptist who will suffer for the sins of others.

Another tiny scrap of evidence perhaps supports this possibility. In the Damascus Document (CD [msB] 19.5-14) there is a description of the poor of the flock who will be saved at the time of visitation when the Messiah of Aaron and Israel comes. A mark shall have been put on the forehead of those who sigh and groan and they will be spared. That is, of course, a citation of Ezekiel 9.4, the passage about the man in linen with an inkhorn at his side. In Ezekiel the old, the young, maidens, little children and women are specifically said to be marked with this saving sign (Ezek 9.6). The community of the Damascus Document also consisted of old and young, married and children. Even manservants and maidservants are said to have been brought within the covenant of Abraham by the master (CD 12.10-11). When children reach the age of enrolment (which must be something different from being a member of the covenant) they swear an oath of the covenant, which looks like the confirmation of something that had already been done for them. It is a short step to conjecture that the sign of the covenant was sprinkling, or marking with water.

The founder of the covenant was said to have dug a well (CD 19.34) and is compared to a fountain of life in whom the covenanters believed (1QH 8.4,7,13,16; 18.10). The possibility is that he was a Baptist whose successors in leadership of the married and celibate communities he founded continued the practice of baptizing.

I have been arguing that there was a generally shared belief that in God's good time Baptists would come who would perform baptism to prepare in some way for the coming of the Kingdom of

God. I have tentatively suggested that two sayings of Jesus might lead us to conclude that there was a belief that the Baptist had to die.

Let us gather up the scattered observations about baptism and ask whether we cannot imagine a set of interpretations of Old Testament passages that would underpin the expectations that seem to be part and parcel of popular religion at the time of Jesus. How did they read scripture so as to get the idea that a Baptist would come, or several Baptists would come to prepare people to enter the Kingdom of God? Is there any evidence they read any of these passages as requiring the death of the Baptist?

If our reading of 1 Peter is right, some interpreted the entering of the ark as baptism: Noah and his family waded through the water to the ark and were saved by passing through the water of destruction. According to one of our earliest descriptions of baptism, in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, baptism was administered by deacons standing in the water with the people to be baptized and pouring water over their head three times. Could the rain that was falling as Noah and his family waded to the ark be one origin of this practice? There is no mention of Noah as baptist - here God is the Baptist - and no particular emphasis on Noah's death: he had 350 years to go after he left the ark. We should perhaps note that Philo takes Noah's drunkenness and nakedness as a type of the soul's escape from the body as from a tomb (Qu. in Gen 2.69, end).

The reference to Moses in 1 Cor 10 is much more promising for our quest. Again we have the passing through water - admittedly dry-shod - and the covering with a cloud, which perhaps represented in this typology the baptism itself. The fathers were baptized 'into' Moses as Christians were later said to be baptized 'into' Christ (Rom 6.3; Gal 3.27). This at least means by the authority of Moses and may mean into allegiance to Moses; we recall that the Galatians passage goes on to say that those baptized into Christ have put on Christ, presumably put on the armour of Christ. Dr Hayman has drawn my attention to the painting on the west wall of the synagogue at Dura which shows the Israelites led by Moses into the Red Sea clothed in dirty garments and coming out of the Red Sea clothed in white garments such as Christians adopted after their baptism.

This baptism in the Red Sea was made possible by a death, the death of the Lamb. Despite Jeremiah's doubts, it seems likely

that the Lamb as a symbol of the Messiah was already established in Judaism. We recall that those who have got the victory over the beast and his mark (did the beast have a form of baptism too?) stand on a sea of glass mingled with fire and sing the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb (Rev 15.3). The sea of water they passed through enables them to stand on the sea of fire. But did Moses, the prototype of the prophet who was to come, die? Our narrative says that he died before the people crossed Jordan and entered the promised land (Joshua 1), but is there any emphasis on his death? Alison Jack has reminded us of the passage Goodenough drew attention to. This passage, in commenting on Exodus 33.20,23, Moses' unique vision of God, describes Moses' vision as a sort of death in the midst of life: 'If anyone should die to this mortal life, that person will live, receiving the immortal life; perhaps that person will see what was never before seen' (Harris 72). And we remember that Moses was forbidden to enter the promised land because he did not glorify God at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 27.12-14; 20.1-13). Perhaps his death was to bear the sin of the people who forgot their baptism at the Red Sea.

Joshua's crossing of the Jordan appears prominently in our New Testament traditions because John the Baptist deliberately chose Jordan for his baptisms. Joshua's death is not important, but we recall that Elijah, the prophet who was expected to point forward to a second Elijah, passed through Jordan to his death, carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot. We note also that Jesus' name was Joshua.

Finally, the suffering servant of Isa 53 is the one who will sprinkle many nations (Isa 52.15), and the verb to sprinkle is the verb used in the Manual of Discipline to mark the first entry of a new member into the waters of purification.

I am surprised by the richness of the possible allusions to the Old Testament we can find if we allow ourselves to imagine that a common theology of baptism was alive at the time that John the Baptist first began to baptize and which was continued direct over into the early church. But much is conjecture. I plead that unless we try to imagine what such a set of beliefs would have been like and how they would have been based on scripture, we cannot advance further in discovering what people thought at the time of Jesus. If the growing knowledge we have of Jewish beliefs at this time shows

my imaginings to be wrong, I shall be content: that at least will have closed off one avenue. The question, Why did the early church begin as a matter of course to baptize? will still remain to be solved.

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