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The Seal of the Holy Spirit and Baptism

THE word *seal* occurs thrice in the Pauline epistles (Eph. 1.13 and 4.30, and 2 Cor. 1.22) and it is regarded as almost axiomatic by the majority of scholars that the apostle refers in these texts to baptism. The seal of the Spirit, if not actually identified with baptism, is at least regarded as coextensive with it, representing the inward reality or "spiritual grace" of which the sacrament is the external sign. Such a view seems to be advocated by scholars of all persuasions,¹ and has been defended recently from the Baptist standpoint by Dr. Beasley-Murray.² The purpose of the present article is to re-examine these texts and to suggest that their connection with water baptism is by no means so certain as is usually supposed.

The foundation of the view that the *seal* of the Holy Spirit refers to baptism would quite clearly seem to be the usage of the term in the patristic writings. According to G. W. H. Lampe *sphragis* is uniformly used of baptism in the post-canonical writings, and he regards this as a faithful reflection of the meaning of the term in the N.T. The same argument is used by Beasley-Murray.³ This appeal to patristic usage however is very far from being satisfactory, and it is noteworthy that the simple equation of the seal with baptism in the post-apostolic writings has not gone unchallenged. L. S. Thornton has in fact subjected Lampe's thesis to penetrating criticism, and has come to quite opposite conclusions with regard to the meaning of the *seal*.⁴ It may be argued therefore that to interpret the N.T. in the light of patristic writings can hardly be conclusive. And, indeed, even if it were demonstrable that *seal* invariably indicated baptism in the post-N.T. era, this would scarcely prove that this was so in the N.T. itself. Some of the older commentators were not slow to point this out. Salmond, while agreeing that the Greek Fathers used *seal* as a baptismal term nevertheless stated categorically that there "is no instance of this in the N.T."⁵ T. K. Abbott also felt that a reference to baptism in the Pauline texts would be too obscure.⁶

Various other reasons have been advanced for identifying the *seal* with baptism. It is the opinion of Beasley-Murray, for example, that the aorist tenses used by Paul indicate a specific moment in the past, at the outset of the Christian life and this would most naturally be the occasion of baptism.⁷ With the first of these statements none would disagree; it is however going far beyond the evidence to conclude from this that the sacrament of baptism is in view. The past event could equally well have been the converts' acceptance of Paul's preaching or even the laying on of hands—our text does not specify what, if any, external act accompanied the seal

of the Spirit.⁸ It is surely even less satisfactory for Dr. Beasley-Murray to draw a parallel between the *seal* and the formula "in the Name."⁹ Even if this could be adequately sustained, it is difficult to see how this fact in itself would lead us to identify the seal with baptism. The most it would demonstrate would be that a certain idea—that of ownership—was common to both.¹⁰ It is furthermore extremely doubtful whether the formula in question has any specific reference to baptism at all.¹¹

Paedobaptists sometimes advance the argument that baptism had a similar position under the N.T. dispensation as circumcision under the Old. This view is expressed by Cullmann, who thus transfers the *seal* imagery from circumcision (in Rom. 4.11) to baptism in the texts under discussion. It would seem probable indeed that *seal* was used as a designation for circumcision in N.T. times,¹² and in this case Paul's use of the idea would reflect a much wider usage. It may be, furthermore, that a certain relationship between baptism and circumcision is postulated even in the N.T. itself (Col. 2.11). But this does not of course imply that all of the imagery of the O.T. covenant sign was transferred to baptism. Circumcision was outward, in the flesh, whereas it is clear that the seal of the Spirit was not outward at all, but something rather more experiential. The fact, furthermore, that the apostle can use the word in quite different contexts (1 Cor. 9.22; Rom. 15.28) should surely cause us to hesitate before regarding it as a *terminus technicus*. It would be somewhat precarious to base so important an identification upon one isolated text (Rom. 4.11). Héring no doubt reflects a more balanced view when he points out that, although *seal* may possibly have meant circumcision to the Jew, this cannot be taken as proof either that baptism replaced circumcision in N.T. thought, or that *sphragis* always bears a technical sense.¹³

An examination of Eph. 1. 13-14 reveals that Paul uses *seal* as part of a much wider complex of terms. He characterizes the Spirit here also as "the Spirit of Promise." This word is used again in connection with the Spirit in Gal. 3.14, where the gift is bestowed as a result of the redeeming death of Christ. The only other places where it is used in the N.T. concerning the coming of the Spirit are in the post-resurrection words of Jesus (Lk. 24.49, Acts 1.4) and in Peter's speech at Pentecost (Acts 2.39). It is likely therefore that Paul's use of the word refers back to the Lord's original promise.¹⁴ In v. 14 Paul adds a further term *arrabon* (earnest),¹⁵ which seems to imply that the Spirit represents a kind of foretaste of the Christian's future salvation (compare 2 Cor. 1.22, where it is again conjoined with the seal, and 2 Cor. 5.5). Now it is difficult to associate either of these terms with the sacrament of baptism. The *promise* of the Spirit referred primarily to the effusion of the Spirit at Pentecost, accompanied by the charismatic gift of glossolalia. Here, in the nature of the case, baptism is ruled out. It is possible that the *earnest* also has charismatic associations. As many commentators

point out, the word *first-fruit* (*aparche*) is used in Rom. 8.23 in the same sense as *earnest* is in the Ephesian and Corinthian epistles. According to Sanday and Headlam it is likely that this word implies the presence of the charismatic gifts,¹⁷ and if this is so *earnest* may well indicate something similar. In this case the apostle's point will be that it is the possession of the charismatic gifts, rather than the fact of having undergone baptism, that constitutes the Christian's guarantee of future salvation.

If this exegesis can be sustained it leads to interesting conclusions. The *seal*, *promise*, *earnest* and *first-fruits* of the Spirit will not in fact refer to baptism at all, but rather to the charismatic effusion of the Spirit upon the early Christian communities. From what we can gather from the Acts such charismatic gifts were not connected with baptism, but usually came after it (8.12-17; 19.1-6) but sometimes (in exceptional cases?) before (10.44-48 and perhaps 9.17-18 cp. 1 Cor. 14.18) The *seal* therefore will be a charismatic effusion of the Spirit, connected no doubt with the whole process of Christian initiation, but not to be identified with baptism as such.

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NOTES

¹ e.g. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit, a study in the doctrine of baptism and confirmation in the New Testament and in the Fathers* (1951), Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Eng. Trans. 1950). Scholars in the Reformed tradition have usually followed Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV xiv 3) in applying the term *seal* to baptism, although such usage would not perhaps claim to be based directly upon the texts under discussion.

² *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962); so also R. E. O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (1960). The identification is accepted in most of the European commentaries on the epistles in question.

³ Cp. also Bultmann, *The Theology of the New Testament* vol. i, p. 137 (Eng. Trans. 1952). Bultmann refers especially to those books of somewhat dubious parentage, 2 *Clement* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

⁴ *Confirmation, its place in the baptismal mystery* (1954) pp. 188ff. Dix has a similar view. For a full discussion of the use of *seal* in the post-N.T. writings see J. Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Eng. Trans. 1960) pp. 54-69.

⁵ *Ephesians in the Expositor's Greek Testament* (1903) p. 268.

⁶ *The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians* (I.C.C. 1897) p. 22. Other scholars who have adopted a similar view include Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (1877) vol. II, p. 226, Heitmueller *sphragis* in *Neutestamentliche Studien für G. Heinrici* (Leipzig 1914) p. 50, H. G. Marsh *The Origin and Significance of New Testament Baptism* (1941) p. 152 and P. W. Evans "Sealing as a term for Baptism" (*Baptist Quarterly*, XVI, pp. 171ff.).

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁸ P. W. Evans remarked: "That Paul could think of the believer's reception of the Holy Spirit as occurring at a definite point of time does not establish the coincidence of that reception with the moment of baptism" (*op. cit.*, p. 171).

⁹ Heitmueller had attempted to make the same point in his *In Nomen Jesu* (1903).

¹⁰ For the meaning of the term *seal* see Lampe's work and the article by Heitmueller cited above, and also F. Doelger, *Sphragis* (Paderborn 1911).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 79. Erbery explained that this interpretation was his own independent idea although this was shared by Thomas Brightman and Peter Sterry.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶¹ "The woman preacher," *Testimony*, 148.

⁶² *Ibid.*, and pp. 126, 133.

⁶³ "The children of the west," *Testimony*, 133. Cp. 136. In *Apocrypha*, London 1652, 7, he noted "how all formes stand fast as they were from the beginning in other Nations but in this one falls after another, as if nothing should stand on English earth, but pure Spirit, but the Lord himself." In a comment on Isaiah 24.20 in *The Welsh Curate*, *op. cit.*, 14, Erbery spoke of the earth having "reeled from Popery to Prelacy, from Prelacy to Presbytery, from Presbytery to Independency, and now the whole earth, in England, Scotland, and Ireland, is reeling from Independency, to Anabaptisme; as if the world were running into its first Chaos, and to be covered againe with waters."

⁶⁴ "The children of the west," *Testimony*, 140.

⁶⁵ "The idol pastor," *Testimony*, 152f.

⁶⁶ "The wretched people," *Testimony*, 163.

⁶⁷ "A call to the churches," *Testimony*, 229.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶⁹ *The Welsh Curate*, *op. cit.*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Jack Pudding*, London 1654, 5.

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(Concluded from p. 113)

¹¹ The "Name" is of course a common Hebraism. In the book of Acts only 5 of the 30 or so occurrences of the phrase "in the Name" and its variations are connected with baptism. In the Pauline epistles there are but two possible references to baptism (1 Cor. 1.10-13 and 6.11), whereas the phrase is often used in quite different contexts (e.g. Eph. 5.20, Col. 3.17, 2 Thess. 3.6).

¹² See the evidence cited by Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Midrash und Talmud* (Munich 1922-28). Richardson, *Introduction to the Theology of the NT*. (1958), p. 352, regards this as the real origin of the word. Heitmueller (*art. cit.*, p. 43) on the other hand regards the rabbinic evidence in favour of the application of seal to circumcision as both too slight and too late.

¹³ *La Seconde Epître aux Corinthiens* (Paris, 1958), p. 21, note.

¹⁴ so G. S. Duncan, *Galatians* (Moffatt Commentary, 1934), p. 103.

¹⁵ On the meaning of this interesting term see especially Behm, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart 1933ff.), vol. I, p. 474, and Strack-Billerbeck *op. cit.*, III, p. 495.

¹⁶ So Behm *op. cit.*, Lietzmann, Barrett, Vincent Taylor, P. E. Hughes and also Bultmann *Existence and Faith* (Eng. Trans. 1961), p. 249.

¹⁷ *Romans* (I.C.C., 1902), p. 209.

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