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Baptised into Moses— Baptised into Christ: A Study in Doctrinal Development

Despite much that has been written on the topic some of the problems surrounding the origins of Christian baptism and of the interpretations attached to it in the early church remain unclear. The librarian at Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary here offers some helpful comment on the vexed question of the association of baptism with dying and rising with Christ.

It is generally assumed by New Testament scholars that Paul's statement in Romans 6:3—'Are you unaware that all of you who have been baptised into Christ Jesus have been baptised into his death'—reflects Paul's longstanding teaching on the subject, a teaching which had also spread to non-Pauline churches. 'Are you unaware?', it is argued, is used by Paul to refer to truths which his readers are expected to know. There are some indications, however, that the relationship between baptism and dying-rising with Christ was not common knowledge when Paul wrote to Rome from Corinth in AD 44 or 56.¹

Let us begin by looking at Paul's use of *agnoeite* (are you unaware?) and its clear parallel *ouk oidate* (do you not know?). The former appears in Paul only in Romans 6:3; 7:1, while the latter is found in Romans 6:16; 11:12; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 5:6; 6:2,3,9,15,16,19; 9:13,24. Taking *agnoeite*, it would appear that from the only other reference—Romans 7:1—we would have to admit that Paul's readers could reasonably be expected to know that death ends the authority of the law. But, after adding *ouk oidate*, our certainty regarding Paul's use of such expressions diminishes. While most references describe obvious common knowledge (Romans 6:16; 11:2; 1 Corinthians 5:6; 6:9,15,16; 9:13,24), the facts that believers are God's or the Holy Spirit's

¹ For support of this idea see, for example, R. Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul* (New York: Herder, 1964), p. 33f.; and A. J. M. Wedderburn, 'Hellenistic Christian Traditions in Romans 6?' *New Testament Studies* 29 (July 1983), 337-355.

temple (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19), and that believers will judge the world and angels (1 Corinthians 6:2,3) are not elsewhere taught in Paul and could constitute very new information indeed.

Rather than arguing that Paul always used such expressions for information which believers already knew, it might be fairer to say that, while common knowledge is usually being indicated, Paul occasionally used this terminology to introduce truth which he had less hope that his readers actually possessed in their pool of knowledge. In other words, Paul's use of *agnoeite* or *ouk oidate* does not conclusively demand that his readers had had formal teaching on the subject, merely that he hoped they had some inkling of what he was telling them and, if not, that they would learn it now.²

To leave the possibility open that Paul was imparting new information in Romans 6:3 does not, of course, prove that the link between baptism and death with Christ was not a long-standing position in Paul's theology. Let us look at further indications.

When we search the Pauline epistles written prior to Romans, we look in vain for a dying-rising with Christ theme in explicit connection with baptism. The pre-Romans references to baptism number nine: 1 Corinthians 1:13,14,15,16,17; 10:2; 12:13; 15:29; Galatians 3:27, though these include only five actual passages. From Romans on, there are only four references to baptism: Romans 6:3,4; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12, in three passages. The pre-Romans references have no clear association stated between baptism and death-resurrection with Christ, while two of the three Romans or later passages state such an association.

An argument from silence alone is always tenuous, especially when the total number of passages is so small. We could argue as easily that the pre-Romans lack of dying-rising terminology linked to baptism is simply due to the fact that the circumstances did not demand that Paul bring out this aspect of the rite. Let us investigate the pre-Romans silence of Paul.

In the first epistle in which Paul mentions baptism—Galatians

² The argument of Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and rising with Christ* (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1966), p. 12–14, that 'Do you not know' in Romans 6:3 is parallel to 'Since we know' in 6:6, adds little if anything to the argument in favour of prior knowledge among the Roman believers. For one thing, by the time the readers read 6:6, they do know, since Paul has told them in 6:3. Further, Romans 6:6 does not specifically link *baptism* to death with Christ, but simply refers to the latter, a theme which Paul has expounded since Galatians 2:20. It is our argument that 6:3 and 6:6 are not parallel as Tannehill suggests. Simply to know that we are crucified with Christ is not the same thing as connecting that fact with the baptismal rite.

3:27—the context is clearly different from Romans 6. The Galatian context emphasizes the unity of Jew and Gentile through common allegiance to Christ. Paul thus stresses a baptism-as-allegiance theme which, as we shall argue, was a common understanding of the rite. There was no apparent reason for Paul in this context to speak of baptism in terms of death and resurrection with Christ.

Yet there is another passage in Galatians which contains most of the elements of Romans 6:1ff. *without* an explicit reference to baptism at all. Galatians 2:17–21 speaks of sin as alien to Christ, of the necessity of staying outside the realm of justification by law (a realm where sin abounds) and of the Christian experience as crucifixion and resurrection with Christ. Here there would be every reason for Paul to add a reference to baptism to emphasize the decisiveness of conversion, especially since the dying-rising theme has already been introduced. But he does not do so.

1 Corinthians contains more references to baptism than any other Pauline book. The first passage—1 Corinthians 1:10–17—deals with the party spirit in Corinth, which was based on allegiance to human leaders. As part of his argument for unity, Paul contradicts what might have been a misunderstanding in Corinth: Christian baptism does not create allegiance to the baptizer but is a declaration of allegiance to Christ.

Here a dying-rising theme linked to baptism would have added great power to Paul's argument. If he could have shown that death and resurrection with the one to whom allegiance was given was integral to baptism, allegiance to the baptizer would have been relegated to second place. Only Christ, after all, could claim a real death and resurrection.

So far we have seen two arguments from silence. First, a link between baptism and crucifixion-resurrection is not made explicit in Paul before the writing of Romans. Second, pre-Romans contexts in which a death-resurrection connection to baptism would have aided the argument do not contain such a connection.

We must now turn to Paul's curious use of the phrase 'baptised into Moses' in 1 Corinthians 10:2. In context, Paul is attempting to show certain experiences of the Old Testament wilderness wanderings as typological of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The argument is that, if the Old Testament people of God experienced forms of these rites and were given the privilege of being called God's people, yet fell, the Corinthian believers dare not be over-confident of their position.

The broader situation of Corinth must be introduced at this

point if the potential significance of 'baptised into Moses' is to be understood. Corinth was a city familiar with many religions, including several types of mystery religions. The subject of the mysteries is, to be sure, a glorious confusion in the scholarly world. Mystery rites in the ancient world were secret, and it appears that most initiates carried their secret with them into the grave. Yet some obvious trends do show themselves. As many scholars have pointed out, the mysteries arose as popular movements to counter state religions which gave little promise for real spiritual guidance in this life, let alone the next. The Key to these varied secretive cults was, as Gardner has pointed out, a desire for 'salvation',³ that is, personal attachment to a saving god. While fertility and the change of seasons are the most likely sources of the 'death of the god' theme in the mysteries, there does appear to be a common notion that the risen mystery god was able to guide his followers in the afterlife. The god Dionysus, having associations with Delphi, across the gulf from Corinth, was clearly associated with hope for the afterlife.⁴

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that death and resurrection with Christ actually had long been foundational to baptism in the thought of Paul, as Cullmann has proposed.⁵ In the beginning 1 Corinthians 10, Paul wishes to warn his readers of the apostasy of Israel under Moses and thus describes Israel's experience in the terminology of New Testament church practice—baptism and the Lord's Supper. How are we to view this? The Lord's Supper theme is relatively easy to understand in this context, since it could be argued that the fellowship of the meal creates solidarity within the group and between group and leader. Paul, in fact, makes this explicit later in the same chapter (10:14–22). How does 'baptised into Moses' fit the context if baptism is a death and resurrection in its foundational sense? The answer must surely be that death and resurrection simply do not play any part at all, for Moses, unless some strange line of thinking should force such an idea, did not die and rise again. The point of baptism in this context is the adherence of the people to Moses and thus to God, along with the benefits which should have resulted from such a union.

³ P. Gardner, 'Mysteries (Greek, Phrygian, etc.)' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IX, 81.

⁴ See the description of K. Prümm, 'Mystery Religions, Greco-Oriental' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. X, 160–162; for related mysteries at nearby Isthmia see Oscar Broneer, 'Paul and the Pagan Cults at Isthmia' *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971), 169–187.

⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1950), 9–22.

But let us now imagine a new believer in the church at Corinth, a man named Demetrius, who had once been initiated into the Dionysus mystery cult at Delphi. In the mystery he was promised immortality and had taken part in the seasonal rites to awaken the god. In Christianity he has discovered the strange theme of resurrection. He has recognized that Christ is alive forever and is more powerful, and thus more able, to help him in this life and the life to come, than is Dionysus. Demetrius has been baptised into Christ Jesus and has understood this to picture death with Christ and resurrection to new life. Some of the parallels between Christ and Dionysus have troubled him, but there is no real comparison between a vegetation god who must be awakened regularly and the Son of God who lives forever.

An epistle arrives from Paul, and within it lies the unusual expression 'baptised into Moses'. Demetrius had known of Moses long before he heard of Christianity because Moses, as recipient of the divine name, has been referred to in awe by practitioners of the mysteries.⁶ 'Baptised into Moses'—what can this mean? The term 'baptised into' is not common. In fact, the only people who use such terminology are Christians. And, when they use it, they refer to someone dying and rising with Christ. Could Paul be arguing that the Old Testament saints were baptised into Moses as Christians are baptised into Christ? Moses did not die and rise again, though . . . Demetrius ponders. When he led the people into the divided waters in the Red Sea, was that not entry into a sort of death? Beyond this, the deeds of Moses are told by the mysteries—how Moses received the name of God and taught the chosen people the secret things of God. Moses, in fact, is much more like a mystery god than he is like anything else. Could Paul be saying that, before Christ there was the mystery and that God was the source of the mystery? If God was the source of both, could both be true?⁷

Let us leave our fictional Demetrius in his bewilderment for a moment and reflect on the meaning of 1 Corinthians 10. We have seen that death and resurrection make no obvious sense in the

⁶ See John G. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 134–161 for a careful summary of the influence of Moses on the magic of this era.

⁷ As Wedderburn, 'Hellenistic Christian Traditions . . .' has pointed out, the dying and rising *with* Christ theme is uniquely Pauline and does not really reflect the mystery concept where the god *rescues* the initiate from death. But our Demetrius would be hard-pressed to make the distinction after reading 1 Corinthians 10, since Moses, as the Israelite leader, passed through figurative death *with* his followers in Demetrius' schema, but in so doing he became their savior and initiator into the divine name.

phrase 'baptised into Moses'. The theme of adherence to Moses resulting in potential blessing from God is central to Paul's meaning. Why then did he choose baptism and the Lord's Supper as his typology tools here? The obvious answer is that these rites, especially in the New Testament era, identified believers with one another and with Christ. They were the most visible and tangible statements of the meaning of the church. Thus, in Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 10, as the Israelites had concrete signs of their being God's people (the cloud, the sea, the manna and the water from the rock), yet fell, so God's New Testament people with their own tangible signs (baptism and the Lord's Supper) must beware of the same fate. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs of adherence, not of death and resurrection.

The real issue, however, is this. Would Paul, in the context of Corinth, a city he knew very well, have chanced using 'baptised into Moses' if there was a risk that someone like Demetrius would construe a mystery cult out of his words? Would he have left open the possibility that the people of God, under God's sanction entered into death with Moses, their savior, and were led by him into new life?

It is the contention of this paper that, only if death and resurrection with Christ had not yet been connected thematically with baptism, would Paul have used the expression 'baptised into Moses'. If such a connection had not yet been made, Paul's meaning would simply be that the Israelites adhered themselves to Moses, and thus to God, through a baptism-like act. This would say nothing more than the Old Testament text already implies and would leave no implication that Moses was to be seen as a resurrected saviour leading his people into a better world and imparting to them the mysteries of God. Paul was far too careful a pastor to have allowed for such a false implication. He could use 'baptised into Moses' freely, because he himself had not yet made the connection between baptism and death-resurrection, let alone teaching it to anyone else.

If dying and rising with Christ was *not* foundational to Paul's doctrine of baptism prior to Romans, what was the basic import of the rite? We have already seen traces of the most obvious foundation—allegiance. Baptism as a declaration of allegiance to Christ as head and master is certainly the main element in Galatians 3:27. In 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, Paul's argument is surely that baptism places the believer's true allegiance in Christ rather than in the human baptiser. In 1 Corinthians 10:1ff., allegiance is the only link between Moses and baptism that makes sense in Paul's use of baptismal terminology.

The foundation of baptism as the declaration of allegiance to Christ has strong roots in the Gospels where baptism, whether performed by John or Jesus, created disciples (see, for example, the strong rabbi-disciple language of Luke 3:7-13, and the dispute of John 3:22-30 which is only explained adequately when it is seen that the number of baptisms performed by each party indicated the number of disciples that person possessed.) While discipleship terminology virtually disappeared in Paul, the theme of Lord and servant (which Paul uses in Romans 6 just after the references to baptism) easily takes its place.⁸

Even in the first Pauline reference to death and resurrection as a baptismal theme—Romans 6:3f.—the foundational theme is allegiance. Paul must be seen here as embellishing a well-known expression—'baptised into Christ Jesus'—which expressed adherence to Christ, with the fact that this allegiance takes the form of death and resurrection with Christ. The subordinate clause, 'all of you who have been baptised into Christ Jesus', must be taken as the condition or foundation for the new information imparted by the main clause. Paul is saying, in effect, 'Are you unaware that when you declared yourselves loyal servants of Christ by baptism, you were declaring yourselves dead so that Christ could become your life?'

Thus we must argue strongly that baptism was never seen by Paul as demonstrating a change in the life of the believer without regard to a change in allegiance. The foundational meaning of baptism in Paul is a declaration of the acceptance of Christ's lordship. The dying-rising theme, which was added later, certainly after the writing of 1 Corinthians, gave deeper meaning to that allegiance, namely that the believer is connected to Christ because the believer has died with his savior and has received Christ's life in place of his own.

⁸ Paul, of course, had his death and resurrection theme as early as Galatians 2:20. If he did not connect it to baptism before writing Romans, may we have a clue as to his seeming indifference to baptism in 1 Corinthians 1? We must note as well that his baptismal doctrine receives further development in Colossians 2:12, where a link to OT circumcision is added. Ephesians 4:5, by contrast, carries the more traditional sense in a context similar to that of Galatians 3:27. We might paraphrase, 'One Lord, one gospel, one allegiance'.