

Baptisms in the Bible

Our vocabulary item ‘baptism’, and its verb ‘baptize’, are transliterations of the corresponding terms in the Greek New Testament. I am not aware of equivalents in Hebrew, so I will base this study on the NT, including for the baptisms in the OT. Why did the translators into English choose to transliterate rather than translate? Probably because, as with Hebrew, we have no corresponding terms that would serve for a translation. Of course, by now the transliterated terms are part of our vocabulary. I will organize this study of the baptisms under three headings: 1) during the old covenant, 2) during the transition, 3) during the new covenant.

Baptisms during the old covenant

1) In 1 Corinthians 10:2 our versions generally say that the people who departed from Egypt “were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea”. I would prefer ‘by the cloud and by the sea’, but what is the point of the statement? The people were identified with Moses, and that identification translated into dependence and obedience. Without Moses they would not have crossed the sea, and they had to obey ‘blindly’, as it were, no matter how improbable the situation. They were guided and protected by the cloud, but under the authority of Moses. An identification that expresses itself in dependence and obedience might well serve for a definition of Christian baptism, at least in part.

2) Mark wrote for a Roman audience, and in 7:3-4 he explains certain Jewish customs:
“Because the Pharisees, indeed all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they baptize themselves. And there are many other things they have received and hold—baptisms of cups, pitchers, copper vessels and couches.”

‘The tradition of the elders’ was based on the written instructions given by Moses that had to do with purification. That purification was done with water. The idea of purification is not foreign to Christian baptism.

3) Based on extra-biblical information (not in the Bible), we know that a Gentile who converted to Judaism was baptized—it was one of the requirements that he had to fulfill. That baptism was done with water, but there is doubt as to just how it was done. However, it appears that it represented a formal declaration to the effect that the person was changing religion, or way of life. It was a procedure that carried with it significant consequences in both the social and spiritual spheres. We may understand that such a baptism served as a background for John’s baptism—the people were used to the idea.

Baptisms during the transition

1) All four of the Gospels speak of the ministry of John the Baptizer. John began his ministry proclaiming and offering a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins¹ (Mark1:4). Matthew

¹ There are those who squirm at the plain meaning of the Text—John was offering forgiveness of sins. Well, throughout the Old Testament, if you brought an animal offering, you were confessing to being a sinner, and expecting to be forgiven. As forerunner to the Lamb of God, who would provide the ultimate payment for sin, John represented a transition, from the old to the new. Should someone ask, “How could one person pay for the sins of the whole world?”, I offer the following possibility: to pay an infinite debt, would require an infinite person, and Jesus was, and is, an infinite person.

and Mark record that the candidates would confess their sins; of course, it was their sins that they were repenting of. All four of the Gospels record that John was preparing the way of the LORD. John himself affirmed that he baptized with water, but the Text does not clarify how he did it.

2) John baptized Jesus. This was a unique case that did not fit the declared nature of the baptism offered by John. Jesus had no sin; He had nothing to repent of; He did not need pardon. Indeed, John did not like the idea: “I have need to be baptized by You, and You are coming to me?” (Matthew 3:14). In answer Jesus said to him, “Permit it now, because thus it is appropriate for us to fulfill all righteousness”. This response has given rise to a variety of interpretations, but upon reflection, we do not need to interpret it, since it was not a norm or an example to be followed; it was *sui generis*.

3) John 3:22, 26; 4:1 and 2 mention that the disciples of Jesus were baptizing—John 4:2 makes clear that Jesus Himself was not baptizing. The Text does not offer any details about the nature of that baptism. We may imagine that they were following John’s example, helping to prepare the way of the LORD. The absolute lack of detail makes clear that this baptism did not become a norm to be followed. However, if they were indeed using John’s baptism, it continued to be used, here and there, for some time, as Acts 18:25 and 19:3 make clear.

4) In Luke 12:50 Jesus said, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!” When Jesus responded to the ambitious request from James and John, He referred to the same baptism (Matthew 20:22-23, Mark 10:38-39). It appears to refer to suffering within God the Father’s Plan. In His response to James and John He also referred to the ‘cup’, the same one He mentioned in Gethsemane. As for Jesus, this baptism was fulfilled on the cross at Golgotha, which happened before the new covenant. As for James and John, they experienced this baptism later on. If my description of this baptism is correct, then it still exists today (1 Peter 4:19).

Baptisms during the new covenant

1) John the Baptizer said that Jesus would baptize “with Holy spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). There has been no lack of interpretations for this statement, but I would say that the next verse clarifies the intended meaning: “whose winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor and gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” See also Matthew 3:11-12. Now then, the ‘unquenchable fire’ must refer to the Lake of fire and brimstone, the second death, and in that case the ‘chaff’ refers to the lost—it is the lost who will be baptized with fire.¹ In that case, the ‘wheat’ refers to the saved—those who are genuinely saved will have been baptized with Holy Spirit. But just how and when does Jesus baptize us with Holy Spirit? He does it from His position at the Father’s right hand (1 Peter 3:21-22), when we believe into Him. At that point the Holy Spirit begins to indwell us, and He has a good deal to do with our ‘new nature’. I take it that Acts 1:5 refers to this baptism, as does Acts 11:16; it began on the day of Pentecost.

¹ According to 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, the works of the saved will be tried by fire. Although John certainly said “and fire”, both Matthew (according to 80% of the Greek manuscripts) and Mark omit the phrase. Why? I suppose because they were focusing on the present and near future, while the ‘fire’ is part of the final Judgment.

The case of Cornelius deserves its own paragraph. Cornelius really wanted to know God and to please Him—he was serious! So when Peter began to expound, Cornelius hung on his every word. When Peter got to “everyone who believes into Him¹ will receive forgiveness of sins”, Cornelius did! And Jesus baptized him with Holy Spirit. Poor Peter, Jesus got ahead of him, and as he later said in his defense, “who was I to be able to withstand God?” (Acts 11:17). So then Peter said to bring on the water (Acts 10:47)—please notice the order: first Holy Spirit, then water!

I understand Mark 16:16 to refer to this baptism. “The one who believed and was baptized will be saved; but the one who did not believe will be condemned.” In the Text, the verbs ‘believe’ and ‘baptize’ are participles in the past tense—one could render ‘the one having believed and having been baptized’.² There will be no lack of people who were baptized with water in Hell; baptism with water does not save. The Text says that the person who did not believe will be condemned, with no mention of baptism—it should be obvious that Jesus will not baptize someone who did not believe. Let me repeat that: it should be obvious that Jesus will not baptize someone who did not believe! It is the person who genuinely believes who receives the Holy Spirit.

I stated that water baptism does not save; how then do I explain Acts 2:38? “Repent and be baptized, each one of you, upon the name of Jesus Christ, for forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. To begin, this took place on the day of Pentecost itself, and may have been something of a transition. Then, the context is king of interpretation, and the context here is very specific, so what Peter said should not be taken as a generic standard. Verses 36 and 40 are crucial to understanding Peter. “Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom **you** crucified!”³ (verse 36). So then they asked what they should do. Peter concluded with, “Escape from this perverse generation!” (verse 40). The ‘generation’ in question was the one that had crucified the Messiah. By being baptized upon the name of **Jesus Christ** they would be formally disassociating themselves from that generation, and the judgment that was coming upon it. This is the first use of the title, Jesus Christ, after the Gospels; the Lord had Himself inaugurated the title fifty days before (John 17:3)—it affirms that Jesus is the Messiah. Anyone being baptized upon that name would be publicly declaring allegiance to Jesus **as the Messiah**. Peter promised forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit to any who entered into that commitment. Anyone who did that would be believing into Jesus, and He would baptize them with Holy Spirit. It was not the water that saved them.

I understand that 1 Peter 3:21 also refers to this baptism; the poor verse has suffered considerably at the hands of commentators. Since there was no lack of water around Noah’s Ark, interpreters have tended to carry the water over to the baptism in the next verse, but it does not follow. Consider: verses 19 and 20 mention certain rebellious angels in Noah’s day, “while the Ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight, souls were brought safely

¹ The Text always says ‘believe into’, not ‘in’—a change of location is involved, from being outside to being inside, which requires commitment.

² Unfortunately, every version that I have seen (including my own!—that I will change for the 3rd edition) puts the verbs in the present tense, which makes it easier to think in terms of water baptism.

³ Nothing like making sure your audience gets the point! But why “both Lord and Christ”? Perhaps there were a variety of ideas about the ‘Messiah’ out there and Peter nails down His identity as the Lord.

through water”. Then comes verse 21, that I would translate like this: “Its antitype¹ now saves us also, a baptism through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.” So just which baptism might this be? It is Jesus baptizing with Holy Spirit, from His position at the Father’s right hand. Just as the Ark preserved the eight from the water, the baptism with the Holy Spirit preserves us from Satan and his subordinates. The careful reader will have noticed that verse 21 above is not complete; I did not include the parenthetical explanatory aside: “(not the removal of physical filth, but the appeal into God from a good conscience)”. I would place it at the end of verse 21, as I translated it, between ‘Christ’ and ‘who’. Peter makes it clear that he is not talking about baptism with water.

In John’s baptism, he is the agent; in Christ’s baptism, He is the agent; a baptism where the Holy Spirit is the agent is different (as also where believers are the agents). In John’s baptism, the substance used was water; in Christ’s baptism, the substance used is the Holy Spirit. In John’s baptism, the person got wet, but then dried off, so the true meaning of the procedure was a spiritual transaction; how much more then with Christ’s baptism. I believe that we may link the baptism where Christ is the agent to John 4:13-14 and 7:38-39.

Jesus answered and said to her: “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never ever thirst; rather, the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up into eternal life.”²

“The one believing into me, just as the Scripture has said, out from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.”³ 39 (Now He said this about the Spirit, whom those believing into Him were going to receive,⁴ in that the Holy Spirit had not yet been *given*, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.)

In other words, when Jesus baptizes you, you are regenerated, you receive a new nature, you receive the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4:5 refers to “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”. But as we all know, there are a number of baptisms in the Bible, and even in the Church age. The only viable candidate for this ‘one baptism’ is the one where Jesus Christ, the ‘one Lord’, is the agent. Anyone who has not been baptized by Jesus is not part of the Church.

2) The main text for Christian baptism, so to say, is the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20:

¹ The antecedent of ‘its’ is the Ark.

² That is what the Text says, “into eternal life”. Eternal life is a quality of life, more precisely a life in communion with the Father. The picture is not necessarily of a geyser, water spouting up, but there has to be a constant flow. As our capacity increases, the flow should also increase. Of course the water must be shared with others, or we become stagnant.

³ Just where does the Scripture say this, and why “rivers” (pl); would not one be enough? Reference Bibles will give a variety of suggestions, none of which really fit. I personally believe that the reference is to Ezekiel 47:1-12, and most especially to verse 9 where the Hebrew Text has two rivers (or torrents)—when that river got to the Dead Sea it evidently divided, so as to go along both banks at once. Living water takes life and health wherever it goes. So how much living water is flowing out of me, or you? The secret of that water is given in verse 12: “their water flows from the sanctuary” (‘their’ refers to the trees). Compare 1 Corinthians 6:19.

⁴ When you believe into Jesus you receive the Holy Spirit.

And approaching, Jesus asserted to them saying: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 As you go,¹ make disciples in all ethnic nations: baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit;² 20 teaching them to obey everything that I commanded you,³ and take note, I am with you every day, until the end of the age!”⁴

The order is to make disciples, not just to ‘win souls’. So how does one make a disciple? The two gerunds explain it: “baptizing them” and “teaching them”, which should be done by those who themselves are genuine disciples. What concerns us here is the baptizing. The substance used is water, as in John’s baptism, but the agents are disciples of Jesus. And this baptism is to be administered into the name of the Trinity, which represents a new revelation about the nature of God. It also represents a new ‘religion’, quite different from those previously known. In the OT there are veiled references, that as we look back we can associate with the Trinity, but here we have the first clear statement on the subject (see footnote 2 below). But what is the significance of being baptized into the name of the Trinity?

A person’s name represents that person. To do something ‘in the name of the king’ means that the something was ordered by that king; the speaker is representing the king (or is claiming to do so). So then, what does it mean to be baptized into the Trinity? Well, if you are inside the Trinity, then you are protected by Them, because before anything can get to you it must pass through the Trinity. This is tremendous! However, it also calls for a marked change in behavior—sinning inside the Trinity does not sound like a good idea! So then, the true meaning of this baptism should be the following: it is a public declaration, taking a public stand, whereby the candidate is formally renouncing Satan, and the world controlled by him, and is placing himself under the protection of the Triune God. It is to change sides, or teams, or kingdoms, and this carries with it an appropriate change in lifestyle.⁵

I confess that I do not understand why, to judge by the inspired accounts, the apostles were not rigorous in the manner in which they obeyed the Commission. At least, according to Acts 2:38, the baptism was “upon the name of Jesus Christ”, and according to Acts 10:48, Peter commanded to baptize Cornelius and company “in the name of the Lord Jesus”.⁶ And according to Acts 19:5, Paul baptized those disciples of John “into the name of the Lord Jesus”. But upon reflection, I suppose that the practical result would be the same—to be under the protection of Sovereign Jesus would amount to being under the protection of the Trinity.

In fact, Jesus was the ultimate revelation of the nature of God to man. As He Himself said to Phillip, “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). “In Him all the Fullness

¹ The familiar ‘therefore’ is found in perhaps 5% of the Greek manuscripts, but it is a logical inference.

² Our Lord defines the Trinity here. According to Greek grammar the use of ‘and’ plus the definite article with items in a series makes clear that the items are distinct entities. So “the Father” is different from “the Son” is different from “the Holy Spirit”. So we have three persons. But He also said, “into the name”, singular, not ‘names’. So we have only one name. God is one ‘name’ or essence, subsisting in three persons.

³ The ‘you’ here refers to the Eleven (see verse 16), so they were to pass down all the commands that Jesus had given them. To be a disciple of Jesus you should do everything that Jesus had commanded the Eleven to do—this includes healing and casting out demons, as well as preaching the Gospel.

⁴ Since the age has not ended, Jesus is still with us. Praise God!

⁵ Kind reader, can you name even one local church, in the whole country, that teaches this meaning for this baptism? What a shame!

⁶ The Greek manuscripts are divided as to the name here: 35%, including the best line of transmission, have ‘the Lord Jesus’; 57% have ‘the Lord’; 8% have ‘Jesus Christ’. None of the variants refers to the Trinity.

was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19), and “all the Fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). In short, as He walked this earth, Jesus represented the Trinity.

As with John’s baptism, the Text does not specify how this baptism was administered. In consequence, down through the centuries, there has been argument and disagreement about it, as to how much water should be used. I see no way of settling the question, and it probably does not make any difference, at least in the spiritual realm. The important thing is the nature of the transaction in the spiritual realm, not the material substance used. But consider the baptism of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:18). At that time there was no plumbing in the houses; any water had to be carried into the house. In the house where Saul was staying, in Damascus, there was certainly no swimming pool, and almost as certainly, no tank of sufficient size to handle a grown man (and even if there was, the owner would not want to have his water contaminated). We may be certain that Ananias used a small amount of water. The same can be said about the dwelling of Cornelius (Acts 10:48)—not much water for a lot of people. The same can be said about the house of the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:33)—not much water for a lot of people. In short, the important thing is the spiritual transaction, not the substance or the manner.

3) In 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul uses the figure of the members of a body to speak of the Church, and goes on with verse 13: “For we also were all baptized into one body by one Spirit—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and were all given to drink into one Spirit.” I take Galatians 3:26-28 to be about the same baptism: “So all of you are sons of God through the faith in Christ Jesus. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ 28—there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no ‘male and female’;¹ all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”² I take it that Paul is saying that the Holy Spirit baptizes us into Christ. But how so? When and how would it happen? It would be simultaneous to the moment when Jesus baptizes a person with the Holy Spirit.

Due to a basic human limitation, language is linear—it is impossible to say everything at the same time; the relevant information must be given a piece at a time. Something complex, like the spiritual transformation of a human being, can, and should, be described from different angles or perspectives. When we believe into Sovereign Jesus we receive the Holy Spirit; but at the same time we are introduced into His ‘body’ here on earth, which is the Church. And it is the presence of the Holy Spirit within us that is the proof that we belong to Jesus and are part of that ‘body’—Paul describes that proof as a baptism. A ‘baptism in the Spirit’ as being a second, or third, ‘work of grace’, is simply not in the Text. What there is, indeed, are repeated fillings—the more, the better.

4) Due to the limitation that language is linear, it seems to me that in Romans 6:2-4 Paul deals with yet another aspect of the spiritual transformation that we receive in Christ. He insists on the necessity of a holy life, using the argument that we were in Jesus when He died, and so we died too, and a corpse shouldn’t sin. But since the physical body of Jesus was buried and then raised, we were too, and now we have access to the power of God to enable us to live

¹ The Text does not have ‘neither male nor female’; the formula changes, as I have indicated. I suppose that the reference is to Genesis 1:27, and to the reason for the female in Genesis 2:18. All are saved on the same basis.

² The reference is to the spiritual realm, not the physical—a Jew who believes into Jesus does not stop being a physical Jew, a slave who believes into Jesus does not automatically change social status, a male who believes into Jesus does not stop being a physical male. Obvious.

differently. To cover all that Paul used the phrase, “baptized into Christ Jesus”, which probably refers to what the Holy Spirit does, as discussed in the prior item. I take Colossians 2:11-12 to be parallel to Romans 6:2-4.

5) 1 Corinthians 15:29 has given no end of exercise to commentators, and also translators. Most versions just put baptized ‘for the dead’, but does that mean ‘on behalf of the dead’, or ‘in favor of the dead’, or ‘because of the dead’, or ‘in the place of the dead’? The context is the king of interpretation, and the context here is the reality of resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then our faith is in vain, we are suffering needlessly. I would say that the intended meaning is ‘in the place of the dead’; that is, new converts occupying the space left by those who had died—in those days there were many martyrs. If there is no resurrection, there would be no point to becoming a Christian, just to feed the lions. The ‘baptism’ here could include both with the Holy Spirit and with water.

6) It remains to deal with Hebrews 6:2 and 1 Corinthians 1:17. In Hebrews 6:2 ‘teaching about baptisms’ is included in the ‘elementary teaching’ (verse 1), that should be left behind so we can ‘move on toward perfection’. But since that teaching is in the company of repentance, faith, resurrection and eternal judgment, truths that form an essential part of our Faith, it is not being treated as inferior. Such doctrines are part of the foundation for spiritual growth, but that growth depends on factors beyond the basic truths.

But how could Paul say in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that “Christ did not send me to baptize”, since in the Great Commission Jesus commanded to do it? Once again, we must pay attention to the context. Beginning at verse 10, Paul is combating divisions based on individuals; there were ‘parties’, one of them following Paul himself. In an effort to reject that ‘party’, he argues that no one was baptized into his name (verse 13); and he goes on to thank God that he himself had baptized few people, precisely so that they could not say that he used his own name. Then comes verse 17: “Because Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel.” Is Paul denying that water baptism is part of the Gospel? It almost seems so. Or was he distinguishing between essential and nonessential? If we define ‘essential’ as being the elements that are necessary for someone to be saved, then water baptism is a nonessential—it joins other elements that are relevant to spiritual growth, to living the Christian life, and such elements are certainly important.

Conclusion

For us today, the one, all-important, baptism is the one where Jesus is the agent and the substance used is the Holy Spirit. The key is to believe into Jesus. When we believe into Him, He baptizes us with Holy Spirit. Anyone who has not been baptized by Jesus is not part of the Church.