

Baptism – Inaugural Spirituality

Part I: John and Jesus

Baptism as Kingdom Sign (Gospels)

“Baptismal spirituality is to always live in the pattern of Jesus’ death and resurrection.”

(R.Weber)

Within the majority of the Christian church today baptism functions as the ritual by which a person declares their loyalty to Jesus Christ and marks officially their inclusion in the church. In this sense it inaugurates formally a person’s spiritual involvement in the Kingdom of God. Yet there remains considerable dispute within Christendom regarding its significance and its mode. In three presentations we consider what John and Jesus taught, what Paul taught, and what Peter taught about baptism, the three major voices that discuss baptism in the New Testament. At the end of each section a summary of the conclusions is provided, with some consideration of their implications.

Religious Ritual in Judaism

God established for Israel several religious rituals and experiences that dramatically represented for them significant moments in their relationship with God as His covenant people. As Israel practiced these rituals, they experienced afresh and for their generation the continuing significance of these formative events. These included:

- a. circumcision – focused attention upon God's covenant promise to Abraham – blessing, a son, and land (inheritance);
- b. Sabbath – God's creation of the universe and his 'rest' from this good work;
- c. Passover – God's rescue of his people from Egypt, keeping his promise to Abraham. It reminded Israel of God's final act to demonstrate his sovereign power over the most significant empire that earth had known. The food, the dress, the liturgy all blended to confirm that their salvation was God's act, not theirs. He preserved them for His purpose. (Read the account of its origin in Exodus 12-13 and imagine its power. Cf. Deuteronomy 16.)
- d. Annual festivals – Unleavened Bread (linked with Passover); Weeks (Harvest, Firstfruits Exodus 23:16), associated with giving of the Law at Sinai; Tabernacles (Booths, Ingathering Exodus 23:16), associated with the wilderness wanderings; Purim, recalls Israel's rescue from the intrigues of Haman (Esther);
- e. Day of Atonement – a holy convocation (Lv. 23:26-31);

f. Sacrifices, washings, and prayers. – Firstfruits – Deuteronomy 26:4-11.

These religious activities become then dramas, re-enacting and defining God's relationship with his people. In the first century the newly re-built, Herodian Temple and its spacious courtyards provided a magnificent setting for centering these rituals.

When John and Jesus begin their ministry in first century Palestine, they introduce new religious activity, namely baptism and the Last Supper. However, they do this with a deep consciousness of Israel's diverse religious rituals, particularly those that involve ceremonial washings for purification. John and Jesus used ritual to enforce their prophetic messages and encourage people to accept and involve themselves in their teachings. They knew:

- that ritual can assist the spiritual nurture of God's people because it reminds them of the great events related to salvation. The prophets were critical of these religious rituals because Israel lost the integral connection between faith, ritual and holy obedience (Isaiah 1:10-17);
- that ritual helps us remember and repetition of ritual can bring a person repeatedly to reflect upon God's mercy;

In our postmodern world ritual can enable people to locate their own lives in the story of God in very vivid and passionate ways.

John's Baptism (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; Matthew 21; Mark 11; John 1, 3)

As the precursor to Jesus' ministry, John used ritual washing as a sign of inner spiritual repentance and preparation for God's imminent action. He called Israel to spiritual renewal – with moral and political consequences. He will let none escape his call – Herod, religious leaders, soldiers, etc. He warns of God's judgment that is about to be unleashed, unless Israel responds.

Why did John choose the ritual washing called 'baptism'¹ as the required means of demonstrating spiritual readiness?² The use of water for ritual purification of priests and common worshippers is well-documented in the OT.³ The Essenes at Qumran followed similar practices. After a probationary year, a person was admitted to the community with a ritual bath.

¹ The English verb “baptize” and the cognate noun “baptism” and adjective “baptist” are transliterations of the Greek terms *baptize*, *baptisma*, *baptizōn*, *baptistēs*. The Greek term has the sense of dip, drown, immerse, plunge.

² James Brooks, *Drama of Decision*, p. 25-30. Brooks provides considerable background information regarding the Jewish ritual purifications.

³ Appointment of priests (Exodus 29:1-5). Sinai Covenant (Exodus 19:10,14). General sign of repentance (Isaiah 1:16-18).

Proselyte baptism,⁴ probably emerging some time after John's ministry, similarly involved ritual washing along with circumcision as a sign of inclusion in God's people. Further, throughout Jerusalem and Judea public, walk-in baths ("Miqveh," a specially constructed immersion pool)⁵ were frequent, enabling Jews to engage in ritual purification at anytime. A number of these have been discovered at the entrance to the temple. Ritual washings before worship were a significant part of Judaism.⁶

The Gospel narratives agree that John baptized "in the Jordan river."⁷ We do not know precisely the mode that this baptism followed. The language suggests that people entered the river. If the practices of current Judaism (i.e. use of *miqvoth*) are any indication, then it would more likely be whole-body immersion. In the case of Jesus Mark writes that "he was plunged (*ebaptisthē*) into the Jordan."⁸ The passive voice indicates that some agent did this to Jesus, probably John. When Philip baptized the newly converted Ethiopian Eunuch, Luke narrates that they went down into the water and Philip "baptized" the man.⁹ How far we should press the phrase "into the Jordan" in terms of literalism is debated.

John had many precedents from which to borrow. The prophetic words of Zechariah (13:1) and Ezekiel (36:25f) divulge God's plan for a future washing and cleansing of Israel. What were some of the unique elements that set his religious practice apart from other Jewish projects?

- He required no probationary period or commitment to certain ascetic principles. His baptism was immediate upon indication of repentance.
- John's baptism prepared people for God's imminent activity for salvation and judgment, not entry into a community.
- This act was a single, non-repeatable act.
- Ethical action by the individual was required to demonstrate his or her personal, repentant response to John's prophetic message. It affirmed their spiritual and moral choice to participate in God's new event.

⁴ This was part of the process by which a Gentile declared conversion to Judaism.

⁵ While none have been found on the Temple Mount, they have been found adjacent to major staircases that gave access directly to the Temple Mount. As well, they have been found at Masada, probably at Qumran, outside the Dung Gate of Jerusalem among wealthy Jewish homes, etc. Presumably Jesus, as any pious Jew would have purified himself in this way prior to entering the Temple.

⁶ In Luke 11:38 the writer describes the astonishment of the Pharisee at whose home Jesus was dining that Jesus did not ceremoniously wash (*ebaptisthē*) himself before eating.

⁷ Mark 1:5,9; Matthew 3:6.

⁸ Mark 1:9.

⁹ Acts 8:38. The verb used is κατέβησαν which means to descend, go down, followed by the prepositional phrase εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ..

How was John perceived? (Matthew 3, Luke 3) People certainly regarded him as a prophet; even Herod Antipas did. John's use of baptism fits within the realm of prophetic symbol. Did people in the first century perceive John's baptism as identification with the people of God?

- John's baptism retained a prophetic note, an eschatological dimension that points the participant forward to what God was about to do.
- John links his baptism with ethics/morality. Baptism indicates 'repentance', i.e. the sincere desire to change and this change is ethical and moral.
- Personal participation in such a religious drama demonstrated a person's commitment to God's new action.

John's baptism is frequently linked to the phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" in the Gospels (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).¹⁰ What is the relationship between John's baptism and forgiveness? Participating in John's baptism demonstrated the person's moral choice to repent, accepting that the current Jewish religious scheme was not sufficient to guarantee divine forgiveness. John teaches that those who prepared themselves for God's imminent action would receive forgiveness of sins. Whether this is anticipatory of the forgiveness presented by Jesus at the cross or immediate and, like OT forgiveness, subsumed in what Jesus did at the cross, is not clear. The fact that Paul baptizes "into the name of Jesus" disciples of John who previously had experienced John's "baptism of repentance" (Acts 19:4-5) perhaps indicates that John's baptism was a sign of what Jesus would accomplish at the Cross, but was not sufficient in itself as Christian baptism.¹¹

The response to John's prophetic message, as recorded in the Gospels, was immense, particularly people from Jerusalem and Judea.

Jesus, Baptism and Kingdom Formation

As his first act to inaugurate his mission Jesus was baptized by John ().¹² Questions continue to arise as to why Jesus did this. What was he signifying by this act?

¹⁰ As in various contexts Luke rehearses how the early church understood the nature of John's baptism. In Acts 1:5 Jesus repeats the prophecy of John regarding "baptism in the sphere of the Holy Spirit." Cf. Acts 10:37; 11:16; 12:42 (baptism of repentance); 19:4 (Paul links John's baptism as preparation for Jesus' coming).

¹¹ The Jewish historian Josephus similarly associates John's baptism with forgiveness.

¹² Mark 1:9-12; Matthew 3; Luke 3:21-22.

- He agreed with John's message and affirmed John's role and message as God's prophet. God's salvation and judgment is imminent and Israel needs to prepare for God's new action.
- The time was right for him to embrace the mission for which God has sent him into the world. This eschatological dimension is essential to grasp.
- Jesus showed his submission to God's plan – he will accept and carry out that mission, though it meant his death and resurrection. (Jesus' use later in his ministry of baptism as a symbol of his mission in death is significant (Mark 10:39-40)).
- In Matthew's narrative Jesus defined his baptism as a sign of the way he will "fulfill all righteousness." As Jesus accepted John's baptism, he was affirming that God through him was going to accomplish fully all of the covenant promises that He had made to Israel. This included all that will be required for human salvation.
- The writer of John's Gospel indicates that John's baptism was his way to reveal Jesus to Israel.¹³ When John would see the Spirit descending as dove on a person being baptized, this would be the sign that this person was the Messiah.¹⁴

Apart from this initial act and commentary, there is little reference in Jesus' teaching to baptism as a necessary religious ritual for Kingdom people. He uses it symbolically,¹⁵ as we have already indicated, to define his ultimate mission which includes suffering. John's Gospel hints that several of Jesus' followers, because they first followed John, were baptized.¹⁶ Should we presume that all of Jesus' apostles had submitted to this ritual? John's Gospel also indicates that Jesus disciples were baptizing "more than John,"¹⁷ even though Jesus himself did not baptize anyone. John says¹⁸ that Jesus was baptizing, but probably in this means that Jesus' followers were baptizing. Was this Christian baptism? Probably not, since Jesus had not yet risen from the dead. It is to be seen as an extension of John's call to repent and prepare oneself for what God was doing in Messiah Jesus. But having said this, baptism as ritual did not loom large generally in Jesus' ministry. We never discover him commanding people to be baptized during his ministry as a sign of their repentance.

¹³ John 1:31

¹⁴ John 1:32-34

¹⁵ Mark 10:39-40

¹⁶ John 1:35-42

¹⁷ John 4:1-2

¹⁸ John 3:22-27

Only at the conclusion to Jesus' earthly ministry does baptism emerge once more as a significant part of his ministry legacy. Matthew 28:19-20 requires Jesus' followers to include baptism as part of the signature rituals that mark Christianity – "baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." The longer ending of Mark (16:16) links putting faith in Jesus and baptism as the essential acts that mark a person as a Christian. Luke does not mention baptism at the end of his Gospel narrative nor in the first chapter of Acts. However, we find Jesus' followers in their early preaching requiring people to be baptized as their way of showing their faith in Jesus (Acts 2:38 "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins and you shall received the gift of the Holy Spirit").

So the continuity is clearly present between John's prophetic sign of baptism, Jesus' embrace of baptism, and the early church's requirement that all followers of Jesus be baptized.

Baptism is linked with two strategic issues:

- The forgiveness of sins.
 - John, Jesus and the early church preachers define baptism as a way for the individual to accept and proclaim forgiveness of sins.
 - There is no indication that the act accomplishes the forgiveness, but as a ritual of purification, it symbolizes this action of God's grace in the person's life.
 - It indicates how significant the issue of sin remains for humanity and unless this is dealt with, relationship with God is negated.
 - Normally in Judaism forgiveness is related to sacrifice in the temple. What is the significance of forgiveness being pronounced as people embrace God's initiative proclaimed by John and Jesus and being baptized in response? Presumably it is related in some sense to the significance of Jesus' imminent passion.
- The gift of the Holy Spirit.
 - In John's initial prophecy about Jesus he contrasted himself with the Messiah, proclaiming that "I baptize/immerse you with water, but he will baptize/immerse you in Holy Spirit."¹⁹
 - When Peter preached at Pentecost he promised that repentant, baptized people will receive the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

¹⁹ Mark 1:8; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 4:19-28,

- Throughout Acts as people put faith in Jesus as Saviour and were baptized. Either before or after baptism, the presence of the Spirit was noted as well. This was the norm.
- The presence of God's Spirit is an eschatological sign, marking the presence of God's kingdom and the inclusion of specific people within God's rule and reign. The Spirit also empowers God's people to proclaim and express God's character as the community or family of God.

We saw that John had linked ethical behaviour with baptism. Jesus does not make this connection explicitly. However, discipleship, which includes baptism, will be nurtured as people are taught "to obey all that Jesus has commanded." Since baptism and discipleship are intertwined the ethical element is implicit, if not always expressed.

We should also note the significance of the Trinity's attachment to the act of baptism in Matthew 28:19-20 – "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit." In Acts the consistent term is "baptism in the name of Jesus." Matthew's expression represents the reality that Jesus is fully identified with the Trinity. The idea of "name" carries the sense of authority. If one is "ritually purified in the name of...", then in some sense one submits to the authority of this party, signifying this in the act of baptism. Perhaps this adds a dimension to Christian baptism that needs emphasis, namely this ritual enables the confessor to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

- How do we use the example of Jesus and his baptism to enhance the significance of baptism? Can we use it to mark our embrace of God's calling in our life?
- Given how Jesus chooses to use baptism symbolically to speak of his suffering and death, does our baptism speak of our willingness to embrace God's will for our lives – whether in life or in death?
- What is the eschatological significance, i.e. our participation in God's future, of the baptismal act, particularly as this is linked with the Holy Spirit's presence, for the believer?
- Is it appropriate to describe baptism as the "Drama of Decision"?²⁰
- Do John or Jesus ever connect baptism with circumcision or hint that Christian baptism will in some sense replace circumcision? Because it is Jews that are baptized by John and Jesus, people already circumcised, it would seem that baptism is not connected at all with circumcision in their ministry and perspective, at least in any explicit manner.

²⁰ This is the title James Brooks used for his book defining the theology of baptism in the New Testament.

The infrequent mention of baptism during Jesus' ministry does raise a question. What for Jesus marks the critical transition for a person into the Kingdom? Does the fact that the Gospel narratives tell stories of those who respond to Jesus before the cross affect this question?

- Did Jesus assume that those who responded to his message already had experienced John's baptism and so there was little need to emphasize this ritual? How extensive was the influence of John's prophetic ministry?
- Did followers of Jesus submit to baptism at the hands of Jesus' disciples? Was this part of their ministry during their mission to Israel?²¹ If so, why is it only John's Gospel that mentions this?²²
- Did the incarnate presence of Jesus create a unique situation in which a person's physical following of Jesus or response to his presence through healing, exorcism, etc. constitute the primary sign of Kingdom membership?
- Is baptism the sign of our following the no longer visible Jesus, connected in some way with our reception of his Spirit in conversion?

The way that Jesus fosters the spiritual formation of his followers seems to focus upon the command to follow him. Following implies becoming a learner and embracing his way of Kingdom inauguration. Perhaps Paul's focus upon baptism as identifying us with Jesus' life, death and resurrection is linked to this perception.

Special Note on Mark 16:16.

This text is problematic for several reasons. First, it is disputed as to whether Mark 16:9-20 is part of this Gospel. Second, the mention of belief, baptism and salvation in the same verse makes it sound as if it is teaching that baptism is a means of salvation. Third, if this material is not original to Mark, then does it have any valid connection with the teaching of Jesus or is it merely a witness to what some segments of the Christian church were teaching in the second century AD?

While I personally believe that sound, reasonable arguments can be made to demonstrate the probability that 16:9-20 is part of the original Markan Gospel, the fact remains that many in the church today do not. Because our teaching about baptism usually comes at a very early stage in the life of a new believer, it may be pastorally unwise to introduce such young believers to the technicalities of textual criticism and discussions about the way these Gospels

²¹ Mark 6, Matthew 10.

²² John 4:1-6.

were written. So personally I would turn to passages that have less controversy (e.g. Romans 6, 1 Corinthians 12, and other passages in the Gospels) to ground teaching about baptism.

However, it is quite possible that new and more advanced believers will have questions about this text. Essentially the textual data indicates that the longer ending was in use in the middle of the second century AD.²³ We have no evidence from that period of the second century that a shorter version of Mark was in circulation. The textual evidence for 16:8 forming the ending of Mark comes from the latter half of the third century (manuscripts such as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus and comments in church fathers from that same period). So the earliest evidence we have about the shape of Mark's Gospel points to 16:9-20 as being part of that Gospel. What happened to create a shorter version remains a mystery, despite our efforts to penetrate the historical fog.

When it comes to the interpretation of v.20 we should note the following:

1. Personal faith (ὁ πιστεύσας, "the one who has believed" (aorist active participle, usually indicating an action prior to that of the main verb)) explicitly results in "salvation."

2. Baptism (ὁ βαπτισθεὶς "the one who has been baptized" (aorist passive participle, usually indicating an action prior to that of the main verb)) is linked with the expression of faith, just as we find it normally is within the Acts narrative, when people become disciples. Note how in Acts 2:38 Peter tells those responding to his Pentecost sermon to "repent and be baptized" in order to receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. In that text also we find repentance and baptism linked together as one whole action inaugurating discipleship.

3. These actions of faith and baptism are a response to the prior proclamation of the Gospel (v.19). If we can trust Paul's writings and those of Peter to bear true witness to the essence of this Gospel, it always faith in the Messiah Jesus that brings a person into righteous status with God, not baptism. It would seem to be rather inconsistent for Mark, a person very familiar with the theology and teaching of both of these apostles to propose a Gospel that was substantially different. Given Paul's strong language condemning any attempts to make circumcision a requirement for full membership in the family of God, it would seem rather strange for Mark to require the ritual of baptism for salvation.

4. When the reverse statement is made in v.20b that "the one who has not exercised faith (ὁ ἀπιστήσας aorist active participle) shall be condemned," the writer does not include "nor is baptized" as part of this statement. The focus is entirely on unbelief. This would suggest that

²³ This data includes a quotation from the longer ending in a work attributed to Irenaeus, c. 175 AD., a probable allusion or quotation in Justin Martyr, c. 160 A.D., and fragments of Tatian's *Diatessaron* which seem to be based on the longer ending of Mark's Gospel (c. 170 A.D.).

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baptism in the first clause functions as a marker of faith, not as a requirement for salvation.

Baptism: Drama, Grace and Inaugural Spirituality

A. Religious Ritual in Judaism

1. Dramatic representations of significant events in God's dealings with Israel.
2. Repeated rituals – every generation could 'relive' these saving moments
 - a. circumcision
 - b. Sabbath
 - c. Passover
 - d. Annual Festivals
 - e. Day of Atonement
 - f. Sacrifices, washings and prayers

B. John's Baptism (Matthew 3, 21; Mark 1, 11; Luke 3; John 1, 3)

1. Nature of John's ministry
 - a. calls Israel to repentance
 - b. prepares Israel for God's imminent action
2. John chooses the ritual of Baptism – why?
 - a. purificatory washings in Israel – Old Testament
 - b. Essene practices
 - c. proselyte baptism (unsure when this started)
 - d. *Miqvoth* – public ritual bathing stations in Jerusalem and private homes
 - e. Prophetic anticipations
 - i. Zechariah 13:1
 - ii. Ezekiel 36:25ff.
3. Elements unique to John's Baptism
 - a. no probationary period or prior commitment to ascetic principles
 - b. preparation for God's action, not entrance into a community
 - c. a single, non-repeatable act
 - d. a dramatic representation of a person's repentant response to God's message through John.
4. How was John perceived? (Matthew 3, Luke 3)
 - a. connection between prophetic role and prophetic symbol
 - b. identification with the people of God
 - c. relationship to "forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4)
 - i. forgiveness – anticipatory of the work of Jesus at the cross?
 - d. acknowledgment that current Jewish religious practices were not sufficient to guarantee divine relationship
5. Christian applications from John's Baptism
 - a. the prophetic note – a symbol that dramatically represents God's worldview
 - b. John links ethics and morality to faith actions – does this relate to baptism?
 - c. personal participation in the drama of baptism – a decision required.

C. Jesus, Baptism and Kingdom Formation

1. Jesus embraces John's Baptism – why? (Mark 1:9-12; Matthew 3)
 - a. agreement with John's message and affirmation of his role
 - b. engagement of his personal mission from God. Eschatological shift is occurring
 - c. sign of submission – his mission means suffering, death and resurrection. Precursor of Gethsemane
 - d. he "fulfills all righteousness", i.e. through Jesus God will demonstrate complete faithfulness to his covenant with Israel. Jesus is fully prepared to live it completely

- e. means by which John might identify Jesus as Messiah (John 1:32-34).
- 2. Jesus' baptismal practice (John 3:22-27; 4:1-2)
 - a. Jesus' disciples baptized people
 - b. Jesus does not talk about baptism (at least in the Synoptic Gospels) directly
 - c. Continuation of John's Baptism?
- 3. Jesus' resurrection commission (Matthew 28:19-20)
 - a. Jesus' mission linked with the Trinity (not expressed in Luke's Gospel)
 - b. Mark's longer ending links faith demonstration to baptism
 - c. Acts 2:38 – early preaching requires baptism as a demonstration of faith
 - d. continuing sign of Christian discipleship
- 4. Baptism is linked in these teachings and activities with three strategic issues:
 - a. baptism is a way for the individual to accept and proclaim forgiveness of sins
 - b. baptism is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; Acts 2:38)
 - c. baptism marks a change in ethical standards and behaviour (Matthew 28:19-20)
 - d. through these means baptism becomes the event that marks a person's transition into the family of God/people of God. It marks a boundary.
- 5. What is the significance of names attached to baptism? (Matthew 28:19-20)
 - a. in Acts consistently baptism is in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). It is related to his position as Lord
 - b. "name" carries associations of authority. To be baptized in the name of Jesus Messiah is to submit to his authority and indicate one's complete approval of what he stands for.
- 6. Contemporary issues:
 - a. how do we use the example of Jesus and his baptism to enhance our understanding of baptism? Can we link our baptism with our calling in Christ?
 - b. does our baptism indicate our willingness to embrace God's will for our lives – whether it be one of suffering?
 - c. what is the eschatological significance of baptism, particularly as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence?
 - d. in what sense is baptism "a drama of decision"?
 - e. do John or Jesus ever associate baptism with circumcision?
- 7. Questions about the relationship between John's Baptism and Jesus' call to enter the Kingdom.
 - a. did Jesus assume that those who responded to his call to follow had already embraced John's Baptism? What happened after John was executed? Did Jesus expect his followers (prior to the Cross) to be baptized?
 - b. If followers of Jesus were baptized by Jesus' disciples, was baptism also part of the apostles' ministry to Israel (Mark 6, Matthew 10, Luke 9)?
 - c. Does the incarnate presence of Jesus create a unique situation in which a person's willingness to associate with Jesus is a sufficient mark of Kingdom membership?