



Holy Baptism -- Introduction

Prayer Before Studying Theology

Almighty, ever-living God, whose own dear Son Jesus Christ shed his blood to wash away our sins, grant that we may renounce

the Devil and all his works,
the empty display and false values of this world,
and the sinful desires of the flesh,

so as to forever remain in the number of your faithful and elect children, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Baptism: The Meaning of the Term

The **Hebrew** *tbl* (b^c) means roughly “dip (in/into).”

(1) It can be used to speak of dipping something in blood (Gen. 37:31), hence its use in sacrificial contexts (Lev. 4:6; 9:9; 14:6,51 [also in fresh water]). In making the sin-offering the priest dips his finger into the blood of the animal which has been sacrificed and then places it on the horns of the altar or sprinkles it before the veil (Lev. 4:6,17; 9:9), representing the death paid for sin (cf. Heb. 9:19-22).

(2) It can also be used to speak of dipping something in water, often but not always for purification (Num. 19:18; contrast 2 Kings 8:15); hence its use for a person bathing in water for the purpose of purification (2 Kings 5:14; cf. the use of *t^ebal* in Aramaic).

- Arguments that dipping necessarily implies immersion probably exceed the evidence.
 - For example, *tbl min* = “moisten with (some of)” Lev. 4:17 [blood]; 14:16 [oil]; compare also Job 9:31: “in the ditch do you dip me”, where Job complains that Bildad has plunged him into a pit of accusations, the precise degree of immersion not being defined in the metaphor).
 - In many contexts immersion does not seem to be strictly required (see Ruth 2:14 [bread dipped in vinegar to make it tasty]; a coat in blood [Gen. 37:31]; etc.). In Rabbinic Hebrew it is used of plunging vessels into water to purify them, which apparently involves immersion; see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, col. 517b)

The Hebrew *tbl* is commonly rendered by the **Greek** βάπτω (*bapto*) “dip, plunge” (esp. in/into water or wine) in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament made in Alexandria, Egypt in the second and third centuries B.C.); see Ex. 12:2; Lev. 4:6,17; 9:9; 11:32 and for the middle/passive βαπτίζομαι (*baptizomai*) see 2 Kings 5:14; Is. 21:4; Jdt. 12:7; Sir. 34:25.

- The Greek *bapto* can be used of bathing, including performing ritual washing (Lk. 11:38).

- It may suggest the idea of immersion to a slightly greater extent than its Hebrew equivalent does, since *bapto* is used in reference to dyeing fabrics and gilding with precious metals such as silver, but this idea cannot be presumed to be present in every usage of the word.

John's Baptism as the Background for the Apostle's Baptism

John's baptism: in water unto (i.e. for the purpose of)

- repentance (Mt. 3:11) and
- the remission of one's sins (Mk. 1:4; compare Mt. 3:7-8)

The precise background of this baptism is debated:

- **The Levitical washings** (r-ch-ts) which cleansed one from uncleanness (impurity such that one cannot stand before God or be associated with God; see Lev. 14:8-9; 15:5,6,7,8,10,11,16,18,21, 22,27; 17:15; cf. 15:13; 16:4,24,28; Num. 19:7,19; Ex. 19:10; 29:4; 40:12; compare Heb. 9:10, where "different baptisms" refers to the ritual washings commanded by the righteous ordinances of the OT).

The Levitical washings are sometimes linked to the purification that accompanies the act of sacrificial expiation and cleansing from sin (Num. 8:5-22; Lev. 13:14; Ex. 19:14; compare 1 Jn. 5:6 [linking of blood and water] and esp. Heb. 10:22-23: hearts being sprinkled [to cleanse] from an evil conscience and the body being washed with pure water).

In the prophetic literature, the Levitical washings are therefore connected with **purification from sin and idolatry, which allows the restoration of the covenant relationship and thus communion with God** (Is. 1:16; *Ezek. 36:25 [note vv. 26-27]; *37:23 [note vv. 24-28].; *Zech. 13:1 [note v. 2]).

- Compare the notion of baptism as ritual cleansing removing impurity (i.e. the stain of sin) in Acts 22:16 (Grk. βαπτίσει καὶ ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου "dip and wash away your sins").

Note, however, that these washings were to be performed upon oneself and not upon others, hence the unusual character of John's practice (for which he is described in the Gospels as ὁ βαπτιστής "the plunger", i.e. of others into the water).

- The exception to this rule is in Lev. 8:6: "Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water" (=purification before the latter took up priestly role).
 - This passage was linked in Rabbinic thought with the coming of Elijah and the future purification and restoration of Israel (see Lightfoot on Jn. 1:25 and Kimchi on Zech. 9:6: "The Rabbis transmit [the following]: Elijah will purify the false [or: illegitimate] and restore them to the assembly").

- **The baptism of proselytes** in later Judaism (evidence that this was required alongside circumcision is late, not in Philo, Josephus or earlier Rabbinic texts).
 - See, however, 1 Cor. 10:1-2, which has sometimes been thought to be parallel: God leads a people threatened by death through the water to become His own people.
 - In texts about proselyte baptism, something similar seems to be imagined; neither the Gentile convert nor his/her ancestors would have been present at the passage through the Red Sea, so must pass through an analogous experience in order to become a part of the people God has redeemed for Himself.

Features Common to the Baptism of John and That of the Apostles:

- in water
- in connection with repentance (compare Mt. 3:6: “they were baptized, confessing their sins”/Mk. 1:4: “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” with Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized, each of you for the remission of sins”)
- for the remission (i.e. forgiveness) of sins (again compare Mk. 1:4 with Acts 2:38)

Features Peculiar to the Baptism of the Apostles:

- **Repentance alone is not sufficient, one must have faith in Jesus as the one who was to come and whom God sent.** See Acts 19:4-5: “John baptized with a baptism of repentance, speaking to the people, so that they might believe (have faith) in the one coming after him, i.e. in Jesus.”
 - This is why “baptism in the name of Jesus” is so important in Acts (8:12-13; 10:48; 19:3,5) and the Epistles (see Paul’s ironic remarks in 1 Cor. 1:13,15: “were you baptized in the name of Paul?...so that some might not say that you were baptized in my name”).
 - This is probably also the significance of “the teaching about baptisms” in Heb. 6:2, i.e. one is taught to distinguish between the washings performed in the OT, by John and by the apostles/early Christian community (see Jn. 3:25ff.; Acts 18:25; 19:3-5).

Jesus is the means by which God reveals himself to his people during the great events occurring at the point in the history of salvation (compare the mediating role of Moses in 1 Cor. 10:2: “all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea,” which looks back to Ex. 14:31: “they believed (had faith) in YHWH and Moses his servant”).

- **Paul emphasizes that baptism associates one with Christ’s life in such a way that one shares in the death and burial that Christ experienced** (*Rom. 6:3-4; *Col. 2:12; cf. “put on Christ” [like a piece of clothing] in Gal. 3:27). For the understanding of Jesus’ suffering as a baptism, see also Mk. 10:38; Mt. 20:22.
 - Compare also 1 Cor. 15:29 “baptized on behalf of the dead”, where “baptized” is connected with being in danger and dying in vv. 30-31; more broadly, this is comparable to Greek usages like “sunk in debt” or being

plunged into/sunk in affliction (see Mt. 20:22-23; Mk. 10:38-39; Lk. 12:50; compare Is. 21:4 LXX).

- **Christ's death is significant here because, like the Old Testament sacrifices, it cleanses one from sin.**
 - Note the parallel drawn between Christ's death for others and the shedding and sprinkling of blood in the expiatory sacrifices of the OT in 1 Jn. 1:7 ("the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin") and 1 Pet. 1:2 ("sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ").
 - God's acceptance of Christ's death in the Resurrection makes it possible for the stain of sin to be removed so that one can approach God with a clear conscience (1 Pet. 3:21).
- **Baptism brings one into the community of all those who believe in Jesus.**
 - See 1 Cor. 12:13, where "we were baptized" not only for repentance and remission of sins but also "into one body" and Eph. 4:5, where "one baptism" is one of the elements of the fellowship that binds together all believers.
- **Baptism is associated with the action of the Spirit** (Mk. 3:11; Lk. 3:16: "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"; cf. Jn. 3:5 "born of water and spirit").
 - Presumably a purification from sin effected by Spirit is meant (cf. Ezek. 36:25-27; compare the Lord's cleansing of his servants in Mal. 3:2-3; Is. 6:6-7).