

BAPTISM – THE WHAT, WHO AND HOW – BEGINNING WITH JOHN THE BAPTIZER

Introduction

In this study I have relied heavily on the research that has been done by:

1. A. Andrew Das, “Baptized Into God's Family” Milwaukee(NWPH -Impact Series) 1991
2. Dwight Hervey Small, “The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism” (Baker/Grand Rapids)1968
3. Two of the major resources which Das relies on are: Joachim Jeremias, “Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries” Transl. David Cairns(Westminster Press/Philadelphia) 1962, Oscar Cullman, “Baptism in the New Testament” J. K. Reid(transl.)(Westminster/Philadelphia) 1950.

John the baptizer was to go before our Lord as an Elijah to announce the Messiah's arrival. He was also a transitional person. With John there is the transition to New Testament baptism which then our Lord gave as the risen Savior for His church to carry out. Baptism was not new, as the Jews already practiced it with their converts coming into the church. With John we have a transition from what was already known to the Jews about a baptism to then Jesus' Great Commission. At some point in Jesus' ministry His disciples began to baptize and as time passed they were baptizing more disciples than John. Jn. 4:1 This is also an indication of a transition. John stated that his task was to recede out of the picture as Jesus increased. When John is told “all are going to Him” (Jn. 3:26) it does not bother John at all. The “making and baptizing...disciples” of Jesus' disciples was a continuance of what John had been doing.

Have you ever wondered about why all those people would so readily go out to be baptized by John the baptizer? “Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan...” Mt. 3:5 Luke specifies that it was “multitudes”, “tax collectors”, “soldiers.” Ch. 3 The baptism of repentance that John gave had the people “confessing their sins.” Mk. 1:4 Even Pharisees and Sadducees came to him, though he warned them since they were coming in hypocrisy. Mt. 3:7 The Jews in Jerusalem sent their priests and Levites out to ask him “Who are you?” John answered and then they asked further, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” Jn. 1:19-28

What was John doing baptizing?

We have no record of any asking why he was baptizing per se, but they just assumed the baptism. It was supposed to be by Christ, or Elijah or the prophet. The prophet was to be Jesus from Deut. 18:15-18. John was the latter day Elijah prophesied of in Mal. 4:5-6 Jesus was the anointed one who would be the Christ or Messiah to bring salvation to all nations. He gave the great commission with the baptizing injunction. Mt. 28:19-20 This was much later after He carried out His three year ministry and His rising from the dead. But why would the priests and Levites think that the Messiah would baptize? We have the prophecy about baptism in Ez. 36:25-27 “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” This sounds very much like John's baptism of repentance and the New Testament sacrament of the “washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.” Titus 3:5

Another reason why there was no asking about the baptism itself is because the Jews were familiar with the practice. It had developed among them outside of the Scripture as a means by which converts were brought into the church. Das in his research on baptismal customs at the time of Jesus fills us in on this. (“Baptized into God's Family” by A. Andrew Das) “After the last of the prophets, two schools arose in Judaism, the schools of Shammai and Hillel. These schools fought over the proper interpretation of the

Law. The school of Shammai said that a convert could eat the Passover meal if circumcised and baptized on the night before. Hillel would not allow this. The rabbis in these two schools passed their teachings down orally. In the centuries after Christ, the rabbis finally wrote the oral teachings down. So the 'Babylonian Talmud,' the 'Gemara Babylon,' and the 'Jerusalem Mishna' came to be. Along with Maimonides, they testify of the baptism of converts as a practice from long before Christ.”

Fragments of Jewish writings before Christ have been found that refer to baptism of converts. “Epictetus, in 109 AD at the age of 60, writes: 'But when he assumes the sentiments of one who has been baptized and circumcised, then he both really is and is called a Jew.' Epictetus says that the baptism of converts was a standard practice. Given his age and when he writes, the practice must then be quite ancient.” (D pp.73-74)

Who was John baptizing?

An interesting practice in the Jewish baptisms was that whole families were baptized including infants. “Later Jewish teachers confirm the baptism of infants. Rab Huna (AD 212-297) speaks of a court demanding an infant baptism. His pupil, Abba, also speaks of the practice. Raba (AD 299-352) speaks of infant convert baptism in relation to the mother's baptism. The oldest Jewish sources simply take infant convert baptism for granted. And there's not a single dispute among the Jews over an infant being baptized along with its parents. Indeed, the parents would even be called 'newly born babes' after their baptism. Baptism was said to be their 'birth' into Judaism.” (D p. 75)

When John baptized there is no reason not to assume that he baptized infants as well as adults just as it was done among the Jews. This practice continued. Whole families were baptized among the Christians: Stephanas – 1 Cor. 1:16, Lydia – Acts 16:15, the jailer – Acts 16:33, all who were at Cornelius' house -Acts 10:47-48. And this naturally would include infants. We know that infants:

- Are included under “all nations,”
- Are sinful by nature and in need of regeneration, Rom. 3:23, Ps. 51:5,
- Are able to believe by the power of God, Mt. 21:16, 18:6,
- Are to be saved by the grace of God just as adults, “He saved us, not because of deeds done by us...that we might be justified by His grace...” Titus. 3:5-7

Testimony of the Early Church

The baptizing of infants was a continuum. While we do not place the following on the same level as Scripture, it all is evidence that baptizing of infants was normal, a continuation of the Jewish convert practice, John's baptizing and Jesus command to baptize as well as New Testament examples of whole households being baptized.

The First Two Centuries – *Justin Martyr* (born between 80-90AD) in his Dialogue with Trypho teaches that baptism took the place of circumcision and proselyte baptism. “In fact, very early evidence that Christian baptism was interpreted as spiritual circumcision is found in the Clementine literature...where those baptized were not allowed to eat at a common table with the unbaptized, a rule which applied to both parents and children...” (Small p.106)

Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna in the latter half of first century) at his trial before his martyrdom testified that he had been serving the Lord for 86 years. This indicates he was baptized as an infant. He was martyred at 86. Both Justin Martyr and Polycarp were born and lived during the latter half of the first

century. This puts the evidence back to the time of the apostles.

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp. He wrote, “Christ came to save through means of Himself all who through Him are born again unto God, infants and little children, and boys and youths...” (S. p. 105) *Hippolytus* (born between 215-220) wrote in his *Apostolic Traditions* that entire households were baptized. “This included the children who cannot answer for themselves. Jeremias explains: 'We are told that it took place in three parts (children, men, women) and that the parents said the baptismal confession for the smallest children.' According to the best evidence, Aristides' *Apology* is dated in the second century. It too mentioned household baptisms. All the evidence indicates that infant baptism was the accepted practice from the time of the apostles.” (D. p. 102)

The Third Century – *Cyprian* (died in 258) was the bishop of Carthage. He rebuked a presbyter in Numidia who taught that children should not be baptized until after their eighth day. “And therefore, dearest brother, this was our opinion in council, that by us no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God, who is merciful and kind and loving to all. Which, since it is to be observed and maintained in respect of all, we think is to be observed in respect of infants, and newly-born persons...” (D. p. 103)

Origen (born 185) wrote on infant baptism, “The church has received from the apostles the custom of administering baptism even to infants. For those who have been entrusted with the secrets of the divine mysteries knew well that all are tainted with the stain of original sin, which must be washed off by the water and the Spirit. - In *Rom. Com.* 5,9 EH 249” (D. p. 103)

Tombstone Inscriptions of children who died in infancy indicate infant baptism. “Jeremias (in his book) includes a lengthy discussion of ...tombstone inscriptions that show infant baptism as the normal practice of the third century. But why wasn't there such evidence before AD 200? There simply were no Christian epitaphs earlier than AD 200. But when the Christian inscriptions begin, infant baptism is well attested...” (D. p. 105)

The Fourth Century – *Augustine* (born 354) was the great church leader from North Africa. He wrote, “Let no one mislead you by false doctrine. The baptism of children the church has practiced at all times...and had guarded it to this day continuously.” (D. p. 106) He stated that it came down from the days of the apostles.

Council of Carthage has this to say, “What we know of the history of the church indicates much rather that in the early church both forms of baptism, the baptism of adults and infant baptism, always existed side by side, just as they do today in the mission fields. This can only mean that infant baptism must go back to the time of the apostles. It would have been included in the practice of baptizing whole families to which the New Testament gives witness, even though children are not explicitly mentioned.” (D. 107)

Early Church Orders also speak of infant baptism (*Testamentum Domini*, 2:8; the so-called Egyptian Church Order, 16:4-6; the so-called *Canons of Hippolytus*, 19:112-114, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, 6:15, etc.). There is no evidence anywhere in the early church to suggest that infant baptism was not apostolic practice from the very start. At a later time Augustine stated that no council commanded infant baptism, but that the practice had come down from the apostles, adding that he never heard or read of anyone in the church who held otherwise.” (S. p. 106-107)

How did John baptize?

There are so many who assume that he immersed because he baptized at the Jordan. But just because he was where there was a lot of water does not mean he immersed. People could go into the water and still have water poured or sprinkled on them. Don't forget the Ezekiel prophecy about sprinkling many

nations. Also remember how John said he baptized with water but there was one coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt. 3:11). On Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out and tongues of fire appeared on the apostles' heads. If in the same sentence John uses the word 'baptize' for pouring when it was Jesus' baptism, why not for John's baptizing also? The same word in the one sentence used twice and with one in clear relation to the other.

Anyone who reads the Old Testament cannot miss the 'sprinkling' over and over again. On the great Day of Atonement there was the sprinkling of blood to make atonement. Lev. 16:14-15, 19 But there was much more.

- Lev. 14:7-9, 15-18 – The sprinkling of oil for cleansing from leprosy.
- Lev. 14:49-51 – The sprinkling of water and bird-blood to cleanse a mouldy household
- Num. 8:5-7 – The sprinkling of clean water at the initiation of the Levites
- Ex. 24:8 – The blood sacrifice for the people was represented by the sprinkling.

In the New Testament also we have the sprinkling mentioned.

- 1 Pet. 1:2 – we are “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with His blood.”
- Heb. 12:24 - “and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.”
- Heb. 9:13-14 - “For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”
- Heb. 10:22 - “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”
- Heb. 9:10 - This refers back to diverse baptisms in the Old Testament, which can only refer to the sprinklings of water, blood, oil, or ashes. On the ashes of the red heifer with ashes is explained by the Jewish authority “Josephus in his Jewish Antiquities (IV,4) ...'baptizing by the ashes put into spring water, they sprinkled on the third and seventh day.’” (S. p. 122)

So the idea of baptizing with sprinkling of water would fit in with the Old Testament pictures. At least fifty three times in the Old Testament and seven in the New we have 'sprinkling', but not so with immerse. Think of Ps. 51:7 “Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.” Small advances this thought, “When we assume that John stood in the stream and used a bunch of hyssop, dipping it into the running water and sprinkling it upon the thousands who came, everything recorded applies without added explanation and without major problems of interpretation.” (S. p. 130)

Small also brings up a grammatical point against immersion, but in favor of pouring or sprinkling. “Grammarians point out that in three of the eight instances where water baptism is spoken of, there is no preposition at all. The word 'water' is in the dative case, obviously as a dative of means. The only accurate translation is: 'I baptize you *with* water.' This construction would not be employed if the intent were to say 'in water,' nor would one say 'I immerse you *with* water.’” (S. p. 130)

Small has a fine study in pp. 141-153 how baptizo was used in a variety of literature. He points up that it did not mean always immerse or dip in various writings. The word itself was changing in its usage over the years. As he stresses, what counts is how it was used in the New Testament, which is - pouring, washing, cleansing.

The idea of immersing is just not very present. In ceremonial washing we have the six waterpots in John 2:6 which were used in the Jewish manner of purifying. The water was poured or sprinkled from them. People did not dip their hands in to wash. “Rabbis tell us today that the Jews never baptize their hands except in running water, for still water represents corruption and death, while running water represents life and the quickening influences of God's Spirit. To the Jew the amount of water is without meaning; the tiniest stream of water would suffice for the most complete ceremonial lavation.” (S. p. 123)

Summary

We have gone from before John's baptisms to much later with the Jews even today to understand what John was doing in baptizing and to whom. The Jews grasped what he was doing and how. Jesus' baptisms by His disciples followed on John's and were compared by the Jews. As with John's baptisms, so with Jesus' disciples' baptisms. The use of the word 'baptize' in the Greek of the New Testament as John uses it was not an immersion type. Yet in our Christian freedom we grant that there can be baptisms by: Pouring, Sprinkling and Immersion. This the early church accepted and we do too. That babies and little children were included in the Jewish baptisms continued with John's and Jesus'. This we still hold to as did the apostles.