

THE SEMANTICS OF SACRAMENTAL LANGUAGE

With special reference to baptism

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Our point of departure must be the Old Testament, though the available data are somewhat scanty. We read in 4 Kings 5:14 LXX that Naaman 'went down and ἐβαπτίσατο in the Jordan seven times . . .'. *LSJ* suggest that he 'dipped himself'. N. Turner's view¹ that both middle and passive of this verb in the New Testament have the sense of 'allow oneself to be . . .' is hardly relevant here. But we should not fail to notice that he dipped himself 'according to the word of Elisha'. The prophet had told him (verse 10) to wash seven times in the Jordan and that he would be cleansed. In obedience he dipped and was cleansed. 'To baptize', then, means 'to dip', with an overtone of 'to cleanse' or 'to wash'. Perhaps we might render 'to wash by dipping'. It would seem that in further uses of the verb one or other of these ideas, if not both, is emphasized according to the context. In the present instance 'dip' is faithful to the Hebrew טָבַל and 'wash' is justified by the context. (The Hebrew verb can be used without any possible reference to washing: Job 9:31, RV, 'If I wash myself with snow (water) . . . yet wilt thou *plunge* me in the ditch.' We may find that the Greek verb is similar.)

Judith 12:7 reads: '. . . ἐβαπτίζετο in the camp at the fountain of water'. The RV translates 'washed herself' and A. E. Cowley² in a note renders by 'bathe' and speaks of '(merely ceremonial) washing'. In the following verse he

1. J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, III, Syntax, by N. Turner, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh (1963) 57.
2. In R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Clarendon Press, Oxford (1913) I, 262.

remarks that she came up, 'i.e. from the water'. The emphasis here would lie on the ablution rather than on the dipping. Compare 'βαπτίζόμενος after (contact with) a dead body and toucheth it again, τί ὠφέλησεν ἐν τῷ λουτρῷ αὐτοῦ;' (Sirach 31 (34):25). W. O. E. Oesterley and G. H. Box note the futile contradiction between the ritual act of purification and the immediate contraction of defilement again, and cite in illustration of the thought 2 Peter 2:20–22; Hebrews 10:26.³ Once more the emphasis is on the washing.

But in Isaiah 21:4, ἡ ἀνομία με βαπτίζει, the thought cannot be that of washing! Perhaps the meaning is that 'lawlessness overwhelms me', or 'floods me', arising from a prior 'I have been dipped in'.

In the New Testament 'baptize' is used only in a ritual sense⁴ though the element of dip or wash, or both, remains. It may be helpful to draw attention to certain phrases associated with the word and thus to lay a semantic foundation on which the theologians can build their superstructure.

To begin with, the candidates of John the Baptist 'were baptized by him in the river Jordan' (Mt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5, cf. Jn. 3:23). The river expresses the locality, but what did John do in it? The background of the word would suggest that he 'dipped' the people, but as they were 'confessing their sins' the rite would surely have been useless unless 'washing' was also implied. In Mark 1:9 we read that 'Jesus was baptized into (εἰς) the Jordan by John'. In the Koine εἰς and ἐν are freely interchanged,⁵ but N. Turner thinks that εἰς here is 'possibly pregnant, implying the notion of coming'. The confusion of the two prepositions is freely admitted, but we do not have to say that every example of εἰς must be taken in the meaning of ἐν. It might here suggest 'was plunged into the Jordan'⁶ instead of Turner's implied 'He came to the Jordan and was baptized in it'. If this view is correct, the meaning

3. *Ibid.* I, 436–437.

4. *Arndt*, s.v.; *TWNT* I, 530.

5. N. Turner, *op. cit.* 254; cf. F. Blass, A. Debrunner, R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, Cambridge University Press (1961) 205.

6. *TWNT* II, 433; cf. Jn. 9:7 (Oepke).

'dip' is appropriate. As Jesus was the candidate, how far can we go in saying that 'wash' is also implied? Perhaps it is enough to translate by 'ritually dipped'.

Not dissimilar is baptism *in water* (Mt. 3:11; Jn. 1:26, 31f.). The ἐν may be instrumental, but must it be so regarded? Consider Matthew 26:23, 'the one who dips (ὁ ἐμβάψας) with Me ἐν τῷ τρυβλίῳ'. The ἐν must be local. Matthew alone in the New Testament does not replace ἐν by εἰς in a local sense⁷ and 'in' is here surely correct. The man dipped his hand *into* the contents *in* the bowl. 'To baptize in water' thus means 'to dip ritually'.⁸

Parallel to this is to baptize *in Holy Spirit and fire* (Mt. 3:11; cf. Jn. 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16). At such a juncture it seems best to say that we are given a picture taken from the act of ritual dipping but to translate simply by 'baptize'. It seems wrong to say baldly 'dip in the Holy Spirit and fire'.

There is a slight change with Mark's (1:8) 'I baptized you *with water*; but he will baptize you *with Holy Spirit*' (cf. Lk. 3:16a; Acts 1:5; 11:16). The simple dative is clearly instrumental. But it is hardly possible to 'dip with water'. The other factor comes forward implicitly: we need not argue that these differences were in the mind of the writers. The undifferentiated use of the word 'baptize' implies different emphases or nuances in different contexts and constructions. 'To baptize with water' suggests therefore 'to wash ritually' 'With Holy Spirit' continues the picture of washing ritually but it is best to translate simply by 'baptize'. Perhaps the theologians might consider the fact that Christ cleanses in the sense of removing the impurity which prevents access to God, but the Holy Spirit cleanses in removing all that impedes growth in holiness and Christian character.

There are two examples where either 'wash' or 'dip' is prominent, to the complete or almost complete exclusion of the other. In the passage on ceremonial defilement it is said that 'ἐὰν μὴ βαπτίσωνται they do not eat' (Mk. 7:4). The reading is inferior, though accepted by some commentators, but inferior

7. N. Turner, *op. cit.* 254.

8. *Ibid.* 252.

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or not it is evidence for linguistic usage. Somebody thought that the word 'baptize' was appropriate. In such a context 'wash' must be implied. Little boys 'dip' timidly in soapy water to avoid the defilement of cleanliness but Pharisees would not have done so without the prospect of 'washing'. Notice ἀνίπτους (verse 2), νίψονται (verse 3) and βαπτισμούς (verse 4). This is not the sacrament of baptism but it does show how the word is used (cf. Lk. 11:38 and context).

When our Lord said that there was a baptism with which He had to be baptized (Mk. 10:38f.; cf. Lk. 12:50) He can hardly have been thinking of washing. The picture is similar to that of Isaiah 21:4, or at least analogous. The waters of death will engulf Him; or, to keep to the figure, He will be plunged into death.

Dipping and washing are combined in Acts 22:16, 'βάπτισαι καὶ ἀπόλουσαι your sins, invoking His Name'. Here are two middle imperatives. Blass-Debrunner-Funk 317 take them in the causative sense (cf. *sich lassen*) of 'let yourself be baptized and get your sins washed away'. N. Turner, however, thinks that both middle and passive admit 'allow oneself to be . . .', though both voices at times become virtually an intransitive active.⁹ He cites Acts 9:18. Our present interest does not require us to bring out the aorist by the mere intransitive 'dip!' It is enough to notice the association of dipping and washing. We leave open the question whether the sins are washed away by the water or not.

A further factor now arises. The risen Lord in commissioning His disciples told them to baptize *into the Name* . . . (Mt. 28:19). In a linguistic study we need do no more than notice that this is into the Name of the Holy Trinity, whereas in Acts 8:16; 19:5 it is into the Name of the Lord Jesus; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:13, 15. From the point of view of words alone the Matthaean text resembles baptizing *into the Jordan*. 'To wash into the Name' does not make sense. 'To dip into the Name' might possibly be metaphorical though it is very unlikely. Therefore the verb must mean something like 'take them through a ritual act'. But it is not formal, or *in vacuo*.

9. *Ibid.* 57.

The act is charged with the picture of dipping or washing. And the context suggests further: 'take them through a ritual act and do it into the Name . . .'. In other words, 'into the Name' describes not the mere dipping or washing but the ritual as such *and its motive*. The Name means God as known, as standing in a relationship to men; not God in Himself, absolute, unknown. Now does baptism *bring* men into a relationship with God? If we emphasize the Greek expression we suggest 'so as to become the possession of the Holy Trinity', perhaps adding 'who is named in the rite'. But if the phrase is an original word of the Lord, spoken in Hebrew-Aramaic, there may be further questions. G. R. Beasley-Murray tells us that 'the basic meaning of the Hebrew *לשם* is "with respect to"; it can denote both the basis and purpose of that which is named'.¹⁰ I am wondering if purpose has been emphasized to the neglect of 'basis'. Thus in Matthew 10:41¹¹ a prophet is received *because* he is a prophet, not in order to make him one. If the Semitic phrase is more elastic than the Greek, baptism into the Name may include the two ideas of 'because they belong' and 'with a view to belonging'. The implications of this may emerge later.

A slight change is seen when men are baptized *in the Name* of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:48 *ἐν*; 2:38 *ἐπὶ* plus dative.) The 'Name' suggests Jesus Christ Himself in His nearness, not His distance; as standing in a relationship to men. The *ἐν* may be instrumental. But if it is indeed 'a maid-of-all-work'¹² we need not be surprised if double duty is forced upon it. Here it looks backwards to baptism *in water, in the Holy Spirit and fire* and forwards to baptism *into Christ*, the link being provided by baptism *into Moses in the cloud and in the sea* (1 Cor. 10:2),¹³ with the additional meaning of 'in the context of (*i.e.* during the mention of) the Name'. This is illustrated in Acts 22:16, '. . . be baptized, and wash away your sins, invoking His Name'; and in Ephesians 5:26. This use of *ἐν* in the sense of 'in' and 'in

10. *Baptism in the New Testament*, Macmillan, London (1962) 90.

11. Mt. 18:20; Heb. 6:10 also?

12. J. H. Moulton, *op. cit.* I, 103.

13. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:13.

the context of' is broadly local. But who mentions the Name? It is the candidate as we have seen; but it is also the one who administers baptism. If we invert the passive verb in Acts 10:48 we have the form 'to baptize them in the Name . . .'. This is analogous to casting out demons in the Name, in the context of the Name, with mention of the Name (Mk. 9:38). A 'secular' example occurs in Acts 19:13, where some wandering Jews tried to name the Name of the Lord Jesus over those who possessed evil spirits.

In Acts 2:38 ἐπὶ means 'on the basis of' the Name¹⁴ and so 'on the authority of' the Name (cf. Lk. 24:47). Such authority is *exercised* by the baptizer in baptizing, *acknowledged* by the candidate in submitting and *confirmed* by the Lord in receiving him. In view of what follows it is not unduly fanciful to see a parallel between the water which receives the candidate and the Lord who likewise receives him.

For all the *baptizati* were baptized *into Christ* (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). This is analogous to baptism *into the Jordan*. The picture is that of dipping, but the translation must be 'baptize', because of the ritual and spiritual implications. Here we must see a parallel between baptism into Christ and faith in(to) Christ. I believe that the profoundest meaning of πίστις in the New Testament is trust, the conscious and voluntary commitment of a personality, oneself, to a Personality, Christ. 1 Peter 4:19 puts this clearly: 'Let them hand over their souls to a *trustworthy* Creator'. There must be some relation between πιστεύειν εἰς and ἐν Χριστῷ.

We now approach a point on this baptismal road where we reach a fork. On the one hand we have the road, *into Christ*. There can be no question of being plunged into Him and then brought out again. The final consequence of a believing baptism into Christ is to be ἐν Χριστῷ. By a rapid sequence of metaphors, not uncharacteristic of a Hebrew, Paul tells us that through faith we are sons of God *in Christ Jesus*; for all who were baptized *into Christ* put on Christ. If we 'put on' new clothes we are 'in' them. In believing baptism we 'put

14. F. Blass, A. Debrunner, R. W. Funk, *op. cit.* 235.

on' Christ. The sartorial metaphor illustrates justification: God sees us in our clothes—always.

But, on the other hand, there is another road. All without exception who have been baptized into Christ were baptized *into His death* (Rom. 6:3). Paul has to use an abstract term here, because he is going on to speak of resurrection; and he could hardly speak of being resurrected out of Christ. The picture of dipping is prominent in this text, though washing need not be entirely absent if we think of a series like: death—blood—cleansing. But it is a very long way round and I am not sure if the New Testament thinks of plunging into cleansing blood: the element in baptism is water. The blood does cleanse, to be sure; but it is sacrificial blood, not baptismal blood.

Now through the baptism into His death just mentioned we were buried with Christ. We were plunged into the—grave, cf. Colossians 2:12. Resurrection is not automatic or mechanical. The purpose is the new moral walk (ἐν Rom. 6:4) and it is achieved in a resurrection through faith (Col. 2:12).

Baptism into Christ; baptism into His death; burial: these are not consecutive actions but are coincident; and the resurrection through faith is almost coincident, though the moral walk must continue. The picture of the plunge into the watery grave is possible only by the use of abstract terms. We are not raised out of Christ but we can be raised out of death. The implication surely is that we are baptized into Christ crucified: plunged into Him, to remain for ever ἐν Χριστῷ; put into new clothes, to stay in them for ever; and by dwelling on the abstract terms to see a parallel between ourselves and the Lord: we died. Our death is the important factor. When did we die? We died to sin, to self, when our self-will was broken and we surrendered in repentance and faith to Christ.¹⁵ Baptism tells that story, with its moral implications and vocation. It is a ritual plunge. If we view it as 'into Christ', then the candidate stays in Him. If we think of it as a burial

15. See R. Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St Paul*, Blackwell, Oxford (1964) 63, 66. Was it 'when the step of faith was taken' or 'in baptism'?

there is the possibility of resurrection; and to complete the picture we can add that it is through faith and with Christ: with Him in the experience of faith and with Him in the likeness of His resurrection (Rom. 6:5).

Baptism is also *into one Body* (1 Cor. 12:13). This is a plunge (to keep to the picture), to which we gladly submit, into the church, provided we regard the Body as consisting of the Head and the members together. For all the members are *in Christ*. The body is one and has many members; so also is Christ (1 Cor. 12:12).

It is now almost time to try to sum up and say what actually happens in baptism. But first we must point out some linguistic features. βαπτίζω seems to mean (1) to dip; (2) to wash; and (3) to perform a ritual act. It is helpful to seek the use of an analogy and I quote C. H. Dodd in an important article in *The Expository Times*.¹⁶ 'We are disposed to say, πνεῦμα means (a) breath, (b) wind, (c) spirit. But it is pretty certain that the Greek who said πνεῦμα did not keep them as neatly separated as that; else John would not have been able to say, τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ . . . οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος (Jn. 3:8). We have no alternative but to render "wind" in the first clause and "spirit" in the second, but we have lost something in doing so.' Dodd goes on to speak of 'a unity of concept which we cannot reproduce in English'. A similar example may be seen in the verb ἀπόλλυμι with its meanings 'destroy', 'ruin', 'waste', 'lose'. Similarly, I suggest, there is a unity of concept in βαπτίζω in accordance with which a Greek would not neatly separate out the separate meanings of 'dip', 'wash', and 'perform a ritual act'. We may feel the impact of one or other meaning in a given context. The word is like a trident, with one unitary concept as the long handle, the three teeth remaining joined together but sometimes only one felt by us.

Another factor is that of metaphor. We ourselves prefer them unmixed and should not follow the pope who once remarked that 'we are now reaping the bitter frost of life'. But the New Testament can use the verb 'to baptize' and at the

16. 72.9 (June 1961) 272.

same time associate with it the putting on of clothes. We have to allow for all this in attempting a summary view of baptism.

We have seen that the phrase 'into the Name' as a reflection of Hebrew-Aramaic usage can denote both basis and purpose. We may grant that baptism is with a view to candidates belonging to the Lord. But if 'basis' is allowable, do not believers belong to Christ before they are baptized? It may be that conversion and baptism are one event, if baptism followed 'immediately'. But what is 'immediately'? If a man were converted at Troas at midnight, would there be a pool available? How long elapsed before Dionysius the Areopagite who believed was brought to baptism? However united conversion and baptism may be (and a ninety-year-old man has *one* life: it can contain long intervals) there must be an appreciable leeway before water can be found. During the interval does the believer belong to Christ or does he not? We can only say that he does.

Consider again baptism *in the context of the Name*. The baptizer has authority to baptize: he has been commanded to do so. By whom? By Him who is Saviour and Lord. The candidate is willing to submit to baptism. Why? Because (and he thereby acknowledges that) Jesus is already his Saviour and his Lord. If He were not that already, why submit? The Lord Himself, like the very water, receives the candidate into Himself (sometimes called incorporation), because He has already done so. If Paul is right in his doctrine and experience of justification by faith and sonship by faith, it cannot be right to say that the believing man is not in Christ until he has been baptized.

What then 'happens' in baptism? It pictures, actualizes, brings into a focus, and seals, what has already happened. It 'externalizes' what has up to now been an inner spiritual experience. And by externalizing it it brings it—as far as spiritual matters can be so brought—under the scrutiny of witnesses.

We have used the word 'focus'. Baptism is a picture in miniature, though a three-dimensional movement of living beings rather than a two-dimensional painting of a still figure.

Purely by way of illustration an analogy may be brought forward from the Catechism concerning the communion service.

Question. What are the benefits whereof we are partakers thereby?

Answer. The strengthening and refreshing of our souls by the Body and Blood of Christ, as our bodies are by the Bread and Wine.

The quantities of bread and wine received are so minute that the refreshment of our bodies can hardly be seriously considered. It is a picture in miniature. And baptism pictures in miniature the story of the Lord's dealings with a man when he first put his trust in Him.¹⁷

17. In all discussion of the closeness of the relationship between faith and baptism, and of the unity of the two in 'one event', the following factors should never be forgotten:

1. The Penitent Thief. Lk. 23:43.
2. Simon Magus. Acts 8:21f.
3. Paul's spiritual principles. Rom. 2:28f.; 9:6f.; 1 Cor. 10:1-11.
4. The empirical evidence, e.g. the baptism of such a man as Stalin.