

## STUDY 2

# Something New Is Here<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I want to make some suggestions. The first is that wherever baptism is discussed, people will think in terms of water baptism. Discussions concerning how much water is used or who gets wet (or perhaps, who gets slightly damp) are regarded as nitpicking by all except those involved in the discussion. Two thousand years of church history cannot, and perhaps should not, be brushed aside as irrelevant. Then I want to suggest that church history also teaches us how quickly the church drifts from the core issues of the gospel. The letter to the Galatians is clear evidence of that: ‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel’ (Gal. 1:6).<sup>2</sup> I want to suggest that because of that drift from the gospel, we have been saddled with an explanation of baptism which has grown out of human rationalisations rather than apostolic testimony. Instead of reading back our doctrinal positions (perhaps at times drawn from rationalisations of practice) into the text, we must face the possibility that we are wrong and come humbly to the apostles and ask them to teach us again the first principles. That may lead us to see that our evaluation of baptism in the New Testament differs dramatically from what has been and is being taught. Basically, though, my concern is that, if we are not ourselves gripped by the power of the apostolic gospel, the tug of the past will still have such strong effects.

Pastorally, baptism can be a very difficult issue. Men in the pastoral ministry in those denominations baptising infants often have to face the incessant demands of people outside the church for it to be administered almost at the whim of those requesting it. In any event, baptism is administered often many years before the candidate comes to a conscious faith (if ever—realistically it must be said that the vast majority of those baptised as infants in our churches never *show* any sign that the prayer offered at baptism was effective). Those in denominations practising ‘believers’ baptism’,<sup>3</sup> while not subject to the same demands from unbelievers, are not immune from difficulty either. It is not impossible that, for them, baptism can be a mark of maturity, as if to say, baptism is a step of obedience which one takes, sometimes many years after becoming a believer.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws heavily on my little booklet, *The Baptism of John: Its Significance for the Understanding of Christian Baptism* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1987). When that was written, parts of the church were enmeshed in controversies concerning baptismal practice, especially questions of re-baptism.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> A strange phrase, since, to my knowledge, no group has ever practiced ‘unbelievers’ baptism’.

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The New Testament evidence points to neither of these extremes. In the New Testament, baptism (whatever we mean by it) does not anticipate conversion, neither does it follow it after a space of some time, either of catechising or maturing. In the New Testament, baptism seems to be virtually identified with regeneration, as for example when Saul was instructed to ‘Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name’ (Acts 22:16; cf. 2:21).

An examination of church history is of little help in an attempt to come to some solution. It is easy to see how certain practices have arisen, and to judge them as wrong, per se, would show a profound lack of understanding on our part. But nevertheless we do find that our approach to the subject of baptism is significantly clouded by the practices in which we engage. The purpose of this study is to approach the subject as far as possible without the preconceptions which our confessional theology and church practice impose upon us. Of course neutrality is not possible. So, for the present, the aim is not to justify any position at all. I do not wish to defend any position because simply we might all be wrong. Only a careful and, as far as possible, unbiased examination of scripture will help us to come to a conclusion.

### **THE SEPTUAGINT**

In the previous paper for this school, I set out the Greek words used for baptism in the scriptures.<sup>4</sup> What is plain from that examination of those words is that nothing in the Old Testament scriptures leads us to expect or understand what we encounter in the New Testament.

### **RITUAL WASHINGS**

The New Testament uses two related nouns, *baptisma* and *baptismos*. The former is the word used for ‘baptism’. The latter is used four times only—in Mark 7:4, Hebrews 6:2 and 9:10, and Colossians 2:12. In Mark 7:4 and Hebrews 9:10 the reference is clearly to ritual cleansings under the Old Covenant, and we see from Mark 7:4 that these were not necessarily bodily cleansings either: ‘and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing [literally, baptisms, βαπτισμοῦς, *baptismous*] of cups, pots, and bronze kettles’.

In Hebrews 6:2 the reference is not so clear: ‘... instruction about [βαπτισμῶν, *baptismōn*]’. The NRSV, NIV, ASV and AV all transliterate the word as ‘baptisms’, while the RSV translates it as ‘ablutions’ and the NASB as ‘washings’. The RV translates the phrase as ‘of the teaching of baptisms’, but gives the marginal (i.e. preferred) translation of ‘washings’. It does seem likely that this is a reference to the ritual washings of Judaism (cf. e.g. Exod. 19:10; 30:18–20; Lev. 15:8; etc.). In New Testament times, ritual washing was a significant feature of the life of many in Judaism, particularly among the more rigorous Essenes. The ‘baths’ are quite

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<sup>4</sup> See pages 1–3 in study 1.

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prominent in the excavations at Qumran, and also at Masada which was by no means an Essene establishment.

It may be, then, that these ritual washings provide some sort of antecedent to the New Testament practice of baptism. However, the dramatic quality of the New Testament practice is quite distinct from the legal stipulations of the Old Testament and of later Judaism. Furthermore, it is conspicuous that the New Testament uses an entirely new word (*baptisma* is unknown prior to the New Testament) to describe baptism, and *baptismos* to describe the Old Testament ritual washings, which includes the practices of first century Judaism. It seems that we could conclude from the particular use of the words, and from what we know of Old Testament practices, that there are no definable antecedents to New Testament baptism in the Old Testament.

### **CIRCUMCISION**

It is not at all uncommon to hear circumcision described as the theological antecedent to baptism, and in particular to the baptism of infants.<sup>5</sup> Notions of ‘covenant’ are brought forward to justify the practice but, without at this point going into detail, it ought to be said that this type of argument is guilty of ignoring the essential nature of the New Covenant. Just as one became a member of Israel and an inheritor of covenant blessings by birth, so one becomes a member of the people of the New Covenant by birth, but it is re-birth: one must be born of the Spirit and not of the flesh (John 1:12–13; 3:3–8). Under the Old Covenant, the physical sign of the physical kingdom was circumcision. Under the New Covenant, the sign of the spiritual kingdom is itself spiritual, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30).

In terms of the covenant, the line is drawn directly from circumcision to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Even if New Testament water baptism does relate in some way to the baptism with the Holy Spirit, as it certainly does (see Matt. 3:11; etc.), it still provides no antecedent for New Testament baptismal practice in the rite of circumcision. This, of course, is obvious from the total failure of the New Testament (and indeed in Galatians it is total refusal!) to make the connection.

### **THE BAPTISM OF JOHN**

If it is true that the canonical history of Israel provides no discernible antecedent for baptism, how are we to explain the remarkable appearance of John the Baptist? The New Testament virtually commences with a practice which we have not previously encountered but which is presented, for John at least, as a very sensible and appropriate activity. There is no hint that the crowds found John at all quaint. On the contrary, almost the whole social spectrum is represented in his audience which was present ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα (*epi to baptisma*, for the baptism, Matt. 3:7), βαπτισθῆναι (*baptisthēnai*, to be baptised, Luke 3:7).

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<sup>5</sup> Even if it were the antecedent, it would still not explain the New Testament practice which, in form, is so completely different.

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My approach from this point will be to examine Matthew chapter 3 (and its parallels) with the aim of understanding the role of John the Baptist. This is necessary if for no other reason than that John himself, as well as Jesus, regarded the work of John as in some way preparatory and possibly even definitive for the work of the Messiah (cf. Matt. 3:1–2; Acts 1:4–5; 11:16; etc.).

**Verse one:** John is introduced by his title ὁ βαπτιστής (*ho baptistēs*, the Baptist). Mark calls him ὁ βαπτίζων (*ho baptizōn*, the baptizer). It is conspicuous that neither Matthew nor Mark mention the birth of John. As far as their narratives are concerned, John is simply introduced without any word of explanation. This is in contrast to Luke who, in 3:2, calls him ‘John [the] son of Zechariah’. The titles used by Matthew and Mark are no doubt intended to indicate the immediate association of the man with his main activity from the very beginning. However, it is conspicuous that in the angelic announcement to Zechariah and in Zechariah’s later prophetic outburst (Luke 1:13–17, 67–79) it is the content and not the form of John’s ministry which is paramount. John’s work was principally one of proclamation.

**Verse two:** John’s message was simple: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’. Repentance is literally ‘after thought’, then ‘a change of mind’. Of course the lexicon meaning of the word does not exhaust the meaning of John’s exhortation. To repent is to actively repudiate all that is ungodly in the past and all that is associated with it in the present, which by implication means that all the past and all the present comes under judgement since there is no point at which sin is not pervasive and active. Clearly, the other side of the coin to repentance is faith. If men and women are brought to repentance, that is to repudiate all that is ungodly in their lives, there is no alternative than to cry out to God for forgiveness and to trust him totally.<sup>6</sup> The reason for John’s appeal is the imminent appearing of the kingdom of heaven. For those who do not repent it will be a day of wrath (v. 7) and that day is already dawning (v. 10). John’s message is, then, one of great urgency. Mark’s version is: ‘John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mark 1:4). ‘[F]or the forgiveness of sins’ is εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (*eis aphesin hamartiōn*), which would make sense as, ‘with a view to the forgiveness of sins’, meaning that when the kingdom comes<sup>7</sup> you who have repented and been baptised will have forgiveness.

**Verse three:** The reason John speaks as he does is that he is the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy: ‘A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God”’ (40:3).

We must for a moment consider Isaiah’s purpose, which at first sight seems somewhat different from John’s. John is warning of coming judgement, Isaiah is prophesying coming salvation.

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<sup>6</sup> Hence Paul said, ‘For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death’ (2 Cor. 7:10). If it is genuine repentance, that is a gift (Acts 5:31; 11:18), since by the law of Moses, God is ‘shutting men up to faith’ (cf. Gal. 3:23).

<sup>7</sup> The Lord’s Prayer, though taken as a general prayer for all generations, is most likely directed to this situation. ‘Your kingdom come’ is the prayer of the penitent, and it is the message of the post-Pentecost documents, Acts to Revelation, that the kingdom has indeed come.

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C. H. Dodd, in his famous little book, *According to the Scriptures*, makes the significant point that the method of biblical study employed in the New Testament:

. . . included, first, the *selection* of certain large sections of the Old Testament scriptures, especially from Isaiah, Jeremiah and certain minor prophets, and from the Psalms. These sections were understood as *wholes*, and particular verses or sentences were quoted from them rather as pointers to the whole context than as constituting testimonies in and for themselves . . . it is the *total context* that is in view, and is the basis of the argument.<sup>8</sup>

We must, then, examine the context of any Old Testament quotation or allusion, and in particular, by Matthew's reference to Isaiah 40:3,<sup>9</sup> the first five verses of Isaiah 40. When we examine Isaiah 40 and then measure the ministry of John against it, we conclude that Matthew's application of Isaiah 40:3 to John is not primarily with the aim of making John a harbinger of judgement. The primary reference is that not judgement but deliverance is coming. The voice in the wilderness is preparing the afflicted people for a new exodus, and so he is speaking as the deliverer's prophet. The coming of the kingdom may mean a day of wrath for the impenitent, but for 'the poor in spirit' it is a rich blessing (5:3). How does someone 'prepare the way of the Lord' or 'make straight in the desert a highway for our God'? The answer, according to Isaiah, is by a radical change (40:4):

Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

John's word for this radical transformation is 'repent'. John the Baptist and the prophecy of Isaiah are then in complete harmony.<sup>10</sup>

**Verse four:** John's preparatory, prophetic role is reinforced by his appearance. He is obviously in the prophetic line of Elijah (2 Kings 1:7–8). His food was indicative of a desert dweller.<sup>11</sup> The similarity of John the Baptist to Elijah was more than physical. In what is probably the final prophetic utterance of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:1–6, there is a reference to the reappearance of Elijah:

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<sup>8</sup> C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (Fontana, London, 1952), p. 126—emphases his.

<sup>9</sup> Luke quotes vv. 3–5, Mark conflates Isa. 40:3 with Mal. 3:1, and in John 1:23 it is John the Baptist who applies Isa. 40:3 to himself.

<sup>10</sup> This is in contrast, e.g. with Claus Westermann, among others, who said:

Although we must therefore resign ourselves to the fact that 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness' as applied to John the Baptist does not exactly correspond to the Old Testament text which it cites, the quotation, with its differences from the original, has nevertheless something to tell us. It shows that, as a general rule, in dealing with citations of the Old Testament in the New, we must never set the New Testament version, its precise wording and meaning, directly over against the Old Testament original, but must take account of the whole road over which, through translation and other processes in tradition, the words of the Old Testament had travelled up to the point where they took on the meaning given them in the New (*Isaiah 40–66*, Old Testament Library, SCM, London, 1969, pp. 37f.).

Westermann's approach means, of course, that exegesis is always dependent on 'scholarship', since the history of translation and tradition will not be the area of expertise for most who read the Scriptures.

<sup>11</sup> Some have suggested that John's desert experiences were associated in some way with the Qumran community—certainly they were in the same general area—and adduce theological similarities as proofs. Nevertheless there are significant dissimilarities also.

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Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse (Mal. 4:5–6).

To understand John the Baptist, therefore, it is necessary to understand also what Malachi is saying concerning the reappearance of Elijah. He is saying that the covenant has largely been broken (cf. Jer. 31:31ff.) and that one is coming who represents the God of the covenant:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap . . . (Mal. 3:1–2).<sup>12</sup>

For those who persist in disobedience, that day will come as a day of destruction:

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 3:5).

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch (Mal. 4:1).

The similarity to John the Baptist's words in Matthew 3:12 can hardly be overlooked. For the faithful, the dawning of the day of the Lord will be a rich delight:

But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. <sup>3</sup> And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 4:2–3).

It is this note of healing, rejoicing, and deliverance from the wicked that we have already observed in Isaiah's prophecy. The messenger tells of coming deliverance. But the coming deliverance is not for those who presume on the goodness of God. On the contrary, the messenger has this to say:

Remember the teaching [law] of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel (Mal. 4:4).

God's command, through his Elijah, is that Israel should return to the covenant and resubmit itself to the statutes and ordinances. Thus, John the Baptist was like every other prophet whom God had sent to Israel; his task was to recall the people to the covenant. It made little difference that the prophetic voice had been silent for about four hundred years; the role which John was fulfilling already had its parameters clearly defined.

**Verse six:** The crowds did more than hear John; they responded to his call by being baptised. Their baptism was closely associated with his preaching. Mark says that John was 'proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (1:4). The

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<sup>12</sup> Recall Mark's use of this passage in reference to John the Baptist (Mark 1:2).

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command to repent was at the same time a command to be baptised. It is also noted that the baptism of the crowds was accompanied by the confession of sins. But is the relationship of baptism and the confession of sins a necessary one, or is it conditioned by other factors?

If we recall that the central feature of Elijah's ministry (according to Malachi) was to call people to submission to the law of Moses, then we may perhaps draw the conclusion that the fundamental feature of the baptism which John was administering was not the confession of sin but submission to the law. This does not exclude confession, but it does relegate it to a secondary role—that is: (i) baptism is submission to the law of Moses; and (ii) confession of sin is an obligation upon those whom the law condemns. It is the law and not baptism which requires confession!

A brief return to the subject of antecedents is due here. Though there may be no canonical antecedents to New Testament baptism, there may quite possibly be some extracanonical evidence, namely in the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism.

F. F. Bruce says:

A further analogy to John's baptism may be sought in the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism. A Gentile who was converted to Judaism had to be circumcised (if he was a male) and to offer a special sacrifice in the Temple (while it stood), and also to undergo a ceremonial bath. The date when this bath or self baptism was instituted is disputed, but as it was a matter of debate between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel it must have antedated the fall of Jerusalem and goes back at least to the beginning of the Christian era. Some members of the school of Hillel went so far as to maintain—for the sake of the argument, but hardly in practice—that it was by this baptism rather than by circumcision that a Gentile became a Jew.<sup>13</sup>

Oscar Cullmann, writing of proselyte baptism, says:

It may be held as certain that John the Baptist is involved in this practice; but at the same time he introduced the revolutionary and—in Jewish eyes—scandalous innovation, that he demanded this baptism not only from heathen but from all circumcised Jews . . .<sup>14</sup>

This means that John was treating all and sundry as outside the covenant. No one has the right to claim membership of the covenant people on the basis of physical descent (cf. Matt. 3:7–9). Furthermore, John was saying that submission to the law of the covenant will always result in consistent actions: 'Bear fruit worthy of repentance' (Matt. 3:8).

**Verse ten:** Because of the impending arrival of the kingdom, baptism may not be postponed with impunity.

**Verse eleven:** Submission to the law of Moses and hence to the God of the covenant, as expressed in baptism, is not the conclusion of the affair; it only prefigures the baptism which the coming one, the Lord (v. 3), will administer. The precise meaning of baptism 'with the Holy Spirit' is not spelled out here. Apart from the various prophetic references to this work of the Spirit in the Old Testament, we do not know

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<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, Anchor, New York, 1969, p. 156.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, trans. J. K. S. Reid, SCM, London, 1978, p. 62.

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what ‘baptism with the Holy Spirit’ looks like until it actually happens to Jesus and then later, at Pentecost, to the new people of God.

### **BAPTISM AS SUBMISSION—THE ILLUSTRATION**

If my conclusion about baptism as submission to the law of Moses is correct, then we ought to expect to see future baptisms corresponding to the pattern. Matthew immediately provides us with an illustration (*the* illustration) in 3:13–17, the baptism of Jesus.

**Verse fifteen:** Why was Jesus baptised? If the essential feature of baptism was confession of sin and repentance (however much they may be essential to John’s proclamation) then clearly Jesus ought not to have been baptised. Some have suggested that Jesus simply identified himself with those he came to save. But surely that involves a certain amount of deception; he was not a partaker of sinful flesh and the point of identification was not here but at the Cross, when he bore the sin of the world.

The solution lies in the nature of baptism as signifying submission to the law of God, which to Israel (the Jews) meant the law of Moses. To the guilty, it goes without saying that this implies repentance and confession with a view to the forgiveness of sin; to Jesus, quite naturally it need imply no such thing. Indeed, we would be quite shocked to read that Jesus was baptised ‘confessing his sins’. Jesus’ baptism refers only to his complete submission to God. Jesus submitted to the redemptive plan and purpose of God which was to be worked out through him. Furthermore, Jesus is ‘Israel my son’ who alone is God’s faithful covenant partner.<sup>15</sup> All the purposes of God are to be fulfilled in and through him. Thus Jesus said, ‘it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness’ (RSV). Baptism does not ‘fulfil all righteousness’, nor is it, at this point in any event, an act of special obedience. That which ‘fulfil[s] all righteousness’ is the total submission of Israel (in Jesus the anointed one, the Christ/Messiah) to the demands of the covenant. It ought also to be kept in mind that submission, although calling on a person for holiness, also brought him into the operative sphere of forgiveness *where that was needed* (Exod. 34:6–7; etc.).

One further instance can be presented to confirm the conclusion that baptism refers to submission; this time, however, as an indication of the operation of the New Covenant. In Acts 2:21 Peter quotes the prophet Joel, ‘Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’. To call on the name of the Lord implies submission to that name. However, Peter’s conclusion to his ‘sermon’ is, in Acts 2:36, that ‘God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’. The Lord to whom submission must be made is none other than the crucified Jesus. Only one response is possible to those in fear of judgement (Acts 2:37, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’), namely, ‘Repent, and be baptized’ (Acts 2:38), that is, submit. This time, though, submission is not to the law of Moses but to the Lord Jesus.

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<sup>15</sup> Compare Matt. 2:15, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’, which in Hosea 11:1 refers to Israel, while here it directly refers to Jesus; of course, both are true.



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### **CONCLUSION**

It is not at all hard to see, then, how it is that in the New Testament baptism is immediately associated with conversion and with all that is involved in it. As the expression of submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ it is the expression of conversion and rebirth. Nor is it hard to see why baptism is most commonly administered to Jews or to people closely associated with them, as I observed in the previous paper. The only antecedent to the command to baptise in Matthew 28 is the practice of John the Baptist.