

BROUGHT SAFELY THROUGH WATER: BAPTISM AND
THE COVENANT STORY OF ISRAEL

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Summary:

This paper develops a theology of baptism by examining its place in the covenant story of Israel. Its thesis is that theologically, baptism functions for the church as a fundamental sign of her participation in the covenant story of Israel as it is taken up and ultimately fulfilled by God's act in, through and as Jesus the Messiah.

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Introduction: Baptism and the Restoration of Israel

In the opening scene of Acts we see Jesus gathering his disciples together prior to his ascension, speaking to them about the kingdom of God and assuring them that, though John baptized with water, they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). Even as it looks ahead to the coming day of Pentecost, this specific reference to John's baptism inevitably harkens us back to the opening chapters of Acts' prequel, the Gospel of Luke. There John the Baptist responds to the people's speculations that he is the Messiah by announcing the coming of one mightier than he, one who will drench them not with water but with the Holy Spirit and eschatological fire (Lk 3:16). There too we see Jesus' own baptism and his anointing by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove (Lk 3:21); and reading closely we might especially note how, in contrast to the Markan and Matthean accounts, Luke's Jesus is seen praying as the Holy Spirit descends on him (Lk 3:22). This picture will find an important thematic parallel in Luke's later description of the church praying at Pentecost—"Jesus prays and the Holy Spirit comes [Luke 3:21]; likewise the church prays (Acts 1:14) and the Holy Spirit comes"¹—which suggests that for Luke, Jesus' own baptism is somehow paradigmatic for understanding the church's baptism by the Holy Spirit. Against the variegated background of baptismal imagery evoked by Acts 1:5, including John's water baptism, Jesus' own baptism and the promised Spirit-baptism, the disciples ask that poignant question which sits as a kind of thematic fulcrum for Luke-Acts: "Are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?" (Acts 1:6). As is underscored by the inferential conjunction οὖν at the start of verse 6 ("Therefore ... they were asking him"), the disciples' question here about the restoration of Israel flows logically and directly from Jesus'

¹ Charles G. Dennison, "How is Jesus the Son of God? Luke's Baptism Narrative and Christology," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 17.1 (April 1982): 17-8.

statements about the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit.² Though the connection may not be immediately clear to us, in Luke’s mind, and in the minds of the disciples, baptism—both John’s water baptism and the baptism of the Spirit it prefigured—is somehow related to the fulfillment of Israel’s covenant story in Jesus and her restoration as a kingdom over whom God reigns.

When we read Peter’s sermon at Pentecost in this light, the way in which baptism functions as part of the restoration of Israel comes into sharp focus. While Peter makes it clear that Pentecost is the direct fulfillment of Joel 2:28-9 (Acts 2:17-21), the larger context of Joel’s prophesy makes it equally clear that this eschatological out-pouring of God’s Spirit was to mark Yahweh’s act to restore the kingdom to Israel, to end the exile, and to bring justice to the diaspora (see Joel 3:1-3).³ Peter connects the Spirit-baptism of the church at Pentecost to the covenant story of Israel more deeply still when he calls on all “the house of Israel” to witness it as a sign that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36), using a covenant term for the nation that was significant in both the first covenant at Sinai and in Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant.⁴ And when the “house of Israel” is pierced to the heart with this message and asks Peter what they are to do, he commands them to repent and receive the sign of the restored people of God: baptism into the forgiveness of sins. Though much scholarly ink has been spilled over the soteriological implications of Peter’s directive here to be baptized “for the forgiveness of sins” (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, 2:38),⁵ the broader context suggests that “forgiveness of sins”

² See Marty Culy and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 6: “when οὖν occurs in the narrative of Acts, it makes ‘explicit the close consequential relationship that exists between the elements it links. The second event is the direct result of the first, and closely conforms with its demands and implications.’ Here the disciples’ question naturally follows Jesus’ statement in vv. 4-5”.

³ Though it is slightly obscured by the NASB’s rendering (“When I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem”), Joel 3:1 is clearly envisioning the end of Israel’s exile: אָשׁוּב אֶת־שְׁבוּת יְהוּדָה וְיִירוּשָׁלַם “I return/restore the captives of Judah and Jerusalem”; cf. LXX: ἐπιστρέψω τὴν αἰχμαλωσίαν Ἰουδα καὶ Ἱερουσαλήμ. Note also 3:2’s concern for the Diaspora: אֲשֶׁר פָּרְדוּ בְּגוֹיִם (cf. οἱ διεσπάρησαν ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, LXX).

⁴ cf. Ex 19:3: אֲדַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וְאָמְרָתָם לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וְאָמְרָתָם לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל “say to the house of Jacob and announce to the children of Israel; and Jer 31:31: וְכָרַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל ... בְּרִית הַדְּשָׁה “and I will cut the house of Israel... a new covenant.”

⁵ Lit. “into the forgiveness of sins”; Culy notes: “The prepositional phrase denotes purpose. ... It is likely that repentance and baptism were viewed as a single complex act leading to forgiveness” (*Acts* 44). For a discussion

signifies not simply the remission of individual sin but especially the eschatological forgiveness of Israel's national sin, and by implication the return from exile, the renewed covenant and the restoration of God's people.⁶ Thus Beasley-Murray's reading of Acts 2:38-9 does not say enough when he claims that "baptism in the Name of the Lord Jesus connoted not alone a cleansing from sin but an expression of dissociation from the rejectors of the Messiah".⁷ More fully stated, baptism here is a fundamental sign of the fulfillment of Israel's covenant story in Jesus; thus, with allusive glances back at Joel's prophecy, Peter assures his listeners in Acts 2:38-9 that with repentance and baptism they will receive God's promise to restore his people—a promise which extends to them, to their sons and daughters (cf. Joel 2:28 and τοῖς τέκνοις υἱῶν, Act 2:39a), to the scattered exiles (cf. Joel 3:1-2 and τοῖς ἐς μακρὰν, Acts 2:39b) and all those whom God calls (cf. Joel 2:32, οὗς κύριος προσκέκληται LXX and ὅσους ἄν προσκαλέσεται κύριος, Acts 2:39c). From here Acts will trace the restoration of God's people among all the nations, as the covenant promise indeed reaches out to "those who are far off," spreading in concentric ripples from the history-shattering impact of Pentecost in Jerusalem and moving out to "all Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth," in direct fulfillment of Acts 1:8. And as the boundaries of the re-constituted people of God expand, we see specific references to water baptism at each key moment along the way: in Jerusalem three thousand are baptized (Acts 2:41); then in Samaria, Philip baptizes "both men and women" (8:12); Peter baptizes Cornelius as a sign that "God has granted to the Gentiles repentance that leads to life" (10:47-8, cf. 11:16-

of the theological implications of this expression, see Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 369-71.

⁶ So Joel Green suggests: "Inasmuch as forgiveness was the means by which persons who had excluded themselves or been excluded from the community of God's people might (re)gain entry in the community, the promise of forgiveness has an obvious social dimension. More important still is the centrality of divine forgiveness to the restoration of Israel in contemporary Jewish thought" ("From 'John's Baptism' to 'Baptism in the Name of Jesus': The Significance of Baptism in Luke-Acts" in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 164). See also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 272-3.

⁷ G. R. Beasley Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 98.

18); Paul brings the gospel to Europe with the baptism of Lydia in Macedonia (16:14-15), and so on. As Joel Green suggests, “Luke’s ‘theology of baptism’ ... is related to his larger concern with plotting the fulfillment of the divine purpose to restore Israel—and, in doing so, to transform Israel so that its borders are broadened in expansive ways to include ‘the nations’.”⁸

While the disciples’ question in Acts 1:6—“Are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?”—may seem an unlikely starting point for developing a theology of baptism, it allows us to avoid for a moment that mire of theologically-bottomless debates about appropriate modes, candidates and sacramental understandings of baptism that bogs down so many explorations of the topic. It permits us, instead, to rise to slightly drier ground and discuss baptism in terms of its place in the theological narrative that the New Testament writers were telling about the covenant God of Israel and his act on behalf of his covenant people in the person of Jesus Christ. From this vantage point we discover a clear thesis: Theologically, baptism functions for the church as a fundamental sign of her participation in the covenant story of Israel as it is taken up by and ultimately fulfilled by God’s act in, through and as Jesus the Messiah. The perspective afforded by this thesis has profound pastoral implications in relation to our practice of baptism, suggesting as it does that to be faithful witnesses to Jesus (Acts 1:6-8), we need to move beyond conceiving of baptism primarily as “an act of obedience” or a “public declaration of personal faith” on the part of the candidate, and reclaim its place in the story of Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness that underlies nearly every word the New Testament speaks about this sacred act.

John the Baptist and the Covenant Story of Israel

In order to tell the theological story of baptism as a sign of God’s fulfillment of Israel’s covenant in the person of Jesus Christ, we must go back briefly to examine the ministry of John

⁸ Joel Green, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 172

the Baptist as it is described in the New Testament. There has been much discussion and speculation about the historical significance of John's baptism as a sign for the people of Israel. Some read it as a variation on the ritual ablutions of Second Temple Judaism that "had to do with ridding the body of uncleanness,"⁹ while others suggest that, though John likely "practiced abulatory rites which were common in the Judaism of his day...this does not appear to have been associated with his baptismal ministry."¹⁰ What scholars generally agree on, however, is that John's baptism was somehow a sign of the restoration of the true Israel. Robert Webb, for instance, argues that baptism was a preparatory rite for entrance into the reconstituted people of God: "As a corporate body, these prepared ones constituted the eschatological community of the true, remnant Israel, and it was baptism which prepared them, and so initiated them into this community."¹¹ Similarly, Colin Brown suggests that in Second-Temple Judaism, "although Israel was physically in the promised land and the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt, conditions were such that it was tantamount to living in exile"; thus John's baptism was a "symbolic penitential act of sanctification by which the baptized nation sought renewal as they turned back on the sins of the past which kept Israel in bondage, and returned ... to the land which Yahweh had promised their forebears."¹² In this light, Luke's claim that John preached a baptism of repentance "for the forgiveness of sins" (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν Lk 3:3; cf. Acts 2:23 above), or Matthew's claim that Jerusalem and all Judea were baptized "confessing their sins" (Matt 3:6), should not be read primarily as the confession of individual impiety for the forgiveness personal guilt. Rather, this baptism was a corporate act whereby individuals personally identified with, confessed and repented of the national sin of Israel—which the

⁹ So Joan Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 99.

¹⁰ Robert Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (Sheffield: JSNT Press, 1991), 196.

¹¹ Robert Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 215.

¹² Colin Brown, "What Was John the Baptist Doing?" in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*

prophets made clear had led to their exile—and whereby they sought a forgiveness which would mean the end of exile with the full restoration of the covenant people. As Meredith Kline puts it, “The time had come when here in the Jordan River, where once Yahweh had declared ... that the promised land belonged to Israel, he was requiring the Israelites to confess their forfeiture of the blessing and their liability to the wrath to come.”¹³ In a similar vein, Robert Webb argues that, “while John called individuals to respond, within the context of Second-Temple Jewish thought, the effect should be view corporately. It was all Israel ... facing imminent judgment, and it was only the prepared who would experience the fulfillment of the ancient hopes and promises for restoration (i.e., a remnant, or true Israel).”¹⁴

This historical reading of John’s baptism certainly fits with the broad picture the New Testament paints of his significance as a prophet and forerunner of the Messiah. It takes full account, for instance, of the one point about John on which all four Evangelists agree: that Isaiah 40:3 somehow forms the prophetic basis for his ministry (see Matt 3:3=Mk 1:3=Lk 3:4; cf. John 1:23). And indeed, when we let Isaiah’s voice “crying in the desert” ring out in the wider context of Isaiah 40:1-3ff., we discover that the whole text is directly concerned with the end of the exile and the return of the captives to Israel. Following Chapter 39’s narrative about Hezekiah, which culminates in the prediction of the Babylonian captivity, Chapter 40 begins Second Isaiah with the proclamation that Israel’s captivity has ended and her iniquity has been removed (cf. 40:2 *הַמִּלְחָמָה וְהָאֲרִיזוֹת*, “her warfare/hardship has ended” cf. *ἐπλήσθη ἡ ταπείνωσις αὐτῆς* LXX, “her humiliation has been fulfilled”). This declaration of the end of exile forms the prophetic basis of John’s ministry of baptism: a forgiveness of national sin which leads to the restoration of Israel as a covenant people over whom God reigns (40:1-3), a picture of God

¹³ Meredith G. Kline, “Oath and Ordeal Signs” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 27.2 (May 1965): 133.

¹⁴ Robert Webb, “Jesus’ Baptism: It’s Historicity and Implications” in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10.2 (2000): 284.

coming with his might, ruling with his arm, gathering together the flock of Israel and leading them back into the land (40:10-11). In a related way the Jordan River, the site of that miraculous entrance into the Promised Land under Joshua, may have had a symbolic significance as the setting for John's ministry. Brown proposes, for instance, that "John was organizing a symbolic exodus from ... Judea as a preliminary to recrossing the Jordan as a penitent, consecrated Israel in order to reclaim the land in a quasi-reenactment of the return from the Babylonian Exile."¹⁵

Added to all this, John's identity as Elijah, an identity the Synoptic tradition especially underscores through a variety of allusions and direct references,¹⁶ is intricately bound up with the expected fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. We note first how Elijah's own story, as a major chapter in Israel's covenant history, stands as a profound witness to Yahweh's covenant faithfulness despite the faithlessness of the people. The climax of the story, of course, is 1 Kings 19, where Elijah, despairing over the idolatry of Israel and the apostasy of her monarchy, flees to Mount Sinai where God first cut the covenant, suggesting by this action that God's promise to establish his reign over his people has failed. But Yahweh need not descend on Sinai in fire and earthquake and blasting wind here, as he did when he first made the covenant (1 Kings 18:11; cf. Ex 19:18ff), because his covenant still stands: as he assures Elijah with a gentle whisper, he has reserved "seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal" (1 Kg 19:18). Paul's citation of 1 Kings 19 as concrete evidence that "God has not rejected his people" (Romans 11:1-5) suggests that Elijah's story functioned for the early Christians as a profound testament to Yahweh's covenant faithfulness.

Along similar lines, we must consider how Malachi 4:5-6 promises the return of Elijah as the forerunner of the "great and terrible day of the Lord," a prophesy which the Synoptic

¹⁵ Brown, "What was John Doing," 45.

¹⁶ For a survey of such allusions, see for instance, Mark Öhler, "The Expectation of Elijah and the Presence of the Kingdom of God," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118.3 (1999): 468-73.

tradition applies directly to John the Baptist (cf. Mk 9:12, Matt 11:10=Lk 7:27). Of particular note here is how Malachi 3:1 describes this “second Elijah” as a messenger who will clear the way specifically for a “messenger of the covenant.” Given the singular form of the verb “come” (בָּא) in 3:1c, it is most likely that וַיִּמְלֵאךָ הַבְּרִית (“and the messenger of the covenant”) is an expegetical clause in apposition to הָאֲדֹנָי אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם מְבַקְשִׁים (“the Lord whom you seek”); that is to say, the “Messenger of the Covenant” is none other than the coming Lord himself.¹⁷ Thus, inasmuch as Malachi’s message addresses “mainly the Levitical priesthood (Mal 1:6-2:9) and the nation of Israel (Mal 2:11, 3:5, 8) for violating that covenant relationship,”¹⁸ the “great and terrible day of the Lord” heralded by the Elijah-forerunner will be a day of covenant fulfillment, a day when the “messenger of the Covenant” himself will come suddenly to his temple and confirm his faithfulness to the sons of Jacob (3:1-6). This, then, is the prophetic context against which John’s father Zechariah can declare—as he looks at his new born son and recalls Gabriel’s word that he will go before the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk 1:17)—that God has begun to act to “remember the holy covenant” which he made with Abraham (Lk 1:72-3). This proclamation of Yahweh’s covenant remembrance is the prophetic mantle which John has assumed as the eschatological Elijah.

The Baptism of Jesus and the Reconstitution of the People of God

Given the prophetic context of John’s ministry as it is outlined above, Jesus’ baptism takes on new and deeper significance. Webb suggests that by being baptized, “Jesus was agreeing with John’s vision of a reconstituted Israel. ... Jesus thus begins his ministry within an

¹⁷ See Walter Kaiser Jr, “The Promise of the Arrival of Elijah in Malachi and the Gospels,” in *Grace Theological Journal* 3.2 (1982): 225-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

ideological framework marked by this eschatological orientation.”¹⁹ This is helpful so far as it goes, but does not say enough. For if John’s baptism was indeed a prophetic sign of the reconstitution of the people of God, then through his baptism by John, Jesus signifies his identity as the “true Israel” who takes up this story in himself and fulfills Israel’s vocation as a covenant people in his own mission and passion. This reading warrants careful unpacking, for it suggests the basis from which we can understand the church’s baptism as a living sign of its participation in the covenant story of Israel as fulfilled by God’s act in, through and as Jesus the Messiah.

Though each of the Evangelists deals in their own way with Jesus’ as the “true Israel” in whom God fulfills the covenant, a close reading of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism makes it especially clear. We note first the significant contribution Matthew makes to the baptism tradition by describing Jesus’ insistence that John must baptize him in order “to fulfill” (πληρῶσαι) all righteousness (Matt 3:15). Of course Matthew uses the theme of “fulfillment” elsewhere to indicate the fulfillment of Israel’s covenant history in Jesus’ own story: the flight to Egypt “fulfills” Hosea’s vision of the Exodus wherein *Israel* is the beloved and called out son of Yahweh (Matt 2:15 ἵνα πληρωθῆ; cf. Hos 11:1); the massacre of the innocents “fulfills” Jeremiah’s vision of Rachel, the archetypal mother of Israel, weeping over her exiled children and receiving the promise that they will return from the land of the enemy (Matt 2:17 τότε ἐπληρώθη, cf. Jer 31:15-16), and so on (cf. also 2:23, 4:14, 8:17, 21:4, etc.).²⁰

In the theophanic revelation of Jesus as the Son of God after his baptism (Matt 3:16-17) we see specifically how “all righteousness,” and with it Israel’s vocation as God’s covenant

¹⁹ Webb, “Jesus’ Baptism”: 309.

²⁰ John Nolland suggests that “the language of fulfillment [in 3:15] is intended to pick up on its use in the formula quotations. Matthew 5.17 (“to fulfil [*sic*] ... [the Prophets]”) may serve in part to confirm this connection, by providing a bridge between the present form, with its use of the active infinitive verb form with no specific reference to Scripture, and the passive forms with clear reference to the prophets, that characterize the formula quotations.” “‘In Such a Manner it is Fitting for Us to Fulfil All Righteousness’: Reflections on the Place of Baptism in the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church* (Sheffield: JSNT Press, 1999), 75.

people, is indeed being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Though it is difficult to align Matthew 3:16-17 with a precise OT passage, it is likely that texts like Psalm 2:7 (cf. Act 13:33, Heb 1:5) and especially—given the Isaianic context of John’s ministry—Isaiah 42:1 form the OT context for God’s declaration that Jesus is his “beloved Son”. And when we turn to Isaiah 42:1 with Jesus’ baptism in mind, we see Yahweh choosing his servant, declaring his delight in him, and putting his Spirit upon him, in a passage that finds striking parallels to the theophany of Matt 3:16-17. Notably, Matthew will specifically apply Isaiah 42:1 to Jesus later as a sign of his Messianic identity (12:17-18, no par.), but will render *בְּחִירִי* (“my elect/chosen one”) as *ἀγαπητός μου* (“my beloved”). This translation is the more intriguing when we consider that the LXX translates *בְּחִירִי* in 42:1 with *ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου* (“my elect”), which suggests that Matthew is working with an independent tradition, one that understands the “chosen one” of Isaiah 42:1 and the “beloved Son” revealed at Jesus’ baptism to be one and the same. Though a full discussion of the Christological issues at play here is beyond the scope of this study, we must also pause to consider how the “servant” who is introduced in Isaiah 42:1 is envisioned throughout Second Isaiah as a personification of the nation of Israel (cf. Isa 44:21, 45:4, 49:3, etc.). That Isaiah 42:1 was indeed understood in Jesus’ day as a picture of Israel personified is reinforced when we consider how the LXX translates this reference to *עַבְדִּי* (“my servant”) as *Ἰακωβ ὁ παῖς μου* (“Jacob my servant/ child”) and *Ἰσραηλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου* (“Israel my chosen one”).

All of this suggests that when Jesus emerges from the Jordan river, still dripping with that baptism administered by the eschatological “second Elijah” as a sign of the reconstitution of Israel, and the Holy Spirit descends on him, revealing him as the true Son of God in whom the Father delights, his Sonship involves a calling as the “true Israel” who will take up into himself the story and fulfill the vocation of God’s covenant people. Thus, just as the nation of Israel—

the son whom Yahweh called out of Egypt (Hos 11:1)—emerged from the waters of the Red Sea as a “new-created people” (cf. Ex 15:17 עַם־זָוֵן קִנִּיִּתָּהּ), only to be led by the Spirit of God through forty years of testing in the desert, so Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan, revealed as the true Son of God, only to be led by the Spirit to be tested in the desert for forty days (Matt 4:1). As suggested by the references to Deuteronomy which Jesus uses to resist the Devil, Jesus’ testing in the wilderness is intricately related to his role in fulfilling the story of Israel: though Israel grumbled for bread in the desert (Deut 8:2-3), Jesus will be satisfied with every word that comes of the mouth of God (Matt 4:4); though the people tested God’s faithfulness at the waters of Massah (Deut 6:16), Jesus will not put the Lord his God to the test (Matt 4:6); and though the people fell into idolatry (Deut 6:12-13), Jesus will bow and worship the Lord alone (Matt 4:10).

To complete this picture of Jesus’ baptism as the sign of his identity as the true Son who fulfills in himself the covenant story of God’s people, we must consider briefly his ultimate “baptism” as the Son of God which his water baptism by John signified: his drenching in the agony of the cross, his immersion in the burial-tomb, and his glory-soaked resurrection from the dead. To this end, Kline’s reading of Jesus’ water baptism is a helpful first step: “As covenant servant, Jesus submitted in symbol to the judgment of the God of the covenant in the waters of baptism. ... For Jesus, to submit to the symbol of judgment was to offer himself up to the curse of the covenant. By his baptism, Jesus was consecrating himself unto his sacrificial death in the judicial ordeal of the Cross.”²¹ Though the sayings are absent in Matthew’s Gospel, both Luke and Mark describe Jesus referring to his coming fate on the cross as a “baptism” to be undergone, an overwhelming by death and humiliation which looms inexorably ahead of him on his journey as God’s Messiah (see Mk 10:38-39, Lk 12:50). Inasmuch as it clarifies the relationship between Jesus’ baptism by John and the cross, N. T. Wright’s reading of these

²¹ Kline, “Oath and Ordeal Signs”: 135.

sayings bears extended reference: “If John’s baptism evoked the exodus; and if Jesus’ central and final symbolic act, pointing to his own fate was a further evocation of the exodus; then it is not unreasonable to see this cryptic reference to a ‘baptism’ still to be undergone as an allusion to the fate he would have to suffer, and as investing that fate with exodus-significance.”²²

In a way that informs our discussion of Acts above, Luke’s reference to this coming “baptism” may have in mind both the Pentecostal tongues of fire and John’s promise of one who will baptize with the fire of judgment, for, as 12:49 makes clear, Jesus’ pending “baptism” will be the spark that kindles the fire he has been sent to cast on the earth. More significant to our purpose here however, is Mark’s account of the dialogue between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee, where the reference to baptism is connected not only to the cup of suffering Jesus must drink (Mk 10:33-34, cf. 14:36), but also to his “coming into glory” as the Messiah of God’s kingdom (Mk 10:37-38). If Jesus was revealed at his baptism as the beloved Son in whom God will fulfill his covenant promises, then it is ultimately in the cross that Jesus answers this calling. For there he endures a “baptism” of suffering whereby the “iniquities of many” are poured upon him as the one who came to serve, the one Isaiah 53:10-12 predicted would pour out his life as the sin offering by which God would ransom and reconstitute his covenant people (cf. Mk 10:45, δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν).

As we consider this theological progression, from John’s baptism that signified the eschatological reconstitution Israel, to Jesus’ baptism that revealed him as the Son in whom and by whom God would fulfill this covenant promise, to the “baptism” of the cross whereby Jesus fulfills the covenant story of Israel as the Isaianic servant who suffers for the sins of his people, what stands out sharply is that in Mark 10:30, Jesus promises his disciples that they will be baptized with the baptism he himself receives. Here Mark implies that our baptism somehow

²² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 572.

participates in the cross of Jesus, uniting us with the one who fulfills the significance of baptism in his death and resurrection. This enigmatic statement should point us inevitably to Romans 6:1-11, where Paul argues that whoever has been baptized into (εἰς) Jesus the Messiah has been baptized into his death (6:3), crucified with him (6:6 συνεσταυραῶ) and buried with him (6:4 συνθαπτομαι); thus through baptism we are united with Jesus in the “likeness of his death” (6:5 σύμφυτοι ... τῷ ὁμοιώματι τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ) and given the promise that we will be raised with him in the likeness of his resurrection. In light of the theological story we have told to this point, Paul’s argument makes perfect sense, for to receive water baptism is to participate in the covenant story of Israel as it is fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can participate in that story only insofar as we are united with him who fulfilled it. Here we have come to the heart of baptism as a sacred act, for here we see how the church’s water baptism actually participates in the “baptism” of Jesus—not just the water baptism he himself received from John as a sign that he had subsumed the story and vocation of Israel in himself, but more significantly the baptism of suffering that it called him to as he poured out his life for the forgiveness of sins. Thus we see that for Paul and Mark, as with Matthew and Luke-Acts, baptism is central to our participation in the covenant story of Israel as it is taken up by and ultimately fulfilled in God’s act in, through and as Jesus the Messiah.

Baptism and the People of God: Reclaiming the Narrative for Today.

As we turn from this inductive study to consider its pastoral implications for the church’s practice of baptism today, what stands out first is that, try as we might, we are hard pressed to find New Testament texts that explain baptism in language similar to the “public declaration of

personal faith” terminology common in contemporary Evangelicalism.²³ What we see instead is that, in keeping with the theological narrative we have sketched out above, the New Testament consistently ties baptism back to our union with Christ and our participation in the covenant story of forgiveness and restoration and blessing that he has fulfilled. Thus Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 that the Red Sea crossing whereby God created his covenant people was a “baptism into Moses” which is ultimately fulfilled by our baptism into Christ. Likewise in Galatians, Paul suggests that Christians, having clothed themselves in Christ through baptism, become children of Abraham and heirs of the Abrahamic promise (Gal 3:15-29). He further ties baptism to the Abrahamic covenant in Colossians 2:10-14 when he describes Christian baptism as a “circumcision made without hands” which unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection (cf. Rom 6:1ff. above). And on it goes: Peter argues that in Christian baptism we receive the anti-type (ἀντίτυπον) of Noah’s salvation, brought safely through the waters of the flood and into a covenant with the creator God (1 Pe 3:18-21; see also Isa 54:9-10); the author to the Hebrews implies that in Christian baptism we are “washed with pure water” and united to the ministry of our Great High Priest in a way that fulfills the Aaronic covenant, “administering the priestly bath to those outside the lineage of Aaron, and thus [enacting] the promise and threat of Shiloh: formation of a new priestly house crowned and enthroned together with Melchizedek.”²⁴

However alien it may be for Evangelicals to think about baptism in such covenant terms, it is vital that our teaching and practice of this sacred act emphasize the theological narrative of union with Christ and participation in the reconstituted people of God that underlies these texts,

²³ The document on baptism in my own church, for instance, offers these reasons for receiving baptism: “Jesus Commands It” (it is an act of obedience), “It demonstrates that I really am a Believer” (it is an opportunity “to go public with my faith story... and tell of my commitment to follow him”), “It demonstrates that I identify with Other Believers” (a sign of my intention to participate in a local body of the church). As for the “meaning of baptism,” it says that baptism “illustrates Christ’s death and resurrection” and illustrates “my new life” as a Christian. Nowhere does this document suggest that God actually says or does anything through baptism.

²⁴ Peter J. Leithart, “Womb of the World: Baptism and the Priesthood of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10.19-22,” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 78 (June 2000): 64.

for it teaches us to take our focus off ourselves and what we are “publicly declaring” by being baptized, and to listen instead for what God is declaring to us by his Spirit whenever someone receives a baptism. If, as James Torrence argues, Christian baptism sets before us primarily the baptism of Jesus, both his own water-baptism wherein he is revealed as the beloved Son, and his “baptism” on the cross whereby he obediently responds to this calling on behalf of his people,²⁵ then baptism should be an instance to graciously witness and receive by faith an irreplaceable sign of the response to God which Jesus made on our behalf as he fulfilled the covenant story of God’s people. This takes us well beyond simply describing baptism in more “biblically sound terms” and into areas with profound implications for pastoral practice; for when we learn to listen to what God is saying through the sacrament of baptism, what we hear is the same thing the New Testament authors heard God say to his people in this sacred act: “I am the God who makes an everlasting covenant with my people; I am a God of everlasting faithfulness to that covenant; You are participating in the covenant story of my people—a story of forgiveness and restoration and blessing—that I have fulfilled in Jesus Christ.” We can reclaim baptism as a powerful act of pastoral ministry, one that points people to the faithfulness and graciousness of God in Jesus Christ and helps them find their place in God’s plan to reconcile the world to himself, if we can teach Christians to “listen” to baptism in this way. As Michael Green puts it, “God comes to us in his free, unmerited grace. We respond in faith and repentance, and baptism signs and seals to us all the blessings of the covenant. Forgiveness, sonship, the Spirit, the new birth, justification, and the promise of life after death. All these covenant blessings are pledged to us in baptism.”²⁶

²⁵ See James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 84.

²⁶ Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), 51.

Reclaiming a vibrant sense of our participation in Christ's response to the Father through baptism can also help people discover spiritual freedom, psychological wholeness and gracious hope through this sacred act. In his *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, Andrew Purves argues that "We find and claim our own authentic personal humanity in the fact that God has been gracious to us and become one with us in Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit made us one with him."²⁷ He proposes that to become truly pastoral, pastoral ministry must emphasize as its starting point our union with the recapitulated humanity of Christ, and must acknowledge as its basis the reality of our participation in Christ's response to God as our mediator before the Father.²⁸ It is not primarily our psychological techniques or empathetic counseling that makes pastoral work pastoral, but our ministry of proclaiming the truth that "in and as Jesus Christ God has entered into our history in such a manner ... that henceforth, in and through the same Jesus Christ, that which has separated us from God has been overcome and we may now participate in God's life as beloved children of the welcoming Father."²⁹ The realignment of our thinking about baptism that this study proposes, emphasizing it as a sign of our union with Christ through our participation in the covenant story he has fulfilled, suggests a way in which baptism may take a vital place in that proclamation. As long as baptism is explained exclusively or even primarily as a "public act that expresses inward decision and intent,"³⁰ the emphasis inevitably stays on the work of the believer in deciding, intending and choosing to believe, in a way that inevitably casts him back on himself to trust in his own decision, intention and choice. If, however, baptism is understood as a sign of our participation in what God has done to demonstrate his covenant faithfulness to his people in the person of Jesus Christ, it can become a profound means of grace in the life of the believer that continually points us to his vicarious

²⁷ Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁰ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 101.

decision, intention and choice on our behalf. In this way, our practice of baptism can become what Thomas Torrence, describing baptism and Eucharist, suggests they should be: sacraments “of the finished work of Christ to which we can add nothing, sacraments which have as their substance and content none other than Jesus Christ clothed with his Gospel of atoning mediation and reconciliation. ... They are sacraments which by their nature direct us away from ourselves to Jesus Christ in whom all God’s blessings for us are embodied, out of whose fullness we receive grace for grace.”³¹

Conclusion

The preceding study has not been able to speak about baptism exhaustively, and, indeed, questions remain about this sacrament, rising like unscaled peaks on the horizon of future study. Among these we note: How do we describe the relationship between the reception of water-baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit? How should one’s reception of baptism be chronologically related to his or her confession of faith? How does our understanding of baptism as a sign of Christ’s completed work speak to the practice of re-baptism? What relationship is there between child-baptism and the covenant sign of circumcision? While these various theological spires must remain unclimbed, at the very least our understanding of baptism as a sign to the church that she is indeed participating in the covenant story of God’s people as it is fulfilled by his act in, through and as Jesus Christ, suggests a helpful starting place for our ascent.

³¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 90.

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