**Baptism: Cultural Background**

1. When it comes to baptism, there is a lot of confusion about what it is for, and even about what it is. Much of that can be cleared up by simply looking at what it meant in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture in and around the first century.
   1. Today we want to look at what the word “baptism” meant to the folks in the first century – our modern definitions of it don’t matter much.
      1. Webster’s job was to define what baptism means in English…not in Greek.
      2. If we want to do what Jesus actually commanded, and what the early disciples practiced, we need to understand what the term meant in their culture.
   2. And we also want to understand how they would have understood John, Jesus, and the early Christians as they went around preaching it.
      1. Baptism isn’t mentioned in the OT – so wouldn’t the Jews have been wary of John preaching about it? Why did so many of them accept his baptism?
      2. And why did the pagans accept it so readily? Did they understand the significance of immersion to obtain forgiveness of sins?
2. First, what did the term “baptism” mean to first century people?
   1. First, we need to understand that it was not originally a religious term. It became one long after the 1st century was over, but originally it just meant “immersion.” We’ll see that clearly, as we look at how it was used in ancient writings.
   2. Baptism in Classical Greek Writings:
      1. “Even thus did we bore the red hot beam into his eye, till the boiling blood bubbled all over it as we worked it round and round, so that the steam from the burning eyeball scalded his eyelids and eyebrows, and the roots of the eye sputtered in the fire. As a blacksmith plunges **[baptizes]** an axe or hatchet into cold water to temper it- for it is this that gives strength to the iron- and it makes a great hiss as he does so, even thus did the Cyclops' eye hiss round the beam of olive wood...” Homer, *Odyssey* (8th Century BC)
         1. The word here can have two senses: Literal: “to plunge into;” Metaphorical: “to temper.”
         2. Regardless of which sense we take this, we know very well that blacksmiths do not sprinkle water on their metalwork to temper it, nor do they pour.
      2. “Each wife shall rob her husband of his life, dipping **[baptizing]** in blood her two-edged sword.” Aeschylus, *Prometheus,* 863 (525-456 BC)
         1. Here it can mean literally “to plunge,” or metaphorically “to dye, stain.”
         2. When we think of taking someone’s life, blood is not poured on a sword, and it is certainly not sprinkled – however, dyeing it by immersing it in someone is quite an appropriate description of what Aeschylus is talking about.
      3. “[A person] goes to the hot-water tanks of the baths, draws **[baptizes]** a ladle full, and rinses **[pours it over]** himself.” Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle, *Characters* (371-287 BC)
         1. It is interesting to notice here the different words used to describe the actions of the bather at the hot bath.
            1. The person obviously puts the ladle down into the water to draw some up, so the word “baptize” clearly refers to submerging it.
            2. However, once the ladle is “baptized” and then drawn out, the person ‘rinses’ himself – that is, he pours it over himself.
         2. These two actions are clearly distinct from one another, and it is highly doubtful that a Greek speaking person would use them interchangeably.
   3. Baptism in Koine Greek (from around the time of Christ):
      1. “For both, being equally hurried by passion, and considering only what they desired to effect, not what they might suffer, pushed their horses with all their force against one another; and each with unerring spears, piercing the buckler and corslet of his enemy, one hid **[baptized]** the point in his side, and the other in his loins…” Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities*,  *5.15.2* (60 BC – 7+ BC)
         1. Again, it is hard to imagine a spear being poured into the side of someone, much less sprinkled…those translations make little sense here.
         2. However, if we use the words “plunged, buried, thrust,” or even “immersed,” they all make sense!
      2. The LXX, or the Greek translation of the Old Testament, also uses the word to translate the idea of dipping or immersing from the Hebrew.
         1. **Lev. 11:32** - “Every vessel…will be dipped **[baptized]** into water.”
         2. **Lev. 4:6** - “The priest shall dip **[baptize]** his finger into the blood and shall sprinkle (some) of the blood seven times before the Lord.”
            1. One cannot sprinkle or pour one’s finger into something.
            2. C.f. NASB – the Hebrew word is translated “dip.”
         3. **Num. 19:18** – “A clean person shall dip **[baptize]** hyssop into water and shall sprinkle around.”
            1. Note the contrast between dipping and sprinkling – again they are rendered with two different words.
   4. New Testament Uses of Baptism:
      1. **Mk. 1:9-10** – Jesus came “up out of the water.” Even if we render this “up from the water” as many sprinkling/pouring proponents want to do, why is this necessary if this is not immersion.
      2. **Rom. 6:3-4** – Baptism is described as a burial and resurrection. This is odd imagery if sprinkling our pouring, but fits perfectly if it is immersion.
   5. Early Christian Views of Baptism:
      1. Concerning baptism, baptize in this way: after speaking all these words, baptize into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in living water. If you do not have living water, baptize in other water; if you are not able in cold, in warm. If you do not have either, pour water on the head three times into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” *Didache* [*Teaching*] (40-80 AD)
         1. Notice that pouring is mentioned as a possible alternative, but it was *clearly* to be used on the rarest of occasions – emergency situations (i.e. death bed; jail; desert wilderness; etc).
         2. The order of acceptable baptismal locations is as follows:
            1. Living water – i.e. running water such as a river, stream, ocean, etc.
            2. Cold water – a natural pond or lake.
            3. Warm water – a man-made cistern or mikveh.
            4. And finally, if all this was not available, people could then have water poured over themselves three times – *it was a thorough dousing*!
         3. Essentially, the writer leaves open the possibility that immersion might not be possible, and in that event permits pouring, but in reality, how many times would this have really been necessary?
         4. Would the writer of this document have ever permitted pouring had he lived in our society which does not lack for pools of water?…we even have an ocean!
      2. “We are immersed [Latin: dip, plunge] three times, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord appointed in the gospels.” Tertullian, *On the Crown* (160-225 AD)
         1. This quote is interesting in that Tertullian notes that a tradition that had come up among Christians by this time was the practice of triple baptism.
         2. He is aware that this is more than what Jesus required.
         3. Notice also that this was written in Latin – Tertullian made sure to use the Latin word for “dip” – not sprinkle, not pour – to describe baptism.
         4. Isn’t it interesting that before the practice changed to pouring, and then to sprinkling that the first “departure” (if we can call it that) from what Jesus commanded was to add more water, not less?
      3. The first real example (not hypothetical, c.f. *Didache*) we have of baptism being something other than immersion occurs in 251 AD, with a man named Novatian.
         1. Eusebius records in the 4th century a letter that was written in 251 AD.
         2. “While being treated by the exorcists, he fell into a serious illness and was thought to be about to die. On the very bed on which he lay, he received [grace, baptism] by [water] being poured over [poured around] him, if indeed it may be said that such a one received it.” *Church History*.
         3. Notice that the water was literally “poured around” him.
            1. Everett Ferguson, in *Baptism In the Early Church*, suggests this meant they simulated immersion as closely as possible – wetting his clothes, the mattress, and anything else near him.
            2. So, even though the man could not make it out of bed to be immersed, they simulated it the best they could.
   6. Clearly, then, NT baptism is immersion – that is just simply what the word meant in Greek.
      1. Really, the only reason there is any confusion is that early translators of the Greek Biblical text chose to transliterate baptism rather than translate it.
      2. Had they not done this, John the “Baptist” would have been John the “Immerser,” and Acts 2:38 would read, “*And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be immersed…*”
3. How would ancient people (Jews, pagans) have understood baptism’s connection to spiritual purification?
   1. The Jews had long connected water with access to God.
      1. **Ex. 30:18-21** – The priests had to wash before they could enter God’s house. If they did not, and tried to enter, they would die.
      2. **Lev. 11:24-25** – Touching the carcass of an unclean animal would defile a person until evening, causing them to be unable to go near God’s house. Again, their defilement was cleansed by washing their clothes in water.
      3. Even outside of the Biblical text we see a very strong connection between washing and purity – even between immersion and purity:
         1. **Josephus on Lev. 15:16**: “But he that sheds his seed in his sleep, if he go down into cold water, has the same privilege with those who have lawfully accompanied their wives.” (Antiquities, 37-100 AD)
            1. Notice that Lev. 15:16 does not specify immersion, but that is how Josephus (and undoubtedly many other Jews of his day) understood it.
         2. **The Essenes** were huge into ritualistic washings that purified their members:
            1. “No man shall bathe in dirty water or in an amount too shallow to cover a man. He shall not purify himself with water contained in a vessel. And as for the water of every rock-pool too shallow to cover a man, if an unclean man touches it he renders its water as unclean as water contained in a vessel.” (Damascus Document)
         3. **The Mishnah** was a commentary of the OT – it was only in oral form during Jesus’ day, but was written down about 200 AD. It contains many rules that date back prior to Jesus’ time, and many that originated during the 1st century.
            1. It states that for certain LOM washings immersion should take place – the water must touch the entire body.
            2. The Mikvahs (water pools) used for these washings must contain 40 seahs of water (77-140 gal.).
            3. They had to be deep enough to permit the full immersion of an adult.
            4. They could only contain clean water (and the Mishnah specified exactly which types of water were clean, and which were unclean.
      4. In none of this was the washing considered a remedy for sin, but it strongly connected with purification and closeness to God, so connecting it with forgiveness and salvation would not have been too big a leap.
         1. This is especially true in light of passages like **Isa. 35:3-8** where salvation in God’s future kingdom was compared to life-giving water in the desert.
   2. The connection between washings and purification was not uncommon in Greco-Roman culture either:
      1. **Oracle at Delphi:** “Come, stranger, pure in mind, to the precinct of the pure god, after touching your hand in the stream of the nymphs. For a tiny drop suffices for a good man, but the whole ocean shall not cleanse a wicked man with its streams.”
         1. We need to understand that we are not talking about “eternal salvation” here, but rather ritualistic cleansing to gain the favor of the gods.
         2. Also, the definition of a ‘good man’ here would NOT be the Christian definition – they permitted pedophilia, lying in many cases, etc.
      2. **Pythagoras:** “Purity is through cleansings, washings, and lustrations **[**vessels for sprinkling**]**, along with various abstinences.” (570 - 495 BC)
         1. In Pythagoras’ mind, purity was not merely abstaining from defiling things, but also purification through washings.
         2. In his mind there was a restorative property to water that reached beyond the physical and went to the realm of the mind.
      3. **Philo** (A Jewish philosopher): “It is foolish to forbid entrance to temples to a person who has not previously washed and cleansed his body but undertakes to pray and sacrifice with a mind still soiled and spotted.” (The Unchangeableness of God, 1st century AD)
         1. Here he criticizes the pagans for permitting people who have washed to enter the temples before the gods, while not insisting that they also cleanse their minds of evil.
         2. This indicates that at many pagan temples washing was mandatory before one could approach the deity.
      4. All of this shows us that when the message of Christian baptism reached the “uttermost parts of the earth” it would not have been a totally weird concept to the gentiles.
         1. When John the Baptist comes on the scene preaching a “baptism of repentance for remission of sins,” no one said, “Where did he pull that idea from???”
         2. And when Paul arrived in Corinth, for example, and told his first converts they needed to be baptized, no one said, “Why???”
         3. Many of their religious rites had washing, or even immersion, associated with them, so baptism would not have been odd at all.
         4. Many gentiles would have already been at least somewhat familiar with Jewish washings, so Christian baptism (which they associated strongly with Judaism) would not have been odd.