

# Baptism in the Old Testament

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*“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him” (1 Peter 3:18-22).*

**B**APTISM IS INTEGRAL to the gospel of the Kingdom of God, but do we really understand its significance? In this article we will examine the Old Testament types of baptism in order to come to a wider understanding of what it means to the one who would put on the saving name of Jesus Christ. The gospel was preached to Abraham (Gal. 3:8), so it should not surprise us that the first ‘baptism’ also occurs in Genesis, as explained in the passage from 1 Peter quoted at the head of this article. Let us first look at its context.

## An act of faith

In 1 Peter the apostle explores the basis of salvation: submission. He establishes his theme in verse 10 of the first chapter after his greeting. He continues by describing the attitude of mind that is required in all those whose hope is in the gospel, that of “obedient children” modelling themselves on their heavenly Father Who called them (vv. 13-15). In chapter 2, Peter describes us all as living stones in a spiritual house (v. 5), as chosen by God to be a royal priesthood, called to manifest His glory. Peter quotes Hosea in describing us as God’s people (vv. 9,10). In being called to show God’s glory, we are called away from our own personal desires and priorities (v. 11).

The theme of submission now begins in earnest. Peter uses several examples of practical ways for us to show our willingness to submit to God: submission to kings and rulers (vv. 13,14), to all men (v. 17), to masters (v. 18), of wives to husbands (3:1) and of husbands to wives (v. 7). All this leads up to 3:8, where Peter exhorts us all to aspire to unity with each other in the ecclesia. We are all to be of one mind in seeking to follow (that is, to imitate) God (v. 13). We are to behave as Christ did (v. 16). This like-mindedness

will lead us to the spirit<sup>1</sup> of unity referred to in verse 8 and explained more fully in passages such as Ephesians 4 (see particularly verse 3 onwards).

This is the context in which baptism is brought into play. Peter is talking about the kind of faith in God that might lead us to suffering in the short term. 1 Peter 3:19-21 actually forms a parenthesis (read straight from verse 18 to verse 22 to see the main thread). Peter uses the example of Noah to clarify further the example of Jesus. Both these men submitted to God’s will, and suffered because of the disbelief of those around them, but were saved by God. Noah and his family made “the answer of a good conscience toward God”, that is, in believing that they could be saved if they obeyed God in constructing the ark. They were saved, not by the ark, but by the Flood itself (“by water”), presumably from the

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1. Where Scripture refers to the spirit of God, of Jesus or of man, we should bear in mind its meaning. The spirit of God and of Jesus is to dwell in us, not in a future sense, but now (Rom. 8:9; 1 Jno. 4:13; Gal. 5:25). We also have a spirit of our own (2 Cor. 7:1; Jas. 4:5) that requires cleansing. This spirit is not a mystical soul or presence, but simply an attitude to life created by a certain frame of mind. Linguistically, it is the word *pneuma*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *ruach*. It literally means a blast or breath of air, and figuratively refers to the expression and function of a rational mind. The translation ‘spirit’, particularly with a capital letter and the (ungrammatical) personal pronoun ‘he’, is very misleading, doctrinally motivated and completely ignores the context of its many uses, such as the passage referred to in Ephesians 4 and verses in 1 Peter. Although the translators have tried to blur the distinction, these references to a ‘spirit’ should under no circumstances be confused with God’s holy spirit, which refers specifically to His revelatory power (for example, by miracles or by the Word).

corruption of the world around them. This, says Peter, is a type of the baptism that can now save us.

So here are our first lessons: baptism is an act of faith in God and has power for our conscience. It shows our willingness to submit to God's will, no matter what, and it shows our confidence in His saving power.

### God's way

But what exactly is it about baptism that can "save us"? Salvation is of faith and not works, so surely the act itself has no inherent power? Let us look to the Syrian nobleman Naaman and the lessons that he had to learn, as recorded in 2 Kings 5.

We are more than familiar with this event, so the type of baptism leaps out at us immediately. By washing in the Jordan Naaman was healed of his leprosy. Likewise in baptism we can be healed from our sins. But Naaman's baptism almost did not happen. He was initially too proud to do as Elisha commanded him. He was hoping for a great miracle, a visual, outward demonstration of power (vv. 11,12), and instead Elisha (who had not even spoken to Naaman directly) told him to wash himself in a dirty river. Naaman had to humble himself and do things God's way, and if nothing else we can say this of baptism; we do it because God tells us to. As Naaman's servants point out to him, it is a little thing that is asked of us (v. 13); what objection can we reasonably give to performing it?

Naaman, of course, eventually came to trust the word that he had received and was healed, unlike the disobedient "spirits in prison" that we read of in 1 Peter 3. This trust in God is vital, in fact it is at the root of the whole purpose of God and the function of baptism. Paul summarises it thus in Ephesians 1:10-12, when he says that God has purposed to "gather together in one all things in Christ . . . that we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ". The relevance to baptism is clear; at baptism we are baptized into Jesus and his death. As we read in 1 Peter 3:18, his death and resurrection was the means of his victory and the reason why he now sits on the Father's right hand.

We are not the first to be baptized 'into' somebody. 1 Corinthians 10 tells us that the Israelites were baptized into Moses during their passage through the Red Sea (v. 2). So here is our next type of baptism in the Old Testament, back in

Exodus 14. Not only were the waters of the Red Sea all around the Israelites (v. 22), but it was also raining. Paul refers to the cloud that they were "under" in 1 Corinthians 10:1, as does Psalm 77. This psalm undoubtedly refers to the Red Sea crossing (v. 20), describing the parting of the sea (v. 16) and a huge storm, with pouring rain, lightning and thunder (vv. 17,18). The Israelites were literally covered with water, making the type complete. In fact, Paul actually calls them 'types' of us in 1 Corinthians 10:11; the Greek word translated "ensamples" in the AV is *tupos*.

### Born of water and spirit

So baptism is not the action of an individualist, but of a person prepared to become a part of somebody else. And this is not the end of baptism in the Pentateuch. We will now look to the Law for an explanation of Jesus's words on baptism in John 3:5: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God".

Exodus 29 lays out the procedure for inducting priests into the service of the tabernacle. They were brought to the door of the tabernacle and washed by somebody else. This was to "hallow" them (v. 1), that is, to make them clean or pure (the Hebrew is often translated 'sanctify'). This is the only time in the law when the priests were commanded to have a complete wash, and that by somebody else. From then on they had only to wash parts of themselves before entering the tabernacle (30:19-21). The similarity with baptism is clear, but the context of priesthood is interesting.

The story does not end here; there was another requirement. The priests had to be anointed (29:7), and not only the priests but the tabernacle and all its furnishings (30:26-30). In the commandments regarding the high priest in Leviticus 21:10-15 he is commanded to be holy specifically because "the crown of the anointing oil of his God is upon him" (v. 12). This is the same crown as is referred to in Exodus 29:6, and the same word is translated "consecration" in Numbers 6:7, referring to the separation of the Nazarite.

The anointing oil, then, was significant of separation and consecration; but that is not all. The spirit of God is also associated with anointing, and, like the washing, the anointing covered the whole body (Ps. 133:2). This spirit came upon David when he was anointed (1 Sam. 16:13) and upon the Messiah because of his anointing by

God (Isa. 61:1), to name two examples. This is the outworking of the type of anointing for us, and for Jesus. After his washing in baptism, the spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove. Perhaps this was what he meant when he said that he had to be baptized to “fulfil all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15); Jesus was fulfilling the type of a priest. We are also called to fulfil that type, being baptized into the greatest high priest of all.

### Having the mind of Christ

In what sense, then, do we fulfil this type? As already noted (see [footnote 1](#)), English translations are misleading in capitalising the word ‘spirit’ almost every time it occurs. This is obviously designed to imply a reference to the holy spirit where no such reference is intended, an interpretation rather than a faithful translation. In Romans 7 Paul expresses his frustration at his sinful nature but offers us all hope; at the end of the chapter he rejoices in Christ his saviour (v. 25). With the mind, he says, he follows the law of God even though he physically continues to sin. Notice how, throughout this chapter, Paul contrasts the mind with the flesh, describing the war between them for every repentant believer. The following chapter continues the discussion, using a different word for ‘mind’: ‘spirit’.

The contexts in which the two words are used in these two chapters are identical. In chapter 8 all those who are “in Christ Jesus . . . walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit” (vv. 1,4). To have a carnal, fleshly mind is death, “but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (v. 6). This mind (or spirit) is, of course, the mind of Christ (vv. 2,9). This explains clearly how, in the words of Scripture, the spirit of God and of Jesus can dwell in us (vv. 9-11). If we take on this spirit, this mind of Christ, and allow it to guide us and replace our own personal, selfish attitude to life, we will be considered the adopted children of God (vv. 14-17).<sup>2</sup> In the letter to the Ephesians Paul describes this in terms of becoming a “new man”, and exhorts us: “be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and . . . put on the new man, which after [that is, ‘according to’] God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (4:23,24). How appropriate that Jesus spoke of it as being “born of the spirit”!

What then of the holy spirit, which is clearly a part of the spirit (of the expression of the mind) of God that we have been considering? After all, the words we have been considering were origi-

nally spoken under the influence of the holy spirit. We are told that the disciples were literally baptized with the holy spirit by fire (Mt. 3:11; Acts 2:3,4), and, in accordance with those words of our Lord in John 3 about being born of the spirit (of which the holy spirit is a part), we must acknowledge that “according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit [or, better, ‘by the holy spirit’]” (Tit. 3:5).

Our anointing, our ceremonial washing, our baptism with the holy spirit (Lk. 3:16), is not accompanied by the ability to perform miracles,<sup>3</sup> so we should understand this as being “the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:26), which, in the context of anointing, makes an interesting comparison with verses that compare God’s Word to light-giving oil, including Psalm 119:105. The Scripture is surely the greatest of the gifts of the holy spirit, its words being God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16).

So Jesus in John 3 was speaking of being covered with water and with the righteous spirit of God. Before we draw our thoughts together, we should consider the third part of the core process of making someone a priest: he was clothed (Ex. 29:5,8). We too can be clothed, with righteousness (Isa. 61:10), and with God’s blessings that we can inherit through Jesus (2 Cor. 5:2-4; Rev. 3:5).

### Conclusion

And so we see that baptism forms a part of a much wider antitype, revealed in the glory of

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2. Under Roman law, adopted children were considered to be equal to the father’s natural children.
  3. As we know, Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 wrote that the miraculous spirit-gifts would “vanish away . . . when that which is perfect [that is, complete] is come” (vv. 8,10). Peter, in his speech in Acts 2, quotes Joel in reference to the gifts of the holy spirit (Acts 2:17,18; Joel 2:28,29). This passage in Joel is clearly a prophecy of the last days, for verse 27 can only be completely fulfilled in the Kingdom. The apostles and early believers were granted a glimpse of the Kingdom in these miraculous gifts, which will be given again when the prophecy of Joel is finally fulfilled. Therefore, we dwell now in the time *before* Joel 2 (when the holy spirit gifts will be poured out) and after 1 Corinthians 13:8 (after the temporary dispensation of the holy spirit gifts has vanished away). Paul describes this time in which we live as a time “when that which is complete is come”; the complete thing to which he refers can only be the words of Scripture.

God's Word. God has called us to be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6; Rev. 1:6), and baptism is vital in explaining this to us. This should, perhaps, be our conclusion: that there are some things that words cannot adequately describe. How can we comprehend God's love for us, or what it means to be completely surrounded and covered by Christ (Rom. 8:38,39; Eph. 3:17-19; 1 Cor. 2:9)? We are all familiar with Romans 6, but how can we understand what death and resurrection actually feel like? How can we understand what it means to be clothed with righteousness or to be washed from our sins? It is almost like trying to understand infinity.

And so we have this simple command; God asks us to experience this complete submersion

*"But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts; and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:14,15).*

## Your Letters

### Joseph's "mother" in Genesis 37:10

In "By faith . . . : Leah" (Feb. 2005, p. 38), Sister Ray Walker states that the "mother" referred to in Genesis 37:10 "must have been Leah". I share the view of Brother Harry Whittaker (*Joseph the Saviour*, p. 10) that it is difficult to come to this conclusion since Leah apparently died in Hebron before Jacob went into Egypt (49:31) and would not have been in the company that went down into Egypt and bowed down to Joseph.

Old Testament words of relationship such as 'son', 'wife', 'brother', etc. often have a wider connotation. In Genesis 30 the handmaids of Leah and Rachel were both given to Jacob "to wife" (vv. 4,9). If, as is reasonable, we assume that Rachel's handmaid Bilhah was younger than her mistress, it is possible she could have lived to see Joseph in Egypt. Perhaps Genesis 37:2 reveals that Joseph had a special relationship with the sons of the handmaids, here called "wives".

Some woman had to nurse baby Benjamin and care for his brother. May not Genesis 37:2 be a clue that Rachel's handmaid became mother to the motherless boys of her dead mistress? Bilhah might by the time of Joseph's dream have been

in water to help describe all these things. Baptism is not a mystical act, nor can it save us on its own. Naaman was saved by Elisha's power, the Israelites by Moses' power, and the power of these two individuals came from God. It can, however, teach us.

It can teach us about humility and God's grace. It shows our faith and willingness to do God's will. It shows our desire for the spirit of God to dwell in us. We share these things with Noah, Israel, Naaman, Jonah, David, the priests, Jesus and others. Now it falls to us to make good the spiritual aspect of our baptism, the washing of the Word in our lives and our consciences. We can show the mind of Christ in our lives, with God's strength.

regarded by Jacob as Joseph's stepmother, as we would term her. She could have entered Egypt and fulfilled the dream.

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### Britain and Tarshish

I would like to comment on the article "Britain in Bible Prophecy" (Jan. 2005, p. 17). It was encouraging to see the author, Brother Nigel Bernard, observe that Tarshish had clear connections to the Phoenicians and Tyre, ancient trade powers. In my opinion, when it comes to identifying Tarshish and her role in prophecy, this is about the only thing we can say with certainty.

While Brother Bernard's premise was that Britain is included in Bible prophecy through a link with Tarshish/Phoenicia, in my view he struggled to present us with substantive evidence for a connection, admitting that the archaeological evidence for a trade link between them was "understandably sparse". Yet in the same paragraph he asserts, "there is little doubt that it [Tarshish] relates to Britain". I find this overstated and unconvincing.