

Chapter 1

Ancient Purification Rites

Many primitive tribes and races practice some kind of initiatory rites. Admission into the tribe, consecration to the priesthood, or attainment of adulthood, may be the occasion for such ceremonies. Often there is some form of blood offering; either the blood of the candidate himself or that of an animal is sacrificed.

Other initiation rites involve purification, which is usually accomplished with water or fire. The ancient pagans practiced a form of water baptism as one of their purification rites.

“That a ritual washing away of sin characterized other religions than the Christian, the Fathers of the church were aware, and Tertullian notices, in his tract *On Baptism* (ch. v.), that the votaries of Isis and Mithras were initiated *per lavacrum*, ‘through a font,’ and that in the *Ludi Apollinares et Eleusinii*, *i.e.* the mysteries of Apollo and Eleusis, men were baptized (*tinguntur*, Tertullian’s favorite word for baptism), and, what is more, baptized, as they presumed to think, ‘unto regeneration and exemption from the guilt of their perjuries.’ ‘Among the ancients,’ he adds, ‘anyone who stained himself with homicide went in search of waters that could purge him of his guilt.’” 1

Tertullian writes that the heathen used baptism in the mysteries of their gods, “and they presume that the effect of their doing that is their regeneration, and the remission of the penalties due to their perjuries.” He concluded that the devil was imitating the things of God; “we find him, too, practicing baptism in his [subjects].” 2

Mithraism, a mystic Oriental religion, also practiced a form of ablution. “They believed themselves purified of their guilt by the ritual ablutions, and this baptism lightened their conscience of the weight of their heavy responsibility.” 3

Among the Jews purification by water washings was well known. The Levitical system of worship was of “divers washings.” Hebrews 9:10. The priests were washed as they began their sacred service. Exodus 29:4. Each priest must wash before he entered upon his daily service. Exodus 30:19, 20. The people were ordered to “wash their clothes.” Exodus 19:10. An “unclean” person who approached the camp was to “wash himself with water.” Deuteronomy 23:11. David cried out in his repentance, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity.”

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“Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” Psalm 51:2, 7. Isaiah pleaded, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings.” Isaiah 1:16. Naaman was ordered to wash himself seven times in the Jordan. 2 Kings 5:10. Jeremiah calls to Jerusalem, “O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved.” Jeremiah 4:14.

The rabbis instructed their followers in the practice of baptism: “The Rabbis connect with this [the washing of the clothes] the duty of bathing by complete immersion.” 4

Immersion was also demanded of proselytes. “One of the steps in becoming a proselyte was complete immersion in running water to wash away impurities acquired while in a state of heathenism. ... It is probable that in course of time the ritual bath was considered less and less as the means of purification from physical uncleanness, and more and more as a cleansing from spiritual impurity - from sin.” 5

The Babylonian Talmud (Mass Jevamoth, fol. 47) relates that “when a proselyte is received, he must be circumcised; and then when he is cured (of the wound of circumcision) they baptize him in the presence of two wise men, saying, Behold he is an Israelite in all things.” 6 Again (Tract. Repudii), “Israel does not enter into covenant but by these three things, by circumcision, baptism, and peace offering; and proselytes, in like manner.” 7

To the Jews the figure of the new birth was familiar, though Jesus gave it a new and deeper significance. When a pagan became a Jew he was considered as born into the family of Abraham; but this was largely in a legal sense, while Jesus taught that the new birth was a spiritual regeneration. “If any one become a proselyte, he is like a child new born.” 8 He was “washed” in the water. “Whenever, in the law, washing of the flesh, or of the clothes, is mentioned, it means nothing else than dipping the whole body in a laver; for if a man dips himself all over except the tip of his little finger, he is still in his uncleanness.” 9.

“The oldest of the Christian sacraments appear to owe much to Judaism. Baptism seems clearly not to have been a Christian innovation. It had been used as a Jewish initiatory rite for proselytes.” 10

Thus, when John the Baptist appeared, “he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” Luke 3:3. Notice his encounter with Jewish authorities: “This is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? ... that we may give

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an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?" John 1:19-22. He was not questioned on the ceremony he was performing. The point under discussion was simply, By what authority do you demand of us another baptism?

Thus challenged, John's answer was, "He ... sent me to baptize with water." John 1:33. He did not pretend that God had just originated the rite, or prescribed for John the details of its administration. But John was sent to baptize those who responded to his message, and he made use of a ceremony already known to his converts.

John baptized at Aenon near Salim, "because there was much water there." John 3:23. He baptized by immersion in harmony with the accepted method of purification.

"Jesus Himself was baptized by John and He esteemed John's baptism highly. It appears also as if many of John's disciples had gone over into Jesus' following. Hence John's baptism was taken up into primitive Christianity in its original significance of a washing away of the uncleanness of the old aeon, a cleansing necessary for the entry into the new Messianic world." 11

Jesus submitted to John's baptism. "Suffer it to be so now," He said, in answer to John's hesitation: "for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Matthew 3:15. The Galilean made no explanation as to the meaning of baptism, or its form or implications. He accepted the baptism then practiced, and His disciples baptized in the same way. John 3:22; 4:1, 2. He commanded His disciples to baptize their converts wherever they taught His gospel. Matthew 28:19, 20.

The apostle Paul explained the rite of baptism in more detail: "We are buried with Him by baptism into death," he wrote, "that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." Romans 6:4,5.

Paul was himself baptized in Damascus by the disciple Ananias. Then, obedient to the commission of Christ, he spread the practice wherever he taught, preached, and converted men to Christ. According to Paul's teachings baptism means much more than merely a symbol of purification, which it had been since time immemorial. It means more than merely an initiatory rite to enter the fellowship of believers, though it was this also. It was an announcement voluntarily made by the convert, many times in the midst of persecutions, that he was

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burying his past life, with its heathen vices or its Jewish pride and complacency, to enter into a new realm of spiritual life. “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Baptism thus became a sign of a revolutionary transformation in the individual, not merely a transfer of loyalties from pagan gods to Christ or from Mosaic rituals to Christian doctrines. It was a ceremony that cut across social life, and many times domestic life, as cleanly as would a surgeon’s scalpel. Adolph Harnack states that the ceremony of the individual’s immersion and emergence from the water served as a guarantee that old things were now washed away and gone, leaving him a new man. 12