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Baptism in water: its foundation, form and formula

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Abstract
Water baptism is the most common act of worship being carried out in any religious denomination. This article intends to demonstrate that Christian baptism did not occur from nowhere, but it is the result of an ascending process of purification rituals found in the Old Testament. Also, in the content of the article are presented other forms of baptism. Regarding the formula used in water baptism, the careful reader of the Bible, raises a legitimate question: Why did Jesus Christ command baptism to be done “in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28,19), while most often when the disciples baptized (in the book of Acts) they used the formula: “In the name of Jesus Christ”? This article aims to answer this question with biblical arguments.

Keywords: water baptism, the Trinitarian formula, repentance baptism, proselyte baptism, nations’ baptism.

Introduction
The doctrine of baptism is characterized as one of the most important biblical doctrines, having a frequent appearance in the religious implications. Anyway, the baptism is often inappropriately materialized as the reason of many polemics. The ritual of immersion is found in almost all religious denominations, especially for the Jews. In their case, this ritual is used mostly during the existence of the Second Temple, as its beginnings can be documented in the book of Leviticus. The first important act for proselyte men and women, which signified their entry into Judaism, was the ritual of immersion. This act was preceded by a time when those being baptized had to learn the Torah and the prophets, thus knowing all the Jewish traditions.

It is well known that the purification ceremonies, and here we encounter washing rituals too, in the Old Testament were related to the institution of sacrifices. There was also the idea that through the rituals of purification, those who wanted to come into contact with the Divinity could have an easier access. All of the Old Testament prohibitions related to the closeness to God, to the experience of theophany or related to the altar are relevant in this regard. The high priest before approaching the altar to make atonement for himself and for the people was forced to bathe and then put on the “holy vestments” (Lev 16, 4). After com-

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pleting the atonement of the sins, he must bathe again and put on regular clothes before entering the yard where the people had gathered (Lev 4,23,24). This did not happen because of an eventual contact with any sin from the Holy of Holies or due to the fact that he might have become impure because of the confession of people’s sins, but probably to remove the effects of interaction with Divinity before returning among men (Ezek 44,19).

Within the Jewish religion there were also other purification ceremonies, which were made especially at birth, or in case of illness or death. These were required to escape the danger of coming into contact with demonic forces. The book of Leviticus in chapters 12 to 15 prescribe bathing and other ways of purifying at the birth and even after birth, after sexual intercourse and other sexual problems, after the contact with a dead body or with a leper. Also, the Israelites had to keep away from any contact with animals sacrificed to idols and to keep clean for YAHWH.4

All these ceremonies for clearance and purification from the Old Testament may be regarded as precursors of the New Testament baptism. Israel reached a stage when these kinds of ceremonies had become simply cleaning rituals, without further emphasize on the spiritual and moral development of these acts. Motivated by this spiritual decadence, prophets had to condemn Israel’s misunderstanding of the religion of Yahweh just as a ceremonial religion, underlining that the rituals and the ceremonies cannot give the inside purity which is required by God. This purity is given by God through obedience. When the prophet Ezekiel speaks about the spiritual purification that God does, uses specific language for the purification ceremonies: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” (Ezek 36,25).6 One of the most profound expressions through which the purity is wanted, can be found in Psalm 51, 6-10: “You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. […] Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

Therefore, the Old Testament prophets announced the day when the house of David will be purified once and for, of all her uncleanness (Zech 13, 1), when the Lord will “sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” (Ezek 36, 25). Until then, the Israelites had to continue to worship God, being purified by the ablutions written in the law.

The Jewish baptism of the proselytes

There are some opinions, which say that the proselytes’ baptism is nothing but a generalization of the laws relating to the purificiation rituals from the Leviticus Code. As we

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4. Ῥιπλί: Βοτέζυλ κριστίν. 17.
5. Ῥιπλί: Βοτέζυλ κριστίν. 18.
reported above, the ritual of immersion had an important role in the religious practices of Jews from the time of the Second Temple. A pagan, who clearly does not respect the laws of purification, was regarded as unclean in the Jewish community and he was not accepted without complying with a tebila, a purification ritual.\(^7\)

Analyzing the testimony from Epictetus, the Sibylline Oracles and the rabbinic writings we can easily find out that in the period before the destruction of the Second Temple, proselytes practiced a ritual of baptism as a mean of initiation into Judaism.\(^4\)

The question which arises related to the proselyte baptism is whether it had any influence on Christian baptism. J. Jeremias and D. Daube believe that these two baptisms had many similarities between them. After analyzing the similarities between these two rituals, Jeremias concluded that “the possibility that they are only accidental is unthinkable; the only possible conclusion would be that the relationship between the two rites is a parent-child relation.”\(^9\)

D. Daube concludes that proselyte baptism was an example for the Christian baptism, both from a theological and catechetical point of view. Even if proselyte baptism and Christian are very similar, there are some serious differences, such as: proselyte baptism had the aim of purification, while Christian baptism emphasized an inner change; in the proselyte baptism, the pagan baptizes themselves while Christian baptism is administered by an appointed person; the eschatological significance of Christian baptism itself cannot be found in that of the proselyte.

So, we can say that considering the similarities between these two baptisms, inevitably we come to the conclusion that Christian baptism is dependent on the proselyte baptism.\(^10\)

### The Baptism of repentance

In 30 A.D., in the Jewish desert there was a simple man. He did not shock through his image. His entire wardrobe was composed of a camel hair shirt which he held close to the middle by a waist belt. We do know few things about his childhood and youth. The prophet Malachi was not speaking at random when he declared: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. 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). He was speaking about John. His message was this: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matt 3,2).

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\(^8\) Tipei: Botezul creștin. 26.


\(^11\) Tipei: Botezul creștin. 27.
Although the message seemed to be simple and short, it was a message which was to mark the past, the present and the future of all those who listened it and then applied it.

Unlike the proselyte baptism, the preaching about the kingdom and the baptism of John stressed the moral and the eschatological aspect: the moral aspect because it presented the need for repentance and the eschatological aspect insists on teaching about justice and the Kingdom of God.¹

People changed their life because John the Baptist’s advice was that all who want to be baptized must confess their sins before and only based on this they could be baptized. John appeared on the stage of history just where Elijah went (the Jordan River) and, in fact, he did nothing but continued Elijah’s mission. He came as “a voice” (John 1,23), which aimed to pave the way for Messiah. This training is achievable only through the repentance of all who heard the preaching of repentance. Repentance (eivj meta,ñoian: Matt 3,11) was to be presented as an absolute necessity and thus it became a basic requirement in applying the baptism. The baptism of John was so closely linked to repentance that it was called the “baptism of repentance”. This phrase has been used both by Mark (Mark 1,4), as well as Luke (Luke 3,3), and it represents the fact that baptism is an outward sign of an inner reality (repentance). Evangelist Matthew uses a different phrase, namely “baptism for repentance” (Matt 3,11).

**Baptism of Jesus**

John was in full activity. Crowds did not hesitate to huddle around him in order to be baptized. During this time Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan in order to be baptized by John (Matt 3, 14). When John sees Jesus, the one about he was told, he wants to stop Him saying; “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt 3,14). But Jesus replied: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.” John had nothing else to say, so he baptized Jesus. After being baptized, while He came from the water, the “heavens opened” and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. An unmistakable voice could be heard, the voice of God the Father, who declared firmly: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt 3,16.17)

If we look at the baptism of Jesus Christ as a historical event, we can say that it is often seen as an important forerunner of Christian baptism; according to this example, the last is established. There are two main similarities found by researchers: 1) our adoption as children of God is present in baptism, just as for Jesus and 2) in both baptisms, they sustain that the receiving of the Holy Spirit is associated with the baptism in water.

The first argument used to prove the connection between the Christian baptism and the baptism of Jesus is based on the concept of adoption (for adoption, “to adopt”) on baptism. According to this view, Jesus became the Son of God only after baptism.¹³ This theory

¹. Tiperi: Botezul creștin. 28.
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is based on the Father’s declaration: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3,22; Mark 1,11; Matt 3,17). Here are some arguments showing that this theory has no biblical foundation:

- Jesus is the Son of God before he is even born from a virgin (Luke 1,35-43);
- Jesus is absolutely aware of his status as Son of God long before his baptism (Luke 2,49); and the dialogue between him and John the Baptist, before his baptism, emphasizes this (Matt 3,14-15);
- The declaration of heaven in regards to him as the Son of God is repeated on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9,7). Neither then, nor at the Jordan is Jesus gives a new status, the one he has is simply conformed.

As a result, the adoptions theory upon the baptism of Jesus Christ is based on a misunderstanding of the reporting of birth, infancy and beginning his work.¹⁴

**Baptism in the name of Jesus Christ or in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?**

Edwald Frank¹⁵ believes that Jesus does not speak in Matt 28,19 about a baptism formula, but about the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and this name being the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, they sustain that there is no Trinity, just God revealed as Father, as Son and as the Holy Spirit. Frank argues that all the disciples were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and therefore valid baptism is in the name of Jesus Christ.

Below we will examine each passage which speaks about baptism in Jesus’ name, and we will notice that although the passages do not explicitly speak about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, implicitly we can understand that they are involved in the biblical baptism and not just in the formula of baptism, but also in the events that took place before baptism. This is because the function of baptism is more important than the formula of baptism. The baptism, as a symbolic act, must be done by immersion, but it is not the formula pronounced at baptism that saves, but the faith of the one who is being baptized. The analysis below is necessary both to understand why at certain times the baptism was performed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and also to demonstrate that the baptism in the name of Jesus does not abolish the Trinity or the Trinitarian baptism.


Starting from the 22nd verse, the apostle Peter does nothing more than to present both the Father and the Son. God the Father is mentioned by fifteen times, being called “The Lord”

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¹⁴. Tipei: Botezul creștin. 40.
(v 25b;34b), “God” (v 22b; 23c;24a;30b;32a;33a;36a) and “Father” (v 33b). God the Son is mentioned by twenty-four times, and He is called “Man” (v 22a; 23a) “Thy holy” (v 27c), “Christ” (v 31b; 36c), “Jesus” (v 22a; 32b; 36c), “Lord” (v 34c; 36b), “Jesus Christ” (v 38b). Even if it is presented first the humanity of Jesus, (v 22; 23), verse 36 clearly tells us that He is Lord and Christ. 


So we cannot exclude the presence of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity in the baptism celebrated at the feast of Pentecost. Peter’s message (Acts 2) was clearly addressed to the Jewish people (v 22a; 36b) who, as it is known, the greater majority did not believe that Jesus Christ was the promised One. Hence he told them that their God (whom they perceived as Father), made Jesus Lord and Christ. Those who listened to this message remained “cut to the heart” and came to the apostles to ask them what to do to be saved. Peter said “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.”

The legitimate question which arises here is why did Peter say that baptism should be officiated in the name of Jesus? Adam Clark⁶ says that Christian baptism was done in the name of Jesus Christ only to those who knew the God of Israel, but did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah promised by law. This principle can be applied very easily to chapter 2, since in this case those who have been baptized in water were Hebrew, and knew the God of Israel. They were not confused regarding the true God, but their confusion was related to Jesus, whether He really was the Messiah promised by God to Israel in the Jewish history. The baptism in Jesus’ name is a positive argument for certification of Christ.

Water baptism of the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch- Acts 8

It is true that in this case we are told the Samaritans who were converted were baptized in the name of Jesus, but we must see what motivated the Samaritans to believe. To see what has motivated the Samaritans to believe we ought to look at the message preached by Philip and what its basis was. Luke shows us that the foundation of Philip’s message was “proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (v 12). We understand from this that the baptism was not only the doctrine of Jesus Christ, but also that of God the Father. Also the Samaritans were a people who had some Hebrew knowledge. The inhabitants of Samaria believed in the God of Israel (Yahweh) and even knew that the Messiah must come. This can be seen in the response of the Samaritan woman (John 4,25) who confesses: “I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ).” So, they needed to be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus to show them through this that Jesus is the Messiah whom they expected.

In the same chapter is the narration of the Ethiopian eunuch. In this case the center of Philip’s message was Jesus Christ, presented as the Son of God. Even this passage does not lack references to the other two Persons of the Trinity: God the Father (v 26) and God the Holy Spirit (v 29; 39).

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The Ethiopian, being a gentile, did not only need to find out that Jesus is the Messiah, but also the God of Israel, whom he did not know. We can therefore say that in the description of his baptism, it was not necessary to mention the used formula. Whether the baptism used the Trinity formula or that of the name of Jesus, the baptism had the same role.

The Baptism of Saul of Tarsus- Acts 9

Even though this passage does not specify the formula used in the baptism of Saul (the name of Jesus or the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), when analyzing chapter 9, we see that all three Persons of the Trinity are involved in the conversion of Saul. God the Father is mentioned in verses 10, 11, 13 and 15, Jesus (God the Son) in the verses: 5, 17, and God the Holy Spirit in verse 17c. Thus, it can easily be seen what doctrine he believed in before being baptized, because of what he began preaching immediately after his baptism, namely that “Jesus is the Son of God”. But, up to his conversion, Saul could not stand the name Jesus, now, after his baptism, he does not only esteem and proclaim the name of Jesus, but he also tells a very correct doctrine- that Jesus is the Son of God before whom he bows and passionately worships.

Frank states that Saul was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, citing this passage in Romans 6:3-4 as his proof: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Frank’s assumption cannot be taken as an argument in the favor of the abolition of the Trinitarian baptism. But, even if Saul would have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, this only certifies that the Jews were baptized in the name of Jesus in order to be demonstrated the messianic character of Jesus. In verses 3 and 4, Paul tells us that through baptism the believer is “introduced” in Christ’s work of salvation. Baptism is “in Christ Jesus” (v 3a) and is also a “baptism into His death” (v 3b). Those who are baptized “in Christ Jesus” are embedded “in him”, but, at the same time they become a participant in the death of Christ, symbolically speaking.

The Baptism of Cornelius’ house- Act 10

In order to be loyal to the Scripture, we must take into consideration the whole chapter, noticing why the baptism in the name of Jesus was used. In this chapter (as is Chapter 2), Persons of the Holy Trinity are presented in Peter’s message before the baptism in water. God the Father is mentioned by 17 times, God the Son by 16 times, being called “Jesus Christ” (v 36c), “Lord of all” (v 36d), “Jesus of Nazareth” (v 38b), “Jesus” (v 42a), “Judge of quick and dead” (v 42c), and “Jesus Christ” (v 48). God the Holy Spirit is explicitly mentioned only by 4 times, being named “Spirit” (v 19b), “Holy Spirit” (v 38a; 44b), “gift of the Holy Spirit” (v 45c). Anyway, we can clearly understand that the focus of the chapter

17. Frank, 100.
18. Frank Ewald’s emphasis.
19. Tipei: Botezul creștin. 84.
is that of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. So, the baptism in the name of Jesus does not invalidate the Trinity, nor does cancel the Trinitarian baptism.

To understand, however, why they were baptized in the name of Jesus we must look and notice what they knew about God until Peter’s preaching. In the 2nd verse, Cornelius and his household members are presented as “devout and God-fearing”. Although he was regarded as a pagan by the Jews, there are commentators who considered Cornelius only a religious man. On the other hand, there are others who state that Cornelius was a “half-proselyte.” However, he knew the God of Israel, this we know from the way he lived (“pious and devout,” “did more charity”), through his worship that he brought in prayer and even through the Lord’s answer to him through a vision (v 3:4). Thus, we can conclude in this case also that just as with the Samaritans, for Cornelius the baptism was a mean of showcasing and strengthening Jesus as the Messiah.

The Baptism of the disciples in Ephesus- Acts 19

The describing of events from this pericope corresponds fully to the conditions necessary for receiving the Spirit, outlined in Acts 2:38. So, faith / repentance come first, then the baptism in water and finally, the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this passage is important to localize in time the experience of faith and of repentance in the case of the 12 apostles from Ephesus. In other words, to clarify whether in the moment of Paul’s arrival in Ephesus they were Christians or not. This information is important in order to determine the relation of their water baptism with the experience of forgiveness, respectively with the experience of repentance. Next we will answer to these 2 questions: were the twelve disciples already converted upon the arrival of the Apostle Paul at Ephesus? If they were converted without being baptized “in the name of God”, can be they considered Christians before the meeting with Paul? If they were Christians before Paul’s arrival, then:

1. the baptism which they later received “in the name of Jesus” did not result in the forgiveness of the sins;
2. the Spirit which they received after the Christian baptism did not have the role of integrating them into the church.

If, on the other hand, they only became Christians after Paul’s teachings, there remain two possibilities: either they were saved and received the Spirit within a single experience, or, they were saved, then baptized and later received the Spirit as donum superadditum.22

The first question: were the twelve disciples Christians before Paul came to Ephesus? This issue was discussed in detail in other papers.23 John Tipei went on and showed

21. “Proselyte half” meant that they accept monotheism and moral standards of Jews to attend synagogue services, but was not circumcised. For more details see: J. Tipei: Acts biblical exegesis course. Pentecostal Theological Institute, Bucharest, 2009. 42.
22. Tipei: Botezul creștin. 68.
that the twelve disciples were part of the original group of Christians in Ephesus. The arguments presented support the idea that they were Christians: they are portrayed as "some disciples" (μαθηταί). The term μαθηταί, with or without the definite article is used only for Christians (Luke 6,1.7; 9,1.19.26.38; 11,26; 14,22; 21,26 ), unless it is attached to another noun, or phrase which further explains the meaning (for ex.: "John's disciples"). Paul's question: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" leads us to understand that they had come to faith before meeting Paul. There is no evidence to suggest that Paul was not sure of the validity of their faith. Apart from this observation, in order to see how they knew God, we must look at those who proclaimed the Gospel to them. In the previous periscope (18,24–28), is presented one of the evangelists of Ephesus, called Apollo, who only knew of John's baptism. Since he knew only the baptism of John, just like the disciples, we can understand that it was he who preached them the Gospel. The disciples were converted and at the coming of the Apostle Paul, they had no need of repentance. This may thus explain the lack of a message about repentance as the Apostle Luke only relates to us that Paul pointed their vision to Jesus and then they were baptized in the name of Jesus. Now it can be understood very clearly why they were baptized in the name of God, namely, because they knew the God of Israel, but their need was to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Based on the analysis made above, we can state that baptism in the name of Jesus was given to two categories of people:
1. The Jews (Acts 2,38b),
2. the gentiles who had a certain knowledge of the God of Israel.
For both categories, the baptism in Jesus' name was intended to help them recognize Him as Jesus Christ promised by the Old Testament prophecies.

Baptism for the Gentiles
In the case of the Philippians jailer and Lydia from Thyatira it is not specified how they were baptized. Which should be the reason why in the case of those who weren't Jews and more, they did not believe in the God of Israel (Yahweh) the formula of baptism is not mentioned? Verse 34 says that the jailer and his household believed in God. They did not need to be showed to them that Jesus is the Messiah, therefore it is not specified that they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. They needed to know the true God, because until then they believed in different gods.

Conclusions

We conclude this article by saying that the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (presented in the book of Acts) does in no case contradict Christ's teaching; rather, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ is a reason of validation of Christ as the Messiah. We can also specify

24. Tipei: Botezul creștin. 69.
that the Trinitarian formula presented by Jesus in Matt 28,19 is not cancelled. In fact, for the Jews and for those who have some Hebrew dowry, it takes the form of baptism in the name of Jesus. Hence between the two baptisms there are no substantive differences, only one of appearance.