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Becoming as a Little Child: Elements of Ritual Rebirth in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity

Matthew J. Grey

Throughout ancient cultures we find that consistent activities often combine to form variations of a pattern which emerge for use in both ritual and secular settings. Four of these elements include: (1) a washing with water, (2) an anointing with oil, (3) clothing in a garment, and (4) the receiving of a name. These activities are fairly consistent in the ancient world are present in different aspects of life and ritual, more particularly in an ancient scripture and temple context. The purpose of this article is to examine various combinations of these elements in light of another concept consistently found in ancient cultures—the idea of “ritual rebirth.” It is hoped that this article will demonstrate a connection between the two concepts. These actions of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming play out a major function in the process of becoming ritually “born again.” The first section of the article will discuss the concept of “ritual rebirth,” followed by the actual elements of birth and rebirth in ancient cultures. The second section will deal with uses and examples of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming as a symbolic new birth process in both ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

Ritual Rebirth in Ancient Cultures

As a foundation to this discussion, there must be an understanding of the “ritual rebirth” concept as found in ancient cultures. Briefly stated, there are times in an ancient culture when initiation into a new phase of life is necessary. At these times the initiate makes
higher covenants with God, prepares for new responsibilities, is adopted into a new family, and so on. Because these experiences literally bring the individual into a new state of being, the ancients felt one must be “born again” to begin this new life. In many cases, the process of being born again involves rituals that call to mind the original birth process.

The rebirth ritual most familiar to Christians is of course the baptism that Jesus sets forth in the Gospel of John. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, he is told that men need to be “born again.” Confused, he asks, “how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:3). Jesus answers by explaining “except a man be born of water [baptism] and of the Spirit [Holy Ghost], he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The chapter later implies that the blood shed (life given) by Jesus is another critical element to accept in being born again. That Jesus uses these three elements—water baptism, spirit of the Holy Ghost, and blood of the Atonement—as necessary components to enter this new life is significant. After all, everyone was “born into the world [originally] by water, and blood, and the spirit” (Moses 6:59). It is therefore appropriate that those three elements be present as the person is symbolically born the second time into the kingdom of God.

Two explicit examples from less familiar settings are given to us by Sir James George Frazer in his seminal work on ancient ritual. The first is from Greek society, the second from India.

In ancient Greece any man who had been supposed erroneously dead, and for whom in his absence funeral rites had been performed, was treated as dead to society till he had gone through a woman’s lap, then washed, dressed in swaddling clothes, and put out to nurse. . . . In ancient India, under similar circumstances the supposed dead man had to pass his first night after his return in a tub filled with a mixture of fat and water; there he sat with doubled-up fists and without uttering a syllable, like a child in a womb, while over him were performed all the sacraments that
were wont to be celebrated over a pregnant woman. Next morning he got out of the tub and went through once more all the other sacraments he had formerly partaken of from his youth up.\footnote{2}

Arab cultures have similar rites when one is to be adopted into a family. \textit{"As the mother brings forth a child, she lets him slip through her dress from the neck to the hem. If he is so big that he cannot pass through her dress in this way she must place him under the hem of her dress."}  

While these are different rites than were performed at the Christian baptism, the concept was the same; to enter a new phase of life one must be born again by ritually experiencing elements similar to the original birthing process. Passing through water, travelling through a woman's lap, or sitting in a fetal position are all examples of being ritually and symbolically reborn into a new stage of life.

**Elements of Birth and Rebirth**

Based on this concept of ritual rebirth it is now necessary to outline the practices of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming present in the original birth process. Interestingly enough, much of what we know about the ancient birthing process, particularly in the Near East, come from manners and customs that have survived to this day. However, we do have enough information from the ancients themselves to speak with confidence as to how such things were indeed carried out. In any case, modern scholars seem to have come to a relative agreement on the birth process during the Old and New Testament periods.

Describing the process as many other scholars have, F. B. Knutson explains that after the baby is born, \textit{"the [navel] cord would be cut, the baby washed with water, rubbed with salt, and wrapped in clothes. Often the child was named at birth."}  

O. J. Baab writes that \textit{"after birth the infant's navel cord was cut; then the}
infant was washed, rubbed with salt, and swathed in bands. . . . Children were named at birth.” For further reinforcement, Edith Deen makes a similar statement in her work on family life during the biblical period. “After a baby was born he was washed, rubbed with salt . . . wrapped in swaddling clothes . . . [and] almost immediately his mother gave him a name.” Here we can easily see, along with the cutting of the navel cord, the elements of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming. One of the purposes of this article is to demonstrate how the ancients saw in these natural experiences of childbearing practices that could easily be used later in life in a ritual context. Following the birth sequence as these scholars have set forth, let us briefly examine each step and their possible symbolic “rebirth” implications.

Washing. It was stated that the baby first had to be washed with water. This has definite hygienic and practical purposes. Of course the newborn baby would be covered with the blood of the mother, as well as any other embryonic fluids. Before anything else it was necessary to wash the baby clean.

The practice of washing with water appears almost universally in the world of ritual. Perhaps due to the natural and obvious symbolic values of water, various forms of washing are carried out in virtually every culture. The use of water in ritual typically parallels its purposes in everyday activity. One of the main roles of water is of course to make something clean. In ritual this is often a key component. For somebody or something to be washed with water symbolically cleanses them from a past action or life of impurity. In the Judaic tradition, the “act of washing [was and is] performed to correct a condition of ritual impurity and restore the impure to a state of ritual purity. . . . the main purpose of any ablution [washing] was to become ‘holy.’” Similarly, washing makes one worthy to act in various capacities. In many cases, a person would have to wash either the entire body or certain parts of the body before entering a sacred place or carrying out a sacred responsibility. These concepts certainly carry over into early Christianity as well.
As relating to the ritual rebirth, it is interesting that we find the same imagery employed that naturally exists in the original birth process. Just as the baby had to be washed clean of the blood with which it was covered from its former sphere of life (the mother’s womb), to be reborn a person must be washed clean of the blood (often a symbol for life and/or sins) of his past life. An explicit example of this is found in an Old Testament temple ritual. Hugh W. Nibley explains that following a specific sacrifice of an animal, the blood (life/sins) would be applied to the priests and smeared all over their garments. They would then be washed clean of the blood. “The sons of Aaron were made bloody, as if they had been sacrificed, and then cleansed, as if cleared of their sins.”

Thus, a washing with water makes one worthy to begin new life or responsibilities as they have been cleansed from the blood and sins of their old life.

Anointing. The second step is the anointing. In the examples of the birth sequence given above, after the baby was washed it would be rubbed with salt. Salt in many ancient cultures (especially Israelite culture) had definite religious as well as practical value. While the religious implications of the salt are beyond the scope of this article, crucial to our discussion is the element that typically accompanied the salt. It is clear that in many cases the salt would be mixed with oil.

D.E. Garland insists that after birth, “the baby was washed, rubbed with salt and oil, and wrapped with strips of cloth.” Raphael Patai agrees and states that after the washing the baby would be rubbed “with salt and oil mixed together.” Further evidence that oil was an important part of this second step of anointing is confirmed by considering the modern Near Eastern practice. John Tvedtness discusses the “washing and anointing of newborn babies” in a biblical context by referring to his own experience among the modern Arabs. He emphasizes the climatic reasons for use of the oil. Being in such a hot and dry climate, the oil can have both a soothing and a cleansing effect. Thus, “newborn babes are
still washed, then anointed with olive oil.”

One final example comes from the Arabs themselves. Presumably following ancient custom, they explain how, along with cutting the navel cord and washing with water, “they crush a handful of salt and mix it with oil. And smear the child with it. And anoint the whole child, even his eyes, ears and nose, and his mouth.”

Just as an anointing of the baby follows washing, there is commonly an anointing that follows the ritual washing. The act of washing is typically to make one worthy. In most cases, the act of ritual anointing serves to empower or enable the person to do what he was made worthy to do through the washing. In its most common application, anointing with oil was used in the coronation of a king or in the consecration of a priest. In both cases the individual is being empowered in his office using the anointing oil as a symbol of the act. Likewise, in both cases the person is beginning a new phase of life into which he must be reborn.

In Old Testament writings, this is made especially clear with Israel’s more famous kings. Before Saul could officially begin to rule as king, the prophet Samuel first “took a vial of oil, and poured it on his head” (1 Samuel 10:1). Likewise David, who was chosen to succeed Saul, had to be anointed as a symbol of his new responsibilities. In this case, the anointing is specifically associated with the receiving of the spirit of God. “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward” (1 Samuel 16:13).

The act of anointing also symbolizes the sanctification of the individual. In the case of an Israelite priest we are told that “the anointment ‘sanctifies’ the high priest by removing him from the realm of the profane and empowering him to operate in the realm of the sacred.” Below we will see more possibilities of meaning for the anointings. However, whether it be empowering individuals to accomplish a task or preparing them for death and resurrection, the anointing consistently plays a role in being ritually reborn into a new life.
Occasionally we will encounter both the washing and anointing of specific parts or functions of the body. It is often important to correlate the symbolic meaning of the ritual act with the possible symbolism of the body part or function being dealt with. For example, in Leviticus a ritual is alluded to in which the blood of the sacrifice (here acting in the cleansing role of water) was applied to the priests “upon the tip of [the priests] right ear, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot” (Leviticus 8:23). Anointing oil would next be applied to those same parts (Leviticus 8:30). Consistent symbolism connected with those specific parts would certainly include the ear as one’s ability to hear the word of God, the hand as one’s ability to do the works of God, and the foot as one’s ability to walk in the path of God. Thus to wash and anoint those parts would carry the connotation of being worthy (washed) and empowered (anointed) to hear, to do, and to walk in accordance with the Lord’s purposes.

The practice of anointing different parts of the body also surfaces as a preparation for death and resurrection. In the pseudepigraphical Book of Adam and Eve, we are told about Adam’s preparations for death. It appears that the fall had delivered various “blows” of mortality to each part of his body, beginning with the head, eyes, ears, and each separate limb. To reverse these effects each part needed to be anointed in anticipation of the resurrection. As Adam asks for the oil from the Tree of Life, he cries “anoint me with it, that I may have rest [λυτροθω ekte—“will be redeemed”] from these pains, by which I am being consumed.” Hence, Hugh Nibley refers to this as the “oil of healing, which reverses the blows of death.”

Without elaborating, it is interesting to at least mention how familiar this sounds to the Egyptian “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony. This Osirian ritual was performed on the dead by a priest using a special instrument to touch the eyes, ears, nose and mouth in an attempt to “awaken” them for the resurrection. Indeed, “the purpose of the ceremony of Opening the Mouth was the restora-
tion of the deceased king to the normal condition of a living man with all his faculties resuscitated, and to make him ready for his purification which was the immediate step to the spiritualization of his body, the glorification of his spirit, and his deification.”

We will encounter these kinds of symbolic practices as I examine examples of ritual rebirth in ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

Clothing. The third step in the birth sequence, following the washing and anointing, is the clothing or dressing of the baby. In ancient cultures this is referred to as wrapping the baby in swaddling clothes. To swaddle means literally “to entwine, [or] enwrap.” Obviously performed by one involved in the birth process, this was done primarily for reasons of strengthening the baby. The child would have been wrapped very tightly due to the “notion that movement would harm his arms and legs.” This step is still followed closely today in various Arab cultures. After “the child has been smeared with the oil it is wrapped again by the midwife.”

This action has deeply rooted ritual meaning in many different religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. The important concept of receiving ritual clothing can be traced back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In referring to the fallen man, the 1611 King James English uses the phrase he was found “naked” (Genesis 2:25, 3:7). We immediately think of simply being without clothing. However, the meaning is deeper. The Hebrew word used is מְנָזֶה which also carries with it the connotation of “shame, uncleanness . . . dishonour.” Also, being “naked” (מְנָזֶה) is to be “exposed, undefended.” Thus symbolically, the idea of being “naked” denotes “defenselessness.” So once Adam falls and is found naked, he is now unclean, unprotected, and open to all the effects of the fall.

To remedy the situation a protection must be provided. This comes as the Lord makes a coat for Adam from the skins of an animal. “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21). This coat protected Adam from effects of his naked, fallen state. By implication we are
to understand that the animal had to die by way of sacrifice in order to provide the protective coat of skins. Through the death of the animal, Adam was now protected and covered from the effects of the fall. From a Christian perspective, the imagery of Jesus’ death and sacrifice would have come to mind every time the coats were handled. It is interesting that the very word for “atonement” in Old Testament Hebrew (ןֵשָׁנָה) had the original meaning of “to cover.”

Certainly in the Christian tradition, it is Jesus who atones for, or “covers,” man from his naked, fallen state. This concept is taught and symbolized by the clothing in a garment (either literally or figuratively) upon entering into a new life as a disciple of Jesus. As having entered that new life, the person is now covered and atoned for.

Naming. The fourth step in the birth sequence, following the washing, anointing, and clothing, is the naming of the baby. This act seems to vary slightly among different cultures. Some name the child immediately, while some have a specified waiting period. In any case, it seems consistent that naming is the next thing that needs to take place. The different naming practices are too numerous to list here. However, one interesting aspect that most seem to have in common is the kind of name. Today in the Near East, as anciently, it appears to be customary to name the child after someone who has gone before, namely a specific ancestor with whom it is hoped the child will have some kind of connection. Occasionally, it can also be circumstances associated with that particular birth that has the deciding influence on the name.

Just as the name given to a baby at birth will essentially become the child’s identity, so in the ancient world the receiving of a new name is common in ritual to signify a person’s new identity. “This act of [receiving a new name] often occurred at a time of transition in the life of the one renamed and frequently carried with it special privileges and honors for the one receiving the new name. . . . The name change of the receipt of a new name marks a turning point in the life of the initiate: he is ‘recreated,’ so to speak, and becomes a new man.”
Often in the Hebrew scriptures as an individual enters into a new covenant with God he receives a new name. A significant example, among many, would be the story of Abram. Once he made the all important covenant with the Lord, in which he was promised to become a “father of many nations,”(Genesis 17:5) his name underwent a change. Abram (lit. “exalted father”) became Abraham (lit. “exalted father of nations”). Likewise Sarai becomes Sarah (Genesis 17:15) upon entering into the covenant. When the covenant was renewed with their grandson Jacob, he became known as Israel (Genesis 32:28).

This also carries over into the Christian tradition, with such figures as Simon (who becomes “Peter,” Πέτρος, “a stone,” or “a rock”) and Saul (who changes to his Roman name of “Paul”). Throughout the book of Revelation, a sign to follow “him that overcometh,” was the reception of “a new name . . . which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Revelation 2:17). In these instances, as in others, the change in name had importance relate to the covenant entered into as it indicated a new life of discipleship.

From all of this we see that the pattern of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming is common to the Near Eastern birth process. It has been briefly demonstrated that each of these natural practices can easily be used in ritual to provide the symbolism of being reborn into a new phase of life. First one is washed clean of his past life. He is then empowered or sanctified by the anointing. Third the person is clothed and protected from his previous, fallen life. Finally, he is given a new name to signify this new covenant relationship. These practices and symbols are abundantly attested in ancient cultures.

**Uses of Washing, Anointing, Clothing, and Naming in Ancient Judaism**

Elements of the birth pattern we have been discussing are often ritually employed in ancient Judaism. Occasionally it is in a
sacred temple setting, and at other times it is found in a more secular, everyday context. Elements of this pattern and their use in both settings act to bring the person into a new phase of life. In some cases we will see all four aspects being employed, while in others we will see two or three being used. In any case, the concept of a rebirth ritual still applies.

**Sacred Settings.** One of the most common uses of this pattern bringing one to a new sphere is its use as a preparation (literally or figuratively) to enter the presence of God. First and foremost (and perhaps the origin of its application in secular settings) is the version of this idea found in Old Testament temple ritual. The temple is designed so that the High Priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement, ascends into the Holy of Holies—the symbolic presence of God. In the preparation phase of these ceremonies, and others similar to it, we find the pattern of washing, anointing, and clothing being carried out. In Exodus the sequence is laid out quite nicely. The priests were first brought to the door of the temple (tabernacle) and there Moses, or another in authority, was to “wash them with water” (Exodus 29:4). This would have made them clean and worthy to begin the ascent back into God’s presence (the Holy of Holies).

Next “thou shalt take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head and anoint him” (Exodus 29:7) While the text only states that the oil was poured over the head, Alfred Edersheim gives more specifics. “In the olden days when [the High Priest] was anointed, the sacred oil was not only ‘poured over him,’ but also applied to his forehead, over the eyes, as tradition has it, after the form of the Greek letter X.” Here again we see the oil being applied to various parts of the body to sanctify and empower the priest in preparation for the sacred journey he was previously washed worthy to take.

Following the washing and the anointing, “thou shalt bring [Aaron’s] sons, and put coats upon them” (Exodus 29:8). The clothing of the priests in this case was rather detailed. When the priest was ready to enter the inner sanctuary, he would have been wearing this coat, as well as other symbolic vestments. There would have
been “a breastplate, and an ephod [an apron34], and a robe, and a brodered coat, a mitre [a bound cap], and a girdle. . . . [also] linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins unto the thighs they shall reach” (Exodus 28:4,42). These articles of clothing symbolize the priest’s new role. Two such roles are those mentioned earlier in connection with ancient Israelite anointings. The recent covenant with God was that they were to be made a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6)—that is kings and priests. With the robe usually representing priesthood, the cap (mitre) is a natural symbol for the crown of the king.35 Thus the new roles of king and priest are both represented by the clothing.

The concept of the new name is also explicitly involved in this case. Inscribed on a plate of gold to be fitted on the cap was הֵלֵ֣שׁ יְהוֹשָׁעׁוֹ נָּמ֣ה לֹאְסֹזָ֔י הַצְּנָלָ֖ה הַצְּנָלָ֑ה “Holiness to the Lord” (Exodus 28:36–38). Writing the sacred Divine Name on the crown of the priest was a symbol of his consecration to the service of God. This entire scenario presents us with a good example of how washing, anointing, clothing and the use of a name were all used to prepare the priest to enter the presence of God. In this way it may be seen as a form of rebirth, as the priest is leaving his former state and ascending to a higher one.

Elements of this pattern appears in pseudepigraphical writings as well. In 2 Enoch, Enoch is beginning a celestial ascent and is told how to prepare for the journey. The Lord tells his escort to “extract Enoch from [his] earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory.”36 While the elements of washing and naming are absent, it is nevertheless clear that stripping Enoch of his old clothes, anointing him with oil, and clothing him in heavenly garments prepares him to enter into a higher sphere.

Secular Settings. A more secular example of this pattern comes from the book of Ruth. Here Ruth is certainly about to enter a new life as she will soon present herself to her future husband Boaz. Naomi instructs her on how to prepare. “Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee” (Ruth 3:3). Washing and anointing generally precede marriage in the ancient
Near East. Again, here the pattern of washing, anointing, and clothing is used to denote a change in the way of life.

We find one more secular example in the welcoming of a guest into one's house by washing and anointing them. It is clear that by the time of Jesus, a common Jewish practice was to offer water and oil to a special guest upon entering the home. J.A. Balchin insists that "on arrival at a feast the guests' feet were washed and their heads anointed with oil." We see the ideal of this practice still in existence in the time of Jesus. When in the house of a Pharisee for a special meal, a woman who was a sinner enters and approaches Jesus. "And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears . . . and anointed them with the ointment" (Luke 7:38). The Pharisee Simon was concerned about this, but Jesus read his thoughts and responded. "I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she has washed my feet with tears . . . . My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment" (Luke 7:44–46).

This secular act may have also originated with a sacred example. Before David entered the house of the Lord, he went through the same process. "Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped" (2 Samuel 2:20). Just as David had to perform these actions before entering the Lord's house, guests in the Old and New Testament periods experienced a similar welcome when entering another's house. In both cases, we again encounter the concept of leaving one place to come into another. And it is the washing and anointing that signifies the shift.

As was mentioned above, these activities also have a role in burial preparation. Just as the Egyptian "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony was an anointing at death, so we find the same concept in ancient Judaism. By the New Testament period, "after death the body was washed, its eyes were closed and its mouth and other orifices were bound shut. A mixture of spices were applied [anointed] to the body . . . . it was then dressed in its own clothes or placed in
a linen shroud.\textsuperscript{38} While it is difficult to determine any originally intended symbolism, it is again interesting to see the same pattern employed before entering the next life.

One final example of this pattern as a type of new birth in ancient Judaism comes from the book of Ezekiel. Here the Lord is talking to His people as a whole. He reveals to them as a nation the missing elements of their original “birth” and then goes on to tell them of their “new birth” through the necessary process. “And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all” (Ezekiel 16:4). Next He reminds them of His salvation offered by performing the important steps. In this passage, birth symbolism signifies a new life for Israel.

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine. Then washed I thee with water; yea I throughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. I clothed thee also with broidered work . . . (Ezekiel 16:8–10)

This is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of what I have been discussing. Here the Lord uses very strong birth symbolism to explain how His people have been reborn into His covenants.

\textbf{Uses of Washing, Anointing, Clothing, and Naming in Early Christianity}

Having shown examples of the pattern in ancient Judaism, this article will conclude by demonstrating some of its uses in early Christianity. Indeed, Jesus Himself as well as the early church fathers, saw the elements of this pattern as useful in signifying a new life for an individual. As would be expected, the early Christian writers tend to emphasize the spiritual rebirth more than anything else.
New Testament. For example, John 9 tells of a man who was blind from birth. John seems to use the story of Jesus' interaction with him to teach a spiritual lesson. In this case, blindness is most likely being equated with spiritual blindness. To both heal the blind man as well as to teach the necessity of being brought to a higher spiritual awareness, Jesus uses elements from the pattern to carry it out. First "he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, and said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. . . . He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing" (James 9:6-7). In response to questions about his healing, the man told how Jesus "anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go . . . and wash: and I went and washed, and I received sight" (John 9:11). In this case, both literally and figuratively, a washing and anointing allowed this man to see, and introduced him to into a new phase of life.

The same imagery is employed by John in Revelation. Here the Lord reminds the churches of their fallen condition. "Thou art wretched . . . and blind and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me . . . that thou mayest be rich; and with raiment that thou mayest be clothed and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see" (Revelation 3:17-18). Again a clothing and an anointing is necessary for ultimate salvation.

Early Christian Ritual. While these are examples of various combinations of the pattern in different New Testament passages, perhaps the best example from early Christianity comes from the baptismal ritual: the ultimate rebirth ritual in all of Christianity. The Christian baptism of the first few centuries is the most explicit use of this pattern as a rebirth ritual. Most of our understanding of this ritual comes from the early church leaders and writers, such as St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and others, along with some very able modern scholars. Their records specify the various steps of being born again in the early church.

Cyril's writings show that the ceremony was performed in some kind of "inner chamber," most likely a form of baptismal font. The
baptismal candidate first took off his former garment, symbolic of putting off the old life. Having put off old sins, the person is now like Adam naked in the garden. In fact, the person is actually standing naked, a definite element of the original birth process. Hugh M. Riley, who has done extensive work on the topic, explains how the removal of the garment was a common ceremony in the ancient world. It is, he writes, a “return to primeval innocence.” Along with this, there is also an account of a pre-baptismal anointing.

Then comes the actual baptism, or washing. “After these things, ye were led to the pool of Divine Baptism . . . and descended three times into the water, and ascended again.” That the Christian baptism is a washing that cleanses the person from his past life and sins hardly needs further comment. And of course Cyril, like Christ in John 3, equates this act with going through the birth process all over again. “And at the selfsame moment, ye died and were born; and that water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.”

Following the baptism of water comes the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Interestingly enough, oil has long been a symbol for the Holy Ghost and to signify its reception, the early Christian would have been anointed with oil immediately after coming out of the water. Extant texts describe the post-baptismal anointing ceremony are very instructive and employ a concept we had discussed earlier. Most of the writings from the early church fathers agree that the anointing oil would have been applied to various parts of the person’s body, along with special blessings in connection to the body part that is being anointed. Perhaps the most explicit description of the ceremony comes from sixth century Gaul. The prayer would have been as follows.

Receive the seal of Christ [Χριστός—“anointed”], listen to the divine words, be enlightened by the Word of the Lord, because today you are accepted by Christ.

I sign your forehead in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit so that you may be a Christian.

I sign your eyes so that you may see the glory of God.
I sign your ears, so that you may hear the voice of the Lord.
I sign your nostrils so that you may breathe the fragrance of Christ.
I sign your lips so that you may speak the words of life.
I sign your heart so that you may believe in the Holy Trinity.
I sign your shoulders so that you bear the yoke of Christ's service.
I sign your whole body, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit so that you may live forever and ever.  

Cyril gives his own description of the post-baptismal anointing ceremony and elaborates on the specific blessings. For example, he connects the anointing of the ears to the common New Testament phrase “He that has ears to hear, let him hear.” To him that phrase was in direct reference to those who had specially anointed [empowered] ears. They were able to “hear” things others were not. The anointing of the various body parts was given special significance by other early church leaders, as Hugh Riley explained.

Most records after washing and anointing indicate that there would have been a new white robe (“the royal robe”) given to the person to dress with. This act has much the same meaning as the coat of skins given to Adam. The person is now literally and spiritually “covered” from their naked, fallen state. Indeed, the “putting on of the white robe [is] a symbol that the sins of the baptized person have been forgiven or covered over” through the sacrificial atonement (τέλος “covering”) provided by Jesus. That it was white symbolized the purity expected in the person’s new life. Chrysostom saw cosmic significance in the baptismal garment: it was a symbol for immortality. He also believed the garment provided great spiritual protection and it was not to be defiled by “untimely words, or idle listening, of by evil thoughts, or by eyes which rush foolishly to see whatever goes on [the same senses that were previously anointed]. Let us . . . keep our garment of immortality unspotted and unstained.” By wearing the garment faithfully and living a pure life Chrysostom also believed it would protect one from temptation and allow outsiders to see the light of the person’s
new life with Christ and become converted themselves. By all accounts, however, the garment represented Christ Himself. It is widely accepted that this garment was what Paul had in mind when he said that “as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27, italics added).

The final step is the receiving of the new name—the name of “Christ.” All of this ritual implied that one was born again or adopted into Christ’s heavenly family. As such, and as one who had received the anointing, the new name received would be that of “Christ” Himself. The Greek word for Christ (Χριστός) literally means “anointed.” Since the reception of the Holy Ghost is an anointing (Χρωμα, or unction), it is appropriate to receive the name of “anointed,” or “Christ” upon receiving the Spirit. “Only after receiving this anointing can the neophyte properly be called ‘Christian.’” To again quote Cyril, “When you are counted worthy of this Holy Chrism, you are called Christians, verifying also the name by your new birth.” As the act signifies adoption into Christ’s family, the initiate now bears the title of “Christ’s Son,” or “Christian.”

The early Christian baptismal ceremony provides an ideal example of how the pattern of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming are used as a rebirth ritual. The baptism is a washing that cleans the person from all past sins. The Holy Ghost was symbolized by an actual anointing with oil that blessed the person’s senses and abilities as a Christian. There was a white robe given to clothe the person from their former naked, fallen state. Finally, the new name of “Christ” was received as the person began his new life of discipleship. This is a striking example of being ritually born again into a new phase of life.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have discussed the role of ritual rebirth in ancient cultures. In pointing out that the original birth process in
the ancient Near East included the baby being washed, anointed, clothed, and named, I hope to have demonstrated that the use of this pattern, or variations on it, offered possibilities for ritual rebirth. Examples have been given from ancient Judaism and early Christianity that demonstrate how aspects of this pattern were used and viewed as symbols of entering into a new phase of life. It is interesting to see how these things originate, circulate, and acquire didactic and symbolic significance. As Latter-day Saints, we can learn much about our own rituals (in our baptismal ceremony as well as the higher liturgies of the church) and theology by examining these ancient customs. Truly we have been left a rich symbolic and ritualistic legacy from our ancient Jewish and Christian theological ancestors.

MATTHEW J. GREY is a senior in Near Eastern Studies with a Hebrew minor. He will graduate in December 2002 and hopes to pursue graduate work in Ancient History and Biblical Studies.

Notes

1. As the focus of the present work is mainly ancient Judaism and early Christianity, I will here give a few examples of this pattern from cultures not discussed in this paper. During the Roman era, for example, we find the “sharp-eyed Athena” statue going through an annual ritual of being washed, polished with oil, and being robed before being put on display. See Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 114. In ancient Babylon the same pattern emerges. Here the “main object of the cult was the service of the gods . . . The gods were supposed to live a physical life and had daily to be washed, anointed, perfumed, dressed, attired and fed.” See Georges Roux, Ancient Iraq (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 212. For Adapa to enter the presence of Ea, he is given “water, clothes to put on and oil with which to anoint himself.” Ibid., 106. Also before the “sacred marriage” ceremony, the priestess representing the goddess must bathe and be sprinkled with oil. Ibid., 91.
8. Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 56. Here Nibley is also discussing the value of blood as a ritual cleansing property in and of itself. It is the concept of being “washed clean in the blood” that comes up so often in the scriptures.
12. Ibid., 428.
15. Ibid., 3:28.
16. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 223. “In the Bible the ear is synonymous with the heart and mind as an organ of cognition (Prov. 2:2; Is. 6:9–10), and true hearing involves listening and understanding (Job 34:16). The ear is personified as hearing and understanding (Job 13:1), seeking knowledge (Prov. 18:15) and testing words (Job 12:11). . . . Hearing symbolizes the proper response to God in the Bible.”
17. Ibid., 361.
18. Ibid., 280.
19. The Books of Adam and Eve, 34:1–2, 36:2, *The Apocrypha and


21. Samuel A. B. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1952), 4:36–7. Here Mercer gives us further references for the details of this ceremony. “The opening of the mouth occurs in many places in these texts, especially in Uts. 20–22 and 37–42. The opening of the eyes occurs in Uts. 638–639; opening of the mouth, nose, and ears is mentioned in 712a-b; and in 1673a-b all four, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth are named.”


23. Deen, 88.


29. See Patai, 170–173.


31. There are actually many possibilities for what the two names originally meant. However, the literal translations provided in the text are the most common given by scholars. For a deeper discussion on the etymology of this particular name see “Abraham,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2:112.


34. This is suggested by Hugh Nibley in “Sacred Vestments,” *Temple and Cosmos*, 98–99. See also Carol Meyers, “Ephod,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:550. Here Meyers describes the ephod as “an apron-like garment, suspended from waist level downward . . . it probably completely encircled the lower body.”


41. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis II:3.

42. Ibid., II:4.

43. Ibid.

44. See Riley, 349–391. Here Riley describes Cyril’s emphasis on the anointing of the “forehead, the ears, the nostrils, and the breast of the neophytes” (pg. 349). In Ambrose we read of the bishop anointing the initiate and reciting the formula, “God the father almighty, Who regenerated you by water and the Holy Spirit and forgave you your sins, will Himself anoint you unto life everlasting” (pg. 353). Other examples are given in greater detail in this section of Riley’s work.


46. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis III:4. “Ye were first anointed on your forehead, that ye might be delivered from the shame, which the first man, when he transgressed, bore about with him everywhere; and that with open face ye might behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord. Then on your ears; that ye might receive ears quick to hear the Divine Mysteries . . . Then on your nostrils . . . Then on your breast.”


48. Riley, 372–375. Riley summarizes the early church leaders’ interpreta-
tions as follows: “The Anointing of the Forehead . . . represents the restoration of this gift of God’s spirit . . . The Anointing of the Ears . . . [that the initiate] will listen to and learn, becoming versed in this divine communication . . . [and] to awaken one to the communication of a spiritual reality . . . The Anointing of the Nostrils . . . makes the neophytes aware that he is participating in Christ Himself . . . The Anointing of the Breast . . . in order that, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, they might resist the manoeuvres of the devil.”

49. Ibid., 417.
50. Ibid., 418.
51. Ibid., 425&429. Chrysostom describes those having “put on the royal robe; they almost vie in brilliance with heaven itself. We see them shine more brilliantly than the stars, as they light up the faces of those who look at them.”

52. Ibid., 428–429.
53. Ibid., 430–431. Chrysostom: “Christians, having put on Christ, signified by the insignia of the white garment, must be careful in the conduct of their lives, and in so doing will attract others to praise Christ: ‘Now the robe you wear and your gleaming garments attract the eyes of all; if you should will to do so, by keeping your royal robe shining even more brightly than it does now, by your godly conduct and your strict discipline, you will always be able to draw all who behold you to show the same zeal and praise for the Master.”

54. This is a conclusion arrived at by the early church leaders themselves and has been reaffirmed by modern scholars such as Hugh M. Riley in Christian Initiation, 413–45, as well as Hugh W. Nibley. See Nibley, Mormonism and Early Christianity (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987).


56. Ibid., word number 5545. The author of 1 John uses the same language in referring to the Holy Ghost when he calls it an “unction,” and an “anointing” in 1 John 2:20&27.

57. Riley, 376.
58. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis IV:5.