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The Influence of Israelite Temple Rites and Early Christian Esoteric Rites
on the Development of Christian Baptism

Ryan T. Wilkins

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Religious Education

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Religious Education
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ABSTRACT

The Influence of Israelite Temple Rites and Early Christian Esoteric Rites on the Development of Christian Baptism

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This thesis seeks to answer the question of the origin of some of the most fundamental additions made to early Christian baptism. Christian baptism began in a relatively simple liturgical form, but became, by the fourth century, a much more dramatic set of initiation rituals. Among the added elements to baptism were washing ceremonies in the nude, physical anointing with oil, being marked or signed with the cross on the forehead, and receiving white garments. Scholars have proposed different theories as to the origins of these baptismal rituals. Some claim the elements existed in the New Testament practice of the rite. Others have supposed that the Christian church adopted the elements from either the Jewish synagogue or from contemporary pagan modes of initiation. This thesis argues that the initiation rituals of the Israelite tabernacle and temple provide a much more likely source for the added elements of Christian baptism. The esoteric practices of the temple priests became the esoteric tradition of early Christianity. The rites of this temple-oriented esoteric tradition in both the Old and New Testaments parallel, and may have been the origin for, the evolutions made to Christian baptism during the third and fourth centuries of the church. Christian groups such as the Valentinians provide evidence of higher esoteric rites being interpreted as baptism. Somehow the esoteric rites of the Israelite temple and the esoteric rites of early Christianity were adopted into the practice of Christian baptism.

Keywords: Baptism, early Christianity, tabernacle, temple, esoteric tradition, tabernacle, initiation, Gnosticism, washings, anointing, garments, Cyril of Jerusalem, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, *Secret Gospel of Mark*, *Gospel of Philip*, New Testament, priests, kings, Revelation, Valentinianism, Hippolytus

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Introduction

John's Gospel describes a Pharisee named Nicodemus coming to Jesus with profound questions on his mind: "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Nicodemus was confused; how could an individual possibly be born again? Jesus explained, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Nicodemus learned firsthand from Jesus that baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost were absolutely necessary in order to obtain eternal life. This truth was consistently taught throughout the writings of the early Church Fathers. David W. Bercot, a noted scholar in the field of early Christian history, writes: "A person wasn't viewed [by the church fathers] as saved or born again until the entire process, including water baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit, were fulfilled.... That, in a nutshell, is what the primitive church believed, and when I say the church believed it, I mean it was universally held. In the entire set of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*—in all ten volumes—I think just about every one of those writers somewhere discusses baptism, and every single one of them presents this same view—no exceptions."¹

Interestingly, the essential nature of baptism as part of Jesus' gospel did not change throughout the years, but the form and meaning of the ordinance did. What began as a somewhat basic and simple procedure, liturgically speaking, "developed quickly into

¹ As found in Tad Callister, *The Inevitable Apostasy and The Promised Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 160. This quote is a fax message sent from Bercot to Callister.

a rich, extended, and dramatic liturgical journey.”² Baptism, as described in the New Testament, involved faith, repentance, immersion, and the laying on of hands. Convert baptisms by the fourth century of the church often included an extended catechumenate period of instruction, exorcisms, official renunciations of Satan, pledging one’s allegiance to Christ, a washing ceremony, multiple anointings of the body with oil, clothing in a white garment, and receiving a new name. Not only did the shape of Christian initiation change, but new meanings were attached to the process. First-century baptismal doctrine seemed to include forgiveness of sins, inclusion in the church’s membership, and a covenant providing entrance into the Kingdom of God. By the fourth century AD Christian baptism began to be viewed as a process whereby one actually became a priest, a king, and a Christ. In form and interpretation the ordinance of baptism underwent drastic changes.

Why did this foundational rite of Christianity change so dramatically, and what were the sources of those changes? The tendency may be to look to the Jewish synagogue or to the initiation practices of the contemporary pagan religions for the origins of the changes made to Christian baptism. These sources may provide explanations for some of the changes, but looking to a set of esoteric rites already existing within first-century Christianity can lead to significant discoveries regarding evolutions made to baptismal practices and meanings. The thesis of this work is that many of the major changes made to Christian baptism during the first four centuries of the church may find their origins in a set of higher initiation rites, rites that some early Christians claimed were originally taught by Jesus Christ and his Apostles during the first century. These higher rites of

² Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 3.

initiation were patterned after, and were possibly a restored form of, the ritual practices of the Israelite temple. As part of ancient Israelite temple practice, kings and priests were washed, anointed, clothed in sacred garments, and received the Divine Name in preparation for their service. These same ritual elements may have been part of early Christian initiation practices which followed at some point after baptism into the Christian faith. Evidence will be presented which argues that as doctrinal and ritual changes spread throughout Christendom these higher ordinances once reserved for a faithful group within Christianity were intermingled with the baptismal practices offered to all who sought to join the faith. Christian baptism, in many of its ritual actions, adopted the practices of these Israelite temple ordinances.

Chapter one will establish what is known about the liturgical form of baptism during the first century of Christianity. This will provide a starting point—as Jesus and his Apostles established the practice, in what did baptism consist? New Testament texts witness a baptismal rite consisting of a water immersion and the laying on of hands by an authorized administrator to bestow the Holy Ghost. These were the major elements of the New Testament rite. The temple-oriented actions which later became integral in Christian baptism find no firm precedent in the documents from first-century Christianity. Comparison of later practice with these sources confirms that many of the actions included in the third- and fourth-century practices of baptism were indeed additions to the original Christian rite.

Given this foundation, distinguishing between that which was originally apostolic in baptismal practice and later additions becomes a straightforward exercise. The most significant changes to the rite of baptism made during the second through fourth centuries

of the church will then be detailed in chapter two. A very different shape of baptism emerges during those centuries, including major elements such as washings rather than immersion, physical anointing with oil, being clothed in a white garment, and receiving the Divine Name. These major additions to the baptismal rite and their connection to both Israelite temple practices and to first-century rites of higher initiation will be discussed throughout this work.

Having established in what baptism consists and how it changed, the third chapter of the thesis will analyze the washing and anointing rituals of kings and priests in the Old Testament performed at the tabernacle and the temple. This pattern of initiation may provide an origin for much of what later became Christian baptism. Some of the temple practices of the priests are seemingly reflected in large measure in the baptismal practices of post-apostolic Christianity; the Church Fathers themselves provide evidence for this conclusion in their writings concerning baptism. These writers consistently looked back to the temple practices of the Old Testament and not to the baptismal practices of the New Testament as sources for many of the actions attached to later baptismal rituals.

If the Church Fathers following the first century began to incorporate Israelite temple practices into baptism, how and why did that transmission of ritual occur? Chapter four discusses evidence for an esoteric tradition within early Christianity wherein Jesus, following his resurrection, passed down sacred esoteric teachings regarding the Kingdom of God to his Apostles. Knowledge and practices, patterned in part after ceremonies of the Israelite temple, were part of this esoteric knowledge, reportedly perpetuated by Jesus and his Apostles. This chapter will also provide evidence of physical rites within this esoteric tradition which reportedly were offered to those faithful saints living during the

earliest years of Christianity who were seeking further spiritual development. The rites of this esoteric tradition parallel both the washing and anointing practices of the Israelite temple and the changes made to Christian baptism. Jesus and his Apostles possibly provided the bridge between Israelite temple practices and higher initiation rites in early Christianity. However, those higher rites were not originally part of Christian baptism. The blending of rites came later once the Apostles were gone.

The final chapter examines the initiation rites of certain Valentinian Gnostic branches of Christianity and provides evidence of higher esoteric ordinances—temple-related ordinances—becoming absorbed into the practice and doctrine of baptism. These Christians claimed they had gained access to the mysteries revealed by Jesus following his resurrection. Their ritual practices included the elements of washing, anointing, clothing in white garments, and receiving the Divine Name. These were the same central elements of Israelite temple initiatory practices and in form and content they parallel the reported esoteric rites practiced among first-century Christians. Valentinian texts provide a clear example of these esoteric initiation rites being absorbed into and interpreted as baptism. For some Valentinian Christians there were two baptisms. The second baptism, designated by some as the redemption, was placed in a temple context, consisted of temple initiatory rites, was offered only to a certain group within the faith, and closely paralleled the post-apostolic baptismal ceremonies of the main church.

An examination of all the driving forces behind each evolution made in early Christian baptism and the means and reasons by which higher initiation rites made their way into the introductory Christian ordinance of baptism is beyond the scope of this work. Hopefully, what lies herein is sufficient evidence from both primary and secondary

sources to establish a possible connection between the initiation practices of the Israelite temple, the esoteric teachings and rites of Jesus and his Apostles, and the post-New Testament changes made to the practice of Christian baptism. The washing, anointing, and endowment practices of the Old and New Testaments may well have in large measure shaped the baptismal rite of post-apostolic Christianity.

Chapter 1

Establishing a Pattern of Baptism in the New Testament

What was the liturgical standard for Christian baptism in its earliest form? This question has both divided and confused liturgical scholars. Paul Bradshaw claims that “we cannot really talk of a standard or normative pattern of early initiation practice in primitive Christianity.”³ Bradshaw relies on the documents of the second through fourth centuries to support this conclusion, and is correct when describing the practices of those centuries.⁴ During those later centuries, it does seem that initiation patterns differed among Christian congregations of the East and West. But what about the original pattern of initiation during the first century of Christianity? The problem Bradshaw and some other scholars see within the New Testament text is a lack of clear descriptions regarding the accompanying rites of water baptism. While the New Testament is somewhat vague at times regarding the precise practice of baptism, a careful study of the sources does argue for a putative “normative pattern” established by Jesus and his Apostles in the first century. There are certain foundational elements of the rite woven throughout the New Testament text. Jesus’ own baptism and ministry began establishing this pattern, and a more concrete pattern seemed to be in place by the time Jesus commissioned the Apostles to “Go...and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19).

³ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 144–70.

“Baptism as a Christian ritual began in a very simple form and only gradually developed into a more elaborate form,”⁵ writes Kenan Osborn. A number of scholars are convinced of the following thesis: “*There exists an original normative structure of Christian initiation* (or, we may simply say, of baptism, for that is the original name of the whole act of initiation) consisting of immersion, imposition of hands and Eucharist, each of which elements has its peculiar and distinctive spiritual significance. *This order is apostolic.*”⁶ This thesis is derived from the New Testament witness of what is explicitly mentioned as part of Christian initiation and what is not mentioned by those living during apostolic times. Exegesis of the earliest sources will establish the apostolic pattern of baptism and provide a view of which practices accompanied the original rite of Christian baptism and which practices were later additions to the ordinance.

Jesus’ Baptism

Nearly all scholars of the New Testament agree that the event of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist is indeed historical. All three Synoptic Gospels assert or imply that John baptized Jesus at the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13–17, Mark 1:9–11, Luke 3:21–22). John’s Gospel does not specifically mention Jesus being baptized, but does record Jesus’ coming to John the Baptist and the Baptizer’s testimony of the event (John 1:29–34).

⁵ Kenan B. Osborn, *The Christian Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 76.

⁶ Georg Kretschmar, “Recent Research on Christian Initiation,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (ed. Maxwell Johnson; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 13; italics added. See also Dom Gregory Dix, *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism* (Westminster, England: Dacre Press, 1946); L. S. Thornton, *Confirmation: Its Place in the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: A. & C. Black, 1954); and G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1976). For Lampe the baptismal rite pattern was simply immersion. He believes the laying on of hands was secondary. The present work will establish, however, the necessity of the laying on of hands as part of the baptismal pattern of the New Testament. Important for this study is that Lampe describes a disintegration of the New Testament doctrine of baptism and the seal of the Holy Spirit beginning as early as the second century.

The baptism of Jesus was, in many ways, the institution of Christian baptism. It became “the pattern and basis for Christian baptism.”⁷ His baptism was the beginning of his formal ministry among mankind, ushering in the doctrines, practices, and powers associated with the higher law of his gospel. Jesus came not only to provide the way to God through his Atonement, but also to show the way through his exemplary actions. Thus, his own baptism became a prototype of baptism for those who would later choose to be his disciples.

Which liturgical patterns were established by Jesus’ own baptism? The Gospels do provide some important facts concerning the event. Mark’s record depicts Jesus “in Jordan” with the Baptist (Mark 1:9), and both Mark and Matthew record Jesus coming up “out of the water” (Mark 1:10, Matthew 3:16). Everett Ferguson concludes: “Certainly Jesus is pictured as having been in the river, something unnecessary for any action other than an immersion.”⁸ John’s baptism was one of immersion, and consequently led him to baptize in places where “there was much water” (John 3:23). One commentary on the Greek indicates that ancient sources claim that John baptized in water that was neck-deep.⁹ Baptism by immersion was the standard set by Jesus as he sought to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), and immersion continued to be the preferred practice among Christians for centuries to come.¹⁰

⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹ See W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1942), 1:87.

¹⁰ Many scholars see the origin of Christian baptism in Jewish concepts and practices, especially in the later practice of Jewish proselyte baptism, e.g., F. Gavin, *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments* (New York: KTAV, 1969); Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 60; H. H. Rowley, “Jewish

Examining the original New Testament Greek word *baptizo*, which was translated into English as *baptize*, strengthens the argument for immersion in Christian baptism. *Baptizo* meant “to dip in or under,” “to dye,” or “to immerse” when used literally. When used metaphorically it meant “to overwhelm.”¹¹ A survey of the Greek terms associated with baptism in the New Testament supports B. F. Smith’s conclusion: “During the New Testament times, the rite seems to have been performed by immersing the candidate. The word used in portraying the act and the views of leading scholars of both immersionist and nonimmersionist groups indicate that this was the case.”¹²

A second major liturgical aspect of Jesus’ baptism is the pattern of being “anointed” with the Holy Spirit. Matthew’s account records these words following Jesus’ ascension up out of the water: “And, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him” (Matthew 3:16). It was the gift of the Holy Spirit that distinguished Christian baptism from that of John. The water baptism of John was to prepare the way for a future baptism of fire (see Matthew

Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 15 (1940): 313–34; T. F. Torrance, “Proselyte Baptism,” *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954): 150–54; and Lawrence Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1985). Along with circumcision and sacrifice a baptismal immersion was required for a Gentile to convert to Judaism. The evidence as to when this practice actually began in Judaism is scarce. We know it existed by the second century AD, but it probably existed earlier, see Aidan Kavanaugh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1978), 7–8. If Jewish proselyte baptism by immersion was the antecedent to John’s baptism and later Christian baptism, then we can assume these later rites were also by immersion. The Jews had no complaints about the mode of proselyte baptism performed by John, Jesus, or the Apostles.

¹¹ Albrecht Oepke, “βάπτω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (ed. Gerhard Kittel; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 1:529–30.

¹² B. F. Smith, *Christian Baptism* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1970), 27; see pages 13–28 for Smith’s review of the evidence. See also Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 38–59. Ferguson summarizes: “*Baptizo* meant to dip, usually a thorough submerging, but it also meant to overwhelm....Christian sources maintained the basic meaning of the word. Pouring and sprinkling were distinct actions that were represented by different verbs, and this usage too continued in Christian sources” (*Baptism in the Early Church*, 59).

3:11). This baptism of the Spirit would be an essential element of the initiation into Christianity and into the eternal Kingdom of God (see John 3:5).

But what did the coming of the Holy Spirit have to do with anointing? The term *Messiah* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “the anointed.” Being anointed with the Spirit was a fulfillment of Jesus’ foreordained mission as the Messiah. Thus, as Jesus himself testified, Isaiah’s messianic prophecy that “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” was fulfilled (Isaiah 61:1, Luke 4:17–21). Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit by God the Father.

Later Christian baptismal practice often connected a physical anointing to the bestowal of the Holy Spirit,¹³ yet the physical anointing at baptism may not have originated as a result of Jesus’ own baptism. Jesus’ anointing at baptism seems to be figurative. There exists no reference to John, or any other administrator, actually performing a physical anointing with oil or ointment at Jesus’ baptism. Rather, Peter clearly understood that the anointing of Jesus at his baptism was a spiritual anointing which endowed Jesus with the Holy Ghost and with power: “The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: . . . That word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; *How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him*” (Acts 10:36–38; italics added).

¹³ According to Maxwell Johnson: “Literal anointing with oil...will develop in all early Christian liturgical traditions to express ritually the gift, anointing, and seal of the Holy Spirit in initiation” (*The Rites of Christian Initiation* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007], 37–38).

Some Christians may have viewed their later baptismal anointing as a physical commemoration of Jesus' earlier spiritual anointing, but the origin for a physical anointing may very well stem from some other source. The precedent set at Jesus' baptism was that of a metaphorical anointing found in the reception of the Spirit, not a literal anointing with oil. Like Peter, early Christians clearly understood Jesus' anointing as spiritual. The early church apologist Irenaeus, writing in the late second century, taught: "In the name of Christ is implied, He that anoints, He that is anointed, and the unction itself with which He is anointed. And it is the Father who anoints, but the Son who is anointed by the Spirit, who is the unction, as the Word declares by Isaiah, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me,' pointing out both the anointing Father, the anointed Son, and *the unction, which is the Spirit.*"¹⁴

The New Testament accounts of Jesus' baptism are not only about what happened to Jesus at baptism, but "they are about what happens in Christian baptism in general."¹⁵ Maxwell Johnson continues: "The significance of the synoptic portrayal of Jesus' baptism and its influence on the development of the rites of Christian initiation within early Christianity cannot be overemphasized."¹⁶ Jesus set the standard for later Christian baptism by being baptized by immersion and receiving the Holy Spirit in what can be termed a spiritual anointing. Liturgically speaking, those are the elements of Christ's baptism which seem certain. Later liturgical elements such as undressing, reciting creeds,

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.3; italics added. All English citations for the early Church Fathers are from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, hereafter cited as *ANF*). It is possible that Christians added a physical act of anointing to their own initiation to commemorate the spiritual anointing received by Jesus; however, it seems clear that the physical rite of anointing as part of Christian initiation did not originate based on a physical anointing as part of Jesus' baptism.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

physical anointing with oil, and receiving a white garment are not mentioned nor are they even implied. The first Christian baptism in the Jordan was much simpler in liturgical form than later elaborate baptismal ceremonies.

Jesus' baptism did help establish the pattern of immersion and receiving the Spirit in connection with the water rite of baptism; however, his baptism was distinct in at least a couple of ways.¹⁷ John's baptism, and later Christian baptism, was one of repentance, but in Jesus' case this was not true—he needed no repentance. Also distinct is the way in which Jesus received the Spirit. The scriptures speak of the Spirit descending in the form of the dove and the Father as the one who in this metaphorical way “anointed” Jesus. Once Jesus sent the Apostles out to baptize following his resurrection and ascension, the Spirit was conferred by authorized men through the laying on of hands (see Acts 8:14–17, 9:17, 19:1–6, Hebrews 6:1–2). Thus, Christ's baptism is not *the* precise mode of baptism found in the early Christian church, but it did establish foundational elements found in the later apostolic pattern.

Baptism in the Gospels

References to baptism in the four Gospels are not abundant, but it is clear that baptisms did continue throughout Jesus' mortal ministry. John's Gospel reports Jesus himself baptizing others as part of his public ministry (John 3:22, 26; 4:1–3). A passage in John 4:2 seems to contradict this fact, but, as Johnson explains: “Since the qualifying phrase in John 4:2—‘although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized’—is generally regarded by New Testament scholars as a later addition to the text of the

¹⁷ Aidan Kavanagh points out that “Jesus' own baptism is undoubtedly the source of Christian baptism yet different from it as well” (*Shape of Baptism*, 13).

Fourth Gospel, the possibility is raised here that these references to Jesus' own baptizing practice may actually reflect a historical reminiscence. . . . The historical Jesus of Nazareth may once have been a 'baptizer' as well."¹⁸

If Jesus' baptism was the beginning model for Christian baptism and Jesus himself, along with his chosen Apostles, baptized newcomers to the faith, then it can be assumed that a uniform pattern of baptism developed within Christianity. Adela Yarbro Collins argues "that such baptizing practices on the part of the historical Jesus would easily explain why it was that the early Christian communities themselves continued to initiate new converts by means of baptism. There would be, thus, *a clear and direct continuity in practice* between John the Baptizer, Jesus, and the New Testament churches."¹⁹ Though the references to baptism in the Gospels are sparse, the continuity is established. That continuity would remain through the ministry of the Apostles.

Matthew's narrative ends with Jesus commissioning his Apostles, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). This charge adds to our understanding of the baptismal liturgy, namely baptism was to be performed "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." There are no references to this baptismal formula at Jesus' baptism or the baptisms performed in the Gospels. Perhaps the formula was used following Jesus' own baptism in which all three members of the Godhead were witnessed by those present at the event (see Matthew 3:13–17), or perhaps it was only added to the

¹⁸ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 18–19.

¹⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Origins of Christian Baptism," in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (ed. Maxwell Johnson; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 49; italics added.

pattern of baptism once Jesus had completed his mortal ministry; however, the use of these three names at baptism remained common if not dominant in later liturgical descriptions of the rite.

Baptism in the Book of Acts

Having been tutored and commissioned by Jesus, the Apostles were now ready to shoulder the responsibility of offering Christian initiation to all who desired it. There are more references to baptism in the book of Acts than in any other New Testament book. The baptizing ministry as recorded in Acts establishes two main actions related to baptismal performance, immersion in water and the laying on of hands bestowing the gift of the Holy Spirit. Following Peter's stirring testimony of Christ during Pentecost, many of those present were "pricked in their heart," and they asked the Apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter's reply was for them to "repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38). "Pentecost is baptism par excellence," writes one scholar.²⁰ Three thousand souls united themselves that day to the Christian faith through baptism. The full liturgy of the event is not described in detail, but here is what is known: Christian initiation involved hearing the word of God, repentance, water baptism, and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Were these three thousand baptized by immersion? There has been some opposition to that belief based on the difficulty in the logistics of immersing three

²⁰ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 82.

thousand people in that spot of Jerusalem, but modern scholarship supports the idea of immersion. According to Everett Ferguson:

In the past a common objection to Luke's narrative and/or to the practice of immersion has been that there were not sufficient facilities in Jerusalem to immerse that number without contaminating the available drinking supplies. That objection can no longer be made, because scores of immersion pools (*mikwaoth*) have been found on or around the temple mount. Their presence could have been assumed, because of the need to provide for the daily purifications by the priests and for worshippers who came to offer sacrifice and fulfill vows. We now have a fairly good idea of the extensive provisions for these ritual baths.²¹

Did the Apostles baptize these new converts “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”? This account and others in Acts refer to baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ.” Addressing this point, Ferguson writes: “The phrases used in Acts may not, however, reflect alternative formulas in the administration of baptism or alternative understandings of the meaning of the act. In some cases the description in Acts may mean a baptism administered on a confession of Jesus as Lord and Christ, or it may be a general characterization of the baptism as related to Jesus and not a formula pronounced at baptism. In the later history the only formula regularly attested to be pronounced by the administrator includes the triune name.”²² The earliest mention of the triune name formula comes from Jesus' commission to his Apostles in Matthew's Gospel (see Matthew 28:19), and that same wording becomes the dominant formula in later Christian initiation, thus it is possible that the formula was used as part of the normative pattern of initiation during the time period of Acts.

²¹ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 170.

²² *Ibid.*, 135.

The laying on of hands is not specified in this passage, but that does not mean that it did not take place. That part of the rite will be extremely important in later events in Acts. Some of the more dramatic elements of post-apostolic Christian initiation, such as anointing and clothing in a white garment, are also not mentioned in these verses. Once again, that does not mean that they did not take place, but the fact that they are completely missing from the other baptismal accounts in Acts does strengthen the argument that they were later additions to the New Testament practice of baptism.

The eighth chapter of Acts preserves an account of Philip's ministry in Samaria. Philip was an evangelist, one of the seven called to assist the Apostles (see Acts 6:1–6). Both men and women were baptized by Philip in Samaria, but the ordinance was not complete. Peter and John, both Apostles, were sent to Samaria so that those who had been baptized “might receive the Holy Ghost” (Acts 8:15). It seems that Philip had the authority to perform the water rite of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, but that the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Ghost—also essential in baptism—required authority held by others. Peter and John “laid...their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost” (Acts 8:17). Clearly, there is a pattern of baptism developing, immersion followed by the laying on of hands bestowing the Holy Ghost. Also, the idea that only a certain number of people held the essential authority to lay their hands upon one's head for the reception of the Holy Ghost adds to the argument for a normative pattern. An organized hierarchy established by Jesus and his Apostles would safeguard standards in liturgical practice.

Acts 8 also preserves the account of Philip's experience with an Ethiopian eunuch (or official). Philip unfolded the scriptures to the eunuch and “preached unto him Jesus”

(v. 35). As they passed a pool of water, the eunuch requested that Philip baptize him. “And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip” (vv. 38–39). One commentator wrote of this passage: “[It] leaves no doubt concerning the mode of baptism: immersion. Only after some years had passed and the theology of the church was altered did the mode change from believer’s baptism by immersion to sprinkling or pouring and then to infant baptism.”²³ Another scholar has written: “The Context...indicates that the baptism was by immersion, and there can be no doubt that this was the custom in the early Church.”²⁴

Paul’s journey to Ephesus adds further support to the thesis of the continuity of baptismal practice in the early church. Upon his arrival the Apostle asked, “Have ye received the Holy Ghost? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost” (Acts 19:2). Surprised, Paul queried, “Unto what then were ye baptized?” (v. 3). After Paul explained the difference between John’s and Christ’s baptisms, the believers “were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus,” after which Paul “laid his hands upon them,” and “the Holy Ghost came on them” (vv. 5–6).

Hearing the word of God, exercising faith in Christ, repentance, baptism in water by immersion, followed by an authorized administrator laying his hands upon the head in connection with the receipt of the Holy Ghost, these are the major elements of baptismal initiation identified in the book of Acts. There are references throughout the book that do not mention immersion or the laying on of hands, but such silence is not surprising. The

²³ Robert L. Maddox, Jr., *Layman’s Bible Book Commentary: Acts* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1979), 57.

²⁴ Nicoll, *Expositor’s Greek Testament*, 2:226.

writer of Acts was not trying to leave a handbook of liturgical rules and regulations; rather, he was declaring the power of the Apostles to continue building the kingdom which Jesus had established. The fact that there *are* references to some liturgical elements argues for their significance. On the other hand, practices extremely significant in later baptismal practice are not mentioned at all in the various conversion accounts in Acts. “The only act in addition to the water rite for which there is a definite reference is the laying on of hands.”²⁵

Other New Testament References to Baptism

Many of the other New Testament passages dealing with baptism focus more on the theology of the ordinance and less on the liturgical aspects. Nevertheless, the theology can reveal insights about how the rite was performed. Realizing the connection between theology and liturgy Bradshaw cautions: “Variation in baptismal theology encourages the supposition that the ritual itself may also have varied considerably from place to place.”²⁶ Yet, one must ask, was there variation in baptismal theology during the first century of Christianity? Bradshaw cites references in the New Testament where emphasis is placed at times on forgiveness of sins and receiving the Holy Ghost, other times on the metaphor of birth and enlightenment, and still other passages in which participation in the death and resurrection of Christ is the emphasis.²⁷ Does this constitute meaningful variation in baptismal theology or do the different elements of death, burial, crucifixion, rebirth, washing, and putting on Christ all combine to form one common theology of baptism? The doctrinal emphasis and imagery of some New Testament

²⁵ Ibid., 2:198.

²⁶ Bradshaw, *Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 61.

²⁷ Ibid.

authors may vary, but their overall theology may have been consistent.²⁸ As one pictures the actions of water immersion and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, it is reasonable to conclude that the various elements of baptismal theology taught in the New Testament could have easily been expressed in these two simple liturgical elements. The “variation” in New Testament baptismal theology may have more to do with a given author’s emphasis than with actual variations in doctrine and practice.

Paul taught those at Rome that baptism was performed in similitude of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: 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....Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Romans 6:3–4, 6). The images of burial and resurrection find themselves at home most readily in the context of an immersion.²⁹ Throughout the New Testament “some descriptions and imagery imply, if not require, an immersion, and nothing is inconsistent with immersion.”³⁰

The book of Hebrews outlines fundamental principles on the path to perfection. Among those principles are listed “the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2). Again, it is

²⁸ Lars Hartman argues that there were specific and consistent theological motifs of baptism which remained constant throughout the years of the New Testament era (*‘Into the Name of the Lord Jesus’: Baptism in the Early Church* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997], 50, 79–81, 99–102, 142–45).

²⁹ Colossians 2:12 provides this same imagery suggesting a baptismal immersion: “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.”

³⁰ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 197–98.

interesting to note what is mentioned and what is not. The only baptismal rite accompanying immersion described by the New Testament accounts “is a postbaptismal rite of handlaying, which is interpreted in relationship to the giving of the Holy Spirit.”³¹ Commenting on this passage in Hebrews, John Fleter Tipei has written: “In regard to the laying on of hands, the text...points to the fact that, at the close of the apostolic period, the laying on of hands had become the established rite for the reception of the Holy Spirit.”³²

Though James does not specifically use the term baptism, the ordinance does seem implied in the following verse: “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18). James’s reference to Jesus begetting Christians recalls the imagery and doctrine of John 3:5 where Jesus taught Nicodemus about being born again to enter the Kingdom of God. The theology and imagery of a new birth would definitely be more impressive to the new initiate if the baptism was performed by immersion. This scene would make the water not only a figurative tomb, as Paul suggests, but a figurative womb as well. Sprinkling or even washing would not produce the needed imagery to match the doctrine. This is important to note because, as will be established in a later chapter, Christian baptism evolved into a washing and christening ritual rather than an immersion. This was not the case during the New Testament time period—immersion was the standard.

³¹ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 29.

³² John Fleter Tipei, *The Laying on of Hands in the New Testament: Its significance, techniques, and effects* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2009), 225. For other scholars who also argue that the laying on of hands became part of the standard apostolic pattern of baptism see Dom Gregory Dix, *Confirmation or the Laying On of Hands* (London: SPCK, 1936); and A. J. Mason, *The Relation of Confirmation to Baptism* (London: Longmans, 1891). Tipei also discusses a dissertation written by Ove Conrad Hanssen (“Handspaleggelsens funksjon ved kristen initiasjon i Apostlenes gjerninger” [ThD dissertation, Lund University, 1987]) wherein Hanssen argues that the laying on of hands was a “fixed component in an early rite of baptism and initiation,” (*Laying on of Hands in the New Testament*, 188).

There are doctrinal passages which mention an anointing in the New Testament. Some scholars see in these passages evidence that a physical baptismal anointing did in fact take place during first-century Christianity. W. H. C. Frend, discussing the possibility of an elaborate baptismal ceremony in New Testament times, concludes: “There was certainly sealing and anointing.”³³ The two passages Frend quotes to support his conclusion are Ephesians 1:13 and 1 John 2:20. The passage in Ephesians reads: “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.” The verse in 1 John states: “But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.” Added here is a third passage seen by some to support physical anointing in the New Testament: “Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts” (2 Corinthians 1:21–22).

Do these three passages provide solid evidence for a physical anointing accompanying New Testament baptism? The context of the passages, the intent of the authors, and the person performing the anointing all present problems to the argument for a baptismal anointing. Aiden Kavanagh has written the following concerning the later two passages: “It is probable that in their literary contexts these two sayings (1 John 2:20, 2 Corinthians 1:21) use ‘anointing’ figuratively. In Paul’s case ‘anointing’ is one figure used along with those of ‘sealing’ and ‘earnest money,’ all of which refer to a Christian’s reception of the Spirit without their being each assigned to specific ritual acts. In John’s case it seems that *chrisma* is a figure for the truth of the gospel which caused the faithful

³³ W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 108.

community to know all things.”³⁴ Ferguson adds: “The verse [2 Corinthians 1:21–22] does use language later associated with baptism, but since here God does the anointing, sealing, and making the down payment, it is better to understand these images as three figures of speech describing the significance of God’s gift of the Spirit to Christians. This occurred at baptism, but the concern of Paul in this passage was not with baptism itself. The seal in early Christianity, as in this passage and in Ephesians...is predominantly associated with the Holy Spirit.”³⁵

Frend and other scholars who claim that such passages by Paul and John establish physical anointing as part the original Christian baptismal pattern fail to remember that, as at Jesus’ baptism, the anointing often represented the reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Any attempts to interpret such passages as literal baptismal anointing are “far-fetched” at best.³⁶ Summarizing the matter Ferguson writes: “An anointing may be implied in some references, but these can all be accounted for as figurative descriptions of the gift of the Holy Spirit, even as Jesus’ reception of the Spirit was described as an anointing.”³⁷ A literal anointing performed in conjunction with baptism is first attested to by Gnostic Christian sources in the second century. The baptismal anointings of the second century were very diverse in their practice and interpretation, likely because they were never originally part of the baptismal pattern established during apostolic Christianity.

³⁴ Kavanagh, *Shape of Baptism*, 27–28.

³⁵ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 155.

³⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A. & C. Black, 1977), 195.

³⁷ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 198.

Summary

Was there a normative pattern of Christian initiation during the New Testament era? The Bible provides strong evidence that there was a normative pattern which consisted of two major elements, a water immersion and the imposition of hands to confer the Holy Spirit. Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist began establishing this pattern of baptism. It is quite clear from evidence within the Bible that Jesus was baptized by immersion. The Spirit also descended upon Jesus at his baptism and he was thus symbolically anointed by God the Father.

A continuity of baptism was established in the New Testament as Jesus himself and his chosen Apostles continued to initiate converts into the church. The Apostles followed and built upon the pattern of baptism established at Jesus' baptism. Again, the biblical evidence suggests that baptisms during the apostolic era were performed by immersion. The physical descriptions of converts coming up out of the water, and the symbolic descriptions of baptism as a burial and as a rebirth, are only intelligible in the context of an immersion. Receiving the Spirit was also essential in the apostolic rite of baptism and the Apostles often connected it with the imposition of hands. Multiple biblical passages clearly witness the essential nature of the laying on of hands to bestow the Holy Spirit and to complete the water baptism. In fact, the *only* additional rite to the water immersion that finds strong support in the Bible is the laying on of hands.

Many of the other elements of Christian baptism which became so wide-spread and dominant in later centuries of the church do not seem to have been part of the original Christian pattern of baptism. Extended periods of instruction before baptism, exorcisms, anointing various body parts with oil, baptism in the nude, receiving white

garments, and other practices of the later rite find no support in biblical texts. Some scholars have seen possible evidence for practices such as a baptismal anointing in phrases used by Paul and John about “sealing,” “unction,” and “anointing,” yet the context of each of these passages seems to imply a symbolic description of the workings of the Spirit rather than evidence of an actual physical rite.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians that there was “one Lord, one faith, [and] *one baptism*” in the first century of the church (Ephesians 4:5; italics added). The sources of the first century do suggest one pattern of baptism in the New Testament. Thus, many scholars are convinced that an “original normative structure of Christian initiation” existed in the apostolic church, and that this normative structure “consisted of immersion, imposition of hands and Eucharist.”³⁸ Those are the elements of baptism confirmed by the Bible. This was the shape of Christian initiation in the first century. However, radical changes to baptismal practice and doctrine lay just over the horizon.

³⁸ Kretschmar, “Recent Research on Christian Initiation,” 13.

Chapter 2

Baptismal Evolutions of the Second, Third, and Fourth Centuries

The number of Christian converts increased dramatically throughout the second through fourth centuries, particularly in the early fourth century when Christianity was made legal. As the church expanded, Christianity faced the challenge of keeping its doctrines and practices pure. This challenge was magnified by factors such as a less centralized authority within the church during the second and third centuries, and the growing influence of a Hellenized society with all of its philosophies. Following the deaths of the original Apostles, church doctrine and practice became less and less standardized. The topics of authority, doctrine, and truth were much debated, with varying sects of Christianity claiming to have a fullness of each. This scene of change and debate provided a stage on which even the most fundamental ordinance in Christianity—baptism—could be altered. An overview of baptismal practices in the second, third, and fourth centuries will be presented to provide a sense of how the ordinance was changed from the original pattern established during the New Testament period. This project is not extensive enough for an analysis of every liturgical text, nor will it seek to identify all the differences between baptismal rites in varying Christian regions and sects. The goal will be to produce enough evidence from the primary sources to allow the reader to understand the major elements of post-apostolic baptism practice and which elements of the baptismal liturgy were added and adapted throughout these three centuries.

Second Century Baptism

In the second century there are two major sources for our understanding of baptism: the *Didache* and Justin Martyr's *First Apology*. The *Didache* is the earliest surviving text available, excluding the New Testament, which describes the administration of Christian baptism. The scholarly consensus is that the document was written in Syria sometime during the late first to early second century,³⁹ and it provides "invaluable information on how converts are to be initiated."⁴⁰ The *Didache* states:

(And) concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having said all these things beforehand, immerse in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit in flowing water—if, on the other hand, you should not have flowing water, immerse in other water [that is available]; (and) if you are not able in cold, [immerse] in warm [water]; (and) if you should not have either, pour out water onto the head three times in the name of [the] Father and [the] Son and [the] holy Spirit. (And) prior to the baptism, let the one baptizing fast; and [let the] one being baptized; and if any others have the strength, [let them fast also]. Order, on the other hand, the one being baptized to fast during one or two [days] prior [to the baptism].⁴¹

The baptismal liturgy of the *Didache* included a pre-baptismal fasting, an explanation of the gospel, and baptism—preferably in running water—in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the same triune name formula found in Matthew's Gospel. Exceptions were allowed, but immersion is stated as the preferred mode of baptism.⁴² There is no mention of the New Testament practice of handlaying for the gift of the Spirit, but the entire passage in the *Didache* seems to focus on the water rite and

³⁹ E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (Collegesville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 1; Jonathan A. Draper, "The Apostolic Fathers: The *Didache*," *The Expository Times* 117, no. 5 (2006): 178; Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 43; Bradshaw, *Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 73–78.

⁴⁰ Kavanagh, *Shape of Baptism*, 36.

⁴¹ *Didache*, 7.1–7.4, translation in Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegesville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 18–21.

⁴² Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 204–06. According to Ferguson: "The triple pouring mentioned with the three names might imply a similar triple immersion, once for each of the names," but he admits, "This, is not stated and may not be implied."

mentions nothing about the Holy Ghost or its reception. In this regard the document does leave “many questions unanswered” regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism.⁴³

But the description in this text, according to Johnson, is of a “ritual pattern” which “corresponds in broad outline to...the regular sequence for adult initiation in the New Testament period.”⁴⁴

Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, written about AD 150 in Rome, provides a further witness to second-century baptismal practice. Justin “was in a position to know general Christian practice and may be taken as representative of Christian baptism at the mid-second century.”⁴⁵

I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, “Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

...And for this [rite] we have learned from the apostles this reason. Since at our birth we were born without our own knowledge or choice, by our parents coming together, and were brought up in bad habits and wicked training; in order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; he who leads to the laver the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone....And this washing is called illumination, because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings. And in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy

⁴³ Kavanagh, *Shape of Baptism*, 37.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 45.

⁴⁵ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 237.

Ghost, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus, he who is illuminated is washed.⁴⁶

Justin's account is the most complete description of baptism in the second century. Justin claims the practice described in his treatise came from the Apostles. One who believed the teachings of Christianity was invited to repent, pray, fast, and commit themselves to live the truths they were taught. They were then baptized, or regenerated, in the triune name, after which they were admitted into the Christian community. Missing are specific references to any accompanying rites in addition to the water baptism, but Justin's use of the term "illumination" may be an allusion to the reception of the Holy Ghost at baptism, which in the New Testament pattern, was conferred by the laying on of hands. Justin's vagueness in this area is not proof that accompanying rites were not performed during this time in his community; perhaps, it was simply not his purpose to describe those elements in this work. What is described by Justin in this ceremony seems rather simple in liturgical form, and is similar to what is described in the New Testament and the *Didache*.

Third Century Baptism

In the third century the major texts describing baptism are Tertullian's *De Baptismo*, Cyprian's epistles, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the *Apostolic Tradition*. As the third century began, the prolific Christian author Tertullian from Carthage wrote his treatise on baptism entitled *De Baptismo* (ca. 198–203). This document is the earliest surviving treatise on baptism in our possession today. It is here, near the end of the second and beginning of the third century, that major changes made to the ceremony of

⁴⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.1–2.

baptism appear in the historical texts. “They who are about to enter baptism,” according to Tertullian, “ought to pray with repeated prayers, fasts, and bendings of the knee, and vigils all the night through, and with the confession of all bygone sins.”⁴⁷ This pre-baptismal repentance was followed by a profession of the Christian faith, and an affirmation that those being baptized renounced “the devil and his pomp and his angels.” The initiate was then to be “thrice immersed” while answering interrogations, which Tertullian himself admits is “*a somewhat ampler pledge than our Lord has appointed in the Gospel.*”⁴⁸ Tertullian knew that triple immersion, and perhaps other elements of the baptismal rite of his day, found no precedent in the New Testament practice of the rite.

Following the washing associated with the water rite, the initiate was “thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction.” Tertullian does not rely on New Testament baptismal liturgy as a source for this practice; rather, he explains that those performing physical anointings were following a practice derived “from the old discipline” found in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁹ Though not mentioned in *De Baptismo*, another of Tertullian’s writings suggests the possibility that this anointing included tracing the sign of the cross with oil somewhere (probably the forehead) on the neophyte’s body: “The flesh, indeed, is washed, in order that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed [with the cross], that the soul too may be fortified.”⁵⁰ This was followed by the laying on of hands “invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 20.

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *The Chaplet or De Corona* 3; italics added.

⁴⁹ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 7. This pattern of looking to the Old Testament temple practices as the source for later baptismal evolutions in Christianity will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

⁵⁰ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8.

benediction.”⁵¹ Preferably, the entire rite was officiated by the bishop, but if not by him then by a presbyter, deacon, or other lay member of the church as designated by the bishop.

Cyprian, who was the bishop of Carthage in the middle of the third century (ca. 248–258), provides information through his letters about a baptismal ceremony comparable to that described by Tertullian. Unlike Tertullian, Cyprian does not provide an orderly sequence of actions, but he does supply information regarding the major elements of the rite. His letters make clear there was some form of a catechumenate—or religious instruction—prior to baptism. No exact formula is given for renunciation of the world and Satan, but Cyprian does seem to imply that such a renunciation was part of the ceremony with these words: “We had renounced the world when we were baptized.”⁵²

Once the baptism itself began the initiate was interrogated with questions of faith such as, “Dost thou believe in eternal life and remission of sins through the holy Church?”⁵³ “We may infer a triple immersion from the triple interrogatory confession,” according to Ferguson.⁵⁴ Cyprian informs his readers that “it is also necessary that he should be anointed who is baptized: so that, having received the chrism, that is the anointing, he may be anointed of God and have in him the grace of Christ.”⁵⁵ Cyprian’s letters reveal clear testimony to the practice of “the imposition of hands” in order to “obtain the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁶ The letters also describe the practice of signing with the

⁵¹ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 8.

⁵² Cyprian, “The Epistles of Cyprian,” Epistle 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Epistle 69.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 353.

⁵⁵ Cyprian, “Epistles of Cyprian,” Epistle 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Epistle 72.

cross.⁵⁷ Again, a sequence is not given, but the major elements are consistent with Tertullian's description, and we might assume the same for the sequence.

Interestingly, Cyprian pointed out that there were some in his day who questioned the legitimacy of the growing practice of baptism by sprinkling. They believed one should be immersed as in times past.⁵⁸ The fact that this question was raised in Cyprian's day suggests that sprinkling was something fairly new to these Christians; and that it was contrary to the normative pattern of the earlier church. If sprinkling had been part of the New Testament rite of baptism, then it would have been heretical to object to the practice. Thus, there were those in Cyprian's day who saw sprinkling baptism as a corruption of a rite clearly practiced only by immersion in New Testament times.

Further knowledge about the third-century rite comes from the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a document written in the early to mid-third century. Its provenance is usually regarded as Northern Syria. In a passage addressed to the bishop it states:

In the first place, when women go down into the water: those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men: but with the imposition of hand do thou anoint the head only. As of old the priests and kings were anointed in Israel, do you in like manner, with the imposition of hand, anoint the head of those who receive baptism, whether of men or of women; and afterwards—whether thou thyself baptize, or thou command the deacons or presbyters to baptize—let a woman deacon, as we have already said, anoint the women. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Epistle 75.

⁵⁹ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 16, translation in R. Hugh Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 146–47.

Apparently, an anointing of the entire body was administered to the initiate by someone of the same gender, and an anointing of the head was performed by the bishop. The writer of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, like Tertullian's community, looked back to practices within the Old Testament for the origin of the anointing and not to some first-century baptismal practice.

Another text which sheds light on the evolutionary changes made to baptism is the *Apostolic Tradition*. This early Christian treatise has been described as an "incomparable source of information about church life and liturgy in the third century."⁶⁰ It had been "long thought to be an authentic, authoritative and dependable witness to early third-century Roman liturgical practice, composed by Hippolytus of Rome (c. 217),"⁶¹ but recent scholarship argues for synthesis of baptismal practices ranging from the mid-second to fourth centuries.⁶² Still, it is included here in the discussion of third-century practice because it is probable that the original of the foundational document comes from the third century.⁶³

The *Apostolic Tradition* called for a three year catechumenate where the word was taught.⁶⁴ Those proving themselves worthy during this trial period then experienced a series of exorcisms to "exorcize all evil spirits to flee away and never to return." The bishop would then "breathe in their faces" and "seal their foreheads, ears and noses."⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Geoffrey J. Cumming, *Hippolytus: A Test for Students* (Long Eaton, England: Hassall & Lucking, 1976), 5.

⁶¹ Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 4.

⁶² Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson and L.E. Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

⁶³ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 328.

⁶⁴ *Apostolic Tradition* 2.17, translation in Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.20.

The initiate stripped off his clothes before entering the water and this was followed by a renunciation of Satan, a pre-baptismal anointing with “the oil of exorcism,” and three questions and confessions of faith—each one followed by a descent into the water. Following the third immersion the person being baptized was anointed a second time with “the oil of thanksgiving” by the presbyter who said, “I anoint thee with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶

Post-baptismal rites included the bishop laying his hands on the neophyte’s head, invoking God’s grace, and then performing a third anointing by “pouring the oil of thanksgiving from his hand and putting it on [the baptizand’s] forehead.”⁶⁷ The bishop completed the ceremony by signing the person on the forehead, giving him or her a kiss, and inviting the new Christian into the community of believers to partake of the Eucharist as well as a mixture of milk and honey.⁶⁸

Many points of this rite connect directly with those points previously cited in the other third-century works. Added elements, which do become more prevalent in later descriptions of the rite, include exorcisms, insufflations, nude baptism, and multiple anointings. Clearly, Christian baptism evolved into something far different in form than the simple rite practiced by first-century Christians.

Fourth Century Baptism

The fourth century provides scholars with more information about the practice of Christian baptism than any of the previous centuries. There is also much commonality in

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2.21.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2.22.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 2.22–23.

the practice as described by various fourth-century writers such as Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan.⁶⁹ This study will present as representative of fourth-century practice the baptismal rite as described by Cyril of Jerusalem. The rite he describes will, in many ways, reflect the basic evolutions of Christian initiation as described by the other fourth-century authors, though the fourth century was still a generation of “radical change” in the performance of baptism.⁷⁰

Cyril’s twenty-three catechetical lectures contain instructions on the doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. Eighteen of the lectures were given before baptism, and the last five lectures on the “mysteries” were reserved for the newly baptized. It is in these last five lectures that one gains a clear understanding of how the ceremony of baptism was performed in Cyril’s day.

Candidates for baptism enrolled in the catechumenate, which for Cyril’s congregation was a forty-day period of instruction and repentance. During this time the catechumens were “breathed upon” and “exorcised,” while having their faces “veiled.”⁷¹ The information, or mysteries, these catechumens received was not to be spoken to others and not to be written down. “Guard the mystery...take heed, pray, to tell nothing out,” wrote Cyril, “not that the things spoken are not worthy to be told; but because his ear [the uninitiated] is unworthy to receive.”⁷²

Cyril’s first mystagogical catechesis describes the pre-baptismal rites:

⁶⁹ See Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1974).

⁷⁰ Kretschmar, “Recent Research on Christian Initiation,” 17.

⁷¹ Cyril, *Procatechesis* 9. All English translations of Cyril’s writings are from Philip Schaff and Henry Wade, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers—Second Series*, 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), hereafter cited as *NPNF*.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 12.

First ye entered into the vestibule of the Baptistery, and there facing towards the West ye listened to the command to stretch forth your hand, and as in the presence of Satan ye renounced him...When therefore thou renoucest Satan, utterly breaking all thy covenant with him, that ancient league with hell, there is opened to thee the paradise of God, which He planted towards the East, whence for his transgression our first father was banished; and a symbol of this was thy turning from West to East, the place of light. Then thou wert told to say, “I believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost, and in one Baptism of repentance.”⁷³

These gestures all took place in the forecourt of the church. After this renunciation, changing of direction, and confession, the initiates were led into the inner baptistery, or what Cyril refers to as “the Holy of Holies.”⁷⁴

Cyril’s second mystagogical catechesis describes the baptismal ceremony:

As soon, then, as ye entered, ye put off your tunic; and this was an image of putting off the old man with his deeds. Having stripped yourselves, ye were naked; in this also imitating Christ, who was stripped naked on the Cross. Then, when ye were stripped, ye were anointed with exorcised oil from the very hairs of your head to your feet, and were made partakers of the good olive-tree, Jesus Christ...After these things, ye were led to the holy pool of Divine Baptism, as Christ was carried from the Cross to the Sepulchre which is before our eyes. And each of you was asked, whether he believed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and ye made that saving confession, and descended three times into the water, and ascended again; here also hinting by a symbol at the three days burial of Christ.⁷⁵

The third mystagogical lecture describes the post-baptismal anointing: “And ye were first anointed on the forehead...then on your ears...then on the nostrils...afterwards on your breast.”⁷⁶ Cyril taught that the anointing had the power to make one like Christ: “Having been baptized into Christ, and put on Christ, ye have been made conformable to

⁷³ Cyril, *Lecture* 19.2–9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁵ Cyril, *Lecture* 20.2–4.

⁷⁶ Cyril, *Lecture* 21.4.

the Son of God; for God having foreordained us unto adoption as sons made us to be conformed to the body of Christ's glory. Having therefore become partakers of Christ, ye are properly called Christs, and of you God said, Touch not My Christs, or anointed. Now ye have been made Christs, by receiving the antitype of the Holy Ghost; and all things have been wrought in you by imitation ye are images of Christ."⁷⁷

Like his predecessors of the third century, Cyril connected the practice of an initiatory anointing not to the New Testament, but to the priests and kings of the Old Testament: "Moreover, you should know that in the old Scripture there lies the symbol of this Chrism. For what time Moses imparted to his brother the command of God, and made him High-priest, after bathing in water, he anointed him; and Aaron was called Christ or Anointed, evidently from the typical Chrism. So also the High-priest, in advancing Solomon to the kingdom, anointed him after he had bathed in Gihon. To them however these things happened in a figure, but to you not in a figure, but in truth; because ye were truly anointed by the Holy Ghost."⁷⁸ Either prior to, or more likely, just following this anointing,⁷⁹ the initiate was clothed in a white robe or garment. Cyril's lecture does not specifically mention this, but Chrysostom, Theodore, and Ambrose do, and Cyril does make definite allusions to the white garment in his writings.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁹ Riley, *Christian Initiation*, 350.

⁸⁰ See Cyril, *Lecture 22.8*. Cyril taught: "But now, having put off thy old garments, and put on those which are spiritually white, thou must be continually robed in white: of course we mean not this, that thou art always to wear white raiment; but thou must be clad in the garments that are truly white and shining and spiritual." Riley also discusses Cyril's "positive allusion to the white garments" (*Christian Initiation*, 349–50).

Summary

Obviously, the ordinance of baptism underwent dramatic changes in its mode over the first four centuries of the Christian church. However, many of the major evolutions made to baptism do not appear in the ancient texts until the third and fourth centuries of the church's existence. The second century rite seems to remain fairly simple in liturgical ritual. Documents such as the *Didache* and Justin Martyr's *First Apology* provide evidence for a rite that corresponds in general form to the rite described by the New Testament texts. There is no indication from the second century texts available that the baptisms during that era included the later, more dramatic, rituals of renunciation, confession, being anointed with oil, being signed on the forehead, and receiving a new white garment. Second century baptism seemed to remain fairly simple in liturgical practice.

It is the beginning of the third century which provides documents describing a more elaborate form a Christian baptism. Sources such as Tertullian, Cyprian, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the *Apostolic Tradition* all describe baptismal practices which find no precedent in the New Testament. These various sources describe baptismal elements such as pre-baptismal catechumen periods lasting up to three years, multiple exorcisms, anointing the body with oil, being signed with the cross, the removal of clothing, multiple immersions, sprinkling with water, dramatic renunciations of Satan, a welcoming kiss into the new Christian community, and other practices which heightened the drama and pageantry of the rite.

Church Fathers like Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan provide ample evidence for the fourth century rite of

Christian baptism. After Constantine's conversion, and as the church became legalized and accepted, the practice of baptism seemed to become more standardized across the Roman Empire. The elements and the order of the ceremony described by the fourth century Christian authors are very similar. Fathers such as Cyril described the entire process of baptism as a great mystery, something that was to be guarded from the eyes and ears of the uninitiated. Pre-baptismal elements of the fourth-century rite included a catechumen period of instruction, exorcisms, a renunciation of Satan, and a confession of faith. The water baptism included nude baptism, a triple immersion or washing, and a triple confession of faith. Post-baptismal rites included an anointing of the forehead, ears, nostrils, and breasts. This was then followed by the reception of a white garment. Fathers like Cyril viewed this entire process as something which made the new convert a "Christ." Fourth-century baptisms were laden with additional elements which began to dominate the rite. That these elements were added, and that they were very important in the church seems clear; but what was the origin of these newer practices and how did they make their way into Christian baptism?

Chapter 3

The Influence of Israelite Temple Practices on Christian Baptism

Having established from the sources what the shape of baptism was as described in the New Testament, and what the shape of baptism became by the fourth century, turn now to the question of the origins of the liturgical evolutions made to baptism. In order to discover possible origins of the alterations which became so prevalent and important in later Christian baptism, attention must be paid to the temple practices of the ancient Israelite priests and kings. The early Christians looked back to the practices of the tabernacle and the temple as sources for at least some of what later became Christian baptism.

Because Christianity sprang from a Jewish culture and setting, there may be a tendency to look to the Jewish initiation practices of Jesus' day as the source for the developments in Christian baptism;⁸¹ however, the ancient Israelite tabernacle and temple almost certainly provide a much more likely source for the practices and doctrines which were attached to baptism in the third and fourth centuries of Christianity. The Jewish practice of proselyte baptism may have influenced John the Baptist's baptism by immersion,⁸² but the additions made to baptism came much later. Margaret Barker, who has written extensively on temple theology and typology, explains: "The temple has been simply ignored, even though the earliest glimpse of Christian worship, found in the book

⁸¹ See W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy* (Gloucester, Mass.: Oxford University Press, 1965). Though he does not discuss baptism, Oesterley demonstrates this tendency to look to the Jewish synagogue as the source of much of what became Christian worship, including the Eucharist. According to Margaret Barker: "The origin of Christian worship is usually located in the synagogues rather than the temple" (*Temple Themes in Christian Worship* [London: T&T Clark, 2008], 19).

⁸² See note 10.

of Revelation, is set in the temple; Jesus was described as the great high priest; a large number of priests became Christian; and the first Christians in Jerusalem worshipped in the temple every day.”⁸³ Furthermore, Barker writes: “Any investigation of the origin of Christian worship must take into account the fact that Jesus was proclaimed the Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), and the high priest did not function in a synagogue; [it must also be considered] that the central message of Christianity was the atonement, a ritual at the heart of temple worship; that the hope for the Messiah was grounded in the royal high priesthood of the original temple; and that the Christians thought of themselves as a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9). The great high priest and His royal priests would have been out of place in a synagogue.”⁸⁴ To make sense of the dramatic evolutions made in Christian baptism one must recognize the Israelite temple themes woven throughout the changes in Christian baptism.

Barker points out that “there appeared very early in Christian writings, references to beliefs that are nowhere recorded in the New Testament [at least not directly] and yet clearly originated in the tradition we call apocalyptic.” She continues, “As more is discovered about this tradition, so more and more points of contact can be found between the beliefs of the ancient temple theology and what became Christianity.”⁸⁵ “A secret, priestly tradition...was known in the early church,” according to Barker, “and it

⁸³ Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20. In his review of this book by Barker, Don Norton writes: “Barker has certainly not been without her critics....Barker’s meticulous explorations of temple theology over the last two decades (included in ten books and numerous articles) certainly warrant careful scrutiny. Her conclusions are not to be easily dismissed, however new or different they may seem at a cursory glance....Clearly, something central to Jewish and Christian worship was lost with the loss of the temple, and a reconstruction of early Christian worship, such as Barker offers, thus becomes entirely appropriate” (review of *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, by Margaret Barker, *BYU Studies* 47, no. 4 [2008]: 160–61).

⁸⁵ Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 9.

concerned certain practices in the liturgy and temple customs.”⁸⁶ She proposes that “the secret tradition of the priests probably became the secret tradition of early Christianity.”⁸⁷ To explore this thesis more fully an analysis of the secret tradition of the priests will be given. Such an analysis provides intriguing connections between ancient Israelite temple rituals, possible higher initiation practices within New Testament Christianity, and the evolutionary changes made to Christian baptism.

The Temple Initiation of Kings and Priests

It seems that Jehovah had grand designs for the Israelites once he led them out of bondage in Egypt. Moses’ role was not just to help make the Israelite nation free, nor was it only to help bring them into their promised land. According to the biblical text, Jehovah intended to use Moses and the priesthood he bore to bring the Israelites into a covenant relationship whereby the Lord could make them “a peculiar treasure,” “a kingdom of priests,” and “an holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6). The Lord commanded Moses to “Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes” (Exodus 19:10). The people were to prepare themselves “to meet with God” upon Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:17). Unfortunately, when the day came for the children of Israel to ascend and meet Jehovah they feared, and “removed, and stood afar off” (Exodus 20:18). They were unable to receive a fullness of the experience with Deity; however, they retained the Law of Moses and priesthood authority whereby they performed rites which were used to initiate both kings and priests.

⁸⁶ Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004), 10.

⁸⁷ Barker, *Great High Priest*, 9.

Ancient Israelite leaders—prophets, priests, and kings—went through a ritual of initiation at the commencement of their new roles and responsibilities. The ancient temple, either in the form of the tabernacle or Solomon’s temple, was the place and the context for this initiation. Major elements of this initiation included washings, anointings, investiture in white clothing, and receiving the Divine Name. Each of these elements will be examined.

Washings

Ritual washings were required of all observant Israelites, but a special washing was required of the priests before participating in further temple practices. The washing was an outward symbol emphasizing the need for inward purity before entering the holy place to officiate as a priest. Moses was commanded to bring Aaron and his sons “unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shalt wash them with water” (Exodus 29:4). This position placed the priests next to the laver of water which was set “between the tent of the congregation and the altar” (Exodus 40:7). “And Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet thereat: When they went into the tent of the congregation, and when they came near unto the altar, they washed; as the Lord commanded Moses” (Exodus 40:31–32). According to the Mishnah the washing ceremony took place behind a linen curtain that had been set up inside the tabernacle’s courtyard. Baruch A. Levine describes the actions of the high priest after he performed his duties at the altar of sacrifice: “[The high priest] proceeded to a screened area, adjacent to the Tent, where he disrobed, bathed, and donned his golden vestments. Mishnah Middot 5.3 and Mishnah Yoma 3.3 refer to the bureau in the temple complex on whose roof was a place for ablutions, called *beit ha-tevilah*, ‘the place of immersion.’

One assumes that in the tabernacle described by the priestly tradition there was also an area for disrobing and bathing, acts quite frequently called for in the performance of the sacrificial cult.”⁸⁸

Anointings

The earliest ceremonial anointing found in the Bible is that of Aaron and his sons at the tabernacle.⁸⁹ The biblical text states that following the washing of the priest Moses was commanded to “take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head, and anoint him” (Exodus 29:7). Speaking of the power and sanctity of this anointing the Lord told Moses: “And thou shalt anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister unto me in the priest’s office. And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, This shall be an holy anointing oil unto me throughout your generations. Upon man’s [the common man who is not a priest] flesh shall it not be poured, neither shall ye make any

⁸⁸ Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 108. The Mishnah is the first major redaction (c. AD 220) of the Jewish oral traditions called the “Oral Torah.” There is scholarly debate regarding which statements and events within the Mishnah are historically reliable. However, some scholars of the Talmud do hold that many or most of the statements and events of the Mishnah are reliable and can be used as a serious source for historical study, e.g., Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974); David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: the Jewish Predilection for Jewish Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁸⁹ The consecrating anointing may have predated Aaron and his sons. The pseudepigraphic 2 *Enoch* depicts the following experience of Enoch: “And the LORD said to Michael, ‘Go and extract Enoch from his earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory.’ And so Michael did, just as the LORD had said to him. He anointed me and he clothed me. And the appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, and its ointment is like sweet dew, and its fragrance myrrh; and it is like the rays of the glittering sun. And I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his glorious ones” Translation in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (ed. James Charlesworth; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 1:138. No manuscripts of this document older than the fourteenth century are known to exist. Dates proposed by scholars range from pre-Christian times to the late Middle Ages, (*Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:94). If this passage does reflect true ancient practices, then we learn that disrobing accompanied the anointing and this ritual had the power to make one “like one of (the Lord’s) glorious ones.” This could be stating the belief that anointing was connected with the theology of deification, or becoming a god. As noted above, this same theology of deification is attached by Cyril to the later baptismal anointings of the fourth century.

other like it, after the composition of it: it is holy, and it shall be holy unto you” (Exodus 30:30–32). Priests were anointed in the same manner as was the high priest: “And thou shalt anoint them [the sons of Aaron], as thou didst anoint their father, that they may minister unto me in the priest’s office: for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations” (Exodus 40:15).

Significantly, the holy oil which was used to anoint priests and kings was kept within the tabernacle in a “horn” (see 1 Samuel 16:13, 1 Kings 1:39), a practice adopted by at least some Christians.⁹⁰ This horn may have been the horn of an ox or bull. Psalm 92:10 reads: “But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of a unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil.” The word “unicorn” in this passage would be better translated as a wild bull or ox. The anointing oil was poured on the head of the initiate (see Exodus 29:7, Leviticus 8:12, Psalms 133:2). Also, “in an ordinance that closely parallels one of the priestly consecration rites,”⁹¹ the following is revealed about the application of the oil:

And the priest shall take some of the log of oil, and pour it onto the palm of his own left hand: And the priest shall dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand, and shall sprinkle of the oil with his finger seven times before the Lord: And of the rest of the oil that is in his hand shall the priest put upon the tip of the right ear of him that is to be cleansed, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot, upon the blood of the trespass offering: And the remnant of the oil that is in the priest’s hand he shall pour upon the head of him that is to be cleansed: and the priest shall make an atonement for him before the Lord. (Leviticus 14:15–18)

According to Jacob Milgrom’s translation of Leviticus 14:18 the text literally reads “The remainder of the oil on the priest’s palm shall be *put on the head* of the one

⁹⁰ A Gnostic Christian group, the Naassenes, used oil from within a horn for anointing initiatory rites, see Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.4.

⁹¹ Matthew B. Brown, *The Gate of Heaven* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1999), 80.

being purified,”⁹² not “pour upon the head” as it states in the King James Bible. “The implication is that the oil was smeared upon the head just as it was upon the other parts of the body.”⁹³ Milgrom is convinced that “the forehead is clearly intended.” The forehead “is the part of the body that is the focus of oil rituals in the ancient Near East.”⁹⁴

Investiture with White Garments

In connection with these other elements of initiation into the rites of a priest the Lord commanded Moses to dress the priests in special ceremonial clothing which would endow them with power, protection, and glory:

And for Aaron’s sons thou shalt make coats, and thou shalt make for them girdles, and bonnets shalt thou make for them, for glory and beauty. And thou shalt put them upon Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him. . . . And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach: And they shall be upon Aaron, and upon his sons, when they come in unto the tabernacle of the congregation, or when they come near unto the altar to minister in the holy place; that they bear not iniquity, and die: it shall be a statute for ever unto him and his seed after him. (Exodus 28:40–43)

The Lord described this sacred and protective clothing as “holy garments” (Exodus 28:2, 4). These sacred garments also seem to have been worn by initiated Israelite kings: “And David was clothed with a robe of fine linen, and all the Levites that bare the ark, and the singers, and Chenaniah the master of the song with the singers: David also had upon him an ephod of linen” (1 Chronicles 15:27).

⁹² Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 828; italics added.

⁹³ Brown, *Gate of Heaven*, 103.

⁹⁴ Milgrom, *Anchor Bible*, 855.

Receiving the Divine Name

The temple is the place where the Lord established his name (see Deuteronomy 12:5, 2 Samuel 7:13, 1 Kings 9:3 and 7, 2 Chronicles 7:16). In Exodus 20:24 the Lord emphasized that “in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.” In temple settings the Lord transmitted his name to those willing to make covenants with him. They then became “a peculiar people...a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:5–6). Receiving the Divine Name was a sign of ownership and of protection, and this took place in the temple. The priests then had the opportunity to “put [the Lord’s name] upon the children of Israel” (Numbers 6:27). Kaufmann Kohler writes: “Only the priests in the temple were allowed to pronounce the sacred Name and were enjoined to do so when blessing the people in accordance with Numbers 6:2....The priests, when pronouncing the Name in their blessing, did it in a whisper—‘swallowed it up.’ An ancient Baraita says: Formerly the quadrilateral Name was transmitted to everybody, but when the insolent ones increased it was transmitted only to the discreet ones (z’nuim) among the priesthood.”⁹⁵

The high priest wore a special plate tied to the front of his turban: “And thou shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it, like the engravings of a signet, HOLINESS TO THE LORD” (Exodus 28:36). The word “LORD” in the King James Bible is the translation of the name of the Lord “YHWH.” Thus, the high priest wore Yahweh’s name—his seal—upon his forehead. But it seems as if the high priest may have also worn the name upon his forehead as a result of the anointing he had received. According to the

⁹⁵ Kaufmann Kohler, *The Origins of the Synagogue and the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 50–51. Baraita refers to teachings included in the Talmud which are outside of the six orders of the Mishnah.

Talmud, oil was placed upon the priest's forehead in the shape of an X, or more precisely in the shape of the Hebrew letter *taw*.⁹⁶ Commenting on the Hebrew *taw* Charles A. Gieschen writes: "As the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, it functioned as a mark of YHWH's ownership because it was considered shorthand for his Name, much like the Greek letter *omega* does in early Christian symbolism....Like the blood on the Israelite doorposts during the night of the tenth plague, this mark was a protecting sign or seal that shielded its bearer from the purge of the unrighteous....Furthermore, it is not insignificant that in ancient Hebrew script and even in the first century C.E. a Hebrew *taw* looked like two equal lines crossed, either erect like + or at an angle like X."⁹⁷

Israelite Temple Initiation and Christian Baptism

Israelite kings and priests took part in initiatory ceremonies. These temple ceremonies, which included washings, anointings, clothing in sacred garments, and marking with the Divine Name parallel some of the major alterations made to Christian baptism in remarkable ways. Consider the following: throughout initiation texts of the third and fourth centuries, *temple terms* such as sacrifice, Levite, laver, altar, incense, priest, high priest, Holy of Holies, the Name, garments, robes, anointing oil, and veil

⁹⁶ *Talmud*, Horayoth 12a, translation in Martin S. Jaffee, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation XXVI* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1984), 186.

⁹⁷ Charles A. Gieschen, "Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation," in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (ed. April D. DeConick; Boston: Brill, 2006), 345–46. This marking of the Divine Name was part of the anointing ritual: "Talmudic tradition also tells of the exact way in which kings and priests were anointed...in the case of priests it was applied in the form of the Greek letter X" (Ralph Patai, *On Jewish Folklore* [Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1983], 124). This mark was later transformed into the prevalent baptismal ritual of signing with the cross in early Christianity, see Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early Church* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 220–60.

began to be used repeatedly in a baptismal context.⁹⁸ The New Testament description of the baptismal rite does not provide this temple-focused emphasis. However, chapter four of this work will advance the theory that these rituals were likely performed during the first century of Christianity in some form of an initiation ceremony reserved for a faithful group within Christianity. These rituals may have been part of first-century Christian worship; however, they do not seem to be part of first-century Christian baptism.

The *Testament of Levi*, a pre-Christian text,⁹⁹ may provide evidence for a binding link between the priestly and royal initiations of the temple and later Christian baptismal practice. The document, describing Levi's priestly ordination, closely parallels the rituals that became Christian baptism. Levi's priestly initiation is described as follows:

And I saw seven men in white clothing, who were saying to me, "Arise, put on the vestments of the priesthood, the crown of righteousness, the oracle of understanding, the robe of truth, the breastplate of faith, the miter for the head, and the apron for prophetic power." Each carried one of these and put them on me and said, "From now on be a priest, you and all your posterity." The first anointed me with holy oil and gave me a staff. The second washed me with pure water, fed me by hand with bread and holy wine, and put on me a holy and glorious vestment. The third put on me something made of linen, like an ephod. The fourth placed...around me a girdle which was like purple. The fifth gave me a branch of rich olive wood. The sixth placed a wreath on my head. The seventh placed the

⁹⁸ See Matthew B. Brown, "The Israelite Temple and the Early Christians," (paper presented at Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research conference, 2008); available from http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2008_The_Israelite_Temple_and_the_Early_Christians.html; accessed 1 June 2011.

⁹⁹ The *Testament of Levi* is part of the pseudepigraphical work the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. There has been much scholarly debate whether the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is basically a Jewish work with Christian interpolations or a Christian composition which uses Jewish sources. However, the pre-Christian nature of the *Testament of Levi* can hardly be doubted. Fragments of two of the Testaments—Levi and Naphtali—have been found at Qumran. The *Testament of Levi* as it now stands is very likely dependant on the *Aramaic Levi Document* found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Robert A. Kugler, *From Patriarch to Priest: the Levi-Priestly Tradition from Aramaic Levi to Testament of Levi* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); and James L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

priestly diadem on me and filled my hands with incense, in order that I might serve as priest for the Lord God.¹⁰⁰

The ritual pattern of washing, anointing, and being vested with sacred clothing corresponds to the pattern found in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8.¹⁰¹ Christians were the ones who preserved this document containing ritual elements dealing with priestly ordination, and many of those elements resemble post-apostolic baptismal accounts. This is how some early Christians viewed the initiation of priests at the temple,¹⁰² and this is the shape the post-New Testament baptismal rite adopted.

The whole context of later Christian baptism took on the shape of temple initiation much more so than the baptisms performed by Jesus and his Apostles. By the fourth century Cyril spoke of “rites carried out in the forecourt,” reminiscent of the initiation of Aaron’s sons in the forecourt of the tabernacle. The ceremony of Cyril’s day then moved into the inner baptistery, or the “Holy of Holies,” as Cyril called it, for the “next stage of our initiation into the mysteries.” As the neophytes of Cyril’s day received the mysteries, Cyril drew their attention to the kings and priests of the Old Testament to find meaning in the ritual actions of baptism: “Moreover, you should know that in the old Scripture there lies the symbol of this Chrism. For what time Moses imparted to his

¹⁰⁰ *The Testament of Levi*, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:791. There is much scholarly debate regarding which elements of the *Testament of Levi* are Christian interpolations. Levi’s vision of the seven beings anointing him is attested to by the *Aramaic Levi Document*. The *Cairo Geniza Levi* text (which is paralleled in spots by the text found in Qumran cave 1) reports the seven angels’ words to Levi: “Now see how we have elevated you above all and how we gave you the anointing of eternal peace,” (*Aramaic Levi Document* 6–7, in James Kugel, “Levi’s Elevation to the Priesthood in Second Temple Writings,” *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 1 [January 1993]: 11).

¹⁰¹ Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, 106.

¹⁰² Margaret Barker writes: “There may be Christian additions to the Testament of Levi....Any Christian additions to an earlier text about priesthood will have served to emphasize the importance of the text for Christians who believed themselves to be the royal priesthood” (*Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, 106).

brother the command of God, and made him High-priest, after bathing in water, he anointed him; and Aaron was called Christ or Anointed, evidently from the typical Chrism. So also the High-priest, in advancing Solomon to the kingdom, anointed him after he had bathed in Gihon.”¹⁰³ The elements of priestly and royal initiation became common in baptismal practice and theology following the first century of Christianity, especially in the third and fourth centuries. The Old Testament temple initiation elements of washing, anointing, investiture with white garments, and receiving the Divine Name are clearly presented by patristic sources in descriptions of post-New Testament baptism.

The immersion and pronouncement of being baptized “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost” found in the New Testament were later adapted into a washing and purification ritual. Baptism, which originally was performed by immersion, became by Cyril’s time period “a washing rather than a baptism, since it is not by immersion,” explains Hugh Nibley.¹⁰⁴ The later Christian initiates experienced this washing ritual in the nude. This nude washing, prior to an anointing with oil, seems to correspond to the washing ceremony of the Israelite temple.

Many Church Fathers and theologians, like Cyril, began to relate the baptismal anointing of their day to the temple initiation which took place anciently in the Old Testament. Tertullian, who referred to the bishop administering baptism as “the high priest,” taught, “After this, when we have issued from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction,— (a practice derived) from the old discipline, wherein on

¹⁰³ Cyril, *Lecture* 21.6.

¹⁰⁴ Hugh Nibley, “What Is a Temple?,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (eds. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 364.

entering the priesthood, men were wont to be anointed with oil from a horn, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses.”¹⁰⁵

Initiates following the instructions of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* were told: “as of old the priests and kings were anointed in Israel, do thou in like manner, with the imposition of hand, anoint the head of those who receive baptism.”¹⁰⁶ “But only in the laying on of hands the bishop shall anoint her head,” according to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, “as the priests and kings were formerly anointed.”¹⁰⁷ The great fourth-century Syrian poet Ephrem described the baptismal anointing as follows: “The priesthood serves this womb in her giving birth. Anointing hastens before her; the Holy Spirit hastens upon her flood waters; The crown of Levites surrounds her; the High Priest is made her servant...O to the womb that, having given birth, is nourished and formed by the altar!”¹⁰⁸ Aphrahat, also writing in the fourth century, described the effects of the baptismal anointing in terms of “darkness depart[ing] from the mind of many...and the fruiting of the Light-giving Olive, in which is the signing of the Mystery of Life, whereby Christians, priests, kings and prophets are made perfect.”¹⁰⁹ Altars, Levites, high priests, anointing, this is all temple language and temple initiation. The temple practices of Israelite kings and priests had in many ways become Christian baptism.

Signing with the cross, which became commonplace in later Christian baptism, also has clear affinities to the marking of the Israelite priest with the Hebrew *taw*. This was reinterpreted at some point not as marking one with the name YHWH, but as a

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 16.

¹⁰⁷ *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 3.2.

¹⁰⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns of Virginity* 7.8, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 53.

¹⁰⁹ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 23, in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Robert Murray; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 115.

symbol for the cross of Jesus.¹¹⁰ Thus, the marking with the *taw* became the signing with the seal, and later Christian baptism became known as “the seal.” The *Apostolic Tradition* instructs the bishop, “when he has finished exorcizing them, he shall breathe on their faces; and when he has signed their foreheads, ears, and noses, he shall raise them up.” Later, the bishop placed oil from his hand on the head of the initiate in the form of the cross.¹¹¹ Emphasizing the necessity of this action, Theodore wrote, “You...must be sealed on the forehead.”¹¹² John Chrysostom emphasized the doctrines of ownership and protection which originally accompanied the reception of the Divine Name among the ancient Israelites. Here he links these blessings to the later Christian practice of signing one with the cross: “After...the renunciation of the devil and the covenant with Christ, inasmuch as you have now become his very own and have nothing in common with that evil one, he immediately bids you to be marked and places on your forehead the sign of the cross....God anoints your countenance and stamps thereon the sign of the cross. In this way does God hold in check all the frenzy of the Evil One; for the devil will not dare to look upon such a sight...for through chrism the cross is stamped upon you.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ See Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 329–31.

¹¹¹ *Apostolic Tradition* 2.22–23.

¹¹² Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Baptismal Homily* 3.27, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 50.

¹¹³ John Chrysostom, *Series of Papadopoulos-Kerameus*, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 43. Narsai, writing in the fifth century, used language that shows the strong bonds between signing with the cross and the temple practice of marking with the Divine Name: “The priest stands as a mediator [i.e. interpreter],...and then he traces for him the image of the Divinity upon his forehead.” A sponsor then called or read the initiate’s name and “presents him before the guards [i.e. the priests], that they may name him heir, and son, and citizen. In the books the priest enters the name of the lost one, and he brings it in and places it in the archives of the King’s books. He makes him stand as a sheep in the door of the sheepfold; and he signs his body and lets him mix with the flock. The sign of the oil he holds in his hand, before the beholders; and with manifest things he proclaims the power of things hidden. And as by a symbol he shows to the eyes of the bodily senses the secret power that is hidden in the visible sign....To them [i.e. the priests] he gave the signet of the Name of the incomprehensible Divinity, that they might be stamping men with the holy Name” (*Homily* 22, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 55–56).

Reminiscent of the officiating high priest in ancient days, the bishop in fourth-century Christianity wore special clothing at baptismal services according to Theodore: “The bishop comes over to you. Instead of his usual clothes, he is wearing a delicate, shining linen vestment. He is wearing new garments which denote the new world you are entering; their dazzling appearance signifies that you will shine in the next life; its light texture symbolizes the delicacy and grace of the world.”¹¹⁴ Once washed, anointed, and marked the baptismal candidate also received “a dazzling garment of pure white.”¹¹⁵ “After this [baptism] white robes were given to you,” wrote Ambrose, “as a sign that you were putting off the covering of sins, and putting on the chaste veil of innocence.”¹¹⁶ Though prevalent, the symbolism of returning to innocence was not the only meaning of the garment. For example, Chrysostom spoke of being “clothed in the *royal robe*.”¹¹⁷ Thus, a change in status occurred with the reception of the baptismal garments according to this patristic source. The neophyte was himself becoming royal and priestly, just as others in the Hebrew Bible had become through the temple experience.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Theodore, *Baptismal Homily 2*, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 48–49.

¹¹⁵ Theodore, *Baptismal Homily 3*, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 50.

¹¹⁶ Ambrose, *On the Mysteries 7.34*, in *NPNF*, 10:321.

¹¹⁷ John Chrysostom, *Stavronikita Series 2*, in *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 46; italics added.

¹¹⁸ A man we know simply as John the Deacon was apparently a deacon in the Church of Rome near the turn of the sixth century. John wrote a letter to Senarius answering questions regarding Roman Christian initiatory practices. The letter was written circa AD 500, and falls outside of the scope of this work, but the information provided by the letter once again details the connection between Christian initiatory practices and ritual practices of royal and priestly temple initiation. John wrote: “Next the oil of consecration is used to anoint their breast, in which is the seat and dwelling place of the heart; so that they may understand that they promise with a firm mind and a pure heart eagerly to follow after the commandments of Christ, now that the devil has been driven out. They are commanded to go in naked even down to their feet....And then when the elect or catechumen has advanced in faith by these spiritual conveyances, so to speak, it is necessary to be consecrated in the baptism of the one laver, in which sacrament his baptism is effected by a threefold immersion....He is next arrayed in white vesture, and his head anointed with the unction of the sacred chrism: that the baptized person may understand that in his person a kingdom and a priestly mystery have met....For a fuller expression of the idea of priesthood, the head of the neophyte is dressed in a linen array for priests of that time used always to deck the head with

Summary

There is strong evidence to support the claim that the ancient Israelite temple practices strongly influenced the evolutions made to Christian baptism in the third and fourth centuries of the church. Israelite priests and kings participated in sacred temple initiation rites which included washings, anointing, endowments with sacred garments, and receiving the Divine Name.¹¹⁹ Sources suggest that the washing of the Israelite priests took place once the priest disrobed behind a screened area of the tabernacle courtyard. Following the washing the priest or king was anointed with oil which was kept in the horn of a bull or ox. The officiating priest smeared the oil on certain body parts of the receiving priest, including the forehead. There is evidence to suggest that part of this anointing ritual included marking or sealing the priest with the divine name of YHWH. Priests were possibly marked on their foreheads with oil in the shape of the Hebrew letter *taw*. This letter was written with two intersecting lines, either diagonal X, or erect +. Following the washing and anointing, the Israelite kings and priests received new clothing. This clothing, described by the Lord as “holy garments;” included coats, girdles, bonnets, and breeches. The elements of washing, anointing, being marked with the

a certain mystic covering. All the neophytes are arrayed in white vesture to symbolize the resurgent Church, just as our Lord and Saviour himself in the sight of certain disciples and prophets was thus transfigured on the mount...And so they wear white raiment so that though the ragged dress of ancient error has darkened the infancy of their first birth, the costume of their second birth should display the raiment of glory, so that clad in a wedding garment he may approach the table of the heavenly bridegroom as a new man” (“The Letter of John the Deacon to Senarius” in *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 166).

¹¹⁹ According to rabbinic legend Moses himself may have been one of those who was washed, anointed, clothed in heavenly garments, called with names of honor, enthroned, and initiated into heavenly secrets, see Joseph P. Schultz, “Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 61, no. 4 (April 1971): 295.

Divine Name, and receiving sacred linen garments comprised some of the major elements of the royal and priestly initiation of the Israelite temple cult.

As one considers the shape of Christian baptism during the third and fourth centuries of the church, there are unmistakable parallels with the initiation practices of the Israelite temple. Like the washing practices of the tabernacle Christian baptism became a nude washing ceremony. Anointing with oil was added to the baptismal liturgy, and this anointing often included the blessing and anointing of certain body parts including the forehead. Often the anointing in later Christian baptism included signing—or sealing—the new initiate with the cross. Christian baptismal liturgies also adopted the practice of endowing the convert with a new sacred garment, which was to cover their nakedness.

Christian baptism adopted rites of the Israelite temple. Church Fathers support this claim in their writings. Many Fathers who wrote about the subject of baptism did not draw upon the baptisms of the New Testament era to support the practices of their extensive baptismal liturgies. Instead, these Fathers relied upon the Israelite temple practices to explain the rituals that became part of baptism. Many of the patristic sources describe baptism in an Israelite temple context. For example; some patristic sources describe the officiating bishop as a High Priest, the place of the baptism as the laver or as the Holy of Holies, the signing of the forehead with oil as the “seal” of Christ, and the new white clothing as holy garments. This language, these practices, and their accompanying doctrines all point to the Israelite temple as possible origin for the evolutions of the Christian baptismal liturgy.

Chapter 4

An Esoteric Tradition in Early Christianity

Why did Christian baptism begin to adopt priestly rites associated with the temple? What is the binding link between the temple initiation rites of the Hebrew Bible and the post-apostolic components of baptism which began to appear in the Christian church? A possible explanation to those questions may rest with Jesus himself. Sources seem to provide evidence that at least some of the major changes which appear in later baptismal practice actually came from an esoteric set of teachings and practices thought to have been established and passed down by Jesus and his Apostles, a tradition with affinities to the temple initiation of the Israelite priests and kings. As noted above, Barker has argued that “*the secret tradition of the priests probably became the secret tradition of early Christianity.*”¹²⁰

Esoteric Teachings

The element of esotericism in early Christianity is not surprising to those familiar with the New Testament. Woven throughout both the Gospels and the Epistles are glimpses of this tradition. “The whole environment of primitive Christianity knows the element of the esoteric,” according to Joachim Jeremias.¹²¹ Discussing the element of secret teachings within early Christianity Margaret Barker has written: “There was far more to the teaching of Jesus than is recorded in the canonical Gospels.”¹²² Sources, both those from within the New Testament and those from without, bear witness that Jesus’

¹²⁰ Barker, *Great High Priest*, 9; italics added.

¹²¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 125.

¹²² Barker, *Great High Priest*, 1.

ministry was permeated by esotericism.¹²³ Most scholars now recognize that such a secret tradition did exist in early Christianity, but as Guy Stroumsa points out, “the importance of these traditions is not always appreciated.”¹²⁴ Understanding this secret tradition sheds light on early Christian teachings and practices which possibly influenced the adaptations made to Christian baptism.¹²⁵

Early in Christ’s ministry he left the multitude behind and ascended a mountain to expound his doctrine to those who were truly his disciples (see Matthew 5:1). Near the end of his sermon Jesus counseled his listeners to “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matthew 7:6). Clearly, not all that Christ shared with those who followed him was meant for the eyes and ears of the multitudes. That which was holy was always meant to be guarded with some degree of caution.¹²⁶

In a later New Testament passage the Master Teacher had shared truth with the people through parables. When questioned by his disciples as to why he used this teaching method Jesus responded, “Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matthew 13:11). The eyes and ears of Christ’s closest followers definitely saw, heard, and experienced holy things not

¹²³ See Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹²⁵ Any attempt to rediscover that which is esoteric is difficult and should be done with caution. But reliable sources do testify of elements of this secret tradition. Guy Stroumsa writes: “By definition esoteric traditions remain concealed...and an effort, even a prudent one, to reconstruct them risks being rejected as ‘speculative’ by some scholars, for whom only that which is evident deserves to be stated. Nevertheless it seems that one may not only attest to their existence, but also state their origin and contents with precision” (*Hidden Wisdom*, 29).

¹²⁶ This is not to say that the Sermon on the Mount should be classified necessarily as “esoteric.” The point is that Jesus consistently taught different things to different groups of people, depending on their spiritual maturity. Thus, the idea that Jesus would in fact teach some sacred things to only a portion of those becoming his followers should not be surprising.

entrusted to others (see Matthew 13:16), and even at times when others were allowed to hear the mysteries of the kingdom, many did not understand what was being taught.

Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to depart from the others and experience marvelous things: “Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John...his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (Matthew 17:1–2). The sacred experience on the mountain continued as the Apostles saw Moses and Elias (or Elijah), and they heard God’s voice bearing divine record of his “beloved Son.” Once the vision concluded Jesus charged the three men to “tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Matthew 17:9). These Apostles obediently “kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen” (Luke 9:36). Whether or not esoteric teachings accompanied the sacred experience we do not know, but the experience on the mount was definitely esoteric in nature.

Not only did Jesus reserve many teachings for an inner circle of faithful disciples, but even they were not privileged to hear everything Christ had to share during his ministry. While discoursing to his Apostles about his imminent death and resurrection the Lord declared: “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Two questions arise from this passage: what were the “many things” Jesus had to say and when would be the appropriate time to share them? The beginning passages in the book of Acts are helpful in finding some answers.

Luke begins the book of Acts with these words: “The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was

taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:1–3). The forty days following Jesus’ resurrection provided a perfect setting to share with the Apostles those truths they were unable to bear before the Savior’s Crucifixion. The resurrected Lord had returned and had forty days to teach the Apostles “things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” When one contemplates the amount of truth Jesus shared in the final week of his life, the thought of that which this now resurrected-being could impart in forty days is staggering.¹²⁷ Unfortunately, the Bible is relatively silent about what Jesus taught during this time period; however, there are many Christian documents not included in the Bible which claim to describe what Jesus did and said during his forty-day ministry. In fact, Nibley points out that “the favorite theme of the early apocrypha happens to be ‘the teaching of the Lord to the Apostles after the Resurrection.’”¹²⁸

Over forty accounts outside of the New Testament claim to describe what Jesus said and did during his forty-day, post-mortal ministry. Not everything in these accounts is historically reliable, but the accounts do reflect that which some early Christians believed really took place during this forty-day time period. Some of these writings were held in high esteem by devout Christian groups in the earliest years of the Church. Among the common threads woven throughout these early Christian sources is a “claim to contain secret teachings reserved for a righteous minority within Christianity,”

¹²⁷ The phrase “forty days” may not be literal. “Forty days” here could be figurative, as it might be in other biblical passages, e.g., Exodus 16:35, Jonah 3:4, Matthew 4:2.

¹²⁸ Hugh Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20, no. 1 (March 1966): 5.

teachings which were passed down from Christ during the forty days.¹²⁹ Post-New Testament writings connect these secret teachings with initiatory rites.

Early Christian tradition claims that Jesus committed secret and sacred knowledge, the mysteries or *mysterion*, to his closest associates, and those disciples continued to share the mysteries with a select group within Christianity. That is the picture painted by many of these ancient sources. One early Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215), provides information on how some early Christians felt the sacred, secret tradition was passed down from Jesus to others: “The Lord imparted the gift of knowledge to James the Just, to John and Peter *after his resurrection, these delivered it to the rest of the apostles, and they to the seventy, of whom Barnabas was one.*”¹³⁰

Early Christian writers claim that the secret tradition was entrusted to and guarded by those who held leadership positions in the church. The Apostles and other leaders were described as unwilling to divulge the sacred knowledge they received with all Christians. Some early Christians insisted that the Apostles “did not reveal all to all men, for...they proclaimed some openly and to all the world, whilst they disclosed others (only) in secret and to a few.”¹³¹ Early Christian writings depict this tradition as very secret and very guarded.

Traditions about the passing and guarding of church mysteries continued for the next several centuries in the church. The *Clementine Recognitions* taught that “the most

¹²⁹ S. Kent Brown and C. Wilfred Griggs, “The 40-Day Ministry,” *Ensign* (August 1975): 6–11.

¹³⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History 2.1*, translation in Christian Frederic Cruse, *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1955), 49; italics added.

¹³¹ Tertullian, *On the Prescription Against Heretics* 25.1.

sublime truths are best honoured by means of silence.”¹³² “It would be impious to state the hidden truths” to the wicked, according to a passage in the *Clementine Homilies*.¹³³

Tertullian gives insight into the seriousness of this Christian silence. While defending Christians against charges of immorality in their meetings, Tertullian states he is sure that since no Christian would reveal what goes on there, strangers must be making up the charges.¹³⁴

According to many of the early Christian writers the esoteric teachings in Christianity were very real, very guarded, and dealt with the highest and holiest doctrines of Christianity. Church Fathers like Basil continued to link the passing down of sacred mysteries back to Christ’s Apostles: “Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us ‘in a mystery’ by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force.”¹³⁵ Basil was seeking to provide validity to certain teachings about the divinity of the Holy Spirit and claimed the “unpublished and secret teaching which our fathers

¹³² *The Recognitions of Clement* 1.23.

¹³³ *The Clementine Homilies* 19.20.

¹³⁴ Tertullian, *Apology* 7.

¹³⁵ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 27.66. All English translations are from *NPNF*. R. P. C. Hanson, relying upon E. A. de Mendieta’s research regarding Basil’s *De Spiritu Sancto*, divides the secret tradition spoken of by Basil into three categories: 1. Extra-Scriptural traditions in (a) sacramental rites and prayers, and (b) ecclesiastical customs and practices. 2. Extra-Scriptural traditions of doctrines implied in these rites and prayers. 3. Extra-Scriptural traditions of the Fathers about some theological dogmata of an advanced sort (“Basil’s Doctrine of Tradition in Relation to the Holy Spirit,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 22, no. 4 [December 1968]: 250). See also E. A. de Mendieta, *The Unwritten and Secret Apostolic Traditions in the Theological Thought of St Basil of Caesarea* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965). De Mendieta confirms that Basil thought this tradition had been transmitted secretly and that it had come down originally from the Apostles.

guarded in a silence” was as authoritative as the written biblical teachings handed down by the Apostles.¹³⁶

Broadening the Esoteric Tradition

Some early Christian sources seem to indicate that as time elapsed, and as the gap between the original Apostles and the church increased, the mysteries of Christianity took on a broader meaning, and began to be shared with all those who were initiated into Christianity through baptism. Baptism itself, along with its associated doctrines, became part of the sacred mysteries which were guarded by Christians in accordance with the *Disciplina arcani* or *Discipline of the Secret*. *Disciplina arcani* is the theological term used by modern scholars to describe the custom which prevailed in the early church whereby knowledge regarding the more intimate mysteries was carefully kept from non-Christians and from those still going through the catechumenate process. Thus, the mysteries as understood by later Christians, especially by the fourth century, were made available to all who had faithfully been baptized. Baptism, the Eucharist, and perhaps other doctrines and rites were kept secret by Christians observing the *Disciplina arcani*. However, this does not seem to be the case in the earliest days of the church. The original secret tradition, as described by some early Christian authors, was *separate from baptism* and was only shared with certain individuals already within Christianity, but not with all members of the religion. What was originally meant to be a higher tradition among a

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

portion of Christian saints possibly became transformed into the mysteries given to all who were baptized.¹³⁷

Some of the earliest Christian sources report that the esoteric tradition was entrusted only to a certain group within Christianity. Joachim Jeremias and Morton Smith both include the Apostle Paul as one who had knowledge of these esoteric teachings.¹³⁸ Paul claimed he, and others with him, were “stewards of the mystery of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). “The writings of Paul...are replete with oblique references to secret teachings,” writes Barry Bickmore. He continues, “Paul possessed some body of esoteric doctrine which was only to be imparted to the ‘mature’ (Greek *teleioi*).”¹³⁹ Paul, addressing the baptized members of the church in Corinth, wrote, “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (1 Corinthians 3:2). Many of these Corinthians had been baptized for years, but had not lived in such a way as to qualify themselves for the “meatier teachings” Paul had to share.¹⁴⁰ Those teachings were reserved for a later time and setting, once faithfulness within the religion had been demonstrated.

Other Church Fathers like Origen and Clement of Alexandria claimed that, in addition to the Church’s public tradition, “they had access to a secret tradition of

¹³⁷ This is not to say that throughout the centuries all Christians began to gain access to the exact secret tradition passed down from Christ to his Apostles. Through apostasy much of that original knowledge was likely lost and/or perverted. However, some of the original secret tradition did likely survive within the church and became enmeshed in a broader set of “mysteries” including baptism and the Eucharist.

¹³⁸ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 125–37; Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 38, 44, 91–94.

¹³⁹ Barry R. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (Ben Lomand, Calif.: Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research, 1999), 292.

¹⁴⁰ See Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 130–31.

doctrine.”¹⁴¹ J. N. D. Kelly reports that “Clement...regarded it [the secret tradition] as stemming from the apostles..., while for Origen it seems to have consisted of an esoteric theology based on the Bible; in both cases it was reserved for the intellectual *elite* of the church.”¹⁴²

Clement claimed to possess the original *gnosis*,¹⁴³ or the *mysterion*, handed down from Christ to his Apostles. Johann Mosheim explains:

Clement represents this secret discipline, to which he gives the title of *gnosis*, as having been instituted by Christ himself... It appears that he considered this *gnosis*, or gift of knowledge, as having been conferred by our Lord, after his resurrection, on James the Just, John and Peter, by whom it was communicated to the other Apostles; and that by these this treasure was committed to the seventy disciples, of whom Barnabus was one... Clement makes it a matter of boast that the secret discipline thus instituted by Christ was familiar to those who had been his masters and preceptors, whom he very lavishly extols, and seems to exult not a little in having, under their tuition, enjoyed the advantage of being instructed in it himself.¹⁴⁴

The third-century theologian Hippolytus told those who had already been baptized: “Yet if there is any other thing that ought to be told [to converts], let the bishop

¹⁴¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 43; e.g., Clement, *The Stromata* 6.7; Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.7.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Clement explained *gnosis* as “the knowledge of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth” (*Excerpts from Theodosius* 78.2, in *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria*, Robert Pierce Casey, trans. [Studies and Documents 1; eds. Kirsopp Lake and Silva Lake; London: Christophers, 1934], 89). Scott Brown’s explanation of Clement’s use of the word *gnosis* is also helpful: “When I use the terms *gnosis* and *gnostic* in connection with Clement’s Alexandrian theology, I am referring to something other than speculative theories about the origins of the universe and dualistic myths of descent into matter. For Clement, *gnosis* determines one’s spiritual progression toward God, but not in the sense of the return of a divine being to the realm from which it had fallen. Clement subscribed to the gnostic mythology that Jesus (the Word) descended to impart to a select few a saving *gnosis* that would permit their eventual deification and perfect, mystic contemplation of God, through education and instruction in secret traditions” (*Mark’s Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith’s Controversial Discovery* [Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005], xii).

¹⁴⁴ Johann Mosheim, *Historical Commentaries on the State of Christianity*, 2 vols. (New York: S. Converse, 1854), 1:375–76.

impart it to them privately after their baptism; let not unbelievers know it, until they are baptized: this is the white stone of which John said: ‘There is upon it a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth the stone.’”¹⁴⁵ Concerning this secret knowledge provided to the faithful R. P. C. Hanson writes: “it is not clear what the matter delivered through this secret rule was. *It obviously could not have had any reference to baptism and eucharist.*”¹⁴⁶

In its earliest form the esoteric tradition was not shared with all Christians after baptism, according to many of these early Christians. Leaders were cautious and waited for signs of true discipleship before they were willing to entrust their flock with the higher teachings of Jesus’ gospel. Further evidence strengthening this argument comes from a letter attributed to Clement of Alexandria.¹⁴⁷ Writing to Theodore, Clement

¹⁴⁵ *Apostolic Tradition* 2.23.

¹⁴⁶ R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 33; italics added.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*. In 1958, scholar Morton Smith discovered a previously unknown letter from Clement of Alexandria, which contained passages of a lost “secret” Gospel of Mark, at the Mar Saba monastery. Eighteen years after Smith discovered the manuscript it was still at Mar Sarba where Smith found it, and it was seen by three other scholars, Guy Strousma, David Flusser, and Shlomo Pines. Unfortunately, the location of the manuscript today is unknown. The book containing the letter was removed to the Patriarchate library in 1977 and the manuscript pages were removed in order to photograph them and have since gone missing, see Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel*, 25–28. The discovery has been quite controversial in scholarly circles. For a summary of the scholarly debate regarding Professor Smith’s discovery, see Shawn Eyer, “The Strange Case of the Secret Gospel According to Mark: How Morton Smith’s Discovery of a Lost Letter by Clement of Alexandria Scandalized Biblical Scholarship,” *Alexandria: The Journal for the Western Cosmological Traditions* 3 (1995): 103–29. Much of the argument against the *Secret Gospel of Mark* can be attributed to Smith’s interpretation of the text, but Smith’s conclusions, which portray Jesus as a magician and infer the possibility that Jesus’ initiation of disciples could have included elements of eroticism, should not be confused with the existence and validity of the text itself. In fact, that Smith did not understand his own discovery argues against any attempt at forgery by Smith. Summarizing the issue of the manuscript’s existence Eyer writes: “Although one wishes this document were available for the examination of Western scholars, it is no longer reasonable to doubt the existence of the manuscript itself. That it represents an authentic tradition from Clement of Alexandria is disputed only by a handful of scholars and...the letter has itself been included in the standard edition of the Alexandrian father’s writings since 1980” (“The Strange Case of the Secret Gospel According to Mark,” 117–18). William Hamblin maintains that “there is good evidence that the material in the *Secret Gospel of Mark* represents Christian ideas from the first century A.D.” (“Aspects of an Early Christian Initiation Ritual,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 2 vols. [eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1990], 1:206).

reports that the Gospel author Mark “composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected. Nevertheless, he yet did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord.”¹⁴⁸ Clement goes on to report that Mark, in this more spiritual Gospel, “brought in certain sayings of which he knew the interpretation would, as a mystagogue, lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils. Thus, in sum, he prearranged matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, . . . and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.”¹⁴⁹ The *Secret Gospel of Mark* was reported to be for a smaller, faithful group within Christianity, and even that record did not include what Clement called the “hierophantic teaching of the Lord.”

According to Samuel Angus: “An awful obligation to perpetual secrecy as to what was said and translated behind closed doors in the initiation proper was imposed—an obligation so scrupulously observed through the centuries that not one account of the secrets of the holy of holies of the Mysteries has been published to gratify the curiosity of historians.”¹⁵⁰ Mosheim adds: “That the more learned of the Christians, subsequently to the second century, cultivated, in secret, an obtuse discipline of a different nature from that which they taught publicly, is well known to everyone. Concerning the argument, however, or matter of this secret or mysterious discipline, its origin, and the causes which gave rise to it, there are infinite disputes.”¹⁵¹ Regarding the origin and content of this

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 446.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Angus, *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 78.

¹⁵¹ Mosheim, *Historical Commentaries on the State of Christianity*, 1:373.

esoteric tradition in Christianity many early Christian writers direct attention to the knowledge Jesus originally gave to his Apostles after the resurrection.

Christian sources as early as Paul's writings provide possible evidence for esoteric teachings reserved for a faithful group within Christianity. Later Christian writers such as Clement (c. 150–215), Hippolytus (c. 170–235), and Origen (c. 185–253) also provide strong evidence for the reality of an esoteric tradition, which they felt was passed down from the Apostles, and which was reserved for a group within Christianity seeking further spiritual development. But, something seemed to happen during the interval between these third-century authors and the Christian writers of the fourth century. By the fourth century, leaders like Cyril were sharing and explaining the “spiritual and heavenly Mysteries” to all newly baptized members of the faith.¹⁵² The secret tradition, by the fourth century, was esoteric in that it was guarded from non-Christians and catechumens, but the secret tradition of earlier centuries seemed to be guarded from many other baptized Christians. The secret teachings of Jesus described by Clement, Origen, and others somehow become absorbed into and combined with the practice of baptismal initiation. Just as the higher esoteric knowledge reserved for the faithful seemed to be assimilated, over time, into the more general form of the mysteries following baptism; so too, the physical rites of the esoteric tradition may have been absorbed, in part, into baptismal practice.

¹⁵² Cyril, *Lecture 19*.

Accompanying Esoteric Rites

Having established that early Christians believed in a secret tradition of teachings, and also that they felt this secret knowledge was not shared with all members of the faith; the question now arises as to whether this esoteric tradition included rites. Early Christian sources indicate that many Christians felt it did. The word “mystery,” or *mysterion* in Greek, denotes both knowledge and action. According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the word *mystery* meant “to close” the mouth or lips, “something on which silence must be kept,” and that “integral to the concept of the mysteries is the fact that those who wish to take part in their celebration must undergo initiation; the uninitiated are denied both access to the sacred actions and knowledge of them.”¹⁵³

Morton Smith has thus emphasized that the word *mystery* was regularly used in the early church in reference to *esoteric rites and ordinances*.¹⁵⁴ Stroumsa admits that “there is a manifest connection between ritual and doctrine.”¹⁵⁵ Early Christian evidence argues that not only were there esoteric teachings in the first-century Christian church, but that there were also esoteric rites.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ G. Bornkamm, “μυστήριον,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:803–04.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 179–84; italics added. John Gee describes how the meaning of biblical words such as *mysterion* evolved: “Lexical reinterpretation is the changing of the meanings of words, such as occurred during the second sophistic period. Between the time of writing the New Testament and the end of the second century, the meanings of several of the words changed. Examples include the change of the principle meanings of...*mysterion* from ‘(initiation) rite’ to ‘secret’” (“The Corruption of Scripture in Early Christianity,” in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* [ed. Noel B. Reynolds; Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2005], 179).

¹⁵⁵ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 33.

¹⁵⁶ Summarizing the textual evidence of esoteric teachings and ordinances within early Christianity Hugh Nibley writes: “We have in the early apocryphal writings both direct and indirect evidence for the reality of the post-resurrectional activity of Jesus. 1) By uniformly supporting the clear and unequivocal language of Acts 1:3, and by making the 40-Day teaching their principal concern, these writers serve notice that this latterly despised and neglected theme had top priority among the early Christians. 2) Under the heading of the 40-Day conversations the same writings convey to us a consistent

Aside from immersion in water and the laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Ghost, no element of the more elaborate baptismal liturgy is mentioned until the third century of the church. It is the closing of the second century and the beginning of the third which begin to produce documents which describe elements such as exorcisms, signing with the cross, the renouncing of Satan, and the swearing of allegiance to Christ as part of the baptismal ceremony. The early church was not in the habit of mass adoptions of worship taken from their pagan neighbors;¹⁵⁷ accordingly, looking within Christianity for the source of these evolutions appears reasonable.

As noted above, Basil testified that not only secret precepts but also *practices* were handed down from the Apostles of the church.¹⁵⁸ In defending and giving examples of such practices of the apostolic esoteric tradition Basil writes:

For instance,...who is thence who has taught us in writing to sign with the sign of the cross those who have truest in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? What writing has taught us to turn to the East at the prayer?...Moreover we bless the water of baptism and the oil of the chrism, and besides this the catechumen who is being baptized. On what written authority do we do this? Is not our authority silent and mystical tradition? Nay, by what written word is the anointing of oil itself taught? And whence comes the custom of baptizing thrice? And as to the other customs of baptism from what Scripture do we derive the renunciation of Satan and his angels? Does not this come from that unpublished and secret

and closely-knit body of doctrine 3) accompanied by an equally organic structure of rites and ordinances—*not* a farrago of odds and ends in the Gnostic manner. 4) The Gnostic phenomenon itself attests the universal awareness that such a teaching had formerly existed and been lost to the Main Church: the specific Gnostic claim to possess the secret of the 40 Days shows what it was that was missing. 5) Furthermore, the apocryphal writings themselves fully explain that loss in terms both of secrecy and apostasy, while 6) the great impact of the 40-Day image on popular Christianity is clearly reflected in popular legends and cults” (“Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum,” 23).

¹⁵⁷ Christians treasured the fact that they were separate from the philosophies and practices of their pagan neighbors; however, some pagan influence was inevitable. Arthur Weigall summarizes: “Christianity developed into a religion in a lurid pagan environment which could not fail to have its influence upon the new Faith” (*The Paganism in our Christianity* [New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928], 264).

¹⁵⁸ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 27.66.

teaching which our fathers guarded in a silence out of the reach of curious and meddling and inquisitive investigation?¹⁵⁹

Intriguingly, Basil focuses most of the examples of practices within the secret apostolic tradition on the additions made to baptism. Basil knew that the biblical writings of the Apostles gave no support to many of the rituals associated with the baptisms of his day, thus he claimed the source of such practices came in the form of an apostolic esoteric tradition. Basil continued to defend such a tradition by referring to Moses and the secret practices of the tabernacle: “What was the meaning of the mighty Moses in not making all the parts of the tabernacle open to every one?...Moses was wise enough to know that contempt stretches to the trite and to the obvious, while a keen interest is naturally associated with the unusual and the unfamiliar.” Basil then concludes: “In the same manner the Apostles and Fathers who laid down laws for the Church from the beginning thus guarded the awful dignity of the mysteries in secrecy and silence, for what is bruited abroad random among the common fold in no mystery at all.”¹⁶⁰ Basil believed he and the Christians of his day had inherited many of their baptismal practices from an esoteric tradition of precepts and practices dating back to the Apostles, and, like the holy practices of the tabernacle in Moses’ day, the baptismal practices were to be guarded in secrecy and silence.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Biblical Evidence

Jesus' own example in the New Testament set a precedent for rites which were esoteric, sacred, and essential to salvation. Following the Last Supper with his Apostles an intriguing scene unfolds:

He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. (John 13:4–10)

This washing seems to be something more than the common washing of feet as a token of hospitality common during the first century. The Greek text indicates that the washing performed by Jesus happened “while supper was proceeding,” not before or after supper.¹⁶¹ This is significant because, as W. Robertson Nicoll explains: “Feet-washing, pleasant and customary before a meal, would have been disagreeable and out of place in the course of it.”¹⁶² Furthermore, Jesus' powerful statement about the necessity of the washing indicates the importance of the event. What did Jesus mean when he said to Peter, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me”? Nicoll suggests: “Superficially these words might mean that unless Peter allowed Jesus to wash him, he could not sit at table with Him. But evidently Peter found in them a deeper significance, and understood them as meaning: Unless I wash you, you are outcast from my fellowship and cease to

¹⁶¹ Nicoll, *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 1:815; see also F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 279.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

share in my kingdom and destiny.”¹⁶³ F. F. Bruce adds: “Jesus hinted that there was a deeper significance in what he was doing—a significance that Peter could not grasp there and then, but which would be made plain to him one day. ‘Afterwards’ [or ‘hereafter’ in the KJV] means ‘after my death and resurrection’; but not until his death and resurrection had taken place could Peter and his companions realize that this was what was meant.”¹⁶⁴

The scene during Jesus’ final supper with his Apostles depicts Jesus administering what seems to be an essential ordinance to a select few of his followers. Jesus tells Peter that the acceptance of this ceremonial washing was essential for salvation, but that he would not fully understand the ordinance until after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Sometime thereafter Peter and the others would come to know the meaning of the washing. Addressing this washing, Truman Madsen observes: “It was given that they might ‘be clean every whit’ *a condition which apparently neither their faith nor their baptism had thus far fully achieved.*”¹⁶⁵

Not only does this episode in Jesus’ ministry demonstrate an esoteric rite instituted by Christ and given to a faithful few, but it is important to note that this ceremonial foot washing was transmitted into the later rite of baptism in some Christian communities.¹⁶⁶ The earliest sources of Christian baptism give no evidence for this practice as part of the baptismal rite, but its adoption into later practice is strong evidence for baptismal evolutions stemming from higher teachings and rites established by Jesus.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1:816.

¹⁶⁴ Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 281.

¹⁶⁵ Truman G. Madsen, “The Temple and the Restoration,” in *The Temple in Antiquity* (ed. Truman G. Madsen; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 7–8; italics added.

¹⁶⁶ See Tertullian, *De Corona*, and Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit*.

One of John's epistles references an anointing received by the faithful: "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him" (1 John 2:27). This reference may provide evidence for a physical anointing in first-century Christianity which was not connected to baptism, but to something else. Madsen explains:

In the earliest manuscripts the Greek word for this anointing [1 John 2:27] is unique; it occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It connotes an unguent or "smearing," or figuratively an endowment of the Holy Spirit or a consecration to a religious service. Some scholars suggest that it refers to a ritual use of oil. But it has often been read to mean "to appoint" or "to elevate." By either reading, here is a ritual act among Christians—among the Johannine community—which is distinct from baptism and which for the writer of the epistle involves a communion or connection with God which teaches or assures.¹⁶⁷

While there is no substantial evidence for literal anointings connected with baptism in the New Testament, we do find in this passage a unique anointing, or smearing with oil, given to the faithful of John's day. Ritual anointings may in fact have been performed in first-century Christianity, but these anointings were originally something distinct from, and superior to, baptism.

Robin Scroggs and Kent Groff see evidence for Christian initiation in the curious account recorded in Mark 14:51–52.¹⁶⁸ As Jesus is betrayed and forsaken, Mark draws attention to one of Christ's disciples who was present: "And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked." Scroggs and Groff pose

¹⁶⁷ Madsen, "The Temple and the Restoration," 8.

¹⁶⁸ Kent Groff and Robin Scroggs, "Dying and Rising with Christ," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 4 (December 1973): 531–48.

the question, “Would it be likely that on an early spring night one would have on only one article of clothing?” They also note that “the Markan author clearly is not interested in reporting trivial scenes.”¹⁶⁹ Was this young man participating in some form of Christian initiation that, like the elements recorded in the Mar Saba letter, required him to unclothe himself and wear a linen garment? Evidence is lacking to prove anything here, but the act of removing clothing for Christian initiation is well documented in later initiation rites. There is no trace of this being part of the New Testament baptismal rite, but Scroggs and Groff draw attention to the likelihood that such disrobing practices existed in the earliest days of the church: “The earliest texts which explicitly describe the removal of the clothes are probably no earlier than the latter half of the second century, but these texts seem to assume the praxis as known and accepted by the church.”¹⁷⁰ The practice was possibly known and accepted, but it may not have been a baptismal practice; rather, disrobing possibly belonged to the esoteric tradition of rites in Christian worship.

References to the wearing of a linen cloth, sacred garments, and or a white robe abound in early Christian documents. “The ritual action of putting on a sacred garment is properly termed ‘endowment,’” writes Blake Ostler, and “the idea of the garment is completely at home throughout the ancient world, always in connection with ordinances of initiation related to the endowment. The garment is usually mentioned in relation with other ordinances, especially the anointing.”¹⁷¹ Washing, anointing, disrobing, clothing with linen garments, these were possibly authentic Christian initiation practices, but they were distinct from authentic baptismal practices.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 532.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁷¹ Blake Ostler, “Clothed Upon: A Unique Aspect of Christian Antiquity,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 1 (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1981): 31–33.

One of the earliest texts revealing the nature of first-century Christian worship is the book of Revelation. The Apocalypse addresses both the saints of John's day who belong to "the seven churches which are in Asia," and future Christian saints throughout the ages, including those who would live during the eschatological events prophesied throughout scripture. Within the pages of John's revelation are passages and promises which argue for royal and priestly initiatory rites practiced during the first century. These rites of initiation are rooted firmly in the temple ordination of ancient Israelite kings and priests. The rites also foreshadow later practices which were incorporated into the ordinance of baptism.

While it is true that the writing style and imagery of Revelation can easily be interpreted in a variety of ways to best fit the biases of whoever is doing the exegesis, nevertheless, the evidence for royal and priestly initiatory rites within the Apocalypse is compelling. Addressing these issues Madsen has written: "The apocalypse lends itself to fanciful and exaggerated readings. But one theme is inescapable: The temple and its liturgy are the apex of man's earthly quest for the heavenly, and of the heavenly transformation of the earthly. Indeed, the promises given the seven churches in the Apocalypse...are promises that can be superimposed fittingly on the sequences described in traditional and modern temple worship."¹⁷² The temple and its liturgy, both the heavenly temple and its earthly counterpart, are the context for the book of Revelation.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Madsen, "The Temple and the Restoration," 13.

¹⁷³ According to Otto Piper the Apocalypse's "visions are presented within a framework of liturgical activities, and toward the end of the book it is hardly possible to dissociate the acts or worship from the visions of the future." He continues: "This close relationship shows that its liturgical portions are not a purely literary device. Rather in the Seer's mind they form part of the revelatory process itself representing the reaction of initiated creatures to the gradual disclosure of the saving purpose of God and

The terms John used to address himself, and other members of the seven churches, provide a starting point in the discussion about first-century rites of royal and priestly initiation in Revelation. John declared that he and other saints had been “made...kings and priests unto God” by Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:6). Later in Revelation, John records a song sung by the twenty-four elders at God’s throne in which they praise the Lord who “hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on earth” (Revelation 5:10). Elsewhere, John records the promise given to some: “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:6).

The latter two passages refer to events in the future, but in the first declaration John spoke of something which had already happened to some Christian saints, something which gave him and others claim on the titles “kings and priests.” Matthew Brown’s inquiry is fitting at this point in the discussion: “The question still remains about the nature of Christian kingship and priesthood during this time period and how status in these offices was bestowed. Were they simply symbolic, spiritualized and allegorical titles or did the New Testament saints physically experience initiation rites like the kings and priests did during the times of Moses and Solomon?”¹⁷⁴ Evidence within the Apocalypse possibly reveals the answer.

its execution” (“The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church,” *Church History* 20, no. 1 [March 1951]: 10).

¹⁷⁴ Brown, “The Israelite Temple and Early Christianity.” Brown argues that promises within the book of Revelation and early Christian initiation rites reveal early Christianity’s adoption of Israelite temple liturgical practices.

Gieschen sees strong evidence in the book of Revelation for actual initiation rites among the first-century Christians. However, Gieschen believes the evidence provided is a witness for early baptismal praxis. In his article “Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation,” Gieschen argues that the two actions in Revelation of marking the Divine Name upon the forehead and receiving sacred white clothing “reflect already existing first-century baptismal praxis.”¹⁷⁵ He explains his reasoning for this thesis: “There are two compelling reasons to see these depictions as reflecting already-existing baptismal rites. First, these practices are not completely new rituals but an adaptation of the priestly ordination rites of ancient Israel. Second, the visions of this apocalypse communicate to early Christians more readily if the imagery used is grounded in the actual experience of the hearers.”¹⁷⁶

Gieschen is not alone in his convictions about Revelation revealing already existing rites, “many interpreters have seen in the language about writing the divine name on the forehead of Christians and their being sealed on their foreheads a reference to a component of the baptismal ceremony.”¹⁷⁷ The evidence for existing Christian practices within Revelation is strong; however, the practices may not have been connected to baptism in the first century. The earliest sources connecting these actions to baptism do not come until the third century and most of those are Gnostic texts which often describe the actions as part of the mysteries passed down by Jesus and his Apostles after Jesus’ resurrection. The very actions Gieschen proposes as existing baptismal practices may in

¹⁷⁵ Gieschen, “Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation,” 341.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 196.

fact substantiate the existence of higher initiation practices among the first-century Christians.¹⁷⁸

Much of Revelation draws attention to marking with or receiving the Divine Name. Consider the following references:

Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. (Revelation 3:12)

And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. (Revelation 14:1)

And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. (Revelation 22:4)

These passages lead to several questions. First, what were the name or names spoken of which were written on the foreheads of certain individuals? Gieschen concludes that the texts “are speaking of a singular name,” and that “there is solid evidence to support the conclusion that the unknown or hidden name of Jesus is YHWH, the personal name of God in the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁷⁹ The revealing and receiving of Jesus’ hidden name coincides with the signet worn by the Israelite high priest and the mark placed upon the temple priests’ forehead with oil.¹⁸⁰ Receiving the Name also became a

¹⁷⁸ See Brown, “The Israelite Temple and Early Christianity.”

¹⁷⁹ Gieschen, “Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation,” 342–43.

¹⁸⁰ Barker, *Great High Priest*, 319, note 87.

fundamental element of initiation for Valentinian Christians who claimed to have access to higher knowledge and rites instituted by Jesus and his Apostles.¹⁸¹

Revelation 3:12 speaks of receiving the name as a future reality (“Him that overcometh...I will write upon him the name of my God”), but, as Gieschen points out: “Both 14:1 and 22:4 imply that the Name was written on the people of God *before* the eschatological events and certainly *before* these people entered the New Jerusalem. This Name gave them identity and protection *during earthly tribulations* as well as assured them of their heavenly inheritance.”¹⁸² It seems that receiving the Name was both a mortal experience within Christian initiation and a future reality once one had proved faithful to the end of his or her life.

What clues does Revelation give as to how the Name was imparted to those who viewed themselves as kings and priests? Revelation 7:2–3 depicts an angel “ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God.” The angel commands his destroying angel counterparts, “Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.” This passage parallels the Old Testament account recorded in Ezekiel 9. There, Ezekiel records a vision wherein he sees seven men gathered at the temple. One of the seven was “clothed with linen” and had a “writer’s inkhorn by his side.” The other six were armed with “slaughter weapons.” In a scene reminiscent of the Passover in Egypt, these men were commanded to mark the faithful and to destroy any who were found without YHWH’s mark on their foreheads (vv. 3–5).

¹⁸¹ In the next chapter initiation rituals of Gnostic Christians will be discussed. As part of the worship practices of some of these groups great emphasis was placed on receiving the Name through initiation rites which would allow one to receive more sacred knowledge.

¹⁸² Gieschen, “Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation,” 345; italics added.

Commenting on this marking of the faithful in Ezekiel, Gieschen writes: “The Hebrew word translated ‘mark’ here is *taw*, which also signifies the specific mark made for the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Therefore, the mark to be placed upon the faithful remnant is probably the Hebrew letter *taw*. It was placed upon the forehead for visibility.”¹⁸³ This mark on the forehead links the scenes of Revelation back to the temple initiation of the high priest who also received the mark, or Name, upon his forehead as part of the anointing.

The passage in Revelation 7 describes angels as the ones who do the marking, but again, this may be a heavenly seal confirming an earlier physical rite. Recall the words of Peter to the first-century Christians who had submitted themselves to Christian initiation: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9). Later, Peter urged the saints to “give diligence to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10). Through the covenant of baptism they had gained the status of “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood,” but this status promised in mortality was conditioned upon faithfulness, and would have to be sealed—or made sure—by heavenly means at a later time. Similarly, the marking of the faithful in Revelation 7 is likely the sealing of saints who had already received the Name, and who had, on a conditional basis, been made kings and priests.

Speaking to members of the seven churches, some of whom had possibly already received the Divine Name, the Lord commended them by saying, “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil...and *for my name’s sake hast labored*, and hast not fainted....I know thy works...for thou hast a

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

little strength, and hast kept my word, and *hast not denied my name*" (Revelation 2:2–3; 3:8; italics added).

Piecing the puzzle together, Revelation seems to describe saints who in mortality received ordinances which marked or sealed them with the Divine Name. This process may have been similar in form to the anointing and marking of the forehead with the Name described in the temple initiation of the Israelite high priest. Eusebius actually records that John, the author of Revelation, had worn the insignia of a high priest—the golden plate bearing Yahweh's name.¹⁸⁴ Is it then surprising that John viewed himself, and other saints who had received similar ordinances, as becoming kings and priests? Some physical form of initiation, separate from baptism, had possibly occurred, giving John and others claim to these titles while still in mortality.

It is difficult to know exactly how this initiation rite of being marked with the Divine Name made its way into baptism, but G. W. H. Lampe suggests some possible reasons as to why it may have been added:

The mystics and the theologians of the age of the Fathers tended to think of the seal imprinted upon the believer as the impress or stamp of the image of Christ set upon his soul by the agency of the indwelling Spirit of God. To the great mass of ordinary Christians, however, this conception was too profound to be properly understood. Yet it was precisely in the religion of the man in the street that the idea of the seal was strongest. The common believer looked for some plain token that he was really sealed for a day of redemption, branded as one of Christ's flock, marked with a sign of his membership of God's people, assured of a talisman against the powers of darkness, and given a password, as it were, which would ensure his reception by the angels into the gates of Paradise and his acceptance among the 'sheep' at the right hand of the heavenly Judge...The New

¹⁸⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31; see also Barker, *Great High Priest*, 27. Eusebius cites Polycrates (c. 130–196) as the source of this information. Roberts and Donaldson write that Polycrates "belonged to a family in which he was the eighth Christian bishop; and he presided over the church of Ephesus, in which the traditions of St. John were yet fresh in men's minds at the date of his birth. He had doubtless known Polycarp and Irenaeus also" (*ANF*, 8:773).

Testament idea of the inward seal of the Spirit was scarcely adequate to meet his need. It was too refined and too deeply spiritual a conception to satisfy the superstitious and literal-minded convert from Hellenistic paganism, who wanted a tangible sign of his election and a quasi-magical talisman to protect him from the demons of Satan. Baptism in itself would hardly suffice....They needed a sign which could directly and unmistakably symbolize the fact that they had become the property of Christ. There was one such *signaculum* which lay ready to hand, the sign of the Cross.¹⁸⁵

The signing of Yahweh's name with the *taw* made its way into Christian circles of the post-apostolic period. It was associated with the temple in the Old Testament, and it seems that in some form it may have been part of esoteric Christian initiation in the New Testament. The mark signified all that these Christians of the second through fourth centuries wanted—a visible sign of protection, identity, and ownership. How easy it would be for Christians who no longer fully understood the royal and priestly rite of anointing one's forehead with the *taw*, or X, to borrow that ritual action and turn it into the signing with the cross which became so prevalent in later Christian baptism.

Cyril, addressing the newly baptized in the fourth century, spoke of the anointing and signing with the cross in terms once reserved for priestly temple initiation: “And very truly; for that had communion with devils, but this, with God. *Thou hast anointed my head with oil.* With oil He anointed thine head upon thy forehead, for *the seal* which thou hast of God; that thou mayest be made *the engraving of the signet, Holiness unto God.*”¹⁸⁶

The second major action of initiation within the book of Revelation was receiving white garments and or robes. It has already been demonstrated in this work that clothing

¹⁸⁵ Lampe, *Seal of the Spirit*, 261–62.

¹⁸⁶ Cyril, *Lecture 19.7*.

in white linen garments was part of the temple initiation rites of Israelite kings and priests. Also, baptismal liturgies of the third and fourth centuries adopt this ritual. The questions Revelation creates concern the meaning of the white clothing so often mentioned and its connection with actual first-century rites of worship.

Some references to white clothing in Revelation depict faithful Christians who received white robes as a reward for their righteousness:

And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment: and they had on their heads crowns of gold. (Revelation 4:4)

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them. (Revelation 6:9–11)

This clothing could represent an actual celestial garment received by the faithful after death, or it could merely symbolize the glorified state attained by the righteous. There are, however, passages within John's vision in which the faithful seemed to receive the garment while still in mortality. Revelation 19:7 describes "the marriage of the Lamb," a frequent image in scripture of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The bride seems to represent the faithful who have prepared to meet the Bridegroom, Jesus. *Before* the marriage had come what had "the bride" done to make herself ready? Part of the bride's premarital preparation was being "arrayed in fine linen, clean and white" (Revelation 19:8). Scripture describes this clothing as "the righteousness of the saints." This figurative explanation does not mean that there was no literal garment. On the

contrary, as Cyril explained in his baptismal lectures, the righteousness was symbolized and reinforced by receiving and wearing a literal white garment.¹⁸⁷

In preparation for the eschatological events enumerated in Revelation the saints were warned, “Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and *keepeth* his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame” (Revelation 16:15; italics added). Once again, John could have been referring to both a figurative and a literal garment in this passage, the literal symbolizing and reminding one of the spiritual. To the saints in Sardis the Lord revealed: “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis *which have not defiled their garments*; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels” (Revelation 3:4–5; italics added). Not defiling a garment already received in the past led to walking in white with the Savior in the future.

If some within the Christian communities of John’s day were anointed and marked with the Divine Name, and did in fact obtain a white garment as part of an endowment rite, then John’s titles of “kings and priests” would seem quite appropriate. Remember, John used these terms in the past tense. Something had happened in the lives of these Christians which gave them claim to these titles. Gieschen argues that the “reception of the Divine Name, washing, and clothing in a white garment was understood to be the foundational priestly preparation for early Christian mystical experience of the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., paragraph 8.

presence of God,”¹⁸⁸ not only after death, but in mortality. Biblical evidence suggests that these early Christians may have submitted themselves to priestly initiatory practices which would later find form in Christian baptism.

Evidence from Clement of Alexandria

Clement, one who claimed access to the mysteries given to those being perfected, adds to our understanding of early Christian views of what accompanying rites may have been included in the acquisition of the *mysterion*. Clement mentions practices which were prerequisites to obtaining the mysteries of his day: “Thence the prophecies and oracles are spoken in enigmas, and the mysteries are not exhibited incontinently to all and sundry, but *only after certain purifications and previous instructions*.”¹⁸⁹ Clement sheds further light on these esoteric rites with his statement about people who were making “a perverse use of the divine words...they do not enter in as we enter in, through the tradition of the Lord, by drawing aside the curtain.”¹⁹⁰ The use of a curtain, or veil, in this context could be meant figuratively, but it is quite possible that Clement was referring to a literal veil through which one must pass to receive all the mysteries. Instructions and purifications before obtaining higher knowledge, and entering into that knowledge by using divine words and drawing aside a curtain or veil, seem to be key elements of the esoteric ceremonies known to Clement.

¹⁸⁸ Gieschen, “Baptismal Praxis and Mystical Experience in the Book of Revelation,” 342. Gieschen believes the elements listed prepared one to experience the presence of God, “especially in the Eucharist,” but the elements seem much more likely to prepare one to experience the presence of God in a temple setting, as it did for the Israelite high priest who entered the Holy of Holies.

¹⁸⁹ Clement, *Stromata* 5.4; italics added.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.17.

More insights about these esoteric rites come indirectly through Clement in his letter to Theodore concerning the *Secret Gospel of Mark* written for those seeking to be perfected. Clement tells Theodore that Mark's more spiritual Gospel included the following story about what happened to Lazarus after Jesus raised him from the dead:

And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, "son of David, have mercy on me". But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.¹⁹¹

First-century Christian baptisms do not mention the wearing of a linen garment or the requirement of nakedness but these elements are found in later baptismal rites. These physical elements, usually found in connection with an anointing, are presented here as part of Lazarus's reception of the original mystery of the Kingdom of God from Christ.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 447. Smith saw this passage describing the young man wearing a linen cloth over his naked body as a description of a water baptism performed by Jesus. Scott G. Brown, who defends the authenticity of Secret Mark, convincingly argues that within *Secret Mark* "There is no mention of water or depiction of a baptism...the young man's linen sheet has baptismal connotations, but the text discourages every attempt to perceive Jesus literally baptizing him" (*Mark's Other Gospel*, 145–46). *Secret Mark* confirms that "hierophantic teachings of the Lord" were transmitted within the early church to a select group of Christians, an initiated elite, and that there were likely accompanying higher rituals apart from water baptism.

¹⁹² William Hamblin presents several conclusions based on the evidence of Clement's letter and the fragment of the *Secret Gospel of Mark*: "Clement's early branch of Christianity in Alexandria believed that there existed three levels of Christian knowledge: First, the canonical gospels, which were intended to bring new converts to Christianity. Second, a secret written tradition, exemplified by the Secret Gospel of Mark, which was only to be read by advanced Christians seeking higher, more esoteric, knowledge. Third, an even more secret oral tradition known as the 'Hierophantic Teaching,' and rituals, known as the 'Great Mysteries,' or 'Mystery of the Kingdom of God.' The 'Mystery of the Kingdom of God' included secret teachings and some type of ritual initiation ceremony which lasted all night. The known elements of this initiation ceremony were being clothed in a ritual linen cloth or robe, and the use of seven veils (or

“Trimnings of the Temple” Assimilated into the Worship of All Christians

Early Christian ties to the temple-oriented teachings and rites should not be surprising. Jesus’ passion towards at least the idea of a temple was clear: “And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves.” He then powerfully declared, “It is written, *My house* shall be called the house of prayer” (Matthew 21:12–13; italics added). Jesus was open about teaching “daily...in the temple” (Mark 14:49), and once Jesus was gone his followers continued “daily with one accord in the temple” (Acts 2:46). Peter and John were found “daily in the temple, and...they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:42). Jesus and the first-century Christians were undeniably involved with the temple. Though the temple had in many ways become “a den of thieves” (Matthew 21:13), yet the temple and possible doctrines and practices related to the idea of a temple still seemed to hold an important place in first-century Christian thought and practice.

The destruction of the temple in AD 70 did not stop Christians from being involved with temple-related worship. Though the building was gone it seems higher teachings, and perhaps rites, associated with the temple continued in early-apostolic Christianity. According to Marcus von Wellnitz:

After the destruction of the temple by Titus in 70 A.D., [the temple’s] place in the activities of the early Christians was not simply left vacant but was immediately replaced by a substitute service of a ritualistic and ceremonial character with a

perhaps doctrines, doors, angels, etc.) hiding an innermost sanctuary. At some point around A.D. 125, Carpocrates acquired knowledge of some or all of these secret teachings and rituals from an apostate elder in Alexandria. A part of Carpocratean Gnostic teachings was thus derived from a modified form of the secret Alexandrian Christian teachings and rituals” (“Aspects of an Early Christian Initiation Ritual,” 214–15).

new Christian essence. Thus two meetings of different forms and purposes were simultaneously offered in the infant church...The more formal meeting with its accompanying ritual patterned essentially after the temple was held in the evening...Only worthy and initiated members were allowed to participate...The holy and formal distinction of the temple service was therefore transferred to this gathering, which then assumed the function and stature of the now-destroyed temple at Jerusalem.¹⁹³

The division between the two meetings described by von Wellnitz “did not continue for long.”¹⁹⁴ He explains: “To rely on the institution of the temple too rigorously...was uncomfortable for the early church because it implied that Christianity was not original but owed its format to the Jewish heritage. On the other hand, to completely ignore the temple ritual suggested ignoring the apostolic favor it had enjoyed and indirectly admitted that something was lost or unjustifiably excluded from the earliest traditions. The most effective course to pursue was to *incorporate the trimmings of the temple ritual into the mass in a different context*. Following that *modus operandi*, the church retained the best of both options.”¹⁹⁵ Such is not only true of the Catholic mass absorbing temple trimmings, but as the evidence suggests, Catholic baptism adopted similar temple trimmings into its ceremony.

If the teachings originally shared with only the more mature in the faith were eventually merged with teachings shared after baptism, then it also seems possible that rites accompanying the original tradition would also have merged in some degree with baptism. According to John Tvedtnes: “In early Christianity, following the apostasy,

¹⁹³ Marcus von Wellnitz, “The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 1 (1981): 5–6. The primary evidence used by von Wellnitz for these conclusions comes from Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67, and Tertullian *De Animo* 9. See also Reginald M. Woolley, *The Liturgy of the Primitive Church* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1910), 34–35.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, italics added.

temple initiation eventually merged with the baptismal initiation, which included both washing and anointing with oil, along with donning of white clothing and sometimes the reception of a new name.”¹⁹⁶ It has already been noted in this work that the rites of baptism and the Eucharist were considered part of the mysteries known to groups of Christians possibly as early as the second century, and definitely by the fourth century; but was the rite of baptism treated as a mystery in the first-century church? The New Testament does not speak of baptism in this way. It seems to become one of the Christian mysteries only as baptism adopted the ritual actions of the Israelite temple.

Liturgist Dom Gregory Dix observed: “The apostolic and primitive church regarded all Christian worship, and especially the eucharist, as a highly *private* activity, and rigidly excluded all strangers from taking any part in it whatsoever, and even from attendance at the eucharist. Christian worship was intensely corporate, but it was not ‘public’...The fact is that Christian worship in itself...was not by origin, and is not by nature intended to be , a ‘public’ worship at all...but a highly *exclusive* thing, whose original setting is entirely domestic and private.”¹⁹⁷ Yet, was the rite of baptism, as part of Christian worship in the first century, private and exclusive? The baptisms of the first century may have been much more public and inclusive than those of the third and fourth centuries. For example, consider Jesus’ baptism at the hands of John. As previously stated, Jesus’ baptism became the pattern for Christian baptism.¹⁹⁸ How exclusive and private was the baptism of John? The biblical record states: “Then went out to [John]

¹⁹⁶ John A. Tvedtnes, “Early Christian and Jewish Rituals Related to Temple Practices,” (paper presented at Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research conference 1999), available from http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/1999_Early_Christian_and_Jewish_Rituals_Related_to_Temple_Practices.html; accessed 4 June 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 16.

¹⁹⁸ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 115.

Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matthew 3:5–8). The scene at the Jordan River appears open and inclusive in the sense that Judeans, including unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees, were able to witness the baptisms performed by John. This may also have been true for John’s baptism of Jesus. Consider also the large gathering at Jerusalem of Jews “out of every nation under heaven” in Acts chapter two (Acts 2:5). The three thousand souls who believed Peter’s words were baptized that “same day” (v. 41). It may be possible that these three thousand converts slipped off into closed-door settings to be initiated out of the view of others, but the record says “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized” implying perhaps that they were baptized then, there, with others present, directly following their acceptance of Peter’s testimony. First-century baptisms may have been much more open and inclusive than the baptisms performed in the fourth century of the church.

There is no strong evidence in the New Testament or the *Didache* to support the idea that first-century baptisms were exclusive and private. Once the elements of baptism began to adopt initiation rituals such as anointing and investiture with sacred garments, then the sources are clear that baptism was more private and guarded. The actions and doctrines which accompanied the New Testament rite of baptism were not part of the original *mysterion* described by early Christian writers, but many sources seem to argue that the additions made to baptism were. Thus, baptism in its original Christian form may

have been more open because it did not include elements of higher Christian initiation, elements of the original *mysterion*. It is somewhat paradoxical, but as esoteric initiation rites blended into baptism, the rite became more private and exclusive—one of the mysteries—but the accompanying knowledge given to the initiated became more public and inclusive in that it was shared with all who had been baptized. This may have been the result of having remnants of something sacred, but not fully understanding what it was. As baptism adopted higher initiation rituals Christians may have recognized the sacred, esoteric nature of the rituals, thus baptism became more exclusive. But accompanying the higher initiation rites were teachings which were part of the esoteric rites, thus the teachings were now open to and shared with a much broader group.

Summary

In this chapter the question of why the post-apostolic church adopted Israelite temple initiation rituals into baptism was addressed. According to some early Christian writers there existed a sacred esoteric tradition established and passed down by Jesus and his Apostles. Most scholars recognize that this tradition existed, but have perhaps failed to recognize its connection to and influence upon later Christian baptismal liturgy. Jesus' mortal ministry provided ample evidence for the idea of esoteric teachings. Early pseudepigraphical sources claim Jesus extended much of this teaching to his Apostles during his forty-day post-mortally ministry spoken of in Acts. Early Christians such as Paul, Clement, Origen, and Hippolytus provide evidence which suggests that this esoteric tradition did in fact exist and that it was separate from the teachings offered to all baptized Christians. The teachings were reserved for a group already within Christianity

who had proved their faithfulness to earlier teachings and were considered mature enough to receive more knowledge in the desire for progress.

Sometime between the third and fourth centuries of Christianity the esoteric tradition seems to have been expanded and began to include baptism and its associated teachings as part of the guarded mysteries of the church. Baptism in the earliest days of the church was not part of the original mysteries, but by the fourth century Basil, Cyril, and others described baptism as one of the mysteries. Thus, the newly baptized received the esoteric teachings of the church, perhaps not the original esoteric teachings of the *mysterion* but whatever had survived to that point in time. Sources argue that the esoteric teachings reserved for a portion of Christians was replaced by the mystogological teachings revealed to the newly baptized of the fourth century.

Just as the higher teachings of Christianity may have been adopted into Christian baptism, so too, the rituals associated with the original esoteric tradition may have been combined with the elements of Christian baptism. The word mystery, as used by early Christians, was associated with rituals and ordinances. Scenes such as Jesus washing his Apostles feet at the Last Supper provide a precedent for such esoteric rituals in early Christianity. Aside from a water immersion and handlaying connected with the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, no element of the more dramatic baptismal liturgies is mentioned before the year AD 200. The elements of washing, anointing, receiving the Divine Name, and being clothed with white vestments clearly seem to be additions to the baptismal rite and sources within the Bible and without provide evidence that these same elements were connected with esoteric tradition of early Christianity. Biblical passages argue for the reality of these Israelite temple rituals being received by some early Christians, giving

them the claim to the titles of “kings and priests.” Post-apostolic writers such as Clement also claimed that higher rites of purification and initiation, passed down from the Apostles, continued down into the third century. Later baptismal liturgies adopted major elements associated with the Israelite temple and sources argue these same ritual elements existed in Christianity in the form of higher rites of initiation. Thus, these higher esoteric rites of initiation are a possible answer as to why the post-apostolic baptismal liturgies adopted rituals such as washings, anointings, investiture with white garments, and being signed on the forehead.

Chapter 5

The Second Baptism among Gnostic Christian Groups

To establish more fully the veracity of higher initiation rites within the earliest years of the Christian church, and their meshing together with the ordinance of baptism, attention will be directed to certain Gnostic branches of Christianity. These Christians, though not recognized as part of mainstream, or “orthodox,” Christianity, claimed to have access to higher rites—rites which parallel the orthodox rites of higher initiation described in the previous chapter. Gnostic texts witness that these rites did exist among groups of Christians, and the Gnostic texts link these rites back to Jesus and his Apostles. Furthermore, within these same texts we see the ordinances of higher initiation being meshed together with the rite of baptism, the very thing that seemed to happen in the mainstream church. Some Gnostic Christians submitted to a “second baptism” which incorporated ritualistic elements such as anointing, investiture with white garments, and receiving the Divine Name.

Gnostic Christians

Gnosticism is a set of diverse, syncretistic religious movements in Late Antiquity consisting of various belief systems. For the purpose of the present work, only Gnostic sects who viewed themselves as part of Christianity will be considered. These Gnostics, though considering themselves as Christians, borrowed heavily from the Greek philosopher Plato. In spite of this borrowing from the world of philosophy, Gnostic Christians “simply considered themselves to be Christians...we know of no ancient group

that called *itself* Gnostic.”¹⁹⁹ Gnosticism revolved around the doctrine of obtaining gnosis, or knowledge, to reach one’s highest state. This was more than receiving cognitive knowledge; the gnosis spoken of in Gnosticism had more to do with receiving esoteric knowledge *and* experiences by direct participation with the divine. Stephen Robinson may be correct that the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Nag Hammadi Library* emphasize the reality that these early Christians were “not merely the ‘heretic fringe’ of the Universal Church, but that in large areas of the ancient world Gnosticism *was* the Church.”²⁰⁰

Many of the documents associated with Gnosticism claim that these early Christians received the knowledge, teachings, and ordinances taught by Christ and his Apostles following the resurrection of Jesus. For example, the introductory words in the *Gospel of Thomas* declare, “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.”²⁰¹ Though much of Gnostic doctrine does not coincide with what is taught in the New Testament, study of their initiation rites will prove most intriguing for the present study. “Theirs were rites for the spiritual elite.

¹⁹⁹ C. Wilfred Griggs, “Rediscovering Ancient Christianity,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 4 (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1999): 75.

²⁰⁰ Stephen E. Robinson, “The Apocalypse of Adam,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 2 (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1977): 132.

²⁰¹ Thomas O. Lambdin, “The Gospel of Thomas” (II,2) in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (ed. James M. Robinson; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 126. Some scholars have understood the phrase “the living Jesus” to refer to the resurrected Christ, e.g., Harvey K. McArthur, “The Gospel According to Thomas,” in *New Testament Sidelights*, ed. Harvey K. McArthur (Hartford: Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1960), 44; Bertil E. Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Harper, 1961), 98–101; C. Schmidt, *Epistle of the Apostles* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1919). Marvin Meyer suggests that “the living Jesus” is “probably not the resurrected Christ as commonly understood, but rather Jesus who lives through his sayings” (*The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992], 67). Likewise, James M. Robinson notes, “since. . . the *Gospel of Thomas* refers neither to cross nor to resurrection, it is a moot question whether the author thought of the sayings as spoken before or after Easter. This seems not to have been relevant to the author” (“Jesus From Easter to Valentinus [or to the Apostles’ Creed],” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, no. 1 [1982]: 23).

Those rites, moreover, must be kept guarded from the uninitiated,” writes Frend.²⁰²

Studying the Valentinian Gnostic texts, there are strong parallels to that which is found in later baptismal practice within the Universal church, and also strong parallels to the original orthodox *mysterion* described by some of the Fathers. Valentinian rituals connected with receiving the gnosis, not only parallel, but possibly originated in higher initiation rites of the first-century church. As Kelly points out:

There was a powerful strain in early Christianity which was in sympathy with Gnostic tendencies. We can see it at work in the Fourth Gospel, with its axiom that eternal life consists in knowledge of God and of Christ, and even more clearly in such second-century works as *2 Clement* and Theophilus’s *Ad Autolyicum*. . . . Clement of Alexandria freely applied the title ‘gnostics’ to Christians who seemed to have a philosophic grasp of their faith. It is the existence of a genuinely Christian, orthodox ‘gnosis’ side by side with half-Christian versions which in part accounts for the difficulty in defining Gnosticism precisely.²⁰³

The powerful influence of Gnosticism can be attributed, at least in part, to the claim that they possessed the original gnosis of Jesus with its accompanying teachings and ordinances. Whether this community had possession of that knowledge in full, and whether they preserved in purity that which they did possess, is very questionable; but there is good reason to study their claims carefully. H. J. Rose explains that it has always been standard procedure to keep rituals, but change the doctrines associated with them to suit the times.²⁰⁴ Whatever the doctrines were that Gnostic Christians began to attach to the ritual, it is very likely that the rites themselves stayed much more true to their original form. Gnostics were not producing a new initiation ritual; rather, they were reinterpreting

²⁰² Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 200.

²⁰³ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 27.

²⁰⁴ H. J. Rose, *Ancient Greek Religion* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1995), 9.

rites they knew existed within orthodox Christianity.²⁰⁵ Thomassen concludes: “All our evidence suggests that Valentinian initiation practice conformed in its basic programme to [a] common Christian pattern, though the Valentinian interpretation of the ritual acts differed in certain respects from the proto-orthodox understanding of them.”²⁰⁶ Georg Kretschmar is convinced that “Gnostic teachers were hardly at all liturgically creative, but rather saw their business as the reinterpretation of existing rites.”²⁰⁷ The fact that the Gnostics chose to place many of their writings in the setting of post-resurrection esoteric teachings of Jesus indicates they were imitating a recognized Christian form. Nibley explains:

The Gnostic exploited both the ignorance and the knowledge of the time, the knowledge that the answers to the great questions of existence were known and treasured by ‘the Elders’ of another day, and the ignorance of just what that knowledge was. The oldest definition of the Gnosis specifies that it was the knowledge imparted secretly by the Lord to the Apostles after the Resurrection. The Gnostics claimed to have that very knowledge, and their tremendous initial success shows how hungry the Christian world was for it—the “main church,” in fact, had to invent a counter-Gnosis of its own to meet the threat....The Gnostics did not invent the 40 day situation, as has been claimed, for they were the last people to imagine a return of the Savior in the flesh...; but they did exploit it because it was there and they had to: at a time when everything else was being questioned, it is one of the few things that is never challenged.²⁰⁸

Jean Daniélou agrees that Gnostics presented their message the way they did because they were imitating a recognized Christian form.²⁰⁹ They claimed to have gained access to at least a portion of the mysteries passed down during the 40-day ministry of Christ,

²⁰⁵ The terms “redemption” and “bridal chamber” do not appear in the early documents of the main church. The terms may refer to the whole of initiation, or to the elements of initiation following baptism, see Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 140–41.

²⁰⁶ Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the ‘Valentinians’* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 386.

²⁰⁷ Kretschmar, “Recent Research on Christian Initiation,” 26.

²⁰⁸ Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum,” 11.

²⁰⁹ Jean Daniélou, “Les traditions Secretes des Apotres,” *Eronas Jahrbuch* 31 (1962): 203.

and they used that foundation of esoteric teachings and rites given by Christ to his Apostles to build their particular doctrines.

How did the Gnostics obtain access to at least some of the highest esoteric teachings and practices within early Christianity? One possible answer comes from Clement. His letter to Theodore about the *Secret Gospel of Mark* was in response to the “the unspeakable teachings of the Carpocrations” which Theodore encountered. Carpocrates, an early Gnostic Christian, apparently had learned of *Secret Mark* and elements relating to the initiation into the great mysteries through an apostate elder of the church at Alexandria. According to Clement: “Carpocrates...so enslaved a certain presbyter of the church in Alexandria that he got from him a copy of the Secret Gospel, which he both interpreted according to his blasphemous and carnal doctrine and, moreover, polluted, mixing with the spotless and holy words utterly shameless lies. From this mixture is withdrawn off the teaching of the Carpocratians.”²¹⁰ Others, who viewed themselves as orthodox Christians, may have been privileged to receive the highest rites and teachings of Christianity themselves, and then later broke from the main church and added new meanings and interpretations to the mysteries they had received.²¹¹ The means whereby the Gnostic Christians received the mysteries may be various, but it seems clear that the Gnostic branches had something of great interest and worth in early Christianity.

In order to gain a better understanding of the nature of the original rites attached to the highest teachings of Christ and his Apostles, the Gnostic Christian texts provide invaluable clues. Stephen Robinson summarizes:

²¹⁰ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 446–47.

²¹¹ Valentinus will provide one such example. He will be discussed later in this chapter.

The knowledge necessary for salvation consisted, according to many Gnostic writings, of higher teachings and ordinances taught by Jesus and his disciples and transmitted in oral traditions which were most often too secret and sacred to be written down or to be discussed with any who were not worthy of them....Although orthodox Christianity has emphatically denied that any such esoteric teachings ever existed, Gnosticism insisted not only that they were an important part of the earliest Christianity, but also that they were the *most* important part.²¹²

Valentinianism

Of the many groups termed “gnostic” by the main church, the Valentinians were the closest to “orthodox” practices and beliefs.²¹³ Valentinians, from the texts available to us, also seemed to be the most interested in ritual. Concerning Valentinus, the man from whom the group received its name, C. Wilfred Griggs has written:

Valentinus was born in Egypt early in the second century and was educated in Alexandria. He preached the Christian faith throughout the length of the Nile valley by the middle of the century. He then journeyed to Rome and enjoyed considerable popularity among church members there and was very nearly appointed bishop in Rome due to his “intellectual force and eloquence.” Tertullian states that because another was appointed in his place, Valentinus “broke with the church of the true faith.” Epiphanius agreed that Valentinus separated himself from the church, but only toward the end of his life, at Cyprus, where he went to Rome to live. By all accounts, it is obvious that Valentinus was not considered heretical during his life in Egypt or his early years in Rome. Even the later Church Fathers who attack him express grudging admiration for his intellect, his doctrinal understanding, and his forceful personality.²¹⁴

²¹² Robinson, “Apocalypse of Adam,” 132–33.

²¹³ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 278. Alastair H.B. Logan goes so far as to separate the Valentinians from Gnostics. He writes: “in terms of the issue of authority and tradition, that whereas the Gnostics as a cult movement introducing new ideas were remarkably independent of the New Testament and mainstream Catholic tradition while still claiming to be true Christians, the Valentinians as a sectarian movement remained much closer to the New Testament and Catholic tradition, as interpreters of scripture, claiming a secret tradition going back to Christ” (*The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* [London/New York: T&T Clark, 2006], 76). For a comprehensive study concerning Valentinianism, including their initiatory practices, see Thomassen, *Spiritual Seed*.

²¹⁴ Griggs, “Rediscovering Ancient Christianity,” 74.

Valentinus claimed he had received the apostolic tradition, the knowledge given by Christ to his Apostles, from Theodas—a disciple of Paul.²¹⁵ Reviewing the texts left behind by Valentinians provides substantial evidence that these branches did indeed have some access to knowledge and practices which strongly resemble the higher esoteric rites given to *some* in early Christianity, and later baptismal rites given to *all* who joined the faith.

The *Gospel of Philip* will be used as the primary text in reconstructing the rites of initiation within Valentinian Gnosticism. Other Gnostic Christian documents which support and extend our understanding of the initiation rites will also be presented. The picture which begins to develop is of various Christian sects who had some knowledge of higher initiation doctrines and ordinances traceable to Jesus and his Apostles, but whose ordinances became mingled with the idea and practice of baptism.

Five Seals and Two Baptisms

The *Gospel of Philip* is a text of New Testament apocrypha. Wesley Isenberg describes what the *Gospel of Philip* is and what it is not:

The Gospel of Philip is a compilation of statements pertaining primarily to the meaning and value of sacraments within the context of a Valentinian conception of the human predicament and life after death....*The Gospel of Philip* is not a gospel like one of the New Testament gospels....[There are a] few sayings and stories about Jesus, however, [they] are not set in any kind of narrative framework like one of the New Testament gospels....Because of the contents, the eccentric arrangement, and the literary types exhibited, it is likely that *The Gospel of Philip* is a collection of excerpts mainly from a Christian Gnostic sacramental catechesis. It explains the significance of sacramental rites of initiation, the meaning of sacred names, especially the names of Jesus, and provides paraenesis for the life of the initiated....The title of this text may be derived merely from the fact that Philip is the only apostle named in it (73,8)...The Coptic text is

²¹⁵ Clement, *Stromata* 7.17.

undoubtedly a translation of a Greek text which was written perhaps as late as the second half of the third century C.E.²¹⁶

The *Gospel of Philip* might be the most important text for understanding Valentinian ordinances or sacraments.²¹⁷ Stephan A. Hoeller calls it “a manual of Gnostic sacramental theology.”²¹⁸ J. J. Buckley goes a step further by maintaining that the *Gospel of Philip* is essentially a preparatory manual for a secret initiation ritual.²¹⁹ Though the practices are not described in full detail, yet the corporeal nature of the initiation rites seems certain. The text teaches its readers that “Truth did not come to the world naked, but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other way. There is a rebirth and an image of rebirth. It is certainly necessary to be born again through the image.”²²⁰ Thus, the *Gospel of Philip* describes images and outward symbols of initiation which symbolized spiritual processes of rebirth.

The *Gospel of Philip* mentions five seals, or elements of initiation: “The lord [did] everything in a mystery, a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a

²¹⁶ Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip” (II,3) in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 139–41. Robert Wilson has argued for a second-century dating of the *Gospel of Philip* (*The Gospel of Philip: Translated from the Coptic Text, with an Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 3–5).

²¹⁷ Most scholars accept the *Gospel of Philip* as a Valentinian text, e.g., Wilson, *Gospel of Philip*, 15; D. H. Tripp, “The ‘Sacramental System’ of the Gospel of Philip,” in *Studia Patristica* 17, part 1, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982), 257–58; Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 325; Elaine Pagels, “The ‘Mystery of Marriage’ in the *Gospel of Philip* Revisited,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 442–54; Einar Thomassen, “How Valentinian is the *Gospel of Philip*?” in *The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (eds. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire; New York: Brill, 1997), 251–79.

²¹⁸ Stephan A. Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1989), 204.

²¹⁹ J. J. Buckley, “A Cult-Mystery in the Gospel of Philip,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 4 (1980): 569–81.

²²⁰ *Gospel of Philip* 67.9–14. All English translations are from Wesley W. Isenberg, “The Gospel of Philip” (II,3) in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*.

bridal chamber.”²²¹ Isenberg suggests that this passage “probably describes five stages of a complete initiation, rather than five separate, unrelated sacraments.”²²² These five rites are blurred in the *Gospel of Philip*, and it is difficult to ascertain where one element begins and where the other ends, but it is clear that the combination of all five seals led one to the highest blessings attached to receiving the ultimate gnosis.

As one entered the realm of the initiatory ordinances one figuratively entered the holy spaces of the temple: “There were three buildings specifically for sacrifice in Jerusalem. The one facing west was called ‘the holy.’ Another facing south was called ‘the holy of the holy.’ The third facing east was called ‘the holy of the holies,’ the place where only the high priest enters. Baptism is ‘the holy’ building. Redemption is the ‘holy of the holy.’ ‘The holy of the holies’ is the bridal chamber.”²²³

These Christians claimed their rituals came from Christ and his Apostles. These rituals were at times associated with the temple and its ordinances, and they gave one claim to the titles of priest and king, following the pattern of the high priest in Israel. George MacRae wrote the following regarding this temple pattern in the *Gospel of Philip*:

The allegory seems to identify these [an outer court, a middle court and the inner court] with three different sacraments in the sacramental system of the Valentinian Gnostics. But I think it is more than that. It is more than that because it builds on the concept that one moves toward the divine presence as one moves successively through the outer courts of the temple toward the inner Holy of Holies, to which only the priest has access. Consequently the order in which the courts are identified with sacraments becomes very important. The initiatory rite of baptism is the outermost one. The rite of redemption, whatever that may have consisted of, is the second one. And it is the bridal chamber, the rite of which was

²²¹ Ibid., 67.27–30.

²²² Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 140.

²²³ *Gospel of Philip*, 69.14–25.

the supreme rite for the Valentinian Gnostic, which is the approach into the presence of God himself.²²⁴

Similarly, April DeConick described *Philip* as preserving a “celestial Temple tradition.”²²⁵ Much like the Jewish mystics who preserved a form of temple worship after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple,²²⁶ the Valentinians seemed to foster a similar temple worship in which the rituals of initiation brought one back into the presence of God. According to DeConick:

[The *Gospel of Philip*'s] three heavenly Temple shrines represent the esoteric reality behind the sacraments. It is plausible that these sacraments are understood on the spiritual level to represent the three rooms of the previously destroyed Temple: the *ulam* or vestibule; the *hekhhal* or central room; and the *devir* or inner sanctum. Just as each of these rooms represents a greater degree of holiness within the Temple, so does each sacrament in *Philip*. Each stage in the ascent through the rooms of the heavenly Temple brings the believer closer to the *devir*, the Holy of Holies where the Presence of God dwells, seated upon his *merkavah*. As the believer moves through each Temple shrine, he is progressively transformed. For the Christian Gnostic, this ascent culminates in an eschatological experience at the much-anticipated End, when the believer finally is able to enter the Holy of Holies and gaze upon the Father, fully transformed.²²⁷

Gaye Strathearn has argued that “the *Gospel of Philip* functioned as a temple text.”²²⁸ She writes:

²²⁴ George MacRae, “The Temple as a House of Revelation in the Nag Hammadi Texts” *The Temple in Antiquity* (ed. Truman G. Madsen; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 181–82.

²²⁵ April DeConick, “The True Mysteries: Sacramentalism in the Gospel of Philip,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, no. 3 (2001): 230.

²²⁶ For a discussion of how Jewish mystics perpetuated temple worship after the destruction of the temple through the idea of a surrogate heavenly temple see R. Eilior, “From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Song in the Hekhalot Literature and its Relation to Temple Traditions,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 4 (1997): 217–67.

²²⁷ DeConick, “The True Mysteries,” 230–31.

²²⁸ Gaye Strathearn, “The Valentinian Bridal Chamber,” (PhD diss., The Claremont Graduate University, 2004), 258–78.

Let me be clear here: I am not suggesting that the Valentinians built temples in the same sense that Solomon, Herod, or the devotees of Isis did. I am suggesting, however, that they understood a process of initiation that encouraged individuals to leave behind the profane world and enter into the realm of the sacred and ritually guided them through that transition. It was through this process that initiates came to understand what their eternal possibilities were. The concept of the journey of the soul seems to have a natural fit within a temple framework. Even though the temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. the ideal of the temple continued to live on within the Christian matrix. I also suggest that the *Gospel of Philip* could have acted as the initiates' textual guide for that transition.²²⁹

The *Gospel of Philip* connects the rites of initiation to the temple in a concrete manner. It is within a temple context then that the rites of initiation within the *Gospel of Philip* are best understood, and the text preserves intriguing insights into the initiation practices of early Christianity.

Water baptism was part of the initiation process as described by the *Gospel of Philip*: “By perfecting the water of baptism, Jesus emptied it of death. Thus we do go down into the water.”²³⁰ Elsewhere, the text depicts God as a dyer: “As the good dyes, which are called ‘true,’ dissolve with the things dyed in them, so it is with those whom God has dyed. Since his dyes are immortal, they become immortal by means of his colors. Now God dips what he dips in water.”²³¹ The phrases “go down into the water” and “dip” imply baptism by immersion.

Baptism in *Philip* was connected with receiving the Holy Spirit and the title of a Christian: “If one go down into the water and come up without having received anything and says, ‘I am a Christian,’ he has borrowed the name at interest. But if he receive the holy spirit, he has the name as a gift....This is the way [it happens to one] when he

²²⁹ Ibid., 277–78.

²³⁰ *Gospel of Philip* 77.7–10.

²³¹ Ibid., 61.12–20.

experiences a mystery.”²³² A removal of clothing was required to express the doctrine of leaving the old life behind and putting on Christ. According to the text, “It is necessary that we put on the living man. Therefore, when he is about to go down into the water, he unclothes himself, in order that he may put on the living man [Christ].”²³³ The picture of baptism gained from *Philip* is of the initiate unclothing himself, going down into the water, and being immersed in connection with receiving the Holy Spirit. However, this was only the beginning of the rites of initiation among the Valentinian branches of Christianity.

Patristic sources claim that there were two separate baptisms practiced among the Valentinians.²³⁴ Irenaeus and Hippolytus called the second baptism the “redemption.” This second baptism was holier and higher than the first; thus, not all Valentinians received it.²³⁵ For many Gnostics there existed three types of human beings: *hylics*, the lowest form, *psychics*, the middle, and *pneumatics*, the highest order of humans. *Psychics* had access to the typical water rite of baptism which made one a Christian, but *pneumatics* entered into a higher initiation of baptism. The *Gospel of Philip* itself seems to witness the fact of two baptisms: “it is fitting to baptize in the two, in the light and the water. Now the light is the chrism.”²³⁶ This reference could be describing two parts of the same baptismal rite—water immersion and chrism—or it could be the two separate baptisms attested to by the patristic fathers. Another Gnostic text, *A Valentinian*

²³² Ibid., 64.22–31.

²³³ Ibid., 75.22–24.

²³⁴ Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.36; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.21.

²³⁵ According to Thomassen there is “a tendency toward a devaluation of water baptism” in some Valentinian texts, and that the “motive underlying this attitude may be as Irenaeus and Hippolytus imply, a desire to distinguish what is offered by the Valentinian ‘redemption’ from the salvation acquired in the baptism of the catholic church” (*Spiritual Seed*, 391).

²³⁶ *Gospel of Philip* 69.12–14.

Exposition, also identifies two separate baptisms among the Valentinians.²³⁷ John Turner proposes the following thesis: “It seems likely that the first three rites (baptism, chrism, eucharist, perhaps unrepeatable) were included in some initiation ceremony, while the redemption and bridal chamber constituted a sort of second baptism.”²³⁸ There is merit to this thesis, with one amendment however, that chrism was likely part of the second baptism.

Baptism and the Eucharist were introductory rites but the *Gospel of Philip* informs its readers that “there is another one [rite] superior to these.”²³⁹ The anointing or chrism “is superior to baptism, for it is from the word ‘chrism’ that we have been called ‘Christians,’ certainly not because of the word ‘baptism.’”²⁴⁰ Readers of *Philip* are informed that “The father gave him [the initiate] this [the chrism] in the bridal chamber.”²⁴¹ It seems likely that the chrism was part of the second baptism associated with redemption and the bridal chamber, and that chrism was part of the higher rites known to these Christians.

²³⁷ *A Valentinian Exposition: On Baptism A 40.37–41.38*, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 488. The text does not describe the second baptism but its existence is implied. Elaine Pagels describes Valentinian baptismal theology consisting of three “types” of baptism. The first two were available to those of the “orthodox” church, but the Valentinian pneumatics had access to the third and highest form of baptism: “The Valentinians consider that the church’s baptism consists of a somatic aspect, which washes the body, and a psychic aspect, that releases the psychic from the prospect of death, conveying ‘forgiveness of sins.’ The pneumatic baptism of *apolutrosis* (or redemption), on the other hand, releases the spiritual from the psychic components of his cosmic existence, redeeming him altogether from the jurisdiction of the demiurge, and restoring him into unity with his pleroma, that is, with the Mother and Father beyond” (“A Valentinian Interpretation of Baptism and Eucharist—and its Critique of ‘Orthodox’ Sacramental Theology and Practice,” *Harvard Theological Review* 65, no. 2 [April 1972]: 161–62).

²³⁸ John D. Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism,” *The Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 33; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 150.

²³⁹ *Gospel of Philip* 75.2.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.12–15.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74.21–22.

“The fire is the chrism, the light is the fire.”²⁴² The elements of light and fire are continuously linked to chrism in the *Gospel of Philip*. Receiving chrism did more than make one a Christian: “But one receives the unction...This power the apostles called ‘the right and the left.’ For this person is no longer a Christian but a Christ.”²⁴³ Later, this work teaches, “The chrism is superior to baptism...And it is because of the chrism that ‘the Christ’ has his name. For the father anointed the son, and the son anointed the apostles, and the apostles anointed us.”²⁴⁴ Boldly, the text places the origin of anointing in Christian initiation (likely administered as part of a second baptism or washing) with the Savior, who administered the ordinance to his Apostles, who then gave it to others. The Naassenes, a Gnostic sect of about AD 100, wrote of the anointing: “And of all men, we Christians alone are those who in the third gate celebrate the mystery, and are anointed there with the unspeakable chrism from a horn, as David [was anointed].”²⁴⁵

For Valentinian Christians such an anointing provided access to the highest blessings from God: “He who has been anointed possesses everything. He possesses the resurrection, the light, the cross, the holy spirit.”²⁴⁶ This reference to the cross may imply that the anointing included marking the initiate with the cross. A second passage with this allusion is fragmented: “But one receives the unction of the [...] of the power of the cross.”²⁴⁷ The anointing endowed one with power over Satan and his forces: “It is fitting for [you at this time] to send thy Son [Jesus] Christ and anoint us so that we might be

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 67.5–6.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 67.23–27.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.12–18.

²⁴⁵ Hippolytus, *Refutation* 5.4.

²⁴⁶ *Gospel of Philip* 74.18–21.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.23–24.

able to trample [upon] the [snakes] and [the heads] of the scorpions and [all] the power of the Devil.”²⁴⁸

Regarding the anointing found in Gnosticism Everett Ferguson states: “Unless there is a physical rite behind the figurative language of the New Testament, a baptismal anointing is first attested among Gnostics, and the importance they gave to the rite may have encouraged acceptance of the practice by others; alternatively, the Gnostics may have adopted the rite from the church and given it their own meaning.”²⁴⁹ Perhaps both scenarios are true. It is possible that Gnostics did adopt the anointing from the main church, not necessarily in baptismal form, but as part of higher initiation rites introduced by Jesus and his Apostles.²⁵⁰ Competition with Gnostic Christian branches, pagan cults, and mystery religions of the day may have fueled the Universal church’s desire to make their rather simplistic ordinance of baptism more elaborate and appealing to match the pomp and pageantry of the other groups. With more elaborate initiation rites possibly already existing in first-century Christianity, later church leaders may have had some knowledge of these initiation rituals which could have been incorporated into baptismal

²⁴⁸ *A Valentinian Exposition: On the Anointing* 40.11–17, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 487.

²⁴⁹ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 282.

²⁵⁰ Jeffrey John discusses two different thoughts processes as to the origin of baptismal anointing: “If, as Lampe believes, (the Gnostics) were the first Christians to introduce [anointing], the motive of the rite may well have been to express and emphasize their spiritual superiority over ordinary Christians who as yet practiced only water-baptism. Dix, agreeing that the earliest unambiguous evidence for chrismation is Gnostic, argues that it is unthinkable that the Church should have taken over any practice from its doctrinal enemies” (“Anointing in the New Testament,” in *The Oil of Gladness* [eds. Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993], 64). Commenting on these two differing viewpoints Barry Bickmore inquires, “But if there is no solid evidence for baptismal anointing in the first and second-century ‘orthodox’ liturgy, and it is ‘unthinkable’ that they would have adopted the practice from the Gnostics, how did it come about that the Catholic baptismal liturgy *did* eventually incorporate anointing?” Bickmore suggests, “Perhaps the answer is that anointing existed from the beginning in the higher ordinances. However, as the higher ordinances fell out of favor and as the various branches of Christianity drifted further from the truth, elements of these rites were incorporated into baptism and the Eucharist and the higher ordinances were set aside” (*Restoring the Ancient Church*, 351).

initiation.²⁵¹ Baptism and chrism became part of the orthodox Christian mysteries, and the elements became mingled and confused with something the main church once possessed but no longer fully understood.

The redemption is the most ambiguous seal discussed in the *Gospel of Philip*. However, Irenaeus did associate the second baptism of the Valentinians with “the redemption.” Describing this second baptism or redemption ceremony, Irenaeus wrote:

For some of them prepare a nuptial couch, and perform a sort of mystic rite (pronouncing certain expressions) with those who are being initiated, and affirm that it is a spiritual marriage which is celebrated by them, after the likeness of the conjunctions above. Others, again, lead them to a place where water is, and baptize them, with the utterance of these words, “into the name of the unknown Father of the universe—into truth, the mother of all things—into Him who descended on Jesus—into union, and redemption, and communion with the powers.”...After this they anoint the initiated person with balsam; for they assert that this unguent is a type of that sweet odour which is above all things. But there are some of them who assert that it is superfluous to bring persons to the water, but mixing oil and water together, they place this mixture on the heads of those who are to be initiated, with the use of some such expressions as we have already mentioned. And this they maintain to be the redemption.²⁵²

Perhaps there were two baptisms in water by immersion or, as Irenaeus explained, the second baptism may have only required oil and water to be placed upon the head and that was considered a baptism, or a washing and anointing.

Hoeller describes the redemption as “a heroic act of renunciation and commitment” through which the initiate becomes “free of the compelling attachments to

²⁵¹ Thomassen writes: “It is *a priori* improbable that the introduction of anointing into Christian initiation generally was due to the influence of the Valentinians, or from other ‘Gnostics.’ A far more likely assumption is that the Valentinians were following a practice that was already spreading among Christians in the latter half of the second century” (*Spiritual Seed*, 398–400).

²⁵² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.21.3–4.

this world and its rulers.”²⁵³ Elaine Pagels, relying on information from Irenaeus, explains: “Before gaining *gnosis*, the candidate worshiped the demiurge, mistaking him for the true God: now, through the sacrament of redemption, the candidate indicates that he has been released from the demiurge’s power. In this ritual he addresses the demiurge, declaring his independence, serving notice that he no longer belongs to the demiurge’s sphere of authority and judgment, but to what transcends it.”²⁵⁴ Hippolytus adds that followers of Marcus, a Valentinian, laid hands on the one receiving the redemption. This gesture in connection with the redemption could be for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, or it could be part of an anointing, which Hippolytus connects to the redemption.²⁵⁵ These insights into the redemption provide strong parallels to the renunciation and confession practices adopted into later baptismal practice in the main church. For Valentinians who relied on the *Gospel of Philip*, the redemption seemed to be a second baptism (which may not have included water) accompanied by a renunciation, a confession, and likely an anointing.

Closely connected with the ideas of chrism and light in *Philip* is the practice of investiture. At some point during the initiation of the five seals the initiate was clothed with white garments. “Investiture typically follows upon naked baptism,” writes Turner; however, this may mean investiture followed the second baptism or washing and anointing ritual. Turner continues: “The metaphor of replacing an old garment with a new one, which occurs repeatedly in Gnostic baptismal contexts, can signify several religious acts: a shift from a life of vice to one of virtue, religious conversion, a change of life-

²⁵³ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 206.

²⁵⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 37. In Gnostic thought the demiurge was a lesser god and the creator of the material world.

²⁵⁵ Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.36.

style, and initiation, where it signifies the death and rebirth of the initiate and assimilation of divine power. In baptismal contexts, the garment that is discarded signifies the physical body, while the donning the ‘robe of light’ signifies the restoration of the lost Image of God.”²⁵⁶ Whether the removal of clothing prior to washing, and the re-clothing in the white garment following the washing, were part of the first or second baptism is difficult to ascertain; however, the garment was usually given as part of anointing rituals. If the anointing took place as part of the higher initiation, then clothing in white garments was likely part of the second baptism, or the redemption.

The *Gospel of Philip* teaches that “no one will be able to go in to the king if he is naked.”²⁵⁷ Also, “In this world those who put on garments are better than the garments. In the kingdom of heaven the garments are better than those who have put them on.”²⁵⁸ One put the sacred garments on “by water and fire,” or in other words by washing and chrism. The garments are referred to as “the perfect light,” and they endowed the recipient with special gifts and powers of safety: “The [evil] powers do not see those who are clothed in the perfect light, and consequently are not able to detain them. One will clothe himself in this light sacramentally in the union.”²⁵⁹ This union took place in the bridal chamber; consequently, receiving these garments was again most likely associated with the higher rites of the redemption and the bridal chamber. Summarizing the essential nature of the garments in the soul’s redemption, the *Gospel of Philip* teaches: “Not only will they [cosmic powers opposing the soul] be unable to detain the perfect man, but they will not be able to see him, for if they see him they will detain him. There is no other way

²⁵⁶ Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism,” 155.

²⁵⁷ *Gospel of Philip* 58.15–17.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.19–22.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.5–9.

for a person to acquire this quality except by putting on the perfect light [and] he too becoming perfect light. He who has [put it] on will enter [...].”²⁶⁰

A further point of interest in connection with the five seals is the reception of the Name.²⁶¹ In his introductory notes to the *Gospel of Philip*, Isenberg points out that the text “explains the significance of sacramental rites of initiation, [and] the meaning of sacred names, especially names of Jesus.”²⁶² “One single name is not uttered in the world,” according to *Philip*, “the name which the father gave to the son; it is the name above all things: the name of the father. For the son would not become father unless he wore the name of the father.” Though the name was not uttered in the world those seeking to leave the world through ascending through the five seals seemed to gain access to this name: “Those who have this name know it, but they do not speak it. But those who do not have it do not know it.”²⁶³

Baptism and chrism had provided the initiate with the name “Christian,”²⁶⁴ but receiving this other name was something higher: “There are other names, however; they are superior to every name that is named and are stronger than the strong.”²⁶⁵ As the soul ascended through the initiatory rites knowledge of the Name (or perhaps Names) was required to obtain the full gnosis: “But truth brought names into existence in the world for our sakes because it is not possible to learn it without these names.”²⁶⁶ As one went

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 76.22–30.

²⁶¹ Ferguson notes that emphasis on receiving the name through initiation “reflects characteristic Valentinian” practice (*Baptism in the Early Church*, 287).

²⁶² Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 141.

²⁶³ *Gospel of Philip* 54.5–13.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 64.22–31; 74.12–16.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.9–12.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 54.14–15.

through the seals of initiation esoteric names were learned which gave the initiate access to more knowledge.

Another text describing Valentinian initiation rites substantiates the importance of receiving the Name. The Valentinian Theodotus presents a scene where “the priest” is allowed to enter “within the second veil” because he has “put on the Name.” Within the second veil the soul “becomes now truly rational and high priestly.”²⁶⁷ Through the initiation one came to possess the Spirit and wear the Name:

Therefore we must put on the Lord’s armour...In the case of the coin that was brought to him, the Lord did not say whose property is it, but, “whose image and superscription? Caesar’s,” that it might be given to him whose it is. So likewise the faithful; he has the name of God through Christ as a superscription and the Spirit as an image. And dumb animals show by a seal whose property each is, and are claimed from the seal. Thus also the faithful soul receives the seal of truth and bears about the “marks of Christ.”²⁶⁸

Wearing this Name marked the faithful soul’s willingness to be owned by Christ, but it was only given to those who participated in the initiatory experience. The Valentinian text the *Gospel of Truth* records:

Now the name of the Father is the Son...The name, however, is invisible because it alone is the mystery of the invisible which comes to ears that are completely filled with it by him...In this way, then, the name is a great thing. Who, therefore, will be able to utter a name for him, the great name, except him alone to whom the name belongs and the sons of the name in whom rested the name of the Father, (who) in turn themselves rested in his name?...The Son is his name.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Clement, *Excerpts from Theodosis* 27.1–5.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁶⁹ *Gospel of Truth* 38.7–39.20, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 49.

Knowledge of the name came to the ears of those who were “sons of the name,” or in other words those who were being born again through the rites of initiation.²⁷⁰

Summary

There are gaps in our understanding of the initiatory practices related to the five seals in Valentinian initiation; however, the elements which are described are intriguing. According to Turner, Christian Gnostic writings contain “numerous references to baptism, washings, anointing and sealings.”²⁷¹ There were baptisms *and* washings, anointings, and sealings within this initiation pattern described by Gnostic Christians. The washings, anointings, and sealings were interpreted as a type of second baptism or redemption. These initiation practices were assimilated into a doctrine of baptism. Similarly, it is the combining of washings, anointings, and sealings within the single ordinance of baptism which takes place in the later practice of baptism within the Universal church. What once was separate in apostolic-Christianity somehow became combined into one rite. That which had a temple context and was offered to a faithful group within Christianity became the initiatory rite offered to all joining the church.

Initiation, in at least some Valentinian branches of Christianity, appears to have contained the following components: the candidate was baptized in water and allowed to participate in the Eucharist, then a second baptism was offered wherein the initiate removed his clothing, was washed, anointed with oil (or perhaps a mixture of water and oil), clothed in a white garment, renounced evil forces and swore allegiance to the true

²⁷⁰ According to Thomassen: “The name is what one receives when one is (re-)born; it also represents the true identity of the one who receives it, and his true being.” He also proposes that “the most likely location for this event [receiving the Name] is the anointing” (*Spiritual Seed*, 384–85).

²⁷¹ Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism,” 139.

God, received the Name (or Names), and used that sacred information to obtain more truth. Which elements of this process occurred as part of the first baptism and which as part of the second is difficult to say with precision, but Valentinian beliefs about the end result of these rites is certain. The soul who received the five seals became “a Christ.”²⁷² The *Gospel of Philip* clearly states the belief that these ordinances of rebirth gave one power to become divine: “You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw [the father, you] shall become father.”²⁷³ This doctrine made perfect sense to the Valentinians because “A horse sires a horse, a man begets man, a god brings forth a god.”²⁷⁴

The rites within Valentinian Gnosticism attest to the reality of esoteric initiation traditions within Christianity being combined with the practice and doctrine of baptism. Whether the combining of higher initiation rituals with baptism began with these Gnostic Christian branches and encouraged a similar comingling of practices within the main church, or whether Gnostic groups borrowed the pattern from trends already existing within the larger church is difficult to say; but, the evidence that both Christian groups allowed the higher initiatory practices to blend into baptism is clear. Initiation practices of washing, anointing, being endowed with a white garment, and receiving the Name became part of some Valentinian esoteric practices and part of the larger church’s mystery of baptism.

²⁷² *Gospel of Philip* 67.22.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61.30–33.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.25–27.

Conclusion

Christian baptisms by the fourth century of the church were very different from the relatively simple actions which seemed to be part of the apostolic rite of baptism. The evidence of the New Testament argues for an original normative structure of Christian initiation which was apostolic. The pattern began with Jesus' own baptism as he was baptized by immersion and received the Holy Spirit. As Jesus' disciples continued to initiate new converts, two major elements of the baptismal rite are made clear: the initiate was immersed in water followed by the laying on of hands of an authorized administrator to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost. Those are the only two baptismal actions which find clear support in the New Testament. They continued to be the only two major elements of Christian baptism witnessed by early Christian documents until the third century. Other elements of the baptismal liturgy which became so prevalent and important in the third and fourth centuries find no clear support in the first or second-century documents. References in the New Testament to actions such as anointings connected with baptism seem much more likely to be figurative language describing the reception of the Holy Spirit rather than evidence for physical elements of the first-century rite. The New Testament pattern was simply a water immersion and the laying on of hands.

The third and fourth centuries of the church saw dramatic elements added to the baptismal liturgy. Among those elements was an extended catechumen period of instruction to prove faithfulness, exorcisms, an official renunciation of Satan, a washing ceremony in the nude, an anointing with oil upon various body parts, a post-water rite reception of a white garment, and the action of being signed with the cross as a mark of

the seal of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of baptism also changed from rebirth and entrance to the Kingdom into something that gave one the status of a priest and king in similitude of the great Priest and King Jesus Christ. The ordinance of baptism changed, and it changed dramatically.

The temple initiation of Israelite kings and priests required rituals which are remarkably similar to many of the post-apostolic additions made to baptism. The patristic authors began to place the rite and doctrine of baptism into the context of royal and priestly initiations of the Old Testament. The ancient initiation practices of the tabernacle and temple included washings, anointings, investiture with sacred garments, and marking or sealing with the Divine Name. These same elements began to find form in Christian baptismal practice. According to many early Christian writers baptism became a washing rather than an immersion. This washing was followed by an anointing, which according to authors like Cyril, made one “a Christ.” Following the washing and anointing the initiate was given a holy white garment. All of these elements correspond to the temple initiation rituals of the Israelite priests. Also included in the ceremony of later Christian baptism was the ritual of signing the initiate on the forehead with the cross. There is evidence which argues that this too had its roots in the Israelite temple initiations, as the priest was marked with the Divine Name of YHWH on his forehead. Many patristic authors looked to and relied on these ancient temple rites as they taught and wrote about the ordinance of baptism in their day. The New Testament rite of baptism was not the source for these ritual elements and the Church Fathers did not claim such; rather, they looked back to the Israelite temple initiation to defend and explain the “newer” baptismal practices.

Yet, many patristic sources claimed not only that some of the dramatic rites added to baptism were traceable back to the Israelite temple, but that they also were introduced by Jesus and his Apostles. How could this be if those elements were never part of the New Testament rite of baptism? The answer may lie in the esoteric teachings and rites of the original Christian *mysterion*. The evolutionary changes made to Christian baptism may indeed have come from Christ in some form. Many early Christians believed in and wrote about an esoteric tradition in early Christianity which included higher teachings and rites. Early church leaders like Paul may allude to this tradition, and later Church Fathers like Clement and Origen provide bolder statements that such a tradition existed within the church. Those who wrote about this tradition believed it was reserved for the “elite” of the church, or those who had proved prior faithfulness and sought further progression in spiritual things.

By the fourth century something had changed. Church leaders still claimed to possess esoteric teachings from the Apostles, but the mystogological teachings of that time were revealed to all Christians as part of their baptism. Somehow the *mysterion*, or secret tradition of the apostolic church, became the mysteries shared with the Christian initiates of the fourth century. It is unknown how much, if any, of the original Christian *mysterion* survived into the fourth century of the church, but the Church Fathers of that era claimed possession of such.

Early Christian sources provide evidence that not only the teachings of the esoteric tradition merged into a baptismal context, but also that the rites of the esoteric tradition may have undergone a similar merger. Evidence within the pages of the Bible *may* reveal rites of higher initiation performed among early Christians which gave them

claim to the titles of “priests and kings.” These rites *may* have included elements such as a removal of clothing, an anointing with oil, receiving sacred garments, and being marked with the Divine Name. These possible early Christian rites of higher initiation, like the teachings of the original *mysterion*, *may* have been assimilated into Christian baptism. As Christian baptism adopted these higher initiation elements the ordinance of baptism became much more secret and guarded.

Exactly how and why these esoteric rites became meshed with the rite of baptism is hard to say with precision, but within the documents of early Christianity there is evidence that this is exactly what happened. Not only are there references to the rites of the *mysterion* within orthodox Christianity, but Valentinian Gnostic branches of Christianity provide strong evidence of higher initiation rites. Certain Valentinian Gnostic branches claimed these higher rites of initiation were traceable back to Jesus and the Twelve, and that they were offered only to the faithful within the religion. Within these sects exists a prime example of higher initiation rites being assimilated into both the language and doctrine of baptism. Gnostic and Orthodox sources claim there were two baptisms in Valentinianism; the second baptism was likely connected with the actions of anointing, receiving a white garment, and receiving the Divine Name. These Christians had combined priestly and royal temple practices with the rite of baptism. The main church, sometime following the ministry of the Apostles, seems to have done the same thing. The reasons behind the adoption of the higher initiation practices into baptism may be many; confusion after the Apostles’ deaths, apostasy from within the great church, competition with Gnostic sects and others with more elaborate initiation practices, etc. Whatever the reasons, the results produced a baptismal rite laden with higher initiation

themes and actions akin to the washing, anointing, and endowment practices of the Israelite temple and possibly the esoteric tradition of the Apostles.

The priestly initiation rites of the Israelite temple, the esoteric tradition of early Christianity, the higher initiation practices of first-century Christianity, and the second baptism among Valentinian Christians all seem to coalesce together in the third and fourth centuries of Christianity to create a picture of what may have happened to early Christian baptism. Dividing lines of authority, of doctrine, and of ritual practice all became more blurred in the church as the original Twelve Apostles passed away. A church structure existed where change and reinterpretation could flourish. There can be little doubt that the most fundamental Christian ordinance—baptism—changed dramatically by the fourth century of the church. A possible and intriguing explanation for some of the major evolutions in Christian baptism may in fact be found in the priestly initiation rituals of the Israelite temple and the early Christian esoteric tradition of higher initiation. The esoteric tradition, which many early Christian sources claim was established by Jesus and passed on to his Apostles, may have been the bridge between the washing, anointing, and endowment practices of the Israelite priests and the baptismal evolutions which appeared in the third and fourth centuries of the Christian church.

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