

NAC STUDIES IN BIBLE AND THEOLOGY

BELIEVER'S  
BAPTISM:

SIGN OF THE NEW COVENANT  
IN CHRIST

THOMAS R. SCHREINER  
SHAWN D. WRIGHT  
editors

SERIES EDITOR: E. RAY CLENDENEN

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# BAPTISM IN THE GOSPELS

Andreas J. Köstenberger\*

The purpose of the present chapter is to investigate the material on baptism in the four canonical Gospels. This will take on the form of a narrative analysis of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. In this way the Gospels themselves will be allowed to determine the parameters for our discussion of baptism, in particular the activity of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism by him, and the literal and figurative baptisms administered, or undergone, by Jesus and his followers. As a brief prolegomenon, it will be helpful to look first at Jewish proselyte baptism, which, together with Jewish ritual washings and immersion practices, forms an important backdrop to our discussion of the material on baptism in the Gospels. The essay concludes with several important implications for our understanding of baptism today.

## *Proselyte Baptism*

It is difficult to know when the Jews began to practice proselyte baptism as an initiation rite for Gentile converts to Judaism, so we cannot assume it was a precursor of John's and Christian baptism.<sup>1</sup>

\* Andreas J. Köstenberger received his Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and is Professor of New Testament and Director of Ph.D. Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

<sup>1</sup> See S. McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 82–85, followed by D. Dockery, "Baptism," *DJG*, eds. J. B. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 56; against G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 18–31; and A. Oepke, "*baptō*, *baptizō*," *TDNT* 1:535, who contends that "it is hardly conceivable that the Jewish ritual should be adopted at a time when baptism had become an established religious practice in Christianity" (similarly, H. H. Rowley, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John," in *From Moses to Qumran* [New York: Association Press, 1963], 211–12). On the possible antecedents of Christian baptism, see also G. R. Osborne, "Baptism," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1:257–58; J. Delorme, "The Practice of Baptism in Judaism at the Beginning of the Christian Era," in *Baptism in the New Testament: A Symposium*, trans. D. Askev (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964 [1956]), 25–60; and the essays by B. Chilton, "John the Baptist: His Immersion and His Death," and C. A. Evans, "The Baptism of John in a Typological Context," in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross, JSNTSup 234 (London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 25–44 and 45–71.

It appears that the import of this practice was both purificatory—Gentiles were generally considered to be ritually unclean and in need of purification—and initiatory. Also, proselyte baptism conveyed the notion of a conversion to a new kind of life, which involved the proselyte's acceptance of the "yoke of the Torah."<sup>2</sup> Hence, the initiation represented a commitment, as well as bestowing certain benefits.

Unlike Jewish proselyte baptism of Gentile converts to Judaism, however, John baptized Jews, not Gentiles.<sup>3</sup> Most likely, John's baptism and Jewish proselyte baptism both harken back to Jewish ritual cleansing and bathing practices.<sup>4</sup> This is supported by mishnaic passages such as *m. Pesah.* 8:8 ("If a man became a proselyte on the day before Passover he may immerse himself and consume his Passover-offering in the evening") that discuss proselyte baptism in the context of Levitical cleansing in preparation for the Passover. At Qumran, too, we find ritual washings in the context of repentance and the community's preparation for entering the eschatological community (1QS 3:4–9; 6:14–23; see 4:18–22).<sup>5</sup> Unlike John's baptism, however, these rites were repeated and self-administered.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the early Church's practice of baptism cannot be adequately explained by, or accounted for, by appealing to proselyte baptism as a precedent. Apart from the question of whether or not proselyte baptism predates Christian baptism (which is far from certain), there are important theological distinctions in the way in which baptism was conceived that makes a link

<sup>2</sup> D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (repr. New York: Arno, 1973), 106–13; E. R. Hardy, "Jewish and Christian Baptism: Some Notes and Queries," in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus*, ed. R. H. Fischer (Chicago: Lutheran School of Theology, 1977), 317; G. F. Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1962), 3:334. Note also the Talmud's reference to a baptized proselyte as a newborn child (b. Yebam. 22a). While conversion in Judaism was marked by circumcision, baptism prepared the new convert to offer a sacrifice as the initial act of worship (Dockery, "Baptism," 56).

<sup>3</sup> See Dockery, "Baptism," 56; Witherington, "John the Baptist," DJG 386. Witherington concludes that John considered heredity as an inadequate safeguard from God's coming wrath and that Israel, like the Gentiles, was lost, unless people repented and received God's forgiveness.

<sup>4</sup> See Lev 11–17; Num 19:11–22; see the use of *baptizō* for Jewish ritual washing in Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; see Matt 15:2; John 3:25; Heb 6:2; Sir 34:25 LXX; Jud 12:7 LXX. See McKnight, *Light among the Gentiles*, 82–85.

<sup>5</sup> See L. F. Badia, *The Qumran Baptism and John the Baptist's Baptism* (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1980); Dockery, "Baptism," 56–57. See also B. E. Thiering, "Inner and Outer Cleansing at Qumran as a Background to New Testament Baptism," *NTS* 26 (1980): 266–77.

between these two kinds of baptism tenuous at best and illegitimate at worst.

### *Baptism in the Gospel of Mark*<sup>6</sup>

A significant number of all occurrences of the *bapt-* word group in Mark's Gospel are found in Mark 1:4–9.<sup>7</sup> Mark's conflated quotation of Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3 identifies John the Baptist as God's messenger sent to "prepare the way for the Lord." Mark 1:4 immediately adds that, in keeping with these prophetic passages, "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"<sup>8</sup> (see Acts 19:4).

The references to repentance and the forgiveness of sins make clear that John's baptism is to be understood not merely in terms of ritual purification and religious observance but as essentially *moral* and *ethical*. This, in turn, is set within a prophetic-apocalyptic eschatological framework which contrasts the impending divine judgment with the coming of the Messiah.

In its original context, Isa 40:1–9 calls God's people to prepare Yahweh's way in the wilderness.<sup>9</sup> While not explicitly stated, the

<sup>6</sup> Markan priority (i.e. the notion that Mark wrote his Gospel prior to the other canonical Gospels, including the other so-called Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke) is tentatively assumed in the presentation of this essay, but little in the argument rests on this assumption.

<sup>7</sup> For an investigation of the historicity of Jesus' baptism by John, see R. L. Webb, "Jesus' Baptism: Its Historicity and Implications," posted at [www.ibresearch.com](http://www.ibresearch.com), who concludes that "the baptism of Jesus by John is historically very probable or even virtually certain." See also id., "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 179–229.

<sup>8</sup> Scripture quotations are from the HCSB.

<sup>9</sup> For a full-fledged analysis of the use of Isa 40:3 in John 1:23 see A. J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (ed. D. A. Carson and G. Beale; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming). Compare the use of Isa 40:3 in the DSS (1QS 8:14; 4Q176 frag. 1–2 cols. 6–7; 4Q259 3:4–5), on which see J. H. Charlesworth, "Intertextuality: Isaiah 40:3 and the Serek Ha-Yahad," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning. Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. C. A. Evans and S. Talmon, Biblical Interpretation Series 28 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 197–224; G. J. Brooke, "Isaiah 40:3 and the Wilderness Community," in *New Qumran Texts and Studies*, ed. G. J. Brooke with F. G. Martínez, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 15 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 117–32; S. Metso, "The Use of Old Testament Quotations in the Qumran Community Rule," in *Qumran between the Old and the New Testaments*, ed. F. H. Cryer and T. L. Thompson, JSOTSup 290 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 217–31; and J. C. VanderKam, "The Judean Desert and the Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum*, ed. B. Kollmann, W. Reinbold and A. Steudel, BZNW 97 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1999), 159–71.

probable manner in which this is to be done is by way of repentance. If Yahweh is to return, his people must prepare the way by repenting of their sins that caused them to be led into exile (see Matt 3:8). As Isa 40:1–2 makes clear, God's ultimate purpose for his people is not judgment but salvation. In its original Isaianic context, exodus typology is interwoven with the figure of the coming Servant of the Lord (see esp. Isa 52:13–53:12). The Messiah and his redemption will bring about a new exodus in which God's glory will be revealed.

John's message meets with a large response, and many come from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside to confess their sins and be baptized in the Jordan River. Dressed in the manner of the OT prophet Elijah, John points people to one after him who is more powerful than he and the thongs of whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, one who will baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (1:8; see Joel 2:28–29; Isa 32:15; 44:3).<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee and is baptized by John, with attesting signs of God's approval (1:9). As Jesus is baptized with water by John and the Spirit descends on him (1:10), so he will in turn baptize others with the Holy Spirit in the future. Jesus' baptism is the occasion of a major Trinitarian manifestation, with the Father voicing approval and the Spirit descending on Jesus the Son (1:10–11). It seems that Jesus' baptism signifies his identification with sinful Israel and points to the cross.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On Spirit baptism, with special reference to Pentecostalism, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, SBT 2/15 (London: SCM, 1970). The Holy Spirit is mentioned elsewhere in Mark only in 3:29 (no forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit); 12:36 (David in Ps 110:1 speaking by the Holy Spirit); and 13:11 (the Holy Spirit will speak on believers' behalf in times of persecution). Chilton, "John the Baptist," 25–44, against Webb, *John the Baptizer*, and the vast majority of commentators, denies that John was a prophet, seeing him as a purifier in a Jewish cultic tradition. Chilton holds that the Baptist was killed when Jesus was only a young man (in AD 21), which would render the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism by John unhistorical (against L. Hartman, "Baptism," *ABD* 1:584, who affirms, "That Jesus was baptized by John is historically certain"). C. Evans, "Baptism of John," 45–71, says there is no need to choose between the alternatives presented by Webb and Chilton: the Baptist was both a prophet and a purifier, similar to the Essenes. Chilton's cavalier dismissal of the reliability of the Gospel accounts of John the Baptist cannot be excused, however, nor can it be denied that Jesus' words in Matt 11:13–14 clearly imply that John was a prophet: "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come." What was Elijah if not a prophet?

<sup>11</sup> See J. A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 3:13–17)," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 511–26. The theme of Jesus' identification with Israel is not as explicit in Mark as in Matthew, but it is probably implied.

In essence, then, Mark shows that John's baptism fulfills OT prophecy and prepares people for Jesus' ministry. His baptism in the wilderness of the Jordan has salvation-historical significance, invoking the exodus motif in continuity with passages in Isaiah.<sup>12</sup> The Baptist is presented as a prophet like Elijah, preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>13</sup> In light of the reality and certainty of God's judgment, John called for conversion—a reorientation of one's life, a return to God, and a restoration of one's relationship with him—whereby people's confession of sins resulted in divine forgiveness. As the one who administered baptism, John mediated this forgiveness in a way similar to the priest who performed sacrifices within the context of the OT sacrificial system (e.g., Lev 5:5–10).<sup>14</sup> Also, John's baptism had a purifying function, in keeping with OT and Second Temple notions that immersions were concerned with cleansing from uncleanness.<sup>15</sup>

John's baptism with water is contrasted with baptism with the Holy Spirit, which will be administered by one "more powerful" than he. This characterizes the relationship between John and Jesus both in terms of continuity (both baptize) and discontinuity (literal vs. metaphorical reference to baptism, Jesus mightier). Against the backdrop of references to God's judgment, John's baptism, as well as Jesus' later "baptism," doubtless has an *eschatological* dimension. It marks baptism as an initiatory rite into the "true Israel," the believing remnant. Hence many of John's disciples later became disciples of Jesus (see John 1:35–37), though doubtless there were those who were baptized by John but who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. In contrast to Jewish ritual washings, which were self-administered, John baptized others, which may have given rise to the designation, John "the Baptizer" (see Mark 6:14,24).

<sup>12</sup> See R. L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, JSNTSup 62 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 181–83, 360–66; Hartman, "Baptism," *ABD* 1:584.

<sup>13</sup> On John's prophetic role, see Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet* and id., "Jesus' Baptism," 14–17.

<sup>14</sup> As Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 12, notes, this parallel is all the more striking as the NT indicates that John came from a priestly family (see Luke 1:5,23).

<sup>15</sup> Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 12 and 29 n 62 (with further bibliographic references). References in Jewish intertestamental literature are helpful in that they show the way in which OT injunctions were applied in the centuries surrounding the coming of Christ.

We can now survey references to baptism in the rest of Mark's Gospel. Mark 6:14,24–25 mentions rumors that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead, which results in a flashback to the Baptist's beheading (see Josephus, *Ant.* 18.5.2).<sup>16</sup> In 7:4, the words *baptizō* and *baptismos* are used in the evangelist's explanatory reference to Jewish ceremonial washings (Matt 15:2 has *nīptō*, “wash”; also Luke 11:38). In Mark 8:28, Jesus' disciples state that some think Jesus is John the Baptist (see Mark 6:14; Matt 16:14). Mark 9:13 recounts Jesus' assertion that, in John the Baptist, Elijah has come (see Matt 17:10–13).

Mark 10:38–39 features six occurrences of the *bapt-* word group. Here Jesus speaks of a future “baptism” which he must undergo, namely, the crucifixion. In response to a question by John and James, the sons of Zebedee (a question stemming from their mother, see Matt 20:20–21), asking Jesus for the places on his right and left in the coming kingdom, Jesus asks whether they can drink the “cup” he will drink or be baptized with the “baptism” with which he will be baptized. This seems to be a reference to the painful destiny and physical distress experienced by Jesus, and later by his followers by virtue of their association with him (see Mark 8:34–38), issuing in his crucifixion.<sup>17</sup>

The final reference involving baptism in Mark,<sup>18</sup> which may be designed to provide closure to the theme of baptism in this Gospel by corresponding to the first mention of baptism in 1:4–9, is found in 11:29, where Jesus challenges his opponents to identify the authority behind John's baptism, whether divine or human. The Jews' response reveals people's respect for John as a true prophet of God.<sup>19</sup>

The references to baptism in Mark's Gospel present themselves therefore as follows:

<sup>16</sup> On John's life and death, see Webb, “Jesus' Baptism,” 17–18.

<sup>17</sup> Dockery, “Baptism,” 58.

<sup>18</sup> The reference to baptism in 16:16 is considered to be part of the “longer ending of Mark” which many scholars consider to have been added subsequent to the original publication of the Gospel and will therefore not be considered here. See D. M. Doriani, “Matthew 28:18–20 and the Institution of Baptism,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. G. Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 30, 43–48.

<sup>19</sup> On Chilton's curious denial that John the Baptist was a prophet, see note 8 above.

- (1) 1:4–9: John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance and his baptism of Jesus
- (2) 6:14,24–25: Rumor that Jesus is the Baptist raised from the dead; John’s beheading
- (3) 7:13: Elijah has come in the person of John the Baptist
- (4) 8:28: Some say Jesus is John the Baptist (see 6:14)
- (5) 10:38–39: Jesus’ reference to a future “baptism” he must undergo (his crucifixion)
- (6) 11:30: Jesus’ challenge to the Jews to identify the source of John’s baptism

The presentation of baptism in Mark’s Gospel can be shown to proceed against the backdrop of the following salvation-historical pattern: (1) John’s baptism, in conjunction with his preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, fulfills OT prophecy in preparing the way for the Messiah (1:4–8); (2) Jesus is baptized by John and attested as God’s Son by the Father and the Spirit (1:9); (3) John is martyred (6:24–25); (4) Jesus speaks of the “baptism” of his crucifixion (10:38–39); and (5) Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:9). Hence the Gospel begins with Jesus’ literal, water baptism by John and concludes with Jesus’ metaphorical “baptism” at the cross, with the Spirit baptism still in the future. Jesus is the one greater than John: the Baptist’s ministry is concluded, while Jesus is the future Baptizer; the Baptist is a true prophet of God (11:30–33), while Jesus is the true Messiah and Son of God (1:1,11; 9:7; 15:39). The underlying symbolism of the Baptist’s baptism is that of cleansing from sin and of spiritual renewal. Mark does little to flesh out the meaning of the future baptism with the Holy Spirit, although baptism with the Holy Spirit seems presupposed in the eschatological reference to the Holy Spirit aiding persecuted believers in the future (13:11).

### *Baptism in the Gospel of Matthew*

About half of the references to the *bapt-* word group in Matthew occur in the account of the beginnings of John the Baptist’s ministry in Matt 3:1–16. In addition to John’s call for repentance, the

Matthean account makes specific reference to John's preaching of the nearness of the "kingdom of heaven" (Matt 3:2). While restructured (e.g., in Matthew the Isa 40:3 quote follows John's message rather than preceding it as in Mark's account), John's Elijah-like appearance and people's response are recorded in terms virtually identical with Mark.

In a major addition to Mark, Matthew in 3:7–10 recounts Jesus' denunciation of the Jews' ethnic presumption upon their Abrahamic descent, threatening God's imminent judgment.<sup>20</sup> As does Mark, Matthew includes John's reference to one more powerful than he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, though Matthew (see Luke 3:16) also adds the phrase "and fire" (Matt 3:11). In keeping with both the preceding and subsequent contexts, "fire" here probably serves as an emblem of God's judgment (see Matt 5:22; 7:19; 13:40,42,50; 18:8–9; 25:41), which is conveyed by strongly apocalyptic language (see Matt 3:10,12, neither of which are found in Mark; see Dan 7:10; Rev 20:10).<sup>21</sup> Jesus' reference to his future "baptism" in the context of

<sup>20</sup> This is part of a tradition Matthew shares with Luke (see Luke 3:7–9).

<sup>21</sup> See Isa 4:4, which speaks of a "washing away" of filth from Jerusalem by a "spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire" (cited in Dockery, "Baptism," 55); and Mal 3:2–3, which speaks of the day of the Lord's coming as that of "a refiner's fire" for the purpose of purification resulting in offerings presented to the Lord in righteousness. See also the Qumran references cited in the introduction above. I. H. Marshall, "The meaning of the verb 'to baptize,'" *EQ* 45 (1973): 130–40, citing Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, esp. 8–10, notes several apocalyptic passages where fire and water imagery is merged (Dan 7:10; Rev 19:20; 20:10,14; 21:8; 4 Esdr 13:10–11; Sib Or 2.196–205; 1QH 3:29–32), in the context of judgment. He also points out that Spirit and water are related in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 3:7–9; 4:20–21; 1QH 7:6–7; 17:26) and elsewhere (including John's Gospel: 7:38–39; see also Acts 2:33; 10:45), conceiving of the Spirit in liquid terms. In light of this apocalyptic background and the Spirit-water symbolism, Marshall concludes that the mode of NT baptism may be affusion rather than immersion, the emphasis being on the result of drenching and outpouring from above rather than on the mode of immersion in a stream or baptistry. However, Marshall fails to note that *baptizō*, as an intensive form of *baptō*, which clearly means "to dip," most likely also refers to immersion. He also fails to note passages in the LXX where *baptizō* indisputably conveys the notion of immersion (e.g., Naaman's "dipping himself" seven times in the Jordan, 2 Kgs 5:14; *ebaptisanto*) and does not consider the references to Jesus' "coming up out of the water" in Matt 3:16 par. Mark 1:10, which also strongly suggest immersion (see also Barn. 11:11; see Did. 7). In the updated version of his article, "The Meaning of the Verb 'Baptize,'" in *Dimensions of Baptism*, 8–24, Marshall adds (20 n 36) interaction with Webb, *John the Baptizer*, 179–81, who notes that baptism was performed in a river and that Jesus came up out of it but Marshall contends, in a case of special pleading, that "granted that the candidate went into the water, does the verb require that there was a total immersion rather than a total wetting by affusion?" Curiously, he cites J. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989), 142, for support, even though Nolland, by Marshall's own acknowledgment, believes the mode of John's baptism

“fire” in Luke 12:50 (see Luke 12:49) suggests that before baptizing others in this way, he must first undergo the “baptism” himself.<sup>22</sup>

In his narrative of Jesus’ baptism by John, Matthew includes the account of John’s initial objection and Jesus’ encouragement that he proceed “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15), a major Matthean theme especially in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:6,10,20; 6:1,33; 21:32).<sup>23</sup> This is another way of saying that God’s plan of salvation and of sending the Messiah included Jesus’ baptism by the one who was sent to prepare the way for him. While the Messiah does not share with others baptized by John the need for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, he voluntarily subjects himself to this rite as part of his identification with humanity and of his role as Savior of humankind.

The next major pericope involving a reference to John the Baptist (not included in Mark) is found in Matt 11:1–19. From prison, and upon hearing what the Messiah is doing, the Baptist sends disciples to Jesus asking him whether or not he is “the one who was to come” (Matt 11:2–3). Jesus responds indirectly, intimating by his use of Isaianic messianic language that he did indeed perform the works of, and thus was, the Messiah (see Isa 35:4–6; 61:1). Jesus then uses the occasion to instruct the crowd about John’s significance as a prophet, calling him “more than a prophet” (Matt 11:9). Citing Mal 3:1 (and hence providing the second part of Mark’s double quotation in Mark 1:2–3; the first part is found in Matt 3:3), Jesus affirms that John is the greatest of all OT prophets, “for all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John” (Matt 11:13). In addition, he is “the Elijah who was to come” (Matt 11:14; see Mark 9:13; see also Matt 3:4 and esp. 17:11–13).

Whether with John or with Jesus, people always find something to criticize; yet both fulfilled their ministries in keeping with the

was probably immersion. See also the critique of Marshall’s view by C. Bennema, “Spirit-Baptism in the Fourth Gospel: A Messianic Reading of John 1,33,” *Bib* 84 (2003): 37–38.

<sup>22</sup> See J. D. G. Dunn, “The Birth of a Metaphor—Baptized in Spirit,” *ExpTim* 89 (1978): 134–38, 173–75, and the discussion of Luke 12:50 below.

<sup>23</sup> See B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought*, SNTSMS 41 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980). Hartman, “Baptism,” *ABD* 1:585, suggests that Jesus’ baptism served as a model for believers, citing Matt 5:9,20,45; 28:19–20.

wisdom and predetermined plan of God (Matt 11:10–19). Jesus defends the Baptist and aligns his ministry with his. While both face opposition, they both pursue and fulfill God's redemptive mission and purpose. In this mission, John's baptism of repentance has an important part, yet it does so within the larger context of his mission of pointing to Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, and as part of his preparation of the way for him. Once Jesus' messianic mission has begun to unfold, the Baptist's mission is close to being accomplished, and his baptism likewise has now fulfilled its temporary salvation-historical purpose and has become all but obsolete.

The account of the Baptist's death in Matt 14:1–12 parallels Mark 6:14–29 fairly closely, though it is less detailed than the Markan passage. The present account complements the just-discussed pericope, Matt 11:1–19, where Jesus, in response to the imprisoned John's apparent doubts regarding Jesus' messianic mission, elaborates on John's significance in light of people's misunderstanding and opposition. Now the Baptist's courageous preaching of righteousness (see Matt 14:4) issues in his beheading by Herod Antipas.

The Baptist's demise is thus part of the "misunderstanding" and "rejection" themes which encompass people's responses to both the Baptist's and Jesus' ministries. This is further underscored by Jesus' disciples' comment in Matt 16:14 that some think Jesus is John the Baptist (presumably raised from the dead; see Matt 14:1; see Mark 6:14) and is made even more clear by Jesus' clarification that "Elijah has already come, and they didn't recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." (Matt 17:12). The teachers of the Law insisted that Elijah had to come first (presumably on the basis of passages such as Mal 3:1–2), so that the time had not yet come for the Messiah to make his appearance. Jesus here makes clear that Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist. Hence, the Jews' rejection of God's plan, both with regard to the roles of the Baptist and of Jesus, was groundless.

Remarkably, and for no obvious reason, both references to Jesus' future "baptism" in Mark 10:38–39 are not included in the parallel account in Matt 20:22–23. Matthew's account of the leaders' chal-

lenge of Jesus' authority and his counter-challenge with regard to the source of John the Baptist's authority in Matt 27:23–27, on the other hand, closely parallels Mark 11:27–33 (see also Luke 20:1–8). Again, Jesus stands in solidarity with John and links his mission to that of the Baptist with regard to their joint divine source of authority and purpose.

The final reference to baptism in Matthew is in the “Great Commission” passage in Matt 28:18–20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.<sup>24</sup>

The passage is intricately interwoven with the Gospel as a whole,<sup>25</sup> which strongly supports the notion that the evangelist wrote the account of the “Great Commission” himself rather than taking it over as a whole from another source.<sup>26</sup>

Some significance is often attributed to the genre of this section. Rather than dealing with this issue in terms of competing, mutually exclusive options, we may detect elements of enthronement, covenant renewal, and commissioning.<sup>27</sup> In an echo of Dan 7:14, Jesus is portrayed as the exalted eschatological ruler of the world's

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the plethora of treatments of this passage, see the detailed bibliography in D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1995), 878–80; and C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 715–21; also G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM, 1963), 131–37.

<sup>25</sup> See O. S. Brooks, “Matthew xxviii 16–20 and the Design of the First Gospel,” *JSNT* 10 (1981): 2–18; D. P. Scaer, “The Relation of Matthew 28:16–20 to the Rest of the Gospel,” *CTQ* 55 (1991): 245–66.

<sup>26</sup> See J. D. Kingsbury, “The Composition and Christology of Matt 28:16–20,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 573–74; A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948), 801: “the ending of the first Gospel [is] . . . written by Mt.”; G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to St Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 48–49; and D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 57, who calls this the “most Matthean” pericope in the entire Gospel. See also J. LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to ‘All Nations’ in the Light of Matthew’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 235–47, whose chapter on the “Great Commission” is given almost entirely to a discussion and defense of the passage's authenticity.

<sup>27</sup> See P. T. O'Brien, “The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20: A Missionary Mandate or Not?” *RTR* 35 (1976): 66–71.

kingdoms (enthronement);<sup>28</sup> by assuring the disciples of his continuing presence, Jesus reaffirms his covenant with them (covenant renewal); and, reminiscent of OT commissioning narratives, Jesus issues to his followers his final charge (commissioning).<sup>29</sup> In the end, it is not any particular genre, or even a combination of these, that accurately describes Matthew's final pericope. The evangelist rather brings his own Gospel to his own intended conclusion.<sup>30</sup>

The commission is predicated upon the giving of "all authority . . . in heaven and on earth" to Jesus by the Father (Matt 28:18; an instance of the "divine passive").<sup>31</sup> Jesus' authority is comprehensive ("all"). In context, it may be inferred that the authority given to Jesus pertains to his mission, to be carried out through the disciples as his emissaries, on the basis of his word. The image in mind here may be that of a victorious military general who assures his followers of his unlimited authority.<sup>32</sup>

On this basis, Jesus' disciples are to "go . . . and make disciples." The aorist participle "go" (*poreuthentes*) modifies the aorist impera-

<sup>28</sup> This is suggested by O. Michel, "The Conclusion of Matthew's Gospel: A Contribution to the History of the Easter Message," in G. Stanton, ed., *The Interpretation of Matthew*, IRT 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 36 and adopted, among others, by Bornkamm, Barth and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, 133–34. T. L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Typology*, JSNTSS 8 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 181–88 contends that many important features of Dan 7:13–14 are missing in Matt 28:16–20: the coming on the clouds of heaven, the terms *basileia*, *doxa*, and the term "Son of Man" itself. He prefers to view the mountain setting, the terms *edothē*, *exousia*, and "Son" Christology as pointers to a background of a Zion eschatology.

<sup>29</sup> Note, however, that this commissioning is given to a group rather than to individuals as in OT narratives.

<sup>30</sup> See D. J. Bosch, "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16–20," in W. R. Shenk, ed., *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 222: "we have here a pericope which is *sui generis* and eludes the labels of form criticism."

<sup>31</sup> A. McNicol, "Discipleship as Mission: A Missing Dimension in Contemporary Discussion on Matthew 28:18–20," *Christian Studies* 10 (1989): 37, plausibly suggests that Matt 28:18–20, the last unit in Matthew, echoes 2 Chr 36:22–23, the last unit in the Hebrew Bible. LaGrand, *Earliest Christian Mission*, 238, referring to K. Barth, "An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16–20," in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1961), 56, considers Matt 28:18b "the decisive fulfillment of 10.23."

<sup>32</sup> See P. Borgen, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 59–60. Also K. L. Sparks, "Gospel as Conquest: Mosaic Typology in Matthew 28:16–20," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 651–63, who notes the contrast between Moses and Joshua, who upon entering the Promised Land were instructed to *conquer by killing* the Canaanites, and Jesus, whose vision was that of *converting* the Canaanites (Matt 15:21–28), and in fact all the nations (including believing Jews).

tive “make disciples” (*mathēteusate*)<sup>33</sup> as an auxiliary reinforcing the action of the main verb.<sup>34</sup> Jesus’ followers must “go” in order to “make disciples.” “All the nations” includes Israel.<sup>35</sup> The two present participles “baptizing” (*baptizontes*) and “teaching” (*didaskontes*) specify the manner in which disciples are to be made.<sup>36</sup> In both cases, further qualifiers are given. Baptism is to be administered in (*eis*, lit. “into”) the name (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one of the most explicit Trinitarian formulas in the entire NT.<sup>37</sup>

In light of the fact that the early church is shown to have baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (*Iēsou Christou*; Acts 2:38; 10:48) or “the Lord Jesus” (*kuriou Iēsou*; Acts 8:16; 19:5) and Paul refers merely to baptism in the name of Christ (*Christon [Iēsou]*; Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3), the question arises whether this formulation reflects later baptismal practice. If Matthew was written prior to AD 70, however, there is hardly enough time for a Trinitarian practice of baptism to evolve if this was not already taught by Jesus himself as Matthew’s Gospel indicates. It appears more likely that the early church felt no contradiction between Jesus’ command to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and its practice of baptizing in the name of Jesus, since the latter implied the former.

Regarding teaching, the disciples are enjoined to teach others “to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20a; see Deut 4:1; 6:1). This charge indicates that mission entails the nurturing of

<sup>33</sup> The term occurs elsewhere only in 13:52; 27:57; and Acts 14:21.

<sup>34</sup> See 2:8; 9:13; 10:7; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7; see also 2:13,20; 5:24; 6:6; 9:6,18; 10:12; 21:2; 22:13. See Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, 184; O’Brien, “Great Commission,” 72–73. Note that the present construction (preceding participle + imperative) occurs seventeen times in Matthew, only once in Mark, twenty-nine times in Luke/Acts, four times each in the Pauline and Petrine corpus, and once each in Hebrews and Jude; it does not occur at all in the Johannine writings. The occurrence of the construction in Mark 16:15 suggests assimilation to Matt 28:19. See C. Rogers, “The Great Commission,” *BibSac* 130 (1973): 258–67.

<sup>35</sup> See 24:9,14; 25:32; see 21:43. The phrase “all the nations” (*panta ta ethnē*) also appears in Gen 18:18 LXX and 22:18 LXX (see Gen 12:3 LXX).

<sup>36</sup> Doriani, “Matthew 28:18–20,” 36–37, distinguishes between three options of taking the participles, modal (manner), means, and imperatival, though by his own acknowledgment “there is some truth in each of these views” (p. 37), so that it is probably better to view manner/means and imperative jointly as implications inherent in the participial forms.

<sup>37</sup> On the use of the preposition *eis* with reference to baptism in the NT, see R. E. Averbeck, “The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament,” *GTJ* 2/2 (Fall 1981): 267–68.

converts into the full obedience of faith, not merely the initial proclamation of the gospel. This was perhaps most admirably carried out by the apostle Paul, whose ambition it was to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Finally, as the church discipled the nations, it is assured of its risen Lord’s continued spiritual presence until his bodily return: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:20b; see Deut 31:6).

Jesus’ command to his followers to make disciples of all nations and to baptize and teach them clearly presupposes that the recipients of baptism and teaching are of sufficient age and maturity that they can consciously choose to be baptized and be instructed in the principles of the Christian faith. Even advocates of infant baptism such as Daniel Doriani acknowledge that “doubtless, the conversion of adults is on Jesus’ mind in 28:18–20.”<sup>38</sup> Doriani proceeds to assert, however, that “combined with the faith of an adult convert, or with the faith of parents in the case of an infant, baptism both signifies and mediates a relationship with Jesus.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, Doriani claims that not only is there nothing in Matthew that “excludes children from discipleship and baptism,” but in fact “baptism is a valuable means for discipling children,” since “God in his grace can regenerate a child from the earliest age, even in conjunction with baptism itself” (!), and “wise parents tell their children about their baptism, perhaps on the occasion of an infant baptism in the church.”<sup>40</sup>

Doriani’s view is problematic for several reasons, however. First, his assertion that baptism mediates a relationship with Jesus “combined . . . with the faith of parents in the case of an infant” is without basis in the text of Matt 28:18–20. Rather, it is clear that potential converts must respond, by way of repentance and faith in Christ, *personally*, not “combined” with the faith of another person. Infants are unable to repent or exercise personal faith in Christ in any meaningful sense and should therefore not be the subject of baptism judged by Jesus’ “Great Commission.”

<sup>38</sup> Doriani, “Matthew 28:18–20,” 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

For this reason also, second, Doriani's assertion that "God in his grace can regenerate a child from the earliest age, even in conjunction with baptism itself," is precarious at several levels. Since regeneration occurs upon personal repentance and faith in Christ (e.g., John 1:12–13; 3:3–8; Tit 3:5), and since, as has just been stated, infants are incapable of exercising personal repentance and faith, how can "a child from the earliest age" be regenerated? Judging by the teaching of Scripture, this seems to be impossible. Moreover, to speak, as Doriani does, of regeneration "even in conjunction with baptism itself" seems to point to baptismal regeneration, which clearly runs counter to biblical teaching (though a critique of this notion is beyond the scope of the present essay).

Third, to present baptism as a "valuable means for discipling children" also runs counter to the Matthean "Great Commission" passage, where baptism is presented as a corollary of Christian discipleship, not a teaching tool for children in hindsight looking back at their baptism as infants. This is clearly a revisionist view of Christian baptism that does not flow from textual exegesis but imports a rationale that is foreign to the text itself. It would seem to be more appropriate to wait until a person is able to exercise personal repentance and faith and then to instruct him or her about the meaning of baptism and subsequently to baptize them.

Finally, regarding Doriani's point that nothing in Matthew "excludes children from discipleship and baptism" (an argument from silence), it may be responded that there is equally nothing in Matthew that suggests that infants ought to be baptized or are capable of conversion. Moreover, a big part of the problem of Doriani's argument is that he fails clearly to distinguish between infants and older children. Jesus' invitation for children to come to him (Matt 19:13–15 pars.), for instance, clearly implies that these children were old enough to walk and on some level able to respond to him.<sup>41</sup> Even so, there is no mention of baptism in that passage, so that it seems questionable to use this reference to support the notion of infant baptism. While a ten year-old child, for example, may be capable of

<sup>41</sup> In the Lukan parallel the children are brought to Jesus, but see the note below as to why such does not establish the case for infant baptism.

responding to the gospel by way of repentance and faith, and hence could legitimately request baptism, this would seem to be precluded in the case of a six month-old infant. For these reasons we conclude, against Doriani, that an argument for infant baptism cannot be sustained from the Matthean “Great Commission” passage.<sup>42</sup>

In comparison with Mark, Matthew’s references to baptism and the Baptist, then, are as follows:

Mk 1:4–9: John’s baptism, b. of Jesus	Mt 3:1–16: John’s baptism, b. of Jesus
—	Mt 11:11–12: John’s greatness
Mk 6:14,24–25: John’s beheading	Mt 14:1–8: John’s beheading
Mk 8:28: Jesus = John the Baptist?	Mt 16:14: Jesus = John the B?
Mk 9:13: Elijah has come	Mt 17:13: The Baptist is Elijah
Mk 10:38–39: Jesus’ future “baptism”	[Mt 20:22–23: “baptism” not included]
Mk 11:30: Source of John’s baptism	Mt 21:25: Source of John’s baptism
—	Mt 28:16–20: “Great Commission”

The above chart indicates that Matthew includes all of Mark’s passages, with the partial exception of the reference to Jesus’ future “baptism” in Mark 10:38–39 (see Matt 20:22–23). In addition, Matthew contains two additional important references, Jesus’ teaching regarding John’s greatness (Matt 11:11–12; also in Luke) and the “Great Commission” (Matt 28:16–20; see Luke 24:44). These are significant additions indeed, providing more material on John the Baptist’s role within the larger context of salvation history and the risen Lord’s command for his followers to disciple the nations, bap-

<sup>42</sup> Douglas Wilson claims that infants should be baptized because they are members of Christ’s kingdom (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:15–16). See *To a Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996), 16–17. The argument here is remarkably weak. First, it should be noted that the text says nothing about baptism. Second, if we were to follow Wilson’s argument then all infants should be baptized, not only the children of believers. Wilson smuggles in from his own theology the idea that Jesus speaks here only of the children of believers. But this is not what the text says. Jesus says that the kingdom belongs to children in general, not merely children of believers. Third, Wilson misinterprets what Jesus teaches here. Jesus does not say that children are members of the kingdom here. Carson rightly says Jesus encourages the children to come to him “not because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them, but because the kingdom of heaven belongs to those like them (so also Mark and Luke, stressing childlike faith).” See D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *EBC*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:420.

tizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and teaching them to obey all of Jesus' commands.

### *Baptism in the Gospel of Luke*

As in the other Synoptic Gospels, the account of John the Baptist's ministry and of his baptism of Jesus is a foundational passage in Luke (3:1–22). As in Matthew, Luke identifies John's baptism as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3) and recounts the Baptist's denunciation of people's presumption upon their Abrahamic descent (Luke 3:7–9). In addition to Matthew, Luke provides examples of what repentance meant in practical terms for the crowds, tax-collectors, and soldiers baptized by John (Luke 3:10–14). Also in addition to Matthew, Luke explicitly acknowledges that many were wondering if John could be the Messiah (Luke 3:15). In response, Luke recounts the Baptist's message in terms identical to Matthew (Luke 3:16–18; see Acts 1:5).<sup>43</sup>

As does Matthew (11:2–19), Luke also records the inquiry of John's disciples concerning whether or not Jesus was the Messiah (7:18–35). Overall, Luke's and Matthew's accounts resemble each other very closely, except for one additional parenthetical statement made by Luke in vv. 29–30: "And when all the people, including the tax collectors, heard this, they acknowledged God's way of righteousness, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But since the Pharisees and experts in the law had not been baptized by him, they rejected the plan of God for themselves." By this statement Luke connects the present with the earlier account of tax-collectors being baptized by John the Baptist in Luke 3:12–14 (see above), contrasting their openness to the ways of God with the obduracy of Israel's religious leaders. Once again, this underscores the connection between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

<sup>43</sup> R. J. Erickson, "The Jailing of John and the Baptism of Jesus: Luke 3:19–21," *JETS* 36 (1993): 455–66, claims that Luke's reference to the Baptist's imprisonment in 3:19–20 even prior to Jesus' baptism by John (see Mark 1:14) is evidence of Luke's "antibaptistic polemic" (466). More likely, however, the order "represents a literary preference to present John and then focus on Jesus" (D. L. Bock, *Luke*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 1:327).

Tax-collectors' receptivity to Jesus' ministry and the Jewish leaders' opposition to it thus find precursors in the identical attitudes of these groups toward the ministry of John the Baptist.

As do the other Synoptists, Luke records Jesus' disciples' acknowledgment that some regarded Jesus as (the raised) John the Baptist (Luke 9:19; cp. Matt 16:14; Mark 8:28). Luke also notes a Pharisee's surprise when he sees that Jesus did not "wash" (*baptizō*) before the meal (Luke 11:38; cp. Matt 15:2; Mark 7:5).

As does Mark (though not Matthew), although in a different context (Mark 10:38–39; see Matt 20:22–23), Luke records Jesus speaking about a future "baptism" he must undergo (Luke 12:50), indicating that Jesus may have spoken of this subject repeatedly. Again the context is judgment: Jesus has come "to bring fire on the earth," and has come, not to bring peace on earth, but division (Luke 12:49,51; cp. Matt 10:34,36). This suggests that the "baptism" includes the persecution issuing in Jesus' crucifixion interpreted as part of an eschatological tribulation.<sup>44</sup> As Bock states, Jesus "faces a period of being uniquely inundated with God's judgment" (Ps 18:4,16; 42:7; 69:1–2; Isa 8:7–8; 30:27–28; Jonah 2:3–6), and only subsequent to this "baptism" can God's plan and the coming of the Spirit's judging work of fire proceed.<sup>45</sup>

The sole reference involving the use of *baptō* in Luke's Gospel speaks of Lazarus "dipping" the tip of his finger in water in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:24). The final reference to baptism in Luke is found in the context of Jesus' familiar challenge for his opponents to identify the authority behind John's baptism (Luke 20:4; see Mark 11:30; Matt 21:25).

The following chart provides a comparison between Luke's treatment of baptism and John the Baptist's ministry and the treatments in Mark and Matthew:

<sup>44</sup> Dockery, "Baptism," 58. It is also possible, as W. F. Flemington, "Baptism," *IDB* 1:349, suggests, that a parallelism is intended between Jesus' first baptism (by John), which inaugurated his ministry in Palestine, and Jesus' "baptism" by crucifixion, which "inaugurated a wider ministry, unfettered by the limitations of the earthly mission." This would be similar in import to Jesus' reference to his disciples' "greater works" in John 14:12.

<sup>45</sup> See Bock, *Luke*, 2:1193–94, with reference to Creed, Plummer, and Oepke.

Mk 1:4–9/Mt 3:1–16: John’s b., b. of Jesus	Lk 3:1–22: John’s b., b. of Jesus
— /Mt 11:11–12: John’s greatness	Luke 7:18–35: John’s greatness
Mk 6:14–25/Mt 14:1–8: John’s beheading	— (cp. Lk 3:19–20)
Mk 8:28/Mt 16:14: Jesus = John the Baptist?	Lk 9:19: Jesus = John the Baptist?
Mk 9:13/Mt 17:13: The Baptist is Elijah	—
Mk 10:38–39 (cp. Mt 20:22–23): Jesus’ “b.”	cp. Luke 12:50: Jesus’ future “b.”
Mk 11:30/Mt 21:25: Source of John’s b.	Lk 20:24: Source of John’s b.
— /Mt 28:16–20: “Great Commission”	— (cp. Lk 24:44)

Overall, Luke’s treatment is comparable and quite similar to that of the other Synoptic writers. On the one hand, Luke does not include the account (quite extensive especially in Mark) of John’s beheading or the identification of the Baptist with Elijah (Mark 9:13/Matt 17:13). He also does not have anything comparable to the statement in Matthew’s “Great Commission” passage involving baptism (though see Luke 24:44). On the other hand, Luke has an equivalent statement to Mark 10:38–39 speaking of Jesus’ future “baptism” (Luke 12:50).<sup>46</sup> Also, Luke, like Matthew (11:11–12), includes Jesus’ discussion of the Baptist’s greatness (Luke 7:18–35). Luke appears to be less interested in the Baptist’s fate subsequent to his imprisonment and seems to have no special interest in baptism, marking out Matt 28:16–20 as a truly exceptional passage on baptism in the Synoptic corpus.

### Baptism in the Gospel of John

John uniformly uses the term *baptizō* with reference to baptism.<sup>47</sup> His usage is limited to three pericopes.<sup>48</sup> The first, similar to the

<sup>46</sup> The reference to baptism is absent in the Matthean parallel in Matt 20:22–23.

<sup>47</sup> John does not use the nouns *baptisma/mos* or *baptistēs*. There are also two references to *baptō* (“dip”) in John 13:26.

<sup>48</sup> Against Hartman, “Baptism,” *ABD* 1:592; H. Mueller, “Baptism (in the Bible),” *NCE* 2:56; and many Church Fathers, the reference to being born of water and spirit in John 3:5 most likely does not refer to baptism, which would not have been a meaningful subject for Jesus to discuss with Nicodemus. See A. J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 123, n. 26. For a survey, see J. E. Morgan-Wynne, “References to Baptism in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, ed. S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross, JSNTSup 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 116–35, esp. 116–21; also the essay in the same volume by J. R. Michaels, “Baptism and Conversion in John: A Particular Baptist Reading,” 136–56.

Synoptics, concerns the Baptist's ministry of baptism (John 1:25–33). In this passage, the Pharisees challenge John to explain why he baptized if he was not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet (John 1:25). This seems to imply that for a recognized end-time figure such as the three personages just mentioned, it would have been considered legitimate, if not expected, to engage in a ministry of baptism. The objection in the Baptist's case was that they did not see him as a figure clearly related to OT expectation.

In John 1:26,33, John acknowledges that he baptized with water but that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. This is similar to the Synoptics, except that John's Gospel does not include the reference to baptism by "fire" (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). John's Gospel explicitly states that the reason for John's baptism was that the Messiah "might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:31). Hence John's baptism was not an end in itself but had a Christological orientation. Likewise, repentance or works in keeping with it were not the ultimate goal, but rather people's preparation for the Messiah. More explicitly than the Synoptics, John draws a connection between the Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism and Jesus' future baptizing of others with the same Spirit (John 1:32–34).<sup>49</sup>

The second reference to baptism in John's Gospel intriguingly speaks of an overlapping period prior to John's imprisonment (John 3:24) in which both the Baptist and Jesus (or rather, Jesus' disciples; John 4:2) were engaged in ministries involving baptism.<sup>50</sup> John 3:23

<sup>49</sup> Bennema, "Spirit-Baptism in the Fourth Gospel," 35–60, esp. 39, contends that the focus of John 1:33 is not on the Spirit as a future gift bestowed by Jesus on others but on the Spirit as the means by which the Messiah will act toward Israel by way of "cleansing through revelation" (p. 53). However, this is rendered unlikely by the Synoptic parallels (and Acts 1–2) and the acknowledgment in John's Gospel that the giving of the Spirit had to await the period subsequent to Jesus' exaltation (John 7:39; see 20:22). The same critique also applies to A. W. D. Hui, "John the Baptist and Spirit-Baptism," *EQ* 71 (1999): 99–115, who claims that "John did not expect [that] the Coming One would bestow the Holy Spirit upon his followers."

<sup>50</sup> Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 21–22, with reference to Murphy-O'Connor and R. E. Brown, suggests that Jesus, subsequent to his baptism by John, "probably remained with him for some time in the role of disciple" and later, "in alignment and participation with John and his movement, . . . also engaged in a baptizing ministry near John. Although he was still a disciple of John, Jesus perhaps should be viewed at this point as John's right-hand man or protégé." Indeed, Mark 1:14 reports that Jesus' Galilean ministry commenced once John was put in prison. The public's difficulty in sorting out the relationship between John and Jesus (e.g., Matt 16:14; Mark 6:14), too, may point in this direction. On the other hand, according to John 3:22 and

places Jesus and his disciples in the Judean countryside, administering baptism, subsequent to Jesus' attendance of the Passover in Jerusalem. John, too, was baptizing at Aenon near Salim (John 3:23). In light of the absence of references to baptism later on in any of the Gospels, it appears that the baptizing activity of Jesus and his disciples is limited to the early stages of Jesus' ministry. This marks off John's baptism as operating within the framework of OT expectations of righteousness in contrast to the early Church, which administered baptism in obedience to Jesus' command as a rite of initiation into the new messianic community.<sup>51</sup>

Upon hearing of Jesus' baptizing activity, John's disciples were concerned about Jesus' success and approached the Baptist (John 3:26). From their question, it is apparent that Jesus already had a large following. The Baptist, in a probable allusion to Mal 3:2, acknowledged that he was not the Messiah, but that he was "sent ahead" of him, and that his attitude was like that of the friend of the bridegroom, who shared in the latter's joy (John 3:27–29): "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30). As John 4:1–2 makes clear, this had in fact begun to take place. The reference to Jesus "making and baptizing more disciples" than John reflects the pattern described in the Matthean "Great Commission," indicating that baptism signaled the conversion and commitment to a new kind of lifestyle and discipleship.

The final reference to the Baptist in John's Gospel finds Jesus returning to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Many came to Jesus there, saying that while John never performed any signs, all that he said about Jesus was true (10:40–41). This is in keeping with the fourth evangelist's consistent portrait of the Baptist first and foremost as a witness to Jesus, whose testimony was both true and of

4:1, Jesus engaged in a separate and distinct ministry, including baptism, already prior to John's imprisonment (see 3:24), and there is little indication in these texts that Jesus served as John's "right-hand man or protégé." Apparently he had begun his own ministry after his baptism by John, with John continuing his own ministry until his imprisonment.

<sup>51</sup> See Dockery, "Baptism," 57. It is unclear whether the Eleven, or other followers of Jesus during his earthly ministry, were (re)baptized subsequent to the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, though this may be suggested by John 19:1–7. Clearly, water baptism, as a sign of repentance, was mandated for the recipients of Peter's Pentecost message, which closely links water and Spirit baptism (Acts 2:38).

an abiding nature. Jesus' actual baptism by John, while presupposed, is not actually narrated in John's Gospel. This places John's baptism within a larger messianic framework and marks it as temporary and subservient to the Baptist's larger role as a witness to Jesus.

The references to baptism in John's Gospel indicate that, as in many other respects, the fourth evangelist charts his own course. Apart from the overlap between John 1:25–33 and the Synoptic parallels, John does not include any of the other pericopes involving the Baptist or baptism found in the Synoptics. At the same time, he provides the interesting supplement concerning the overlapping time period of John's and Jesus' baptizing ministries. Though he does feature a final commissioning (John 20:21–23), John does not include baptism in it, as in the Matthean "Great Commission."

### *Summary and Implications*

Relatively few passages in the Gospels mention baptism. Most of these relate to the baptism of John the Baptist, which fulfilled an important, albeit transitional purpose and serve to clarify the role of the Baptist and his baptism with respect to Jesus. The purpose of John's baptism was to prepare the way for the Messiah, Jesus, by calling people to repentance and urging them to perform works in keeping with it in anticipation of the coming of God's kingdom in and through the Messiah.

John's Gospel also speaks of a baptism administered by Jesus (or rather, his disciples) at a time when John, too, still was active in his ministry. There is very little direct evidence available to assess the significance of this baptism in relation to the baptism performed by John the Baptist on the one hand, or to the baptism mandated in the Matthean "Great Commission" passage on the other. Apparently, this baptism belonged to the transitional period between the Baptist's and Jesus' ministries. Reference is also made to a future time when Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (and "fire"), pointing to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost by the exalted Jesus (Acts 2:3; see John 14:26; 15:26; Acts 1:5).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Averbeck, "Focus of Baptism in the New Testament," 289.

The study of the references to baptism in the Gospels yields the following major implications for the Christian understanding of baptism. First, the rite of baptism is *designed for believers who have repented of their sin and have put their faith in God and in his Christ*. Believer's baptism is presupposed by both John's baptism and the Matthean "Great Commission" passage. This does not mean that fairly young people, say, at the age of seven or eight, should be barred from receiving believer's baptism if they have genuinely understood the implications of Christ's death on their behalf and have repented of their sin and placed their faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> However, the Gospels provide no evidence or support for the baptism of infants, nor does the principle of believer's baptism enunciated in the Gospels allow for such a practice.<sup>54</sup> In fact, if (as is sometimes alleged) Jews were predisposed to baptize infants owing to the parallel with circumcision, it is remarkable—in fact, striking—that there is no mention of infant baptism anywhere in Jesus' teaching recorded in the Gospels.

Second, baptism is *an essential part of Christian discipleship*. This is clear from the Matthean "Great Commission" passage, where disciple-making is said to consist of baptizing converts and of teaching them to obey the commands of Jesus (see also John 4:1).<sup>55</sup> An obedient church will take to heart the risen Christ's command to engage in mission and evangelistic preaching, seeking to engender conversions that ensue in baptism, instruction, and Christian growth. On an individual level, those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ and have repented of their sin must be baptized as part of their Christian discipleship. While there may be a period of instruction preceding baptism, no undue obstacle should be placed in the path of a person who is genuinely converted and desirous of baptism.

Third, the *mode* of John's and Jesus' baptism was most likely that of *immersion*.<sup>56</sup> This is suggested by the root meaning of the word

<sup>53</sup> Though not all would agree; space constraints prohibit a full discussion of the issue here.

<sup>54</sup> See A. T. Robertson, "Baptism: Baptist View," *ISBE* 1:417.

<sup>55</sup> See Dockery, "Baptism," 58, who cites Matt 28:19 and John 3:22–24.

<sup>56</sup> See Webb, "Jesus' Baptism," 11, 28 n 46; Beasley-Murray, "Baptism," *NIDNTT* 1:144; A. T. Robertson, "Baptism: Baptist View," *ISBE* 1:416.

*baptō*, “to dip” (e.g., Josh 3:15 LXX; Ruth 2:14 LXX), of which *baptizō*, “to baptize,” is an intensive or frequentative form. It is also indicated by the LXX usage of *baptizō* with reference to immersion (see 2 Kgs 5:14). Another piece of supporting evidence is the statement that Jesus “came up immediately from the water” subsequent to his baptism (Matt 3:16 par. Mark 1:10, *euthus anebē/anabainōn apo/ek tou hudatos*). While there are differences of view as to the way in which baptism by immersion ought to be stipulated in church polity, evidence from the Gospels suggests that this was in fact the NT and early church’s mode of baptism.

Fourth, theologically, *water baptism presupposes spiritual regeneration* as a prevenient and primary work of God in and through the person of the Holy Spirit. This follows plainly from the Baptist’s announcement that the Messiah would baptize people in the Spirit. Thus repentance from sin and faith in Christ, accompanied by regeneration, are logically and chronologically prior to water baptism. This, in turn, puts water baptism in proper perspective. There is no warrant in the Gospels for the notion of baptismal regeneration.<sup>57</sup> There is also no support for viewing baptism as a sacrament, a sacred rite which mediates some sort of special grace to the recipient of baptism by virtue of the intrinsic efficacy of the rite (*ex opere operato*).<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Robertson, “Baptism: Baptist View,” *ISBE* 1:416–17

<sup>58</sup> Against B. Neunheuser, “Baptism,” *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. K. Rahner et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 1:136–44, who cites Tertullian: “Felix sacramentum aquae nostrae.”