

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 7

The Mode of Baptism and the Biblical Text

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How should baptism be done — immersion, sprinkling, or pouring — and can we gain any clarity about this from the biblical text?

This episode of the Naked Bible focuses on the mode of baptism, focusing on the Greek word *baptizo*, frequently translated “baptize” in the New Testament. Is the meaning of this word sufficiently clear to settle the mode issue? Does it matter?

Transcript

Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast. In the last episode of the podcast, I reviewed my view of the meaning of baptism and applied it to adult or believer's baptism. In this episode, I want to focus on the issue of the mode of baptism-- how it's done.

As most listeners know, most churches that baptize infants use sprinkling as the mode, while most that reject infant baptism use immersion (or dipping). The recipients of baptism go under the water once or three times. There's some boundary-crossing in certain circumstances, though, as some Greek Orthodox churches (at least according to what I've read) immerse infants at baptism. Pouring is much less common today, though early in church history it was prevalent, since it seemed more consistent with the "washing" language of several passages connected to baptism. So who's right? For reasons that will become clear, I really don't think it matters at all. Some scholars seek to prove that sprinkling or pouring was the New Testament apostolic practice, on the basis of archaeology and other ancient texts outside the New Testament that talk about the New Testament. For example, baptistries and baptismal fonts known from the fourth or fifth centuries A.D. are much too small for immersing, and so it's argued that this suggests sprinkling or pouring. Pictures in the form of frescoes dating to as early as the 3rd century A.D. depict acts of pouring as the mode of baptism. Textual comments on baptism dating to as early as the 2nd century A.D. also mention pouring and sprinkling as the mode of baptism.

The problem with this sort of testimony is that it cannot answer the mode question conclusively since the evidence is, by definition, incomplete and postdates the New Testament itself. We can't imagine that we have a complete view of the practices of antiquity, since the vast majority of texts and artifacts are lost to history. For this reason, the debate focuses more on the meaning of

baptizo (the word in the New Testament translated "baptize"). So let's talk about that word. *Baptizo* and the related word *bapto* have no technical or ritual signification in classical Greek. In other words, they're not used to denote a specific pagan rite prior to the New Testament era, and so they offer us no specific analogy that the New Testament authors may have had in mind. There were purifying rites in Greek and Roman worship, but they aren't called baptisms. Instead, the Greeks called their purifying rite catharsis and the Romans referred theirs with the word *lustratio*. Sprinkling was the mode in both instances. Jews and Christians later adopted *baptizo* (the word) to denote rites of purification in the Jewish and Christian churches or assemblies, but any connection specifically back to the classical era is uncertain.

Greek lexicons inform us that *bapto* and *baptizo* (prior to Jewish and Christian adoption) meant "to dip into water," "to sink underwater," and "to dye or tinge in a fluid." The word *baptizo* is employed in the Septuagint in contexts that likely speak of immersion, but not inclusively. The word is also used in some contexts that may or may not have immersion in view. I want to hit a few examples.

In 2 Kings 5:14, we read:

¹⁴So [Naaman] went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God [Elisha], and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

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Naaman, of course, was a leper, and he goes down and dips himself in the Jordan seven times. The word "dipped" in the Septuagint is the Greek word *baptizo*. So 2 Kings 5:14 in this translation does a good job using the word "dipped," since the Hebrew word used in the Masoretic text in this place (the actual Hebrew Old Testament) for what Naaman does means "to plunge." It's not the normal word for merely washing. That said, it's possible that the verse means Naaman entered the water seven times and took a bath. He may or may not have immersed himself seven times, but honestly that seems kind of forced. If I were a leper and I was told to bathe in the Jordan, I would make sure that my entire body went in.

The next two instances are from books in the Septuagint not included in the Protestant canon, so they may not be familiar. They're less clear as to what action *baptizo* might mean. You'll see that it may involve immersion, but it likely did not. In Judith 12:7, we read that Judith:

...went out each night into the ravine of Bethulia and bathed at the spring of water.

The word "bathed," of course, is *baptizo*. What did she actually do? Did she dip herself in the spring or did she just wash herself (pour and rub the water over

herself)? We don't know. In Sirach 24:25 (and a footnote here in most recent English translations of the Septuagint, this verse is Sirach 34:30) we read:

When one bathes [*baptizo*] due to a corpse and when one touches it again, what did he gain by his washing?

The verb "washing" at the end is different than the one translated "bathes." The word translated "bathes" is *baptizo*. So again, it's not clear what actions the person is actually performing. So these passages are ambiguous. It's not clear that *baptizo* means immersion or not, though of course it might. On the other hand, there are other uses of the term in the Septuagint that are fairly obviously describing immersion or dipping. For example, in Joshua 3:15, we read about the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant:

¹⁵ and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water...

The word "dipped" there is *bapto*. So the priests are carrying the ark up to the edge of the water and they dip their feet into the water. I would suggest that if you're dipping your foot in water, your foot is going to go under water. It's going to break the water line. So the idea of immersion or dipping is pretty clear here.

Leviticus 11:32 (a ritual purity passage) says:

³² And anything on which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether it is an article of wood or a garment or a skin or a sack, any article that is used for any purpose. It must be put into water [*bapto*], and it shall be unclean until the evening; then it shall be clean.

After it's been "*bapto*-ed" in water, it will be clean. So it would seem that because you want to remove the impurity from whatever object it is that you would put it *all* into the water. I don't think it's quite as clear as Joshua 3:15, but it seems to require complete coverage.

So we can see from these examples that the Greek of the Septuagint isn't always precisely clear as to whether *baptizo* means "immerse." It might, but it also might not. Turning to the New Testament, there are several passages that retain this sort of ambiguity. In other words, at times the context seems to make it clear that *baptizo* likely describes washing but not dipping. There's ambiguity. For example, in Luke 11:38, we're informed that a certain Pharisee:

...noticing that Jesus did not first wash [*baptizo*] before the meal, was surprised.

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It would seem pretty absurd to insist that this Pharisee expected Jesus to be fully immersed in water before he ate meals. It's far more coherent to presume that the Pharisee's irritation with Jesus derived from observing that Jesus didn't ritually wash his hands before eating. That would be an expectation in keeping with the ceremony referred to in Matthew 15:2 and Mark 7:3-4, which most probably involved having water poured over the hands. This practice is also alluded to in 2 Kings 3:11 and Luke 7:44. Another passage that relates to the same issue is Mark 7:4. There we read:

⁴and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.

Baptizo is the verb translated "wash." Again, it makes little sense to see this as people immersing themselves before eating meals whenever they come home from the market. The washing of the hands is just much more logical.

Now those who argue immersion is the necessary mode rely heavily on Romans 6:3-6. This passage describes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In verses 3-4 we read:

³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

The argument is that this picture (death, burial, and being raised to new life) must inform the meaning of the word *baptizo* used in the passage. This imagery (so the argument goes) can only be accomplished by the act of immersing a person in the water of baptism and then pulling them out. In other words, those who insist on immersion focus on a presumed motion involved in the term *baptizo*. That is, they define the term by presuming that the motion involved in the verb drives the meaning. Baptists, of course, are known for insisting on immersion, and the above logic makes sense if one presumes that motion is the point of the verb. But that actually isn't certain. There are some problems with the use of this passage and getting the meaning of the verb from this idea. First, it isn't even clear that Romans 6:3-6 has anything to do with water baptism at all. The passage never mentions water. It talks about being baptized into Jesus' death. Now it's interesting that Catholics and Lutherans, for example, also presume that water baptism is in view in Romans 6, and so they base their respective views about the relationship of baptism and salvation on this passage. But water is never mentioned. Paul could very simply be using a word found in the Septuagint (as we've seen) that speaks of washing, and then using it here as a metaphor for being cleansed from sin through the death of Christ--"baptized into death" (Jesus'

death). You don't need water baptism to talk about these things. As I've noted in several episodes, connecting this with salvation itself would violate the baptism/circumcision analogy.

Further, while the imagery seems to make good sense (again, given certain presumptions), insisting that the death, burial, and resurrection "down and up" motion requires a view of immersion... That whole approach overreaches what can be known about the meaning of the word. What I mean here is that it is only an assumption or a guess that *baptizo* ought to be understood in terms of the physical motion. Recall that the leading lexicons put forth evidence that *baptizo* means "to dip into water, "to sink underwater," or "to dye or tinge in a fluid." The first part of that definition accords well with the idea of the motion driving the meaning of the word. But what about "dyeing a cloth in a fluid?" Now Baptists assume, again, that the motion of dipping a cloth into the water is what's important. But what if the key to the meaning of the term is the result of the dipping--the union of the cloth and the dye, rather than the motion? If *result* is the point, then any mode is permissible (if the meaning of baptism is associated with a resulting union). As I've noted in past episodes of the podcast, my view is that the union here is that of the recipient of baptism being united to the believing community.

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And so by way of conclusion, the fact that both possibilities for *baptizo* (motion or result) are indeed in existence (they're both possible) and there's no conclusive way to know which one was the major point, and *baptizo* itself is ambiguous, all of these things lead me to say that the mode just doesn't matter. *Baptizo* in the New Testament apparently does not always mean immersion, and so we're just left with an inconclusive issue. No matter what the mode, though, the meaning of baptism that I've argued for works: being placed into a believing community that possesses and teaches the truth of the gospel and the true God.

We'll continue a little bit more on the next episode of the Naked Bible Podcast with some other issues involved with baptism. Thanks for listening.