

OATH AND ORDEAL SIGNS

SECOND ARTICLE

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B. Christian Baptism

ONE of the links between Christian and Johannine baptism is the baptism which Jesus authorized and his disciples administered during the very period of John's preaching and baptizing.⁵⁷ The key to the meaning of that early dominical baptism and to the enigma of its apparently abrupt cessation is to be found in the significance of the role of John and of Jesus as messengers of the covenant lawsuit.⁵⁸

When Jesus began his public ministry, God's lawsuit with Israel was in the ultimatum stage. At this point, the judicial function of Jesus coincided with that of John. Jesus' witness had the effect of confirming John's witness of final warning to Israel, especially to Israel's officialdom in the Judean area. And since the meaning of the baptismal rite administered by these messengers of the covenant derived from the official nature of their mission, the import of Jesus' baptism, though separately conducted, would also be essentially the same as John's. Thus, as a sign of the covenant lawsuit against Israel, the baptismal rite of Jesus was, like John's, a symbol of the imminent judgment ordeal of the people of the Old Covenant.

This interpretation of Jesus' early baptizing in terms of the concurrent ultimatum mission of John is strikingly confirmed by the evident cessation of that baptism once John was imprisoned. By suffering the voice in the wilderness to

⁵⁷ John 3:22; 4:1 f.

⁵⁸ Cf. above, *W.Th.J.* XXVII, 2, pp. 127 ff. See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, London, 1963, pp. 67 ff. for a survey of treatments of these questions. He comments, "If Jesus did refrain from letting His disciples baptize in the later ministry, we have to admit that the reason is shrouded in uncertainty" (p. 70).

be silenced, the Lord of the covenant concluded the ultimatum stage in his lawsuit against Israel, judging that Israel's responsible representatives had by now decisively rejected his warning. The profound satisfaction which the defiant rulers must have registered at John's imprisonment was, it would seem, the final, intolerable expression of their contempt for the heavenly authority in which John had come to them (*cf.* Matt. 21:23 ff.; Mk. 11:22 ff.; Lk. 20:1 ff.). Hence, the imprisonment of John was the signal for the departure of Jesus to Galilee. The form of presentation in the Gospels, particularly in Matthew and Mark, is such as to call attention to the fact that it was the imprisonment of John that prompted Jesus to initiate the new ministry in Galilee, whose epochal nature the Synoptics are clearly concerned to impress on us.⁵⁹ Thus, implicitly, the Gospels trace to John's imprisonment the ending of the early Judean ministry of Jesus with its particular baptismal rite. That is, they implicitly connect the cessation of Jesus' early baptism with the termination of the ultimatum stage in the covenant lawsuit against Israel.⁶⁰

In brief then, the early baptism authorized by Jesus was a sign of God's ultimatum to Israel. When that ultimatum was emphatically rejected, a new phase in the administration of the covenant was entered, Jesus' ministry of baptism ceasing along with the Johannine message of ultimatum which it had sealed.

The difference between the earlier and the later baptisms authorized by Jesus was the difference between two quite distinct periods in the history of the Covenant. The later baptism was of course ordained as a sign of the New Covenant;

⁵⁹ Matt. 4:12 ff.; Mk. 1:14 f.; *cf.* Lk. 4:14; Jn. 4:1-3; Acts 10:37. The Synoptics begin here to record the teaching of Jesus with its announcement that now the time was fulfilled and the kingdom at hand (Matt. 4:17; Mk. 1:15), and with its heralding, in the Nazareth synagogue, of the arrival of the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:19, 21).

⁶⁰ John's Gospel indicates that the concluding of the Judean ministry and the new beginning in Galilee were attributable to a hostile reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus himself (4:1). The response to the ultimatum of the two messengers of the covenant would naturally be similar. His royal summons spurned by Israel's hierarchical powers, Jesus turned to the task of calling the remnant out of the shepherdless flock and thereby saving them from the now certain judgment (*cf.* Zech. 11).

it was no part of the old lawsuit against Israel. Nevertheless, this new water baptism, appearing so soon after the other and still within the personal ministry of Jesus, would hardly bear a meaning altogether different from the earlier one. There would be a pronounced continuity between Christian baptism and the earlier, Johannine baptism. While, therefore, the baptismal ordinance which Christ appointed to his church would have a significance appropriate to the now universal character of the covenant community and to its new eschatological metaphysic, it would continue to be a sign of consecration to the Lord of the covenant and, more particularly, a symbolic passage through the judicial ordeal, in which those under the rule of the covenant receive a definitive verdict for eternal glory or for perpetual desolation. This is borne out by the New Testament evidence.

1. *Baptism as Ordeal*

That Peter conceived of Christian baptism as a sign of judicial ordeal is indicated by his likening it to the archetypal water ordeal, the Noahic deluge (I Pet. 3:20-22). In this passage, *ἀντίτυπον* (v. 21) is best taken with *βάπτισμα*, in which case Christian baptism is directly designated as the antitype of the ordeal waters of the deluge, or of the passage through those waters.⁶¹ But even if *ἀντίτυπον* were connected with *ὕμᾶς* so that the church would be called the antitype of the Noahic family, the total comparison drawn by Peter would still involve an interpretation of the baptismal waters in terms of the significance of the deluge ordeal.

With respect to the interpretation of the deluge-“baptism” as a judicial ordeal, we would observe that that understanding of it opens the way for a satisfactory carrying through of what would seem the most straightforward approach to these difficult verses. For the most natural assumption is certainly

⁶¹ It is a question of whether the relative pronoun *ὃ* at the beginning of verse 21 refers to the immediately preceding *δι' ὕδατος* (understood instrumentally) or to the more general idea of verse 20 (the *δι' ὕδατος* then being understood locally). The acceptance of the textual variant *ὃ* would not affect this choice; it would make it possible to take the *Nûe* of verse 20 as the antecedent.

that Peter was led to bring the deluge and the rite of baptism together because of the common element of the waters. And surely then that exegesis will most commend itself which succeeds in maintaining a genuine parallel between the role played by the waters in the two cases. Since, therefore, a saving function is predicated of the waters of baptism (v. 21), the waters should also figure as a means of salvation in the deluge episode (v. 20). That is, the problematic *δι' ὕδατος* should be construed in the instrumental sense. This can be done, and without the tortuous explanations required by the usual forms of this approach, once it is recognized that the flood waters were the ordeal instrument by which God justified Noah.⁶² It may be natural to think of the flood waters as merely destructive, as something from which to be saved. But those waters may in precisely the same and obvious sense be the means of condemnation-destruction or of justification-salvation, if they are seen to be the waters of a judicial ordeal with its potential of dual divine verdicts.

According to another suggestion,⁶³ Peter meant that the flood waters saved Noah by delivering him from the evil of man (*cf.* II Pet. 2:5, 7). A similar aspect of Christian baptism is then found in Peter's baptismal call to the Israelites on Pentecost to save themselves from their crooked generation (Acts 2:40 f.). It might also be observed that the extrication of the righteous from their persecution by the ungodly is characteristic of redemptive judgments and that the oppressive violence practised by the pre-diluvian kings figures prominently in the introduction to the flood record.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, a forensic interpretation of the salvation referred to in I Pet. 3:20 is preferable since the judicial relationship of God to man is a more prominent aspect of both biblical soteriology and the symbolism of baptism.⁶⁵ Moreover, Peter proceeds

⁶² The author of Hebrews also interpreted the deluge in the terms of the ordeal paradigm: righteousness, condemnation, inheritance (see Heb. 11:7).

⁶³ See Bo Reicke, *The Anchor Bible: The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, New York, 1964, p. 113.

⁶⁴ *Cf.* Gen. 6:2, 4 f., 13. See my "Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1-4" in *The Westminster Theological Journal* XXIV (May 1962), 2, pp. 191 ff.

⁶⁵ Also, Acts 2:40 f. is better understood as a call to escape from that crooked generation regarded as the target of threatening divine wrath.

immediately to develop the idea of salvation, as signified in baptism, the counterpart to the flood, in specifically forensic terms (see vv. 21b, 22).

That which signalized salvation was not, says Peter, the mere putting away of the filth of the flesh incidental to a water rite. It was rather the good conscience of the baptized (v. 21b). Now conscience has to do with accusing and excusing; it is forensic. Baptism then is concerned with man in the presence of God's judgment throne. This conclusion remains undisturbed whatever the precise exegesis of the relevant phrase. The *ἐπερώτημα* seems best understood as a pledge (a meaning well attested in judicial texts), the solemn vow of consecration given in answer to the introductory questions put to the candidate for baptism. In ancient covenant procedure, as has been observed above, such an oath of allegiance was accompanied by rites symbolizing the ordeal sanctions of the covenant. If *ἐπερώτημα* were taken as an appeal, either the appeal of a good conscience to God or the appeal to God for a good conscience, it would refer to the prayer uttered in prospect of the divine ordeal.⁶⁶ There is a further heightening of the juridical emphasis in this passage in Peter's reference to the actual saving act with respect to which baptism serves as a symbolic means of grace (vv. 21c, 22). The salvation figured forth in baptism is that accomplished in the judgment of Christ, which issued in his resurrection. The motif of ordeal by combat is introduced by the allusion to Christ's subjugation of angels, authorities, and powers.⁶⁷ Thus the total context of Peter's thought con-

Note the similarities to the terminology and message of John the Baptist (cf. Lk. 3:5 ff.).

⁶⁶ Cf. further E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter*, London, 1946, pp. 205 f.; Bo Reicke, *op. cit.*, pp. 114 f. and *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, Copenhagen, 1946, pp. 182 ff. Reicke maintains that in this epistle *συνείδησις* does not mean "conscience" but "consent" or "positive attitude". In 3:21 he translates: "a pledge of good will to God", that is, a promise of loyalty. By placing baptism in the context of an oath of allegiance this exegesis too is favorable to the interpretation of baptism as an ordeal ritual.

⁶⁷ Cf. below on Col. 2:11 f. On the early church's association of baptism with the deluge and of both with the overcoming of the demonic powers of the Abyss, see Lundberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 73 ff.

cerning baptism supports the conclusion we have drawn from his comparison of baptism to the deluge, namely, that he conceived of this sacrament as a sign of judicial ordeal.

Paul saw the nature of baptism displayed in another classic Old Testament water ordeal. In I Cor. 10:1 ff. the apostle recalls that the Mosaic generation of Israel participated in events that corresponded in religious significance to the church's sacramental ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁶⁸ Yet, in spite of experiencing the sacramental privileges of the Mosaic Covenant, most of that generation fell beneath its curses because of defection from its sworn allegiance to Yahweh. Therein was a message for the church which Paul proceeded to apply. Our present interest, however, is in verse 2: "(they) were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea".

As was observed previously, the passage through the Red Sea had the character of a judicial ordeal by which Israel was vindicated and Egypt doomed. It was an ordeal by water and by fire, the two elemental ordeal powers. The water needs no further explanation; perhaps the fire does.⁶⁹

In his theophanic embodiment in the pillar of smoke and fire, Yahweh, himself a consuming fire, was present in judgment.⁷⁰ Through the fiery judgment pillar he could declare and execute his verdicts unto salvation or damnation. The fire-theophany at the burning but unconsumed bush was a token of Israel's safe passage through the imminent ordeal. In the exodus crisis the pillar served to shelter, guide, and protect the elect nation; it thereby rendered for Israel a

⁶⁸ H. H. Rowley remarks that Paul "is really concerned to stress the contrast between that crossing [*i. e.*, through the Red Sea] and baptism" (*The Unity of the Bible*, Philadelphia, 1953, p. 149, n. 1). But the force of Paul's warning depends precisely on the similarity of privilege enjoyed in the exodus crossing and in Christian baptism, the contrast being between Israel's post-"baptismal" behaviour and the post-baptismal conduct to which Paul exhorts Christians.

⁶⁹ Cf. footnote 41 above.

⁷⁰ The Apocalypticist beheld the exalted Christ as a veritable incarnation of this theophanic glory pillar, appropriately present for judgment (Rev. 1:13 ff.). The ordeal elements of the waters and sword are included in the picture as subordinate details (vv. 15 f.).

favorable verdict.⁷¹ But through the pillar a judgment of condemnation was declared against the Egyptians as the Lord, looking forth from the fire-cloud, discomfited them.⁷² The theophany of the cloud-pillar functioned then as Yahweh's ordeal by fire.⁷³

This exodus ordeal by the fire-cloud and the waters of the sea Paul identified as a baptism. If there were any doubt that "baptized" in I Cor. 10:2 is to be taken not as a common verb but in its technical religious sense, it would be dispelled by the addition of "into Moses", which unmistakably carries through the parallel to the Pauline phrase, "baptized into

⁷¹ Cf. Exod. 13:21 f.; 14:19 f.

⁷² Cf. Exod. 14:20, 24 ff. Note the flashing forth of the glory of God from the pillar in other judicial situations: Exod. 19:18 (cf. Heb. 12:18-29); 24:16 f.; 33:19; Num. 12:10; 14:10 ff.; 16:19, 42; 20:6. According to E. A. Speiser's rendering of Exod. 14:20, the pillar of cloud is said to curse, or cast a spell upon, the night. See his "An Angelic 'Curse': Exodus 14:20" in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80, 3 (July-Sept., 1960), pp. 198-200.

⁷³ Elsewhere note Isa. 4:2-5, where, in an eschatological context, the prophet associates the theophany pillar with a discriminatory, purgative burning process which leaves in Zion a holy remnant for whom the fiery pillar is a defence and glory. In Revelation 15, the imagery of which seems to draw upon the Red Sea triumph (cf. esp. vv. 2 f.), the elements of the sea and fire (v. 2) and the flashing glory of the theophanic smoke-cloud (v. 8) are combined to introduce the mission of the seven angels who pour out the vials of ultimate divine wrath (v. 1; cf. chap. 16). The earth is thereby brought into its final ordeal which has a dual issue in the destruction of the harlot city, Babylon, and the exaltation of the bride city, Jerusalem. The latter, according to the regular pattern of the law of ordeal, enters into possession of the disputed inheritance. Each of these judicial outcomes is appropriately introduced by one of these angels of the final ordeal (17:1 and 21:9). This reflects the teaching of Jesus, where angels function as God's ordeal power, the ordeal knife that severs the wicked unto the furnace of fire (Matt. 13:49; 21:31; Mk. 13:27. Cf. Louis A. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse*, Kampen, 1965, pp. 148 ff.). For the earliest revelation of the role of angels as instruments of judgment by fire and sword see Gen. 3:24. In view of the association of the Red Sea with baptism in I Cor. 10:2, E. Käsemann asks whether the heavenly sea of Rev. 15:2 ought not to be connected with the waters of baptism ("A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy" in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, Naperville, 1964, p. 161). This viewpoint is more positively presented by A. Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Oxford, 1964, pp. 90 f., 171 f. Cf. Lundberg, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

Jesus Christ".⁷⁴ Besides, none of the non-technical meanings of βαπτίζω (e. g., dip, immerse, plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm) would accurately describe the physical relationship that actually obtained between Israel and the fire and water. In fact, neither baptismal element so much as came in contact with an Israelite during the crossing. Moreover, if in its technical employment as a water rite βαπτίζω denoted a washing or cleansing, we could not account for Paul's usage in I Cor. 10:2. For the effect of the passage through the Red Sea was not a cleansing of the Israelites — may they not even have been a little dustier when they reached the far shore? Also, the idea of washing would not readily account for the "into Moses" aspect of this baptism.⁷⁵ If on the other hand, we grant that technical, ritual baptism signified for Paul a process of judicial ordeal, his placing of the Red Sea crossing in the category of baptism makes transparent sense. What the apostle meant when he said that the fathers were baptized into Moses in their passage under the cloud and through the sea was that the Lord thereby brought them into an ordeal by those elements, an ordeal through which he declared them accepted as the servant people of his covenant and so under the authority of Moses, his mediatorial vicegerent.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Lundberg (*op. cit.*, pp. 140–142) would support this conclusion on the ground that the baptism "in the cloud" is cited as an equivalent to being baptized "by one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). He notes Mk. 9:7; Lk. 1:35; and the use of ἐπισκιάζειν in the LXX for the descent of the cloud. Cf. Mt. 3:11.

⁷⁵ On the assumption that the place of Israel's crossing, *yam sūph*, means "sea of reeds", it has been suggested that this name may have brought to the Exodus author's mind the Sea of Reeds which figures in Egyptian mythology. This sea (also known as a sea of the underworld and of heaven and of life) was a sea of purification through which the soul must pass for regeneration. (So J. R. Towers, "The Red Sea" in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1959, pp. 150–153). But the explanation of Paul's use of βαπτίζω must be sought elsewhere. On the meaning of the Hebrew *yam sūph*, cf. M. Copisarow, "The Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Hebrew Concept of the Red Sea", in *Vetus Testamentum*, 1962, pp. 1–13.

⁷⁶ Cf. my *Treaty of the Great King*, pp. 30, 36 f. That baptism, for Paul, was an act which conveyed one through death into the new world is maintained by Lundberg (*op. cit.*, pp. 135 ff.) on the ground that there was current a similar interpretation of the Red Sea episode, to which Paul likened Christian baptism. He also assembles the evidence for the early

We would judge, therefore, that for Paul, as for Peter, the sacrament of Christian baptism signified a trial by ordeal and that the term *βαπτίζω*, in its secondary, technical usage, had reference to the ordeal character of a person's encounter with the baptismal element.

Thoroughly congenial to the ordeal interpretation of the baptismal symbolism is the New Testament's exposition of baptism as a participation with Christ in the judgment ordeal of his death, burial, and resurrection.⁷⁷ We shall concentrate here on Colossians 2:11 ff. because in this passage there is a noteworthy interrelating of biblical ordeal symbols and realities in explication of Christ's sufferings and triumph.

Earlier we followed the exegesis of "the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11) that regards "of Christ" as an objective genitive and "the circumcision", therefore, as the crucifixion of Christ. "Without hands" would then mean that his circumcision was no mere human symbolization of the curse sanction of the law but the actual divine judgment. "Putting off the body of flesh" would further contrast the crucifixion to the symbolic removal of the foreskin as being a perfecting of circumcision in a complete cutting off unto death and that as an object of divine cursing.⁷⁸ According to another interpretation of the verse, "of Christ" is a subjective genitive and "the circumcision" is a spiritual circumcision experienced by the one who is in Christ, namely, crucifixion of the old man, or destruction of the body of sin.⁷⁹ This circumcision would be "without hands" because a divinely wrought spiritual reality, not a mere external symbol.

The choice between these two interpretations is difficult.⁸⁰

prevalence of the conception of baptism as a passage through the waters of death. It would appear that the thesis of the present article, though not identical with that conception, is compatible with it and in any case restores baptism to the general world of ideas with which it was associated in at least some ancient liturgies.

⁷⁷ See Rom. 6:3 ff.; Col. 2:11 ff.; cf. I Cor. 1:13; Lk. 12:50.

⁷⁸ This would accord with Paul's usage in Col. 1:22; cf. Eph. 2:15 f.

⁷⁹ "Putting off the body of flesh" is thus understood according to the thought of Col. 3:9; cf., e. g., Rom. 6:6 with its similar context.

⁸⁰ F. F. Bruce combines them in his exegesis (E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, Grand Rapids, 1957, p. 235).

But even if this "circumcision of Christ" is understood as an experience of the Christian, it is still one which he has in his identification with Christ in his crucifixion. For in this passage as a whole (including now verses 11a and 12), Christian experience is modelled by Paul after the pattern of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, the Christian's circumcision (v. 11a) corresponding to Christ's death.⁸¹ If then Paul calls the Christian death experience a circumcision it is only because he was first of all prepared to call Christ's death a circumcision. Our conception of the crucifixion ordeal is thereby enriched with the thought associations of the ancient sign of the ritual knife ordeal.⁸²

Paul's delineation of the death of Christ includes the additional ordeal feature of decision rendered through combat (v. 15). A legal setting is already indicated in verse 14 by the statement that the curse claim of the law was satisfied on the cross.⁸³ Then the accusing role of Satan in the judgment of God's people is suggested by the demonic antagonists who face Christ in his judgment conflict (v. 15).⁸⁴ It is by victory

⁸¹ As noted earlier, where the same pattern emerges in Rom. 6:3 ff., the first step is called death, whereas in Col. 2:11 it is circumcision.

⁸² So, for example, the crucifixion is linked to the Genesis 15 circumcision-oath of the Lord as fulfillment to symbolic prophecy. Incidentally, since the theophany in Genesis 15 is essentially the ordeal fire-cloud, the remarkable picture presented there is that of the divine fire ordeal itself undergoing division in the covenantal knife ordeal.

⁸³ Possibly the figure of the *χειρόγραφον* and its "blotting out" (*ἐξαλείψας*) was suggested to Paul by the jealousy ordeal of Num. 5, which prescribed a handwritten document and a "blotting out" (the same verb in the *LXX*). The *χειρόγραφον* would then contain the curses of the covenant sworn to by its members and blotted out by being visited on Christ on the cross, just as the curses of the jealousy document sworn to by the woman in her oath of clearance were obliterated only in an act of divine judgment, being absorbed into the water drunk by the woman and so made the instrument of the ordeal verdict.

⁸⁴ In Jewish apocalyptic, *χειρόγραφον* is found as the designation of a book held by an accusing angel and recording sins which the seer desires blotted out. See the discussion of A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World*, Kampen, 1964, pp. 164 ff. Bandstra's own view of the passage as a whole is distinctive. Following O. A. Blanchette, he takes *χειρόγραφον* as a metaphor for our sinful flesh as borne by Christ and regards that, rather than the principalities and powers or some object understood (so the Latin fathers), as the object of *ἀπεκδυσάμενος*.

in this combat with Satan's hosts that the vindication of Christ and the acquittal of those who are united with him in his ordeal is secured.⁸⁵ Christ's triumphing involves an action denoted by the problematic ἀπεκδυσάμενος. According to a popular exegesis of this term, Christ stripped the vanquished principalities and powers of their armour. In that case we might compare the imagery to the ordeal combat of the champions David and Goliath, wherein, Yahweh having judged in favor of Israel, David stripped the giant of his armour and carried it away in triumph.⁸⁶ But it is worth considering whether the figurative allusion in Col. 2:15 is not rather to the well attested ancient practice of belt-wrestling as a combat ordeal technique in court procedure. Victory and favorable verdict were achieved by stripping off the adversary's wrestling belt.⁸⁷ According to this interpretation of ἀπεκδυσάμενος (and relating it to the ἀπέκδυσις of verse 11), the passage would mean that Christ in his very suffering of the circumcision curse of crucifixion accomplished the circumcision-stripping off of his demonic opponents. The divine verdict was registered in the triumphant emergence of Christ from the domain of death; our Lord "was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25b). His death-burial-resurrection was then a victory over the accusers, a stripping away of their legal claims, exposing, overcoming, and casting them out through the belt-grappling of a divine ordeal.

Graphic confirmation of the ordeal significance of baptism is thus found in the Pauline integration of baptism with the messianic death-burial-resurrection schema, especially where Paul expounds the latter as both a circumcision and a judicial ordeal by combat.

⁸⁵ In the New Testament Apocalypse the verdict against the Accuser is declared through a battle ordeal (Rev. 12:7 ff.).

⁸⁶ Cf. I Sam. 17:54.

⁸⁷ See C. H. Gordon, "Belt-wrestling in the Bible World", *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Part One, 1950-1951, pp. 131-136. Cf. my commentary on Job in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. C. F. Pfeiffer and E. F. Harrison, Chicago, 1962, pp. 486-488. In Col. 2:15, ἀπεκδυσάμενος would be an indirect middle. It is perhaps significant that the principalities and powers of Col. 2:15 appear in the closely related Pauline letter to the Ephesians as the opponents of Christians in their "wrestling" (Eph. 6:12).

Mention must be made of the common significance of baptism and circumcision which emerges so clearly in this same connection. Paul understood both of these rituals as signs made with hands, signifying union with Christ in his representative judgment ordeal. He also interpreted both as signs of the corresponding spiritual death and resurrection of believers. Especially remarkable is the ease with which Paul in Col. 2:11 f. combines circumcision with baptism as complementary signs of the death-burial-resurrection pattern, whereas elsewhere (Rom. 6:3 ff.) baptism by itself serves as sign of the entire complex.

2. New Covenant Judgment

Is the interpretation of Christian baptism as a sign of covenantal judgment ordeal compatible with the biblical teaching concerning the newness of the New Covenant? Even if the earlier covenants were law covenants enforceable by dual sanctions, with both the blessing and the curse signified by the sign of circumcision, the question may still be raised whether the introduction of the new order did not constitute so radical a change as to transform the covenant into an administration exclusively of blessing. Is not that the force, for example, of Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant? And must not the baptismal sign of the New Covenant differ then in this respect from the old consecration sign of circumcision?

This problem was anticipated in the development of our biblico-theological definition of covenant.⁸⁸ Law was there shown to be a fundamental element in the Covenant of Redemption. With respect to the redemptive revelation at last given in Christ, the revelation which *is* the New Covenant, it was observed that for Christ, as the covenant Servant and second Adam, the redemptive mission was comprehensively one of obedience to the law of the covenant as the way to secure the covenant's blessings. The proper purpose of the New Covenant was found to be realized precisely in this, that Christ through his active and passive obedience as the

⁸⁸ See "Law Covenant".

representatives of his people and for their salvation honored the law of the kingdom of God in its abiding stipulations and sanctions even as revealed from the beginning in the Covenant of Creation and as republished in the redemptive administrations of the Old Testament. Whatever it is, therefore, that constitutes the newness of the New Covenant, it is not the negation of its law character, law being understood as the principle that makes kingdom inheritance dependent on the obedience of a representative federal head. Indeed, this aspect of the essential law character of the Covenant of Redemption is nowhere more clearly displayed than here in the New Covenant, its perfecting administration.

Moreover, the newness of the New Covenant does not consist in a reduction of the Covenant of Redemption to the principle of election and guaranteed blessing. Its law character is seen in this too that it continues to be a covenant with dual sanctions. In this connection, account must be taken of Jeremiah's classic prophecy of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31 ff.). Since exegesis has often erred by way of an oversimplified stress on the difference or newness of the divine work promised in this passage, it is important to mark the continuity that is evident even here between the New and the Old Covenants. For all its difference, the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 is still patterned after the Sinaitic Covenant.⁸⁹ It is a writing of the law on the heart rather than on tables of stone (v. 33; cf. II Cor. 3:3), but it is another writing of the law.⁹⁰ It is a new law covenant.⁹¹ Hence, for Jeremiah, the New Covenant, though it could be sharply contrasted with the Old (v. 32), was nevertheless a renewal

⁸⁹ In fact, Jeremiah's concept of the New Covenant was a development of that already presented by Moses in the sanctions section of the Deuteronomic renewal of the Sinaitic Covenant (Deut. 30:1-10; see my *Treaty of the Great King*, pp. 132 f.).

⁹⁰ Cf. J. Coppens, "La Nouvelle Alliance en Jer. 31, 31-34" in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XXV, 1 (Jan., 1963), pp. 12-21.

⁹¹ Relevant here would be all that might be said of the New Testament's teaching that Jesus is a new and greater Moses. Cf. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, Cambridge, 1964, pp. 25 ff.; T. F. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel*, Naperville, 1963. Note also Jesus' fulfillment of the role of the Servant of the Lord, which in its individual aspect, and specifically in the area of law giving, reflects the figure of Moses.

of the Mosaic Covenant. It belonged to the familiar administrative pattern of periodic covenant renewal (of which the cycle of sabbatical years was an expression), and renewal is the exponent of continuity.

Of course, this particular renewal of the ancient law covenant was unique in that it was the final, perfecting renewal. It was *the* New Covenant. Its distinctiveness, according to Jeremiah's description of it, was that of fulfillment in contrast to the penultimate and imperfect nature of the Mosaic Covenant in all its previous renewals. This New Covenant would bring to pass the consummation of God's grace — consummation of divine revelation to men (vv. 33a, 34a), consummation of the personal relationship of God to men in forgiveness and fellowship (vv. 33b, 34b).⁹² But if the distinctiveness of the New Covenant is that of consummation, if when it abrogates it consummates, then its very discontinuity is expressive of its profound, organic unity with the Old Covenant.

Jeremiah speaks, to be sure, only of a consummation of grace; he does not mention a consummation of curses in the New Covenant. But the proper purpose of that covenant was, after all, salvation. Moreover, Jeremiah's particular concern was with the difference between the new and the old, and in respect of the visitation of covenant curses upon covenant members the New Covenant was not as clearly distinctive. Indeed, that aspect of covenant administration was particularly prominent in the Old Covenant, the divine wrath being at last visited upon the city of the great King and upon the Old Testament people unto the uttermost.

Further, there is no reason to regard Jeremiah's description of the New Covenant as a comprehensive analysis, on the basis of which an exclusive judgment might then be rendered, excluding the curse sanction from a place in New Covenant administration. Even the aspect of New Covenant consummation that Jeremiah does deal with he views from the limited

⁹² Such is also the emphasis in the exposition of Jer. 31:31 ff. in Hebrews. Because of the consummatory nature of the New Covenant some prefer not to classify it as a covenant renewal. Cf. B. W. Anderson, "The New Covenant and the Old" in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, New York, 1963, pp. 231 f.; B. S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, Naperville, 1960, p. 79.

eschatological perspective of an Old Testament prophet. He beheld the messianic accomplishment in that perfection which historically is reached only in the fully eschatological age to come, as the ultimate goal of a process which in the present semi-eschatological age of this world is still marked by tragic imperfection. But the theologian of to-day ought not impose on himself the visionary limitations of an Old Testament prophet. By virtue of the fuller revelation he enjoys⁹³ he is able to distinguish these two distinct stages in the history of the New Covenant and to observe plainly that the imperfection of the covenant people and program has continued on from the Old Covenant into the present phase of New Covenant history. It is in accordance with this still only semi-eschatological state of affairs that the administration of the New Covenant is presently characterized by dual sanctions, having, in particular, anathemas to pronounce and excommunications to execute.⁹⁴

⁹³ Cf. Lk. 10:24; I Pet. 1:10-12.

⁹⁴ In Bultmann's formal reduction of the New Covenant to "a radically eschatological dimension, that is, a dimension outside the world" we have an example of an oversimplified appeal to Jer. 31:31 ff. and similar biblical data in the interests of a metaphysic inhospitable to the biblical revelation of the New Covenant as historical ("Prophecy and Fulfillment" in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann, Richmond, 1963, (trans., J. C. G. Greig; originally in *Studia Theologica*, II (1949), pp. 21-44) p. 63; cf. pp. 61 f.). His dichotomy between historical and eschatological leaves no room for the biblical concept of a semi-eschatological age or community, just as it cannot accommodate a genuinely biblical concept of radical eschatology as historical consummation.

To cite another example, it is failure to reckon adequately with the only semi-eschatological character of the present administration of the New Covenant that vitiates R. E. O. White's critique of Marcel's use of the doctrine of the covenant in his discussion of baptism (*The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, Grand Rapids, 1960, pp. 286 ff.).

Similarly, P. K. Jewett, while expressing a proper concern not to atrophy the movement of covenant history at some Old Testament stage, falls into the opposite error of prematurely precipitating the age to come. For when he defends a theology of baptism that bounds the rite and the covenant by faith, he anticipates the ultimate judicial separation into blessed faithful and accursed hypocrites of those who here and now, in the present semi-eschatological phase of the church's existence in this world, form the still undifferentiated mixed multitude of the covenant community. (See his "Baptism (Baptist View)" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. E. H. Palmer, Wilmington, 1964, I, pp. 524 f.).

To interpret Jeremiah's prophetic concept of the New Covenant as excluding curse sanctions is, therefore, to condemn it as fallacious. For the historical fact is that New Covenant administration includes both blessing and curse.⁹⁵ The Christ who stands like the theophanic ordeal pillar of fire in the midst of the seven churches addresses to them threats as well as promises, curses as well as blessings.⁹⁶ By his apostle he warns the Gentiles who are grafted into the tree of the covenant that just as Israelite branches had been broken off for their unbelief, they too, if they failed to stand fast through faith, would not be spared.⁹⁷ Again, when the Lord appears in the final ordeal theophany as the Judge of the quick and the dead, taking fiery vengeance on them that obey not the gospel, he will bring before his judgment throne all who have been within his church of the New Covenant. There his declaration of the curse of the covenant will fall on the ears of some who in this world have been within the community that formally owns his covenant lordship, so that still in that day they think to cry, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?"⁹⁸ There is, therefore, a fulfillment of the covenant lordship of Christ over his New Testament church unto condemnation and death as well as unto justification and life. In the execution of both verdicts, whether unto life or unto death, the New Covenant will be enforced and perfected.

⁹⁵ Of incidental interest here is the understanding of the new covenant concept which is represented by the Qumran and Damascus covenanters when they set forth themselves as the community of the new covenant (1QpHab, II, 3; CDC, VI, 19; VIII, 21; XIX, 33 f.; XX, 12). Especially significant for the question under discussion above is the fact that these new covenant claimants continued the Mosaic covenant tradition of blessings and curses in an oath ritual of entrance (1QS, II, 4 ff.; CDC, XV, 1 ff.) and, consistently, had regulations for the excommunication of covenant breakers. Moreover, the structure of the ancient treaties has been more broadly traced in sections of the Rule of the Community and of the Damascus Document (see Baltzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-127).

⁹⁶ Rev. 2 and 3. Do we see in the figures of the messengers (angels) of the churches the messengers of the covenant lawsuit?

⁹⁷ Rom. 11:17-21; *cf.* Matt. 8:12; John 15:1-8; Heb. 6:4 ff.

⁹⁸ Matt. 7:21-23; *cf.* 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-49; 25:1-30; Rom. 14:10; II Cor. 5:10.

We are bound to conclude, therefore, that the newness of the New Covenant cannot involve the elimination of the curse sanction as a component of the covenant and that this newness consequently poses no problem for the interpretation of Christian baptism as a sign of ordeal embracive of both blessing and curse. In confirmation of this conclusion we may recall that John the Baptist analyzed the work of the coming One as a baptism of judgment in the Holy Spirit and fire. Christ so baptized the Mosaic covenant community and he so baptizes the congregation of the New Covenant.

Pentecost belongs to both the old and new orders. It was the beginning of the messianic ordeal visited on the Mosaic community. Those who received that baptism of Pentecost emerged vindicated as the people of the New Covenant, the inheritors of the kingdom. Pentecost was thus a baptismal ordeal in Spirit and fire in which redemptive covenant realized its proper end.⁹⁹ But the Israel of that generation which did not share in this baptism of justification soon experienced the messianic baptism as a judgment curse unto death, destruction, and dispersion. So also the semi-eschatological phase of the New Covenant moves on towards a messianic ordeal which will bring for the justified meek, the inheritance of the earth, but judicial exposure and the curse-sentence of excision for the apostates. As an Old Testament prophet, even though standing at the threshold of the messianic kingdom, John did not distinguish these distinct moments in the messianic baptism-ordeal. But we who are within the kingdom of God perceive that John's own water ritual pointed to the ordeal of Israel, while the Christian rite that bears the name and continues the essential form of John's baptism signifies the rapidly approaching ordeal appointment of the people of the New Covenant.

Conclusions: Christian baptism is a sign of the eschatological ordeal in which the Lord of the covenant brings his servants to account. In baptismal contexts this judgment is often viewed more specifically as that through which the Christian passes in Christ, in whose ordeal the final judgment of the elect was intruded into mid-history. That is, judgment is

⁹⁹ Cf. Acts 1:5.

viewed in such cases only in so far as it involves the specific verdict of justification. Agreeably, the import of the baptismal sign of judgment is then expounded in soteriological terms like regeneration, sanctification, incorporation by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, or protective sealing against the day of wrath. But even when the consideration of baptism is thus restricted to its significance for the elect, judgment as curse and death remains at the center of baptism's import and continues to be the specific object of its symbolic portrayal. For the blessing of the elect arises only out of their Saviour's accursed death.

One's theology of the sacramental signs of the covenant will have to be consistent with his theology of the covenant itself. If the covenant concept is constricted to an administration of grace to the elect, then it will hardly seem possible that the signs marking entrance into the covenant should signify a judicial consummation of the covenant which is fraught with ultimate curse as well as ultimate blessing. It has appeared, however, that there is independent evidence available for interpreting these signs of incorporation as signifying the dual covenant sanctions and this provides then yet further proof of the impossibility of satisfying all the biblical data with the restricted, guaranteed-promise conception of covenant. It is also another confirmation of the necessity of making the idea of God's lordship the central focus of the systematic doctrine of covenant.

Now if the covenant is first and last a declaration of God's lordship, then the baptismal sign of entrance into it will before all other things be a sign of coming under the jurisdiction of the covenant and particularly under the covenantal dominion of the Lord. Christian baptism is thus the New Covenant sign of consecration or discipleship.

It is immediately evident in the great commission (Matt. 28:18-20) that commitment to the authority of Christ is the chief thing in Christian baptism. For there baptizing the nations takes its place alongside teaching them to obey Christ's commandments in specification of the charge to disciple them to him who has been given all authority in heaven and earth.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Note also the interrelationship of baptizing and making disciples in John 4:1.

Of similar significance are a concatenation like Paul's "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5) and the common confession of Jesus as Lord or Christ in baptismal formulae.¹⁰¹ The related baptismal phraseology of "in (or into) the name of Jesus Christ" (or "of the Lord", or of the Trinity) also expresses the nature of baptism as confirmation of an authority or ownership relationship, judging from analogous usage in the Old Testament¹⁰² and in Hellenistic legal and commercial papyri.¹⁰³ Further evidence is the representation of baptism as a seal, in the sense of a token of authority or mark of ownership.¹⁰⁴

The incorporation of disciples into the jurisdiction of the New Covenant by the baptismal confession of Christ as Lord is in clear continuity with the tradition of the initiatory oath of allegiance found in Old Testament covenantal engagements (and their extra-biblical counterparts).¹⁰⁵ As an oath-sign of

¹⁰¹ Acts 2:38; 8:16; 19:5; I Cor. 1:13 ff.; cf. I Pet. 3:21; Rom. 10:9. According to certain form critical studies much in the way of New Testament confessional formulation had its source in baptismal liturgy. Some of the more extreme conclusions of this type are yielding to analyses that recognize a greater complexity of origin. Cf. Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, Grand Rapids, 1963, pp. 6 ff.

¹⁰² E. g., Deut. 28:9, 10; Isa. 63:19.

¹⁰³ Cf. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago and Cambridge, 1957, p. 575. See, also, our remarks above on I Cor. 10:2.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit*, London, New York, Toronto, 1951, pp. 8-18. According to the New Testament emphasis on the proper soteric purpose of redemptive covenant, the seal motif may be used as an assurance to believers of their security in the hour of eschatological crisis (Eph. 1:13 f.; 4:30; II Tim. 2:19; Rev. 7:2 ff.; 14:1; 22:4). But baptism is to be more comprehensively understood as a sealing with the name of the Trinity invoked in the consecration oath in recognition that the triune Lord is God of the covenant oath and its dual sanctions.

¹⁰⁵ See the discussion of I Pet. 3:21 above. Compare, also, the initiatory oaths required by the Essenes (Josephus, *Wars*, II, 8, 7 f.) and at Qumran for entrance into the covenant (IQS, I, 16 ff.; V, 8 ff.). On the self-maledictory character of these oaths, see IQS V, 12 (cf. II:4 ff.). In connection with I Cor. 11:27 and Heb. 10:26-31, G. E. Mendenhall notes the continuity between the significance of the cup of the New Covenant sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the Mosaic tradition of covenant oath and curse ("Covenant", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville, 1962, p. 722).

allegiance to Christ the Lord, baptism is a sacrament in the original sense of *sacramentum* in its etymological relation to the idea of consecrate and more particularly in its employment for the military oath of allegiance.¹⁰⁶ And if the immediate function of baptism in covenant administration is to serve as the ritual of an oath of discipleship, we have in that another indication that baptism is a symbolic portrayal of the judgment of the covenant. For, as we have seen, covenant oath rituals were enactments of the sanctions invoked in the oath. Indeed from these historic antecedents we may infer that baptism as an oath ritual symbolizes in particular the curse sanction, the death judgment threatened in the covenant.¹⁰⁷

The foregoing analyses bear out the judgment that there is a thoroughgoing correspondence between the meaning of baptism and that of circumcision. Both are confessional oath signs of consecration to the Lord of the covenant and both signify his ultimate redemptive judgment with its potential of both condemnation and justification. There is indeed a shift in emphasis from the malediction side of the judgment spectrum to the vindication side as covenant revelation moves on from Old Testament circumcision to New Testament baptism (the baptism of John being in this respect, too, transitional). This change reflects the movement of redemptive history from an administration of condemnation to one of righteousness. Nevertheless, the maledictory element is no more to be excluded from the New Testament sign of consecration because of this shift in emphasis than vindication-

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Pliny's use of *sacramentum* to denote the oath taken by Christians in their worship, binding themselves to abstain from certain sins (*Letters*, X, 96). Early baptismal liturgy and comments thereon commonly expound the rite as an engagement to serve God and as a renunciation of Satan. Cf. I Tim. 6:12.

¹⁰⁷ See the Hittite Soldiers' Oath in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. Pritchard, Princeton, 1950, pp. 353 f. Cf. our discussion of circumcision above. To say that baptism portrays the covenant curse is not to say that baptism as a sign of trial by ordeal signifies only an unfavorable verdict. For as we have previously observed in connection with both circumcision and baptism, the curse of the ordeal may be suffered by the forsworn in himself but it is undergone by the elect as a soteric experience in their identification with the Redeemer.

qualification is to be excluded from the meaning of the Old Testament rite simply because that was characteristically an administration of condemnation and death.

The form and name of baptism are enough to prevent such an oversimplification of its complex meaning. The form, as we have seen, symbolizes a visitation of judgment waters and, as its name indicates, the ritual proper does not comprise the emergence of the baptized person from the water but only his entrance into the symbolic judgment. For on no view of the meaning of βαπτίζω is any thought of emergence involved. In fact, the metaphorical meaning that it develops is that of perishing.¹⁰⁸ At the same time there is no contradiction between the form or name of the sign and the soteric aspect of baptism's significance, which is emphasized in the New Testament. For even though the waters portray the judgment curse, the rite does not prejudge the ultimate issue of the individual's destiny one way or the other. It places him under the authority of the Lord for judgment and tells him that as a sinner he must pass through the curse; yet it also calls him to union with his Lord, promising to all who are found in Christ a safe passage through the curse waters of the ordeal.

A further word on the relevance of the foregoing for the question of the mode of administering baptism is in order. As for the meaning of βαπτίζω, its semantic development evidently proceeded from the primary idea of dipping in water to secondary metaphorical ideas like overwhelm and (in the Scriptures) to the secondary special idea of administering a religious water rite. Then from the particular significance of certain of these sacred rituals as signs of ordeal (and perhaps with an assist from the metaphorical meaning of overwhelm, which was common in the usage of the Greek world) βαπτίζω came to be used in Scripture for the idea of undergoing a judgment ordeal, whether or not by water. If this analysis is in the main correct, it is academic to debate the contention

¹⁰⁸ This warns against the common but unwarranted attempt to trace a complete modal parallel between the baptismal action and the death-burial-resurrection pattern of Christ's ordeal. Cf. further John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, Philadelphia, 1952, pp. 29-33.

that the idea of immersion belongs inseparably to the primary meaning of βαπτίζω. Further, any exclusivistic claims for the sole propriety of some one mode of administering baptism are gratuitous. For any mode of relating the water to a person that is attested in the various biblical water ordeals would have biblical warrant. Of course, not all such modes would prove expedient. In Israel's passage through the Red Sea the baptismal waters stood in a threatening (if actually protective) position over against the Israelites without, however, touching them, while in the Jordan crossing, the waters were so far removed as to be quite out of sight. At the other extreme, Jonah, like the accused in the Babylonian water ordeal, was plunged into the depths (not to mention now his novel conveyance) and the baptized family in the Noahic deluge ordeal sailed over the rising flood while torrents descended from above.¹⁰⁹

If this means on the one hand that no exclusive claims can be made for the mode of immersion, it would nevertheless appear that the suitability of that mode remains unimpaired. Baptism by immersion will surely impress many as a most eloquent way of portraying the great judgment of God, while the familiar imposition of moistened finger tips which is generously called sprinkling must seem to many to project quite inadequately the threatening power and crisis of the ultimate ordeal.¹¹⁰ Is it not time for Reformed liturgists to address themselves to the task of finding a form for the baptismal sign that will capture and convey something of the decisive encounter which baptism signifies?¹¹¹ A satis-

¹⁰⁹ It was noted earlier that in the witness of John the Baptist the messianic baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire was to be understood as an ordeal. The coming of the Spirit by an affusion at Pentecost may, therefore, be cited as a modal variety of baptismal ordeal.

¹¹⁰ Since the idea of qualification in the specific form of cleansing is included in the import of baptism (*cf.*, *e. g.*, Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5; Acts 22:16) it might seem desirable to practise a mode of baptism suggestive of washing as well as ordeal. To that extent, appeals to ritual cleansing techniques such as sprinkling would have some relevance.

¹¹¹ F. W. Dillistone calls it "one of the most urgent tasks of our day" to revitalize the potentially profound appeal of this water symbol within the Christian community (*Christianity and Symbolism*, Philadelphia, 1955, p. 187; *cf.* pp. 215 f.).

factory solution would seem to require such a decided step in the general direction of the immersion ritual as to open the possibility for hopeful dialogue in the interests of a consensus of all concerned.

III. THE ADMINISTRATION OF CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM

The Covenant of Redemption is an administration of God's Kingdom. It is an institutional embodiment of the divine lordship in an earthly community. The question arises then as to how this divine authority structure relates itself to other coexisting authority structures. At present we are concerned with this matter in so far as it may involve principles relevant to the administration of the covenantal oath signs of consecration. In turning to this aspect of our study of circumcision and baptism, we will once again try to sharpen our historical perspective by viewing the divine covenants against the background of their formal counterparts in the ancient world.

A. Vassal Authority in Covenant Administration

The suzerain-vassal covenants were authority structures which brought outlying spheres of authority under the sanctioned control of an imperial power. The great king gave his treaty to a vassal who was himself also a king. In imposing his covenant the suzerain did not dissolve the royal authority of his vassal, as an empire builder would in the case of the territorial annexation of another kingdom as a province. Indeed, it was precisely in his status as a king that the vassal was addressed in the treaty. The dynastic succession within the vassal kingdom was sometimes a matter of explicit concern in the treaty stipulations. The historical prologue of the treaty might even reflect on the fact that it was the suzerain's efforts that had established the vassal king on his throne; more than that, the covenant itself was at times the very means of his doing so. It was then by swearing the vassal's oath of allegiance that a throne aspirant became king or a

king was re-established in his dominion over his people. There is even evidence that the treaty could be the means of enlarging a vassal king's domain.¹¹²

It is of course obvious from the whole purpose of these treaties that the vassal king in taking the ratificatory oath did so in his capacity as king and thus brought his kingdom with him into the relationship of allegiance to the suzerain. Moreover, from express statements in the treaties we know that the vassal king assumed responsibility for his sons and more remote descendants, committing them with himself in his covenant oath. Consequently, these descendants are mentioned in the curses as objects of divine vengeance if the covenant sworn by the vassal king should be broken.

A few examples may be cited. The treaty of Esarhaddon with Ramataia begins:

The treaty which Esarhaddon, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Sennacherib, likewise king of the world, king of Assyria, with Ramataia, city-ruler of Urakazabanu, with his sons, his grandsons, with all the Urakazabaneans young and old, as many as there be — with (all of) you, your sons, your grandsons who will exist in days to come after the treaty, from sunrise to sunset, over as many as Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, exercises kingship and lordship — (so) he has made the treaty with you concerning Ashurbanipal, the crown-prince, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.¹¹³

Later in this same treaty Ramataia is reminded:

[Esarhaddon] has made you take an oath that you will relate [the treaty-provisions] to your sons and to your grandsons, to your seed, to your seed's seed which shall be (born) in the future, that you will order them as follows: — 'Guard this treaty. Do not transgress your treaty, (or) you will lose your lives, you will be turning over your dwellings to be shattered, your people to be carried off'.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Cf. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-91; J. M. Munn-Rankin, "Diplomacy in Western Asia in the Early Second Millennium B.C.", *Iraq* 18 (1956), pp. 68-110.

¹¹³ Col. 1:1-12. The translation is that of D. J. Wiseman in *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon*, p. 30. For a similar formula in biblical covenant administration see Deut. 29:9-14 (10-15). Cf., also, the language of Peter in Acts 2:39; cf. v. 17.

¹¹⁴ Col. 4:287-295. See Wiseman, *op. cit.*, pp. 49 ff.

The Sefireh treaty begins:

The treaty of Bar-ga'ayah, King of KTK, with Mati'el, son of 'Attarsamak, King [of Arpad; and the treaty of the sons of Bar-ga'ayah with the sons of Mati'el; and the treaty of the grandsons of Bar-ga'aya[h and] his [descendants] with the descendants of Mati'el.¹¹⁵

The concluding curse of the treaty between the Hittite Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru reads:

The words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet — should Duppi-Tessub not honor these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns.¹¹⁶

It is clear then that these ancient treaties, on the form of which the redemptive covenants were patterned, were engagements not merely between individuals but between broader authority structures. In particular, the servant king who was bound by the treaty was bound not alone but together with his subjects and his descendants.

B. Circumcision and Generation

From the pervasive formal correspondence between the divine covenants and the international vassal treaties it would be reasonable to infer that in the covenant of circumcision too the chief vassal figure was approached not in abstraction from his authority status but with his societal station in view, being confronted with the demand to subject all within his sphere of authority to that higher authority before which he was himself summoned to bow the knee. We are not dependent, however, solely on such inference, for analysis of the direct Scriptural evidence leads us to the same conclusion.

One aspect of the circumcision rite not considered above has direct relevance here. The fact that circumcision was

¹¹⁵ I, A, 1 ff. The translation is that given in McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

¹¹⁶ The translation is that of A. Goetze in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 205.

performed on an organ of generation is surely meant to indicate that the significance of the rite — both as a sign of malediction and of consecration — had reference to the descendants of the vassal who swore the circumcision oath-course.

Supplementing what we have concluded as to the primary oath-course meaning of circumcision, we may now add that the specific malediction expressed by the symbolic action of circumcising the foreskin was the cutting off of the vassal's descendants so as to leave him without heir or name in the kingdom. In the parallel extra-biblical treaties there are numerous instances of the particular curse of being denied offspring or having one's descendants cut off. The following examples come from Esarhaddon's treaty with Ramataia. "May he [Ashur] never grant you fatherhood" (col. vi, l. 415 f.). "[May Šarpanitu who gives] name and seed, destroy your name and your seed [from the land]" (col. vi, l. 435 f.). "[Just as the seed of] a hinney [is sterile,] [may your name,] your seed and the seed of [your sons] and your [daughters be destroyed] from the land" (col. vii, ll. 537–539).¹¹⁷ A curse against the one who violated the treaty of Ashurnirari V with Mati'ilu was that he might "be a mule" and "his wife [have no] offspring."¹¹⁸ The treaty-deed of Abban with Iarimlim concludes with this curse against any who would alter Abban's deed: "May Ishtar who makes eunuchs . . . bind his member" (l. 19 f.).¹¹⁹ The final curse in the treaty of Tudhaliyas IV and Ulmi-Teshub is that if anyone changes even a word of the treaty tablet, "may . . . the thousand gods of this tablet root that man's descendants out of the land of Hatti" (rev. 25 ff.).¹²⁰

In this common treaty curse there was the perfect foil for the blessing that was so prominent in the covenant of circumcision, the blessing of the promised son for Abraham and Sarah. And this precise opposition that obtains between the particular blessing that is dominant in the Genesis 17 context and the circumcision-curse as we have interpreted it becomes

¹¹⁷ Cf. Wiseman, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 62, 70. The first example quoted is the first specific curse in the lengthy curse section of this treaty.

¹¹⁸ Col. V. Cf. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

¹¹⁹ Cf. D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets*, London, 1953, p. 25.

¹²⁰ Cf. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

convincing proof of the correctness of that interpretation when we observe that such an exact matching of curses and blessings is characteristic of the sanctions of the ancient treaties. For a biblical example, see in the Deuteronomic treaty the pairing of the six-fold blessing of 28:3-6 and the six-fold curse of 28:16-19, and note especially the appearance there again of the particular curse-blessing contrast featured in the covenant of circumcision: "cursed (or blessed) shall be the fruit of thy body" (vv. 4 and 18).

But the circumcision oath-rite was also a sign of consecration and in relation to that the meaning of the application of the circumcision sign to the male organ of generation would be that the descendants of the circumcised were consecrated with himself to the Lord of the covenant. Corresponding to this was God's promissory definition of this covenant as one he would establish with Abraham's descendants after him (Gen. 17:7). What may be inferred from the nature of circumcision as a cutting off of the foreskin is more explicitly expressed by the prescription of Genesis 17 that circumcision was to be administered (not only at the initial ratification ceremony of that day but throughout the coming generations) to the vassal's sons, and that on their eighth day (v. 12). Thus the vassal's descendants, who yet unborn were consecrated in the circumcision of their forefathers, were again and individually consecrated by the direct application of the sign of consecration to themselves.

These regulations for the administration of circumcision reveal the Abrahamic Covenant to be, like other vassal covenants, an instrument for incorporating a whole authority unit within the higher jurisdiction of the covenant suzerain. Nor was the authority unit in question confined to the sphere of Abraham's parental authority. He was instructed to bring the servants of his house as well as his son Ishmael under the sign of Yahweh's authority (vv. 12 f., 23, 27). The vassal unit thus extended to the more comprehensive sphere comprised within Abraham's authority as parent-householder.

The principle emerges here that a man who enters God's covenant by personal confession is held responsible by his Lord to bind with himself under the yoke of the covenant certain others of his subordinates (as more precisely specified

in the stipulations of a particular covenant administration). To fail to do so is a contradiction of one's oath of allegiance. That is why Moses, for the uncircumcision of his son, was in peril of the curse that was invoked against him in his own circumcision (Exod. 4:24–26).¹²¹ The verses immediately preceding that episode record God's commission to Moses to demand of Pharaoh that he let God's covenant son Israel go to serve him (Exod. 4:21–23). But how could Moses be the bearer of such a demand, how could he be the minister of God to lead forth the multitude of the Lord's servant-sons to their great consecration act at the mount of God, when he had neglected to consecrate his own son to the Lord by circumcision? So it was that God threatened to cut him off from his destiny in Israel — like the accursed ram in the Assyrian ratification ritual cited earlier, separated from the herd, never again to return to its place at their head.¹²²

We conclude then that the principle of vassal authority was integral to the administration of circumcision as sign of entrance into God's redemptive covenant. Confession of Yahweh's lordship as a matter of personal faith constituted the necessary nucleus and historical beginning for the administration of the rite, and thus for the formal establishment of the covenant community for which circumcision was (paradoxically) the sign of inclusion. There had to be an Abraham. But Abraham could not enter into this oath and covenant simply as an individual. It was Abraham the

¹²¹ A recent challenge to the traditional understanding of this passage as involving a threat against the life of Moses is presented by H. Kosmala ("The 'Bloody Husband' ", in *Vetus Testamentum* 12, 1962, pp. 14–28). Taking the pericope (Exod. 4:24–26) by itself, he is able to offer a plausible interpretation of the unaltered consonantal text in terms of a threat against a son of Moses, Moses himself not figuring at all in the episode. Several of the elements of Kosmala's exegesis seem sound; yet, as he acknowledges himself (p. 15), the passage according to the context in which it comes to us concerns a divine threat against the life of Moses.

¹²² So understood, this seemingly abrupt intrusion into Exodus 4 has clear thematic relevance for its context. Also, the blood smearing rite performed by Zipporah to avert the threatening death (v. 25b) invites comparison with the similar feature in the original passover ritual (Exod. 12:7, 22), the occasion of which is mentioned in the divine warning cited immediately before the pericope under discussion (see Exod. 4:23).

parent-householder, Abraham the patriarch, to whom God gave the covenant of circumcision. In keeping with the nature of the covenant as that may be discerned in the light of the most relevant biblical and extra-biblical data, covenantal incorporation into the kingdom of God did not proceed exclusively in terms of individual confession. The formation of the ancient covenant community was rather a process of incorporating households which were under the authority of a confessing servant of the Lord.

C. Baptism and the Authority Principle

When covenant is no longer identified with election and guaranteed blessing, and especially when the baptismal sign of incorporation into the covenant is understood as pointing without prejudice to a judgment ordeal with the potential of both curse and blessing, certain questions that have long ensnared the polemics of infant baptism are eliminated from consideration as no longer relevant. Within the framework of our doctrine of covenant and baptism the practice of infant baptism would clearly involve no presumption that the children of believers are Christians by birth.¹²³ No theory of

¹²³ Contesting the paedobaptist's appeal to the correspondence of baptism with circumcision, P. K. Jewett writes: "he reads the OT concept of a literal seed into the NT and argues that his children are Christians and members of the church by birth, with a right to baptism, just as in the OT a man was born a Jew with the right to circumcision as a citizen of the OT Jewish theocracy" (*op. cit.*, p. 525). According to Jewett, the paedobaptist does this because of his failure to observe that while the Jews possessed a terrestrial version of the celestial inheritance, "this temporal and terrestrial aspect of the covenant blessing has now passed away" (*op. cit.*, p. 524). The irrelevance of this type of argument for the view of covenant and baptism which the present article advocates is noted above. Here we would question the accuracy of the analysis of the difference between the historical contexts of circumcision and baptism. Since the theocracy in the kingdom form which Jewett evidently has in view came into being long after circumcision was instituted, is it not misleading to identify a Jew's right to circumcision with his citizenship in the theocratic kingdom? For over the first half-millennium of the administration of circumcision those who received it did not possess a temporal-terrestrial kingdom. Actually there is in this very respect a remarkable similarity between the age of Abraham when the covenant of circumcision was given and our New Testament age. Then as now the saints had promises of a

presumptive regeneration as the basis for the administration of baptism to infants could be reared on the foundation of law covenant. Neither, on our approach, would the baptism of the infants of believers signify a divine promise that they were destined to secure the blessings of the covenant sooner or later. Hence, there would be no need to theorize how the baptism of such might serve as a means of conveying to them the grace supposedly sealed to them by the rite, much less to apologize for the numerous cases in which that grace never is conveyed.

For us the pertinent question is whether the covenant for which baptism serves as oath-sign of incorporation is, like the divine covenants of the Old Testament and the parallel vassal covenants of the ancient world, a relationship of authority spheres rather than simply of individuals. That the New Covenant is in this respect like its precursors would be the natural inference to draw from our analysis of the New Covenant as generically one with the earlier covenants, new and old being alike law covenants, declarations of God's lordship over a people bound to him under the sanctions of life and death.¹²⁴ The pattern of authority is not peripheral but central in the vassal covenant form and therefore the whole weight of the historical case for identifying the New Covenant as a continuation of the earlier Suzerain-vassal covenants presses for the conclusion that this New Covenant is administered to confessors not just as individuals but as heads of authority units.

Direct New Testament evidence is available to the effect that Christ's authority as Lord of the covenant does indeed extend to his disciples' subordinates, commanding their obedience. At least that can be shown to be true in the case of the children of believers. In the discussion of infant baptism the episode of the bringing of the children to Jesus¹²⁵

kingdom of glory but were obliged to wait for the manifestation of it in any form whatsoever, temporal or eternal. In fact, the patriarchs were never to receive it in any other form than we Christians do, namely, as the eternal new heaven and new earth.

¹²⁴ See above under *B.2. New Covenant Judgment*.

¹²⁵ Matt. 19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17.

has been the source of considerable contention. But in support of the point we would make we need gather no more from that episode than that our Lord heartily approved when those with parental authority over these children exercised it to bring them to him and place them under the authority of his ministry. And that much at least would seem to be beyond debate. Another significant fact is that Paul instructed the children of various congregations to obey their parents in the Lord, and in support of his charge cited the pertinent stipulation of the Sinaitic Covenant together with its accompanying covenantal sanction.¹²⁶ Clear confirmation is also found in Paul's directive to covenant parents to bring their children under the nurturing and admonishing authority of the Lord.¹²⁷ In this exhortation the apostle takes for granted that it is the very authority of Christ as covenant Lord that reaches and claims children through the authority of their parents.

It is therefore a matter of express Scriptural teaching that the disciple of Christ is bound to bring those who are under his parental authority along with himself when he comes by oath under the higher authority of his covenant Suzerain. From this it follows that the Scriptures provide ample warrant for the administration of baptism to the children of confessing Christians, for baptism is the New Covenant rite whose precise significance is that of committal to Christ's authority and of incorporation within the domain of Christ's covenant lordship.¹²⁸

While the New Testament thus indicates decisively that the independent authority of the covenant servant continues to be a regulative factor in covenant administration, the explicit evidence for this is confined to household authority in its most fundamental form, the authority of the parent over his children. There does not appear to be any clear evidence in the New Testament that the societal authority structure of master and servant has been taken up into the organizational structure of the New Covenant. It would be

¹²⁶ Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20; *cf.* Exod. 20:12.

¹²⁷ Eph. 6:4.

¹²⁸ See above pp. 18 ff.

possible to interpret the New Testament accounts of household baptisms¹²⁹ in and of themselves as involving the baptism of household servants along with their converted masters and indeed on the basis of the confession of the latter. But nothing compels us to adopt such an interpretation of these episodes.¹³⁰ We may then ask whether there are any considerations which would rule out the reception of bond servants into the New Covenant on the basis of the authority of a believing master over them.

Since the adult servant is a personally responsible individual before God, one way of approaching our problem is to inquire whether New Testament evidence indicates that any change has taken place in the authority pattern of the covenant with respect to persons of that type. The New Covenant does appear to have instituted such a change in the case of unbelieving wives of Christian husbands. Under the Old Covenant the idea might not be entertained by one of the patriarchs or by a later Israelite that he was at liberty to permit his wife to dissociate herself from the covenantal relationship to which he had bound himself. The wives did not receive a sign of entrance into the covenant but they were none the less brought within the rule of the covenant along with the children and household servants when their husbands entered the covenant.¹³¹ Whatever their personal religious attitude, as members of a covenant member's household the wives were under the authority and sanctions of the covenant Lord. But according to I Corinthians 7:12 ff., in the New Covenant the believing husband's marital authority is not regarded as being at the same time a covenantal authority which claims his wife for the church. In fact, an unbelieving wife is to be

¹²⁹ Acts 16:15, 33 f.; I Cor. 1:16; cf. Acts 2:38 f.; 10:47 f.; 11:14; 18:8; II Tim. 1:16; 4:19.

¹³⁰ Since the evidence of these passages is indecisive on this point and also on the question of whether there were children present and baptized on these occasions, we have not rehearsed the details again here. For a recent examination of the related thesis that the biblical usage justifies our speaking of an *oikos*-formula, see Peter Weigandt, "Zur sogenannten 'Oikosformel'" in *Novum Testamentum* VI (Jan., 1963) 1, pp. 49-74. Weigandt joins K. Aland in his opposition to the *oikos*-formula thesis as developed especially by E. Stauffer and J. Jeremias.

¹³¹ Cf. e. g., Deut. 29:10 ff.; Neh. 10:28 f.; Gen. 35:2 ff.

permitted the initiative in determining whether she will even continue to live with her believing husband. There is no thought of his exercising the restraint of a covenantal authority to compel her to abide with him in a status of subjection to the Lord of the covenant. The important differences between the household position of the wife and that of the slave must give us some pause in using this datum concerning the wife of a believer to support a negative conclusion on the question of the covenantal status of a Christian master's unbelieving slave. On the other hand, the fact that the New Testament has changed previous covenantal administrative policy with respect to one type of adult under household authority would seem to place us under the obligation of finding positive New Testament evidence for our position if we are going to maintain that the householder's authority over other responsible adult subordinates has been taken up into the authority structure of the New Covenant. We cannot safely assume that such is the case simply on the basis of Old Testament administrative practice.

We are led to a yet more conclusive judgment on this issue when we take a broader and more analytical survey of the general relationship sustained by the covenant institution to other coexisting cultural authority structures in the successive epochs of covenant history. We cannot do more here than suggest the main outlines of this development, calling attention to the elements that are most relevant to our present topic and noticing in particular the nature of the sanctions employed in the several covenant administrations.

In the beginning under the Covenant of Creation no distinction existed between the covenant institution and an extra-covenantal area of cultural authority structures. The universal community of man in all his cultural relationships constituted precisely the form of the authority structure of the covenant. It is an ultimate goal of the Covenant of Redemption to bring about once again a total and simple institutional identification of the covenant with the entire community of the new mankind in his consummated relationship to the whole new creation. That will be the final accomplishment of Christ, the Redeemer-King.

In the historical administrations of the Covenant of Re-

demption prior to that consummation there is never a simple identification of the covenant structure with the totality of the human cultural complex.¹³² But neither is there a complete separation between the two. The Covenant of Redemption in its organization and operation avails itself of the structures and processes in which man's cultural history unfolds. It does so, however, in different ways in different ages.

In Old Testament times the redemptive covenant actually embodied itself in one or another cultural authority structure. These cultural units did not comprise the unbroken totality of culture as in the pre-redemptive age, but the covenant and the particular cultural unit did coalesce. As authority structures they were one and coextensive. Thus, the structure of the Abrahamic Covenant was identical with that of the patriarch's authority sphere. And since the covenant took over as its own structure the existing social structure with Abraham as head of the household-community, Abraham was also head over the covenantal community, and covenantal government included (even at the human level) cultural-physical sanctions.¹³³ In the course of time the patriarchal societal form was replaced by the kingdom of Israel, household authorities being now supplemented by various kingdom authorities. But the covenant structure was still one and the same as this more complex cultural form. In fact, it was the covenant revelation through Moses that had legislatively molded this cultural form of Israel with a view to the typological purposes of the covenant and its history in that pre-messianic age.¹³⁴

¹³² This is not to deny that the servant of God fulfills his cultural vocation as a covenantal service in the name of his Lord, but it is to recognize that the Covenant of Redemption exists in this world at present as a distinct and limited organizational entity in the midst of other non-covenantal institutions. Nor is the recognition of such non-covenantal institutions a denial of the lordship of Christ over all institutions; it simply distinguishes between the Covenant of Redemption as a specific historical program and confessional institution and the more fundamental and comprehensive Covenant of the Kingdom. (Cf. my "Law Covenant", p. 18.) In terms of the latter Christ is Lord, yes, even covenantal Lord, over all.

¹³³ Illustrative episodes from the patriarchal era would be those recorded in Gen. 16:6 ff.; 21:14; 27:28 f., 39 f.; 38:24; 49:2 ff.

¹³⁴ See the Deuteronomic stipulations regulative of Israel's government, especially 17:14 ff. Cf. I Sam. 10:17 ff.

In New Testament times there is no longer a simple coalescence of the authority structure of the covenant with that of any cultural unit. Although the New Covenant honors parental authority and works through it, the government of the New Covenant, even at the human level, is not limited to that (or to any more comprehensive) cultural form. For the New Covenant adds a system of special, strictly cultic, officers as a second, and indeed dominant, focus of its human authority structure. The New Covenant thus has a cultural authority focus in the covenant family and a cultic authority focus in the assembled, worshipping congregation with its special officers.

The latter feature is a significantly new development in the pattern of covenant authority. The Mosaic Covenant too had its special authorities in addition to the parent-householders of Israel, but that additional authority was not of a non-cultural nature. For it was the authority of a visible, earthly kingdom and as such it had recourse to economic and corporal, including capital, sanctions. The kingdom of Israel was, of course, not another Caesar-kingdom but, uniquely, the Kingdom of God institutionally present among the nations. Its earthly cultural form was symbolic of the ultimate integration of culture and cult in the world of the consummation. The judicial infliction of cultural sanctions by its officers typified the final messianic judgment of men in the totality of their being as cultural creatures. This institutional symbolization of the final judgment and eternal kingdom disappeared from the earthly scene when the Old Covenant gave way to the New.¹³⁵ In this age of the church, royal theocratic authority with its prerogative of imposing physical-cultural sanctions resides solely in Christ the heavenly King. The judicial authority of the permanent special officers whom

¹³⁵ The covenant as the lordship of Christ over his individual servants spans the kingdom-cultural and the church-cultic. These two areas even overlap institutionally in the authority structure of the covenant family. Nevertheless, until the eschatological reintegration of culture and cultus on a universal scale, the covenant people must distinguish between those functions they perform as members of the church (*i. e.*, the covenant institution in the total unity of its dual foci of authority) and their more general kingdom activities.

Christ has appointed to serve his church on earth is purely spiritual-cultic.

Cultural sanctions have no place, therefore, in the functioning of the central and dominant cultic authority focus of the New Covenant. And to introduce the sword or other cultural sanctions into the New Covenant's pattern of human authority in connection with its minor, household focus of authority would be alien to the distinctive spirit of the Covenant and its mission in the present age. The authority of the parent over the child involves no difficulty on this score since it is a spiritual-moral suasion. If the enforcement of parental authority has its corporal aspect, even that is not civil or judicial. But the authority of a master over a slave is fundamentally a civic-economic authority, violations of which are judicable in civil court and enforceable by the state's judicial sanctions. This cultural authority structure may not, therefore, be endowed with covenantal character in this age.

Hence we would judge that in the administration of the New Covenant and particularly of the New Covenant's sign of baptism, the believing master's authority over his servant is not reckoned as a covenantal authority. The servant, therefore, is not to be baptized on the basis of his household relationship to a Christian master.

Conclusions: The administration of baptism as the sign of demarcation of the congregation of the New Covenant takes account of both personal confession and of the confessor's temporal authority. Just as there had to be an Abraham as the confessing nucleus of the Abrahamic covenant community marked by circumcision, so there had to be a nuclear company of disciples who confessed Christ as Lord for the establishment of the church of the New Covenant sealed by baptism. So too in the continuing mission of that church among new families and peoples, the administering of the sign of covenantal incorporation awaits the emergence of the confession of Christ's lordship. But though the confession of faith has this primacy in the administration of baptism it is not the exclusive principle regulative of this rite. For the one who confesses Christ is required to fulfill his responsibility with respect to those whom God has placed under his parental

authority, exercising that authority to consecrate his charges with himself to the service of Christ. The basis for the baptism of the children of believers is thus simply their parents' covenantal authority over them.

For those who are baptized according to the secondary principle of authority as well as for those who are baptized according to the primary principle of confession, baptism is a sign of incorporation within the judicial sphere of Christ's covenant lordship for a final verdict of blessing or curse. At the same time, the significance of the reception of baptism in the two cases will differ as active consecration differs from passive consignment.

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