



As I noted in an earlier article in *Rite Reasons*, the Church Fathers Tertullian, Ambrose, and Augustine all claimed that baptism inducts the baptized person into membership in the royal priesthood of the church, and Thomas Aquinas said that baptism, by imprinting an indelible “character” on the soul, confers a share in the priesthood of Christ. This was even worked into some ancient baptismal liturgies; the actual water baptism was followed by an anointing with oil, and this was explained by reference to the anointing of priests and kings in the Old Testament.

Modern liturgical scholars have made the same connection. According to one recent article in the journal *Worship*, on the origins of baptism, most of the baptismal rites that existed in first-century Judaism involved self-baptism, self-washing. John the Baptist’s baptism was significantly different in this regard; he did not instruct the people to baptize themselves but urged them to come and be baptized by John himself (Mt. 3:6; Lk. 3:7). The majority of washings under the Old Testament ceremonial system were likewise self-washings (Lev. 14:8; 15:5, 7, 10, 11, 13). One of the few exceptions to this in the Old Testament system was Aaron and his sons, who were “baptized” by Moses at the time of their ordination (Lev. 8:6; see also Lev. 14:7; and Num. 19:19, where a corpse-defiled person was sprinkled by a “clean person”). The passive form of John’s baptism (and Christian baptism) is determined at least in part

by the priestly baptism, not by the baptisms of Jewish or Greek religion in the first century or by the other washings of the Old Testament.

Before moving on, we can see another dimension to the passive form of New Covenant baptism. Prophecies of the coming new Messianic order were frequently promises of water. Isaiah foretold the redemption of Jacob as an out-pouring of water and Spirit on dry ground (Is. 44:1-5). The water that the Lord supplies will renew the parched ground like a forest and garden (Is. 41:17-20). As in their first entry into the land, Israel will have to pass through water and be “sprinkled” clean as they enter the land after exile (Ezk. 36:24-25). In the first instance, these and other water prophecies have to do with the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile, but they also point to a final and greater exodus. When John the Baptist appeared offering water in the wilderness, he was claiming to fulfill these eschatological promises; the fact that he was baptizing around the Jordan particularly recalled Ezekiel’s prophecies about Israel’s restoration to the land. And in each case, these are promises that Yahweh will cleanse His people. The passive form of John’s baptism picks up on these prophecies, as well as on the priests’ ordination bath. The eschatological promise is that water and Spirit will be poured out in order to form a priestly people from the dry ground of old Israel. That the Jews understood the meaning of John’s baptism is shown by the questions they posed to him in John 1:19-28.

If we see Jesus’ own baptism by John as an inauguration to priesthood, some light can be shed on a few of the details of that event, especially as recorded in Luke’s account (Lk. 3:21-23). First, the question of why Jesus was baptized at all, especially with a baptism “of repentance for the remission of sins” (3:3), has frequently been answered by saying that Jesus was identifying Himself with His people. He submitted to baptism as part of His work as the sin-bearing substitute. This explanation fits very snugly with the view that Jesus was baptized into priestly ministry. The High Priest of Israel, after all, was a sin-bearer. Throughout the year, the sins of Israel “accumulated” on the High Priest until they were confessed over the scapegoat and sent out of the camp on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). The Aaronic priests were ordained to bear

the sins of Israel, “baptized” into substitutionary ministry. As Duane Spencer points out in his *Holy Baptism*, this explains what Jesus meant when He said that His baptism was part of “fulfilling all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15): Jesus fulfilled righteousness by undergoing baptism into priesthood.

Second, Luke tells us that immediately after His baptism Jesus “began His ministry,” being “about thirty years of age” (Lk. 3:23). Priests likewise began ministry at the age of 30 (Num. 4:34-37), following their ordination, which included a ritual bath.

Third, at the baptism of Jesus, the Father identified Jesus as the “Son of God” (Lk. 3:22). This can be a royal rather than a priestly title (see 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:6-7), and it surely carries that resonance in Luke 3. Jesus is the royal priest, the priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:1-3). But sonship is not unconnected with priesthood. The Levites, who served in a semi-priestly capacity, took the place of the firstborn sons of Israel (Numbers 3:38-51). In Hebrews 4:14 the new high priest is identified as “Jesus the Son of God,” and in 5:5 the author interprets Psalm 2:7 (“Thou art my Son”) as a prophecy of Jesus’ glorification as high priest.

Finally, immediately after recording the baptism, Luke gives the genealogy of Jesus (Lk. 3:23-38). By modern standards of literary structure, this does not seem to be an appropriate place to insert a genealogy. 1 Chronicles and Matthew make better sense in opening with genealogies. Once we see that Jesus’ baptism is the inauguration of His priestly ministry, however, nothing could be more appropriate than a genealogy. Priests of the Old Testament had to prove descent from Aaron, and later from a particular branch of the Aaronic clan, or they were not permitted to serve (Ezra 2:61-63). Throughout the Old Testament, priests are consistently identified as “son of” some previous priest, a sign that the priesthood was tied to physical descent. So Luke, having recorded Jesus’ baptism into priestly ministry, must show that Jesus has a right to this ministry.

Contrary to expectation, the genealogy proves that Jesus is not a descendent of Aaron but from the tribe of Judah. How then can he serve as priest? Luke, in keeping with Hebrews, shows that this Priest is from an older order, but Luke presses the case even further than Hebrews. This Priest is a priest after the order of Adam (Lk. 3:38). And as the first Adam, having been given the priestly ministry of guarding the garden, was tested by Satan, so also for this newly ordained Priest, who passes through the waters into the wilderness to be tested by the devil (Lk. 4:1-13), so that He could be a priest who was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

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