

# Early Christianity

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## **Editorial**

**J. Albert Harrill**

Atheist Catalogues as an Organizing Technique  
in Classical Literary Culture

**Patricia A. Duncan**

Eve, Mattidia, and the Gender Discourse of the Greek  
Pseudo-Clementine Novel

**Lyn M. Kidson**

Fasting, Bodily Care, and the Widows of  
1 Timothy 5:3–15

**Lynn Mills and Nicholas J. Moore**

One Baptism Once: The Origins of the Unrepeatability  
of Christian Baptism

## **New Discoveries**

Roy D. Kotansky, A Bronze “Rider Saint” Pendant  
with the Lord’s Prayer

## **New Projects**

Darius Müller and Peter Malik, Rediscovering Paratexts  
in the Manuscripts of Revelation

Garrick V. Allen and Kelsie G. Rodenbiker,  
Titles of the New Testament (TiNT): A New Approach  
to Manuscripts and the History of Interpretation



**Mohr Siebeck**

## Table of Contents

### **Editorial 147–148**

#### **J. Albert Harrill**

Atheist Catalogues as an Organizing Technique in Classical Literary Culture 149–170

#### **Patricia A. Duncan**

Eve, Mattidia, and the Gender Discourse of the Greek Pseudo-Clementine Novel 171–190

#### **Lyn M. Kidson**

Fasting, Bodily Care, and the Widows of 1 Timothy 5:3–15 191–205

#### **Lynn Mills and Nicholas J. Moore**

One Baptism Once: The Origins of the Unrepeatability of Christian Baptism 206–226

#### **New Discoveries**

Roy D. Kotansky, A Bronze “Rider Saint” Pendant with the Lord’s Prayer 229–243

#### **New Projects**

Darius Müller and Peter Malik, Rediscovering Paratexts in the Manuscripts of Revelation 247–264

Garrick V. Allen and Kelsie G. Rodenbiker, Titles of the New Testament (TiNT): A New Approach to Manuscripts and the History of Interpretation 265–280

Lynn Mills and Nicholas J. Moore

## One Baptism Once

### The Origins of the Unrepeatability of Christian Baptism

Dieser Artikel stellt die Annahme infrage, dass die Einmaligkeit der christlichen Taufe auf die Taufe des Johannes zurückgeht. Vor dem Hintergrund jüdischer Tauchbäder war die Taufe des Johannes wahrscheinlich wiederholbar. Eine zweistufige Entwicklung der christlichen Taufe, zunächst zu einem einmaligen Initiationsritus und danach zu einem nicht wiederholbaren Ereignis, ist aufgrund der Quellenlage am wahrscheinlichsten.

**Keywords:** ablutions, baptism, initiation, John the Baptist, once for all, one time, repeatable

## 1 Introduction

The search for the origins of Christian baptism is a perennial one, which remains both fascinating and frustrating in equal measure. Certain limited historical data are established beyond reasonable doubt, but much remains unclear and contested, not least because of the incomplete nature of the evidence available to us. Many scholars have however assumed that among the firm and reliable data is the fact that John's baptism was "once only," in that each individual underwent it on only one occasion.<sup>1</sup> For instance, to take a prominent and recent example, Everett Ferguson, in his weighty and thoroughly-researched volume on baptism in the first five centuries of this era, states at various points that John's baptism was a "one-time administered immersion."<sup>2</sup> He notes its similarity in this regard to proselyte baptism, although he does not believe that the latter underlies the former.<sup>3</sup>

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1 We maintain a distinction between "one time," meaning occurring once in the normal course of things, and "once only," meaning strictly unrepeatable. This distinction will become important in the second part of the article.

2 E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 89.

3 Ferguson, *Baptism* (see n. 2), 86–89.

Uncharacteristically, Ferguson does not give any ancient references or other evidence to support this view.

The one motivation or explanation he offers has to do with the eschatological tenor of John's preaching: "The one-time character of John's baptism derived not from proselyte baptism but his prophetic call announcing the messianic end times."<sup>4</sup> This eschatological connection is all the more dubious given that the Qumran community, which practiced frequent ritual immersion, and which Ferguson discusses in the same section, also had a strong eschatological orientation. To account for this divergence in practice despite similarities in outlook, Ferguson states simply that "this feature [of the Qumran community's beliefs] is not connected with its washings although the imagery of cleansing by water was used to describe the eschatological cleansing."<sup>5</sup> Ferguson has missed one of the primary identifiers of the Qumran community. Ritual purification was a very important element in preparation for the appointed time of judgement and the eschaton at Qumran. As Hannah Harrington states, "Purification is holistic, referring not simply to the removal of ritual impurity, but to a complete eradication of guilt and perversion so that a person can join the company of the holy angels and enjoy the blessings of the eschaton."<sup>6</sup>

Ferguson is not alone in his assumption that John's baptism was once only, and examples could be multiplied.<sup>7</sup> Although this is the dominant

4 Ferguson, *Baptism* (see n. 2), 86–87.

5 Ferguson, *Baptism* (see n. 2), 87.

6 H.K. Harrington, "Accessing Holiness via Ritual Ablutions in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature," in *Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. H.L. Wiley and C.A. Eberhart (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 71–95, here 86. Cf. J. Pryke, "John the Baptist and the Qumran Community," *RevQ* 4.4 (1964), 483–496, here 495; D.C. Smith, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John," *ResQ* 25.1 (1982), 13–32, here 31–32; M. Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul*, SNTSMS 53 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 48–49.

7 E. Lohmeyer, *Das Urchristentum: Johannes der Täufer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932), 151–152, states it was a once only like proselyte baptism. O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, trans. J.K.S. Reid, SBT 1 (London: SCM, 1950), 62–65, also assumes that John's baptism is once only on the pattern of proselyte baptism. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), regards John's baptism as a decisive conversion (p. 34) and calls it "a once-for-all baptism" (p. 40). K. Aland, "Zur Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe," in *Neues Testament und Geschichte: Historisches Geschehen und Deutung im Neuen Testament*; Oscar Cullmann zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. H. Baltensweiler and B. Reicke (Zurich: TVZ, 1972), 1–14, here 13, assumes the "Einmaligkeit" of John's baptism. A. Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism," in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, JSJSup 50 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 219–238, here 224, describes John's baptism as "an apparently once and for all ritual." D. Sänger, "Ist er heraufgestiegen, gilt er in jeder Hinsicht als ein Israelit" (b'Yev

opinion, it is not completely unchallenged. Bruce Chilton views this as a result of reading back from later Christian theology of baptism:

It is routinely claimed that John preached a “conversionary repentance” by baptism, an act once for all which was not repeatable nor to be repeated. That is a fine description of how baptism is portrayed in the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:1–8, and such a theology came to predominate within catholic Christianity. But ablutions in Judaism were characteristically repeatable, and Hebrews must argue against the proposition that one may be baptized afresh. Only the attribution to John of later, catholic theology of baptism can justify the characterization of his baptism as symbol of a definite “conversion.”<sup>8</sup>

In this article we will substantiate the challenge to the assumption of the unrepeatability of John’s baptism. First, we place John’s baptism in its early Jewish context of regular ritual immersions, and in the context of John’s call for repentance. Both of these settings suggest *prima facie* that we would expect it to be a repeatable rite. In combination with the fact that John’s baptism was not a rite of conversion or initiation into a movement or sect, this suggests there is no warrant for seeing it as a once-only ritual. Secondly, we will briefly trace the development of baptismal thought and practice in relation to this point in the early Christian movement, up until the turn of the third century. This survey demonstrates that the strictly unrepeatable nature of Christian baptism is a development related theologically to Jesus’s death and resurrection, and therefore did not emerge until after these

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47b): Das Proselytentauchbad im frühen Judentum,” in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, ed. D. Hellholm et al., BZNW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 291–334, here 299, states that John’s baptism was “einmalig und unwiederholbar.” H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 222, asserts, “When John baptized a person, it was a one-time event in that person’s life.” M. Öhler, *Taufe*, TdT 5 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 42, states, “Die Taufe des Johannes geschah, obwohl dies nicht explizit gesagt wird, nur einmal” (emphasis added). Cf. also J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 51–53; T.M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist, 1997), 137; J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 155.

8 B.D. Chilton, *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 26–27; cf. J.E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism*, Studying the Historical Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 70–71; S.J. Pfann, “The Essene Yearly Renewal Ceremony and the Baptism of Repentance,” in *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Technological Innovations, New Texts, and Reformulated Issues*, ed. D.W. Parry and E. Ulrich, STDJ 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 337–352, here 345; B.D. Chilton, “John the Purifier: His Immersion and His Death,” *HvTSt* 57.1–2 (2001), 247–267, here 260; J.M. Baumgarten, “The Law and Spirit of Purity at Qumran,” in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006), 93–105, here 101.

events and subsequent reflection upon them. In concluding, we will suggest that a two-stage process of development from John's rite, first to a one-time act of initiation and then to strict unrepeatability, best accounts for the historical data we have.

## 2 John's Baptism in Context

### 2.1 Jewish Ritual Immersions

Ritual purity was at the center of Jewish life. Many scholars argue that the state of sanctification had to be maintained in both the home and the Temple. Jacob Neusner states that the "sources of change and disruption that threaten the cleanness, hence the sanctification of the Temple are the same sources that threaten the norm of cleanness of the household. If the same uncleanness affects the Temple and the table, then the only difference is one of degree, not of kind."<sup>9</sup>

There are two primary ways that impurity is understood in the Hebrew Bible: ritual and moral. The sources of ritual impurities are natural, unavoidable, impermanent and not regarded as sinful; examples of this are childbirth and coming into contact with a corpse. Alternatively, moral impurity is sinful and is produced by committing acts which are prohibited and avoidable; examples are murder and sexual misconduct. Contrary to popular Christian conceptualization of Jewish ritual purity laws, these are not merely legalistic regulations meant to marginalize a large segment of the population with the taint of sinfulness. Amy-Jill Levine addresses this misunderstanding when she states,

Purity practices are not a form of social marginalizing. To the contrary, they are a recognition of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, then as now. Going to the Temple should not be the same thing as going to the market. Attending to the birth of a child or the burial of a corpse should not be followed immediately by a return to the world of business as usual, but should require taking the time to recognize the power of life and

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9 J. Neusner, "The Integrity of the Rabbinic Law of Purity (Mishnah-Tractate Tohorot)," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 9 (2006), 167–180, here 174. Cf. G. Alon, "The Bounds of the Laws of Levitical Cleanness," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Classical World: Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple and Talmud* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), 190–234; E. Regev, "Pure Individualism: The Idea of Non-priestly Purity in Ancient Judaism," *JSJ* 31.2 (2000), 176–202, esp. 187; S.S. Miller, "Stepped Pools, Stone Vessels, and Other Identity Markers of 'Complex Common Judaism,'" *JSJ* 41 (2010), 214–243, esp. 242; Y. Adler, "On the Origins of Tevilah (Ritual Immersion)," *TheTorah.com* (2017), <https://thetorah.com/on-the-origins-of-tevilah-ritual-immersion/>.

death. By engaging in distinctive practices concerning diet and immersion, Jews recognize the importance of the body.<sup>10</sup>

The Priestly (P) and Holiness (H) authors in the Pentateuch give detailed instructions on purity laws and the procedures for purification after becoming impure. These procedures involve four methods: ablutions, sacrifices, the passage of time, and disposal. David Wright states that “Bathing for humans (complete washing of the body) and washing for objects is a basic element in all purification rites.”<sup>11</sup> There are other forms of ablutions for general purification, such as washing of hands and feet by priests before performing their Temple service. If, as Wright has assumed, most rites for purification from impurity were accomplished by bathing the entire body, the Hebrew Bible gives little detail on immersion. However, by the Second Temple period, there is both archaeological and textual evidence for the widespread practice of immersion.

In considering the development of Jewish ritual immersion in the Second Temple period, it is instructive to note E.P. Sanders’s pithy summary of the situation:

Given the differences which we know existed within second temple Judaism, I am amazed that in the first century so many Jews in Palestine agreed (1) that there should be pools; (2) that they should be large enough to allow immersion. [...] in all probability immersion before entering the temple was *enforced*: thus the pools near the entrance. This is an unexpected, almost a fantastic degree of uniformity, once one recognizes that immersion pools are not required by the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the purity requirements to enter the Temple, immersion was practiced by Jews in the Second Temple period as the default method of ritual purity. Yonatan Adler points to Sifra Emor 4:7 as a Tannaitic and Amoraitic rabbinical source for the preferred practice of full immersion in order to remove impurity:<sup>13</sup>

10 A.-J. Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 128.

11 D.P. Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” *ABD* 6 (1992), 729–741, here 736.

12 E.P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM, 1990), 223–224 (emphasis original).

13 It should be noted that there is an inherent difficulty in citing rabbinic sources to support ritual immersion practice pre-70 CE, as dating these sources is very difficult, as is determining the extent to which they influenced popular piety. In fact, some scholars argue that the rabbinic discourse was attempting to normalize popular practice. Cf. B.G. Wright III, “Jewish Ritual Baths: Interpreting the Digs and the Texts; Some Issues in the Social History of Second Temple Judaism,” in *Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, ed. N.A. Silberman and D.B. Small, JSOTSup 237 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 190–214, here 192–193; S.S. Miller, “Stepped Pools and the Non-existent Monolithic ‘Miqveh,’” in *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender,*

כי אם רחץ בשרו, יכול יהיה מרחיץ אבר אבר ת"ל ובא השמש וטהר מה ביאת שמשו כולו כאחת אף במים כולו כאחת.

"Unless he has washed his body in water" (Lev 22:6). Perhaps he should wash one limb at a time? Scripture teaches: "When the sun sets he shall be clean" (Lev 22:7). Just as the setting of the sun occurs all at once, so too in water – all at once.<sup>14</sup>

Far from the Temple, *miqva'ot* are often discovered in rural agricultural areas next to oil or wine presses of the Second Temple period. "It is the strict observance of regulations related to the handling of fruits that calls for extreme purity: fruits that were picked and pressed to yield fluids (oil, wine) become susceptible to ritual impurity."<sup>15</sup> Adler notes that as of 2017 there have been approximately 1,000 archaeological *miqva'ot* identified in the land of Israel.<sup>16</sup> Stuart Miller argues convincingly that the practice of ritual immersion was widespread "in 'Ereṣ Israel not only among the sages and different types of pietists but also among the masses."<sup>17</sup>

A number of passages in the New Testament also attest to the widespread practice of purification by immersion. This reading emerges when the semantic range of βαπτίζω is taken seriously.<sup>18</sup> The basic meaning of the verbs βαπτίζω and βάπτειν is "to put into a yielding substance." Eckhard Schnabel glosses this in English as "to plunge, to dip, to immerse" and the extended meanings in greater context as:

when a person immerses himself in water, he "washes" himself; if she stays under water, she "drowns"; if a ship is immersed in the ocean, it "sinks"; when a woven cloth is im-

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*Ethnicity, Class and the "Other" in Antiquity*, ed. D.R. Edwards and C.T. McCollough (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2007), 190–214; id., *At the Intersection of Texts and Material Finds: Stepped Pools, Stone Vessels, and Ritual Purity among the Jews of Roman Galilee*, *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, Suppl. 16 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015). Miller's leitmotif in his well-researched monograph on the topic is that the practice of ritual immersion was both widespread among the Jewish population of Palestine and that practice varied widely.

14 Text after I.H. Weiss, *Sifra de-ve Rav hu sefer Torat kohanim* (Vienna: Schlossberg, 1862; repr., New York: Om, 1946), 96d; trans. Adler, "On the Origins of Tevilah" (see n. 9), 2.

15 R. Reich, "Miqva'ot," *EDSS* 1 (2000), 560–563, here 561.

16 Adler, "On the Origins of Tevilah" (see n. 9), 5. Adler, Ronny Reich, Sanders, and Miller are maximalists who take all stepped pools to be *miqva'ot*, rather than the minimalists' position which is that a stepped pool would have to be built according to rabbinic strictures to be a *miqveh*.

17 Miller, "Stepped Pools and the Non-existent Monolithic 'Miqveh'" (see n. 13), 223; cf. esp. the progression of Miller's argument *ibid.*, 224ff.

18 E.J. Schnabel, "The Meaning of βαπτίζω in Greek, Jewish, and Patristic Literature," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 24 (2011), 3–40, here 4, points out that the term "baptize" is a transliteration of the Greek βαπτίζω, not a translation.



mersed in water containing color pigments, it is “dyed”; when a knife is “plunged” into the flesh of an animal, it is “slaughtered.”<sup>19</sup>

Given this understanding that washing implies that the individual is immersed to do so, Adler reads “immerse” rather than “wash” in Mark 7:3–4 and Luke 11:38.<sup>20</sup> What is more, John 3:25 explicitly connects John’s baptism with ritual purification. While the reference and function of the dispute about purification (καθαρισμός) between John’s disciples and “a Jew” are opaque, this verse clearly demonstrates that John’s baptism was understood as relating to the wider domain of ritual purity.<sup>21</sup>

From this brief survey of archaeological and textual evidence it is evident that immersion was the purification method frequently employed by the priests and the people of Israel in the first century CE. Its purpose was to purify, and as one is continually exposed to natural and unavoidable impurities, purification is a recurring activity.

## 2.2 The Community at Qumran

John’s baptism is often compared with the ritual immersions of the community (*yahad*) at Qumran.<sup>22</sup> While some scholars define the first immersion upon entering the community as an initiation rite<sup>23</sup> and others argue against this,<sup>24</sup> it is agreed that the immersion rite was repeated daily.

<sup>19</sup> Schnabel, “Meaning of βαπτίζειν” (see n. 18), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Adler, “On the Origins of Tevilah” (see n. 9), 4.

<sup>21</sup> On the nature of this dispute in its Johannine and wider context, particularly the relationship between ritual and ethical purity, see N. Förster, “Jesus der Täufer und die Reinwaschung der Jünger,” *NTS* 64.4 (2018), 455–472.

<sup>22</sup> Though the debate continues whether the Essenes were the sect at Qumran, the identity of the sect need not concern us here as both the *yahad* at Qumran and the Essenes, as described by Josephus (*B.J.* 2.119, 128), practiced frequent ritual purity rites. For a summary of the argument, cf. J.C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 97–126. For a summary of the scholarly discussion on the identity of the Qumran community, cf. S.W. Crawford, “The Identification and History of the Qumran Community in American Scholarship,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Scholarly Perspective: A History of Research*, ed. D. Dimant, STDJ 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 13–30; D. Dimant, “Israeli Scholarship on the Qumran Community,” *ibid.*, 237–280.

<sup>23</sup> O. Betz, “Die Proselytentaufe der Qumransekte und die Taufe im Neuen Testament,” *RevQ* 2.2 (1958), 218; C.H.H. Scobie, “John the Baptist,” in *The Scrolls and Christianity*, ed. M. Black, Theological Collections 11 (London: SPCK, 1969), 58–69, here 62–63; Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (see n. 7), 50; R.L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study*, JSNTSup 62 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 159–160; J.D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature*, AcBib 23 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 135–141.

<sup>24</sup> H.H. Rowley, “The Baptism of John and the Qumran Sect,” in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of Thomas Walter Manson, 1893–1958*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Man-

John Pryke argues that the “washings of the sectarians, probably taken before every meal, were only a part of the ordered life of meticulous purity [...] they were not initiation ceremonies, admitting the candidate into the order, and possess such a tenuous connection with Christian baptism, that it is best forgotten.”<sup>25</sup> The *yahad* was hypervigilant regarding purity, as they considered the Temple defiled, and their community the alternative dwelling place for God. In order for God to dwell in the community, the community must be pure.<sup>26</sup>

One area in which the purity rites of the *yahad* and John share a common thread is in conflating moral and ritual impurity.<sup>27</sup> Purification was not achieved by washing in water alone but must be accompanied by repentance. Repentance is required only for moral impurity as ritual impurity was a natural and unavoidable state as seen above. This is seen most clearly in the Community Rule (1QS 3:4–9) where the candidate cannot be cleansed by waters of purification until he repents and submits to judgments of God, and instruction by the community.<sup>28</sup> The Synoptic Gospels connect John’s immersion to his message of repentance. Mark succinctly states, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).<sup>29</sup> Matthew and Luke expand on this (Matt 3:7–12; Luke 3:7–18). There is no need to posit Qumranic influence on John; we simply observe that the numerous points of similarity support the notion that John’s baptism was repeatable like the Qumran ritual.

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chester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 218–229; Pryke, “John the Baptist” (see n. 6), 494–495; Taylor, *Immerser* (see n. 8), 80–81; Newton, *Concept of Purity* (see n. 6), 27–28.

25 J. Pryke, “The Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion in the Light of the Ritual Washings and Sacred Meals at Qumran,” *RevQ* 5.4 (1966), 543–552, here 546–547.

26 For a well-researched and articulated thesis on purity at Qumran, cf. Newton, *Concept of Purity* (see n. 6), esp. 32–34 for the function of the ritual baths.

27 J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75; id., “Moral and Ritual Purity,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. A.-J. Levine, D.C. Allison Jr., and J.D. Crossan, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 266–284, here 278–281.

28 Text in J.H. Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations; Rule of the Community and Related Documents*, PTSDSSP 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 13.

29 All biblical quotations are taken from NRSV unless otherwise stated.

### 2.3 John's Baptism of Repentance

John's baptism was not an initiation rite. He was not founding a new sect or group. John was preaching a message of repentance within the framework of Judaism, taking the images of cleansing and repentance from the Hebrew Bible and interpreting them in the dominant practice of immersion for ritual cleansing in the first century CE.<sup>30</sup> His prophetic message echoes those of the Hebrew Bible prophets. It is a call to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). John gives specific instructions to care for the poor, not to steal from them, or exploit them through protection schemes in Luke 3:11–14.

Josephus readily records this aspect of John's message: "[He] commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God" (*A.J.* 18.117a). In keeping with Josephus's avoidance of any mention of things eschatological, he does not record the eschatological content of John's preaching, nor the call to repentance with the remission of sins. However, the call to righteous behavior is intricately tied to John's call to repentance. True repentance results in changed behavior. The reason John preaches this message is to "prepare the way of the Lord." If Jesus is the one coming after, as the writers of the Gospels are at pains to emphasize, then John expected this to happen in his lifetime and worked to bring his fellow Jews back into right relationship with God to prepare for this coming judgement. Israel was called to repentance by her prophets repeatedly and the formal rites were enacted every year at Yom Kippur. John has taken up the mantle of Israel's prophets calling his people to return to their Lord. This is a call not for conversion, but rather for a return to the covenant. As it is not an initiation ceremony, but rather a repentance ceremony, it need not be restricted to a one-time event. In support of this – although an argument from silence is never solid ground on which to stand – it is worth mentioning that there are no extant ancient texts which state that John's baptism was a one-time only rite.

### 2.4 Prophetic Symbolism

Before we move on from John, it is important to consider two potential arguments for his rite having a one-time character. The first is its symbolic connection with the Israelites' one-time entry into the land at the Jordan (cf. the one-time deliverance out of Egypt in Jude 5). John, the prophet, was calling the people of Israel, his fellow Jews, to a renewal of the covenant and

30 Cf. Ps 51:2; Ezek 36:25–27; Jer 4:14; 33:8; Isa 1:16–17.

return to their God, as mentioned above. In the tradition of the Hebrew Bible prophets, his physical actions were a medium for his message.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the somewhat opaque actions of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea, John's choice to conduct his baptism in the river Jordan, possibly close to where Joshua led Israel into the land, was more obviously connected to his message. Being immersed in the Jordan, particularly on the east bank (John 1:28; 3:26; 10:40), the baptized would cross (back) across the Jordan and re-enter the promised land, having repented and renewed their covenant with God.<sup>32</sup> Robert Webb describes this scenario, acknowledging that it is plausible that John conceived of his baptism in this highly symbolic way, but that it was not possible to confirm, and admitting that it is possible that John baptized elsewhere than the Jordan.<sup>33</sup> We suggest that the textual evidence supports the contention that John baptized only in the Jordan, and therefore that he deliberately chose this site to enact prophecy and herald in the end times. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor states that "John's choice of location was a deliberate prophetic gesture," and points out that "John appeared exactly where Elijah had disappeared (2 Kings 2:4–11)."<sup>34</sup>

While this characteristic of prophetic symbolic action may be the most convincing of arguments for the unrepeatable aspect of John's baptism, it is challenged by a parallel in the covenant renewal ceremony at Qumran. The text uses phrases such as "cross over into the covenant" (ובעוברם בברית, 1QS 1:18) to describe the action of entering the community in a ceremony which involves ritual immersion. Although "entering the covenant is a definitive act, it is one that is never completed once and for all. Through the yearly ritual the sectarian repeatedly re-enacts the movement of 'crossing over' and 'entering in' that constitutes his identity."<sup>35</sup> Keeping in mind the commandment to remember the exodus out of Egypt<sup>36</sup> in an annual re-

31 Cf. Isa 20; Jer 13:1–11; Hos 1:1–9.

32 For discussion on the locations of John's baptism, cf. J.E. Taylor, "John the Baptist on the Jordan River: Localities and Their Significance," *Aram Periodical* 29 (2017), 565–583; B. Reicke, "The Historical Setting of John's Baptism," in *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Church: Essays in Honor of William R. Farmer*, ed. E.P. Saunders (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 209–224. C. Evans, "The Baptism of John in Typological Context," in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. S.E. Porter and A.R. Cross, JSNTSup 234 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 45–71, here 50–52, argues for a geographical connection to the twelve stones set up by Joshua.

33 Webb, *John the Baptizer* (see n. 23), 364–365.

34 J. Murphy-O'Connor, "John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypotheses," *NTS* 36.3 (1990), 359–374, here 360, cf. his n. 7.

35 C.A. Newsom, *The Self as Symbolic Space: Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran*, STDJ 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 118.

36 Exod 12:14; Lev 9:1–5; Deut 6:1.

enactment of the Passover meal, it is not surprising that these rites would be repeatable.

John's ministry certainly had prophetic-symbolic aspects, but the Qumran parallel suggests that his immersive rite would have been iterable at least annually if not more frequently.

## 2.5 Proselyte Baptism

One final argument for the one-time character of John's baptism relates to Jewish proselyte baptism, long held to underlie John's rite. However, the current scholarly consensus is that the textual evidence does not support this. The debate is perhaps best articulated on one side by Joachim Jeremias who provides the most comprehensive argument for proselyte baptism being the source of John's baptism,<sup>37</sup> and Derwood Smith who decisively argues against this view and Jeremias's argument in particular.<sup>38</sup>

It is sufficient for our purposes to summarize briefly the most critical argument here. Jeremias argues that proselyte baptism predates John's on the basis that one must have influenced the other and that Jewish hostility towards Christianity would have prevented influence from Christianity.<sup>39</sup> From this starting point Jeremias considers the available texts in which he reads proselyte baptism. Yet his foundational assumption is flawed. One need not assume that one rite influenced the other. Both could have developed independently from the same source: Jewish ritual immersion. Given his starting point, Jeremias has fallen prey to confirmation bias. The texts he (and others) cite are either difficult or impossible to date before John and/or are misread as to the nature of the purification.<sup>40</sup>

Another consideration is the aspect of initiation in proselyte baptism. The rabbinic literature refers to three requirements for conversion to

37 J. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, The Library of History and Doctrine (London: SCM, 1960), 24–37. For a more extensive list of arguments for an early date, cf. Webb, *John the Baptizer* (see n. 23), 123 n. 93.

38 Smith, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism" (see n. 6), 13–32. For additional scholars who argue against proselyte baptism being the source for John's baptism, cf. Ferguson, *Baptism* (see n. 2), 76–82; S. Légasse, *Naissance du baptême*, LD 153 (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 89–106; Webb, *John the Baptizer* (see n. 23), 122–130; Taylor, *Immerser* (see n. 8), 64–69.

39 Jeremias, *Infant Baptism* (see n. 37), 24.

40 The most common texts cited are T. Levi 14:6; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.9, 19–21; Sib. Or. 4:163–167; m. Pesah. 8:8; b. Yebam. 46a–47b; and Justin, *Dial.* 122–123. Cf. Smith's refutation of these texts and his conclusion that proselyte baptism first originated in the latter half of the first century CE (Smith, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism" [see n. 6], 19–22).

Judaism: circumcision (for males), immersion, and sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> The only requirement for a gentile converting to Judaism which was unrepeatable was circumcision. The immersion would be repeated many times, perhaps even daily. The only feature of the initial immersion which set it apart from subsequent washings was the requirement of three witnesses.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, even if the initial full ceremony was a one-time event, the immersion itself was certainly repeated frequently.

Proselyte baptism was the first of many immersions in the life of the convert, and in any case probably developed too late to influence John's baptism. All of the above evidence taken together strongly suggests that it is highly likely that John's baptism was repeatable in principle, and – although the time of his ministry was short – quite probably in practice as well. The origins of Christian baptism's unrepeatability must therefore be sought elsewhere.

### 3 The Trajectory of Early Christian Baptismal Practice and Theology

Having established that John's baptism was repeatable, the concern of the second half of this article is to trace the development of the *unrepeatable* aspect of Christian baptism, and to indicate the theological developments which accompany this historical trajectory. We do so through a brief examination of key passages in the New Testament, the Shepherd of Hermas, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.

Before beginning this survey, however, a word on its end point. The question of repeating baptism appears to be a live one in the Novatianist controversy in the third century CE. In fact, however, this dispute *presupposes* the once-only nature of Christian baptism. All sides agree that Christian baptism is unrepeatable; what is at issue is the question "what constitutes a valid Christian baptism?" On this point the African bishops (in a council convened by Agrippinus in ca. 230 CE), and later Novatian (in the mid-third century), refused to accept baptism conducted by heretical groups, and therefore apparently *rebaptized* members joining them from

41 See b. Yebam. 46b–47b. Note that according to Maimonides, after the destruction of the Temple, only circumcision and immersion were required: "Once the Temple is built, one will bring a sacrifice" (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Kedushah, Forbidden Intercourse 13:5, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah%2C\\_Forbiddn\\_Intercourse.13.5?lang=bi&with=Versions&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Forbiddn_Intercourse.13.5?lang=bi&with=Versions&lang2=en)).

42 See b. Qidd. 62b.

those groups – but they in fact understood themselves to be administering true Christian baptism for the first (and only) time. Tertullian stands as an African witness to the consensus over baptism’s “once-only” status a generation before Agrippinus’s synod, and therefore our survey ends with him.

### 3.1 Early Christian Baptism as Initiation into “the Way” (Acts)

Acts is treated first because of its narrative setting at the origins of the Jesus movement. John’s baptism, which receives some attention in Luke, continues to be in the frame at certain points in Acts.<sup>43</sup> The most significant episodes for our purposes are the mention of Apollos, and the “rebaptism” of the twelve Ephesian disciples (Acts 18:24–28 and 19:1–7, respectively). The striking contrast between these two juxtaposed episodes is that Apollos is not baptized again, whereas the Ephesian believers are. The Ephesian case demonstrates that John’s baptism did not, in principle, exclude a subsequent baptism, even if this is understood to be of a different kind or for a different purpose. The fact that, so far as we can discern, Apollos was not baptized a second time,<sup>44</sup> would seem to imply that his baptism by John came to be regarded as an initiation into the Jesus movement because he had progressed from John’s teaching to an adherence to “the Way of the Lord.” That is to say, both incidents point to the same underlying fact: John’s baptism, for Luke, was not in itself an act of initiation into a movement, but could be re-evaluated as such, providing that adherence to the core tenets of the emerging Jesus movement had followed on from it.<sup>45</sup> Conversely, where such adherence or understanding was lacking beyond a certain degree, a fresh baptism was appropriate. Both examples, then,

<sup>43</sup> Acts 1:5, 22; 10:37; 11:16; 13:24–25; 18:25; 19:3–4. This demonstrates the “extensive base and influence of John’s ministry” (J.B. Green, “From ‘John’s Baptism’ to ‘Baptism in the Name of the Lord Jesus’: The Significance of Baptism in Luke-Acts,” in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R.E.O. White*, ed. S.E. Porter and A.R. Cross, JSNTSup 171 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 157–172, here 162).

<sup>44</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 335, suggests Apollos does need to receive baptism as part of his “further initiation.” Contrast D.L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 592–593; and J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 637, 639, who thinks Apollos’s deficiency is “remedied by instruction” whereas the Ephesian believers’ deficiency is “remedied by baptism.”

<sup>45</sup> So Green, “John’s Baptism” (see n. 43), 168, for whom John’s baptism was supposed to lead people “in a christological direction.”

reinforce the contention of the first half of this article that there was nothing in principle to prevent John's baptism from being repeated.

Consideration of these two events also leads us to the second important point to be drawn from Acts: Christian baptism is here portrayed as an initiation into a movement. In Acts 2, although the description of Peter's exhortation to the crowd to be baptized in vv. 37–41 retains the strong overtones of John's preaching with its emphasis on eschatology and repentance, the context nevertheless indicates that baptism here functions as initiation into a group or movement. Thus in response to Peter's command we read that "three thousand persons were *added* (προσέτεθισαν)," rather than "baptized," and the following verses (vv. 42–47) indicate commitment to a pattern of teaching and common life.<sup>46</sup> The events of Pentecost are paradigmatic for the rest of the book of Acts, and thus we would expect the aspect of initiation to obtain in other places where baptism is mentioned.<sup>47</sup> In some places this is explicit: for the Philippian jailer and the Corinthian believers, baptism marks their conversion (16:34; 18:8); for Paul, it is part of his commissioning to become an apostle of the Way (9:15–18; 22:10, 15–16); for Lydia, as probably also for the Samaritan believers, it is the beginning of a new community life (8:13–17, 25; 16:15, 40). Moreover, despite the importance of baptism within Acts, and despite its status as an initiation rite, it is nowhere suggested that baptism could not be repeated. Indeed, the episode with the Ephesian dozen might suggest the opposite in those cases where baptism was not a marker of initiation into the Jesus movement.

### 3.2 Baptism and Christ's "Once-for-All" Death (Rom 6 and 1 Pet 3)

In the Letter to the Romans, written some time in the mid-to-late 50s CE, Paul connects baptism with Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–4;<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Thus Yarbrow Collins emphasizes in commenting on Acts 2 that "among the early Christians [...] the ritual became an initiation rite into a community" (Yarbrow Collins, "Origin of Christian Baptism" [see n. 7], 233, cf. 235).

<sup>47</sup> That baptism constitutes an initiation in Acts is relatively uncontroversial among scholars. Cf. Green, "John's Baptism" (see n. 43), 163–164; C.R. Holladay, "Baptism in the New Testament and Its Cultural Milieu: A Response to Everett Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church," *J ECS* 20.3 (2012), 343–369, here 367; K. Stendahl, "One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins," *Worship* 40.5 (1966), 272–275, here 273, 275; Fitzmyer, *Acts* (see n. 44), 265; Johnson, *Acts* (see n. 44), 61–62.

<sup>48</sup> This is "the key, indeed distinctive, baptismal passage in Paul" (Ferguson, *Baptism* [see n. 2], 155). Connecting baptism with death and resurrection is "Paul's innovative insight" (Holladay, "Baptism" [see n. 47], 354).



cf. 1 Cor 1:13; Col 2:12–13; Mark 10:38–39; Luke 12:49).<sup>49</sup> He goes on to highlight the emphatically once-for-all (ἐφάπαξ) nature of Christ's death (Rom 6:10). The debate over how far the baptismal imagery stretches in this passage (ending at v. 4 or continuing throughout), and whether it is concrete or figurative,<sup>50</sup> need not detain us, as no reading entirely effaces the distance between baptism and ἐφάπαξ, with Christ's death as the middle term. In other words, Paul does not directly describe baptism as once-for-all, nor would such a connection serve the primary goal of the passage. Rather, the connection of baptism with death and resurrection, and thus of the believer with Christ, forms the basis of an ethical exhortation which seeks to engender the *ongoing* mortification of sin and living to God (6:11–14). The fact that this “once-for-all” concept is shared with 1 Peter and Hebrews might suggest a traditional origin, although whether traditional or not it is here clearly integrated into Paul's argument, underlining the definitive nature of Christ's death which is a gateway to his unending resurrection life (Rom 6:9–10).

A strikingly comparable occurrence of ἅπαξ in the context of discussion of baptism is found in 1 Pet 3:18.<sup>51</sup> As with the precise extent of the baptismal imagery in Romans, debates over 1 Peter's possible origins as a baptismal homily or liturgy need not detain us.<sup>52</sup> The explicit mention of baptism in 1 Pet 3:21 is introduced via appeal to Noah and the flood (3:20–21), which itself follows an appeal to Christ's suffering (πάσχειν, ἔπαθεν, 3:17–19). Here the appeal to the *once-for-all* nature of Christ's suffering as a basis for believers' *ongoing* patience in suffering (3:17) is perhaps a little more incongruous, and suggests that by the time of 1 Peter we are more certainly dealing with a traditional connection between Christ's death and

49 This leads Cullmann, *Baptism* (see n. 7), 22, to speak of “the baptismal death of Christ completed once for all on the cross,” but this is a conflation and development of several New Testament traditions.

50 J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 308, sees baptism here as one metaphor among many. U. Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M.E. Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 329, regards it as central. For a treatment which underlines the importance of baptism for identity formation, cf. S. Siikavirta, *Baptism and Cognition in Romans 6–8: Paul's Ethics beyond “Indicative” and “Imperative”*, WUNT 2/407 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

51 A wide variety of dates are suggested for 1 Peter, depending in part on whether or not it is held to be pseudepigraphal. For the purposes of this overview a date after Romans and likely at some point in the second half of the first century CE is sufficient. The probable connection with Rome (1 Pet 5:13) is also significant given the overlaps with Romans on the theme examined here.

52 Such reconstructions have in any case been subject to sustained criticism and are no longer widely held; cf. P.J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 59–62.

its once-for-all nature.<sup>53</sup> As with Romans, 1 Peter does not directly describe baptism as once for all. Both of these texts, then, suggest an important theological association between baptism and the death (and resurrection) of Christ understood as once for all, and yet do not make any clear inference from this that baptism itself is strictly unrepeatable.

### 3.3 “Impossible to Renew Again Those Once Enlightened” (Heb 6)

The Letter to the Hebrews thematizes repetition in ways unique within the New Testament.<sup>54</sup> The impossibility of renewing the apostate to repentance is described in Heb 6, and connected with the offence associated with crucifying the Son of God. This chapter was interpreted as speaking of baptism in the early church,<sup>55</sup> although this is not explicit. Reference to “baptisms” comes in Heb 6:2 as part of the list of basic teachings, though the word is ὁ βαπτισμός, commonly used of immersions and ablutions,<sup>56</sup> and not τὸ βάπτισμα, the usual term for Christian and John’s baptism. Language of “renewal” (ἀνακαινίζω, 6:6) and “enlightenment” (φωτίζω, 6:4) was taken by patristic authors to signal baptism.<sup>57</sup> The prevalence of this interpretation is indicated by the Peshitta rendering of Heb 6:4 as “those who have gone down into baptism.”<sup>58</sup> The “foundational teaching” (6:1), repentance and faith (6:1), and reception of the Holy Spirit (6:4), all point quite clearly to an initiatory or conversionary experience<sup>59</sup> such as is associated with baptism elsewhere, not least in Acts. As with Rom 6 and

53 Cf. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (see n. 52), 241–242, 246–247.

54 Cf. N.J. Moore, *Repetition in Hebrews: Plurality and Singularity in the Letter to the Hebrews, Its Ancient Context, and the Early Church*, WUNT 2/388 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 31–66.

55 P.E. Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6 and the Peril of Apostasy,” *WTJ* 35.2 (1973), 137–155.

56 The same word occurs in Heb 9:10, clearly referring to ceremonial washing; in both instances plural washings are envisaged.

57 For “renewal,” cf. Ps 102:5 LXX (ἀνακαινίζω); Rom 6:4 (καίνετης); Eph 4:23 (ἀνανεώω); Ambrose, *Paen.* 2.2. For “enlightenment,” cf. Heb 10:32; Justin, *1 Apol.* 61.12 (φωτισμός, φωτιζομένων, language which already appears to be traditional); Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 2.1; *Hom. Heb.* 13.10. Cf. Ferguson, *Baptism* (see n. 2), 241. The association of baptism with enlightenment was strengthened by the practice of lengthy instruction for the catechumenate before admission to baptism, usually at Easter (Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6” [see n. 55], 139).

58 S. Byrskog, “Baptism in the Letter to the Hebrews,” in Hellholm et al., *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* (see n. 7), 587–604, here 592.

59 So Ferguson, *Baptism* (see n. 2), 187; Hughes, “Hebrews 6:4–6” (see n. 55), 151–154; W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Dallas: Word, 1992), 141. P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 319, agrees that this is initiatory, but thinks the rest of Heb 6:4–5 (after “once enlightened”) may refer to present Christian experience.

1 Pet 3, we find a clear connection with the crucifixion (ἀνασταυροῦντας, Heb 6:6) – whether the verb is understood as “crucifying” or “recrucifying” – and also with “once-for-all” language (ἅπαξ, 6:4). This terminology of ἅπαξ/ἐφάπαξ in connection with the Christ event is more prominent in Hebrews than in the rest of the New Testament put together; in a small yet significant shift from Romans and 1 Peter it characterizes Christ’s heavenly entrance and offering (as the climax of the process leading up to it) rather than his death alone (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10).

Hebrews moves beyond Romans and 1 Peter in excluding the possibility of repeating Christian initiation,<sup>60</sup> and for explicitly theological reasons relating to the nature of apostasy as crucifying or re-crucifying the Son of God. This is the closest any New Testament text comes to an explicit theology of baptism as unrepeatable; yet it does not quite take that step, even if the language it uses readily lends itself, in the eyes of later readers, to such an interpretation.

### 3.4 “One Baptism” (Eph 4)

The Letter to the Ephesians<sup>61</sup> mentions “one baptism” (Eph 4:5) as part of a series of “ones” in an apparently confessional or credal formula. Scholars generally agree that in this context “one” does not denote the temporal “one-time” or “once-only” quality of baptism.<sup>62</sup> A variety of meanings for “one baptism” here have been posited.<sup>63</sup> Raymond Brown proposes that it means “baptism into the one Lord,” and suggests that the oneness of baptism comes from Jesus’s oneness; he goes on to elucidate this with reference to the ἐφάπαξ nature of Christ’s death and resurrection, concluding that “through ‘one baptism’ all Christians have the same radical

<sup>60</sup> The date of Hebrews is comparable to 1 Peter in its possible range (second half of first century) and its indeterminacy within this range; no direct dependence, influence, or development is being invoked here, but the co-incidence is noteworthy. Hebrews’ probable Roman connections (Heb 13:14, 24) reinforce this.

<sup>61</sup> Modern scholarship generally regards Ephesians as deutero-Pauline and therefore later than the undisputed Pauline corpus. Given that, as we shall see, it does not address the question of baptism’s repeatability, its precise dating is less relevant to the trajectory of development we are tracing here.

<sup>62</sup> A.R. Cross, “‘One Baptism’ (Ephesians 4:5): A Challenge to the Church,” in Porter and Cross, *Baptism* (see n. 43), 173–209, here 184; D.F. Wright, “One Baptism or Two: Reflections on the History of Christian Baptism,” *VE* 18 (1988), 7–23, here 9; M. Barth, *Ephesians*, AB 34 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), 468.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. J.A.T. Robinson, “One Baptism as a Category of New Testament Soteriology,” *SJT* 6.3 (1953), 257–274, who holds the view that the whole world is baptized in Jesus; and the refutation by W.E. Moore, “One Baptism,” *NTS* 10.4 (1964), 504–516.

initiation into the once-for-all Christ event.”<sup>64</sup> This is a good illustration of the kind of inferences and intracanonical connections that are made by subsequent readers of the New Testament: there is nothing in Ephesians itself to suggest that “one baptism” should be connected with the “once-for-all” tradition; moreover, Brown himself excludes the further inference that baptism’s “once-only” aspect is in view.<sup>65</sup>

The prevailing view in scholarship is that “one baptism” refers to the common nature of baptism as shared by all believers.<sup>66</sup> This is supported by the other terms in the list: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one God and Father of all. What matters is not the numerical or temporal singularity of any of these items, but their united or unifying nature, as grounds for the unity (ἐνότης) which the Ephesian Christians both already enjoy (4:3) and must strive towards (4:13).<sup>67</sup> Ephesians thus does not alter the picture we have traced elsewhere in the New Testament.

### 3.5 Baptism the “One, First, and Only Repentance” (Hermas and Clement of Alexandria)

Moving forwards in our historical trajectory we come to the early second century text, the Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>68</sup> Here for the first time we find an explicit description of the unrepeatable nature of baptism. In Mand. 4:3, Hermas asks whether there is only one repentance, which occurred “when we descended into the water”;<sup>69</sup> he has heard this from “some teachers.”<sup>70</sup> The angel affirms this teaching, and goes on to allow a further repentance, but not a second baptism. The reference to “some teachers” may indicate that this view of baptism was not universal, although it more likely relates to the teaching on repentance, which is the focus of the passage.

64 R.E. Brown, “We Profess One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins,” *Worship* 40.5 (1966), 260–271, here 268.

65 Brown, “One Baptism” (see n. 64), 267.

66 So, e.g., Barth, *Ephesians* (see n. 62), 469–470.

67 Best notes that there is “constant difficulty in determining the precise significance of the ‘one’ attached to each noun” (E. Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998], 371, cf. 366–372).

68 Written roughly 110–140 CE; see B.D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, LCL 25 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 168–169.

69 Baptism is often implicit in Hermas, but is fundamental to the book’s argument (V. Blomkvist, “The Teaching on Baptism in the Shepherd of Hermas,” in Hellholm et al., *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* [see n. 7], 849–870, here 850).

70 Baptism as forgiving all prior sins may also be in view in Herm. Vis. 2:2 (“your wife, who is about to become your sister,” would suggest conversion), though this may be an instance of the second repentance, as Blomkvist, “Teaching on Baptism” (see n. 69), 854–855, suggests.

A comparable passage is found in Clement of Alexandria's *Miscellanies*, where he speaks of the "first and only repentance" (πρώτη καὶ μόνη μετάνοια, *Strom.* 2.13.56). This is unrepeatable, but there is a second repentance (μετάνοια δεύτερα) – which is itself also unrepeatable, for it is a "repentance not to be repented of" (μετάνοια ἀμετανόητος, 2.13.57).<sup>71</sup> There is no explicit mention of baptism, but the reference is clear enough, in particular given the reference to the former life as pagan, to cleansing (2.13.56), and an earlier passage (2.3) in which repentance and baptism are juxtaposed.

In a second notable passage Clement dismisses the Levitical injunction to wash after sexual intercourse, because the Lord "has cleansed believers by one single baptism, just as he takes in the many washings prescribed by Moses (τὰ πολλὰ Μωυσέως) by one single baptism (δι' ἑνὸς [...] βαπτίσματος)" (*Strom.* 3.82.6). This is a brief statement to justify Christian (non-)observance of an Old Testament command by reference to fulfilment. Yet in doing so, it sets Christian baptism in contrast to Jewish ritual washings which are plural, both in their temporal repetition and in their various purposes. It would therefore appear that the word "one," for Clement, tilts towards "once only" (cf. Ferguson's translation "one *single* baptism").

Clement, writing in the second half of the second century, is aware of the Shepherd and regards it highly, so his position on baptism may derive partly from this text. Given the relatively allusive, almost incidental nature of these references, however, it seems more likely that baptism's unrepeatability had become established, at least in some places, by the early second century, and that both the Shepherd and Clement are witnesses to it.

### 3.6 Baptism as "Once for All" (Tertullian)

The final point on this tour is Tertullian, at the turn of the third century. His witness to baptism's unrepeatable nature is clear and makes use of the "once-for-all" tradition. In *Bapt.* 12 he cites John 13:10 ("one who has bathed does not need to wash"), only with the following additions: "he who has *once* (*semel*) bathed has no need to do it *again* (*rursum*)."<sup>72</sup> This roots baptism's nature as once only in a dominical saying, lending it the earliest

<sup>71</sup> John Ferguson's translation, "a repentance which brings no regret" (FC 85.197), rather weakens the force of the expression, with its deliberate lexical reduplication.

<sup>72</sup> Text and trans. E. Evans, Q. *Septimii Florentis Tertulliani De baptismo liber/Tertullian's Homily on Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964).

provenance and highest authority.<sup>73</sup> A little further on in the treatise this is spelled out again:

We enter into the bath once only (*semel*), once only (*semel*) are our sins washed away, because these ought not to be committed a second time (*quia ea iterari non oportet*) [...]. Happy is that water that cleanses once for all (*semel*). (*Bapt.* 15)

Moreover, in *On Modesty* Tertullian directly links baptism as once for all with the death of Christ, remarking almost in an aside that baptism is that by which the sinner is “once for all washed (*semel diluendi*) through the grace of Christ, who once for all has suffered death (*semel [...] morte functi*) for our sins” (*Pud.* 18.15).<sup>74</sup> Here we find baptism’s once-for-all nature directly connected with the once-for-all nature of Christ’s death, in a move which transfers *semel* via Christ’s death – the middle term of Rom 6 (baptism = death; death = once for all) – to the other side of the equation as well.

There is one other place in which Tertullian’s importance for tracing the development of this aspect of baptism emerges. In *Bapt.* 11, he makes a striking observation: in seeking to explain why Jesus himself did not baptize (John 4:2), he develops the argument that baptism had no efficacy until after Jesus’s death and resurrection, because these events alone lend it its power. This stands in some tension with his argument, noted above, that the apostles had already received baptism during Jesus’s ministry (*Bapt.* 12). More significantly, however, it demonstrates awareness of the historical development of baptism, such that John’s baptism and the baptism administered by Jesus’s disciples *before his death* must be of a different kind from the baptism administered *following the resurrection*. Although Tertullian believes that fully-orbed Christian baptism – which can be received only once and with all of the theological content he ascribes to it – has existed unchanged since the beginning of the church, he nevertheless recognizes some degree of historical development, and locates the key turning point as Jesus’s death and resurrection. Notwithstanding the evident differences between Tertullian’s reconstruction of the history of baptism and ours in this article, it is notable that he discerns a staged development hinging on the crucifixion; this sets the stage for our conclusion.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Moore, *Repetition in Hebrews* (see n. 54), 79–80, on this interpolation into John 13:10 in Tertullian and Epiphanius.

<sup>74</sup> Text SC 394; trans. S. Thelwall, *ANF* 4.

## 4 Conclusion

This article has sought to investigate a single, focussed question by surveying a wide variety of evidence across a long historical period: when, how, and why did Christian baptism become not merely a “one-time” event, but a strictly unrepeatable “once-only” rite? We have sought to show that the frequent assumption in scholarship that John’s baptism was a “one-time” rite is unfounded. Both direct evidence about his baptism and evidence about the practice of immersion within Second Temple Judaism support this conclusion. Rather, John’s baptism was repeatable in principle and quite probably in practice over the short years of his ministry and its continuation by his followers. The same was presumably true of the baptism practiced by Jesus’s followers during his ministry. Christian baptism derived from John’s baptism as its most significant and direct antecedent, and from the outset of the Christian movement appears to have been treated as an initiation rite. In this capacity it was “one time” but not at first clearly “once only” or unrepeatable. This was a subsequent development dependent on a theological understanding of Jesus’s death (and resurrection) as “once for all.”<sup>75</sup> The raw material for this development can be observed in the New Testament, and later readers found it easy to read the texts in this way (and all the more as they began to read across the developing canon); but it is not itself attested in any New Testament text. It is not until Tertullian at the turn of the third century that we find the first unequivocal equation of baptism’s “once-only” aspect with Jesus’s “once-only” death, although the evidence from Hebrews, Hermas, and Clement suggests that such a development in fact took place closer to the turn of the second century. The unrepeatable nature of Christian baptism was not simply a *post factum* theological justification; rather, this historical development was theologically driven by reflection on Christ’s death and resurrection.

**Lynn Mills**

Trinity College, Dublin (Ireland)  
orcid.org/0000-0002-7443-7374

**Nicholas J. Moore**

Cranmer Hall, St John’s College, Durham (UK)  
orcid.org/0000-0003-4226-578X

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<sup>75</sup> Holladay, “Baptism” (see n. 47), 345, distinguishes three or four stages: John’s baptism; Jesus’s baptism by John; baptism administered by Jesus’s disciples; Christian baptism. Our analysis suggests Christian baptism spans two stages, not one: a “one-time” initiation, and then a “once-only” unrepeatable rite.