

Baptism in the Navajo Bible

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Introduction

In the Navajo Bible¹ the word "baptize" (Greek *baptizō*) is translated *tó yee asííh*. Thus, John the Baptist is *John Tó Yee Asííhii*, or "John the one who sanctifies by means of water." To sanctify someone means the person is being set apart for a special relationship with God. They are now His. It's a beautiful symbol.

Baptism

There is more to learn about baptism than we're going to find out by translating *tó yee asííh*, because this rendering focuses only on the result of the action. It doesn't tell us how the action is performed. It is true that baptism has the effect of setting a person apart for Christ. That's the result. But what sort of action brings it about?

"Baptize"

The Greek word *baptizō* means to submerge, to immerse, to put beneath the surface. It doesn't tell us what that surface consists of (soap suds, dye, water); it only asserts that something is put all the way down in. The different forms of the English word "baptize" ("baptism, baptisms, baptist, baptized, baptizing") all come from some form of the Greek word *baptizō* (*baptisma, baptismos, baptistēs*). In English these words occur 106 times in 88 verses. Here are the 88 verses where they occur:

Matt 3:1, 6f, 11, 13f, 16; 11:11f; 14:2, 8; 16:14; 17:13; 21:25; 28:19
Mark 1:4f, 8f; 6:14, 24f; 8:28; 10:38f; 11:30; 16:16
Luke 3:3, 7, 12, 16, 21; 7:20, 29f, 33; 9:19; 12:50; 20:4
John 1:25f, 28, 31, 33; 3:22f, 26; 4:1f; 10:40
Acts 1:5, 22; 2:38, 41; 8:12f, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:37, 47f; 11:16; 13:24; 16:15, 33;
18:8, 25; 19:3ff; 22:16
Rom 6:3f
1 Cor 1:13ff; 10:2; 12:13; 15:29
Gal 3:27
Eph 4:5
Col 2:12
Heb 6:2
1 Pet 3:21

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

"Wash"

New Testament. In addition to all the passages listed above there are two more. In these two other passages *baptizō* is translated "wash," rather than "baptize."

When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash [from *baptizō*]. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles. (Mark 7:4)²

But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash [from *baptizō*] before the meal, was surprised. (Luke 11:38, NIV)

When we wash for a meal we don't hold our hands over the water, we put them under. There is a Greek word that means "sprinkle" (*proscheō*). It's Hebrew counterpart is *zāraq*. The Greek word means used for "sprinkle" really means "pour out," and the Hebrew word translated "sprinkle" really means "toss" or "scatter." Anyway, sprinkling water on dirty hands will not make them clean. In any event this word is not used in the New Testament, but only in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. So it is not used in any of the above passages. There the word is always *baptizō* ("submerge, immerse").

Old Testament. There is an Old Testament passage we could mention here as well. Consider the Greek translation of 2 Kgs 5:14, which is part of the story about Naaman. Naaman was from the land of Syria and he had leprosy. When he came to ask the prophet Elisha for help, Elisha told him to go to the Jordan river and wash seven times in the Jordan river and he would be cleansed of his leprosy (see 2 Kgs 5:10). At first Naaman didn't want to do this, but he finally did and as a result he was cleansed. He went down into the water and dipped below the surface seven times. When he did this the leprosy left him. This was a miracle from God. Dipping in water seven times is not normally a cure for leprosy, but in this case it was because he was doing something God had asked him to do. In the Greek translation of 2 Kgs 5:14 the verse reads as follows:

So he went down and dipped himself [from *baptizō*] in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. (2 Kgs 5:14, NIV)

This is the NIV translation. In King James the word is "wash." In NRSV it is translated "immersed," which brings us to the heart of the matter. Here's the above verse as it reads in NRSV.

So he went down and immersed himself [this is the real meaning of the word *baptizō*] seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. (2 Kgs 5:14, NRSV)

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For Naaman, the result of dipping, or washing, seven times in the Jordan river was healing. For Christians, baptizing is not a healing ceremony. The result of being baptized is that one is set apart for God as His special possession. But even though the results are different, the process is the same. In both cases something is put all the way down into the water. It is completely submerged.

Original meaning

My point about the Navajo translation of the Greek word *baptizō* is not that it is wrong, but that it is incomplete. It is right to say that baptism has the effect of consecrating a person to God, i.e., that baptism has a sanctifying influence in a person's life. This much is certainly correct. But the original meaning of the word translated "baptize" has nothing to do with results, only with process. It only indicates that something is submerged and says nothing about what the result of doing that might be. So the Navajo expression *tó yee asííh* and the Greek expression that it derives from are coming at this from opposite points of view. My point here is that they should meet in the middle. We should have the right result and we should have the right process.

We don't want to be half dead and half buried and rise again to only half a life in Christ. That sends the wrong message. So don't this by half measures. Really do it! Go all the way down beneath the surface of the water so that nothing remains visible. That's the way Jesus was baptized. So follow his example. Then come all the way back up and accept every part of the new life Christ wants to give you. Because of the significance this special symbol has (i.e., death and resurrection), it is important to do it in a way that conveys the original meaning and intent.

Conclusion

I have pointed out, if not a weakness in the Navajo translation, at least something we should be careful to try to understand. Now let me show where this same Navajo rendering of the word *baptizō* really works well. In Matt 3:11 John the Baptist says he baptizes people with water, but the One who comes next (Jesus) will baptize people with fire, i.e., with the Holy Spirit.

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (Matt 3:11, NIV)

When John says "I baptize you with water," that's *tó bee danihisííh*. When he says "after me will come one who . . . will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire," that's *kó' bee danihidzisiíh doo*. This way of translating the word *baptizō* perfectly captures the parallel between what John did and what he says Jesus will do. In this case the Navajo rendering captures the desired meaning perfectly.