

Reflections on Immersion vs. Pouring/Sprinkling
Reggie M. Kidd
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It is often asserted that *baptizein* means “to dip” or “to immerse” and that this means the only truly biblical means of baptizing is to dip or immerse. The term is much richer than this.

Actually, the shorter verb *baptein* does mean basically “to dip.” In classical Greek, one way to change a cloth’s coloring would be to immerse (*baptein*) it in a vat of dye. But you could also dye a piece of cloth by applying a stain to it — either way, a piece of cloth that had undergone color transformation, whether by dipping or staining was called — guess what? — “dipped” (lit., *baptos*; e.g., Ezekiel 23:15 — see also Aristophanes who simply refers to a colorful bird as *baptos*). Metaphorical uses even of the verb *baptein* abound (and I only make the point because it is so often asserted that the verb can only be taken literally: Aesop writes of a lake dyed (lit. *baptein*) with blood; Ajax’s sword is stained (lit., *baptein*) with the blood of the Greeks; actors smear (lit. *baptein*) their faces with greasepaint. Even with this word (*baptein*), the mode, to quote Bill Murray in *Meatballs*, “just doesn’t matter!”

The longer verb used for the NT rite, *baptizein* is made up of the “dip” root (*bapt-*), plus the causative suffix, *-izein* (= English “-ize”). Rendered literally, *baptizein* would be to “dip-ize” — this is probably one of the reasons the word had to be transliterated in English, and it suggests an even more subtle meaning. The base meaning of the term is stronger than *baptein*, and one step away from the literal etymology. I’d offer the English terms “galvanize” & “colorize” as examples of the distance between meanings of the literal root and the causative verb.

If *baptein* means “dip,” *baptizein* covers a range of things: “inundate,” “plunge,” “drown,” “overwhelm.” For instance, Josephus uses the verb to talk about someone committing suicide by “plunging” a sword up to its hilt in his own throat (Nice image!). If the effect of “bapting” something was often to effect a recoloring of it (rather a superficial change), the effect of “baptizing” something was to bring it under a controlling, overwhelming influence. A person could be intoxicated (lit., “baptized”) by liquor. A citizenry could be overburdened (lit., “baptized”) by high taxation. Josephus uses the verb metaphorically to talk about how people “poured into,” “inundated,” “deluged,” “overwhelmed,” “flooded,” or “overran” the city of Jerusalem during the Jewish War (ὁ δὴ καὶ δῖχα τῆς στάσεως ὕστερον ἐβάπτισεν τὴν πόλιν: [BJ 4.137]). The idea of liquid is seldom far off, even in the metaphorical uses of the term; but what is important to notice is that whether the controlling force comes from below or above is immaterial!!!

It may be helpful to think of the two great OT acts of baptism to which the NT refers — the Flood in 1 Pt 3 and the Exodus in 1 Cor 10. Both these baptisms envision God’s people coming under a new, controlling influence, and this on the far side of a potentially drowning judgment; but in neither case are the people dipped or immersed in water. The only ones immersed in both cases are the unsaved: at the Flood, everybody on earth *except* Noah’s family, and at the Exodus, Pharaoh’s army. In Noah’s case the noun *baptismos* (formed from the verb *baptizein*) is used to point to God’s preserving people from a drowning deluge that pours down from heaven and engulfs the earth — it points to a cleansing of the conscience rather than of the outward person and to a sharing of Christ’s resurrection life. The mode is not the point; the resultant condition is. In the case of the Exodus, Paul says that the Israelites were baptized “into Moses” — the point of being “under the cloud” and going “through the waters” (which would have been piled high on either side of them, threatening, apart from God’s mercy, to crush them from above) is to be in relationship with Moses, the Deliverer. Again, the Israelites stayed dry, the Egyptians got wet — water is not the point; coming “into” relationship with Moses on the far side of a judgment that threatens to overwhelm you is the point.

If the basic idea behind *baptizein* does have to do with drowning in or being deluged by water, why would it occur to anybody to symbolize this by pouring from above rather than plunging a person into a river or a pool?

Well, in the first place, because as indicated above, in the two classic portraits of baptism from the OT, the judgment water descends or threatens from above.

In the second place, there is the NT association between baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit, an association that, in its turn, hearkens back to another layer of OT teaching. First, notice that the baptism of the Holy Spirit — a theme that recurs throughout the book of Acts — is all about the Holy Spirit falling on the church from above. Second, notice that Paul talks about believers experiencing a washing of regeneration and renewal carried out by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) — this seems to be his way of talking about that same Spirit-baptism. These facts have struck many of us as having in view the teachings of prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah had envisioned the great day of the Lord being one in which the Spirit would be poured out on the earth; on the one hand, this pouring would make "the wilderness a fertile field, and the fertile field like a forest" (Isaiah 32:14; see also 44:3), on the other hand, it would be like "a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters" (Isa. 28:2). When the Lord comes down like a great rain from on high, you either get life made more abundant, or you get swept away in a hurricane; what decides your end is whether you stand on the tested stone laid in Zion (Isa. 28:16 — and it's hard not to think of Matt. 7:24-27). For his part, Ezekiel talks about God sprinkling clean water on Israel, cleansing his people from their filth and idolatry, giving them new hearts, putting a new Spirit in them, taking away their heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh — all summarized in terms of putting his Spirit within them. The point is that the cleansing waters come from above, the Spirit comes from above.

It is not at all surprising to me that both practices — placing people down into water and applying water down onto people from above — have emerged in the church. Each does justice to part of the picture. Once the waters fell in Noah's day, they created a flood on the earth; once the waters of the Red Sea fell on Pharaoh's army, it was water below as well as above that drowned them; the reason Isaiah says you need a solid rock to stand on is that when God's storm descends on you from above it creates killing torrents under and around you. Why choose? Maybe that is why the earliest Christian art consistently pictures baptisms this way: baptizer and baptizee standing waist deep in water, with the baptizer pouring water over the head of the baptizee. Maybe everybody's partially right, and we ought to stop telling folks who do it the "other way" — whether by immersion or by pouring — that they are wrong.