

## OATH AND ORDEAL SIGNS

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A MORE authentic identification of the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism has been made possible through the recovery of their original historical context of covenant form and ceremony.<sup>1</sup> It will be found that the new view of these rites opened up to us by our improved historical perspective challenges the divergent ecclesiastical traditions, not merely at distinctive points peculiar to one or another communion but, more significantly, in respect to that which has been their area of (at least formal) agreement. Specifically, the traditional consensus that these sacramental symbols are primarily if not exclusively signs of divine grace and blessing is now called in question. And perhaps in this there is cause for hope. For if it should really be the case that our common foundations are being shaken under us by advances in historical knowledge, it could prove difficult to maintain our composedly adamant stance of antagonism over against each other. We might find ourselves tumbling together, head over traditions.

### I. CIRCUMCISION, SYMBOLIC OATH SANCTION

#### *A. Sign of Malediction*

Genesis 17 contains the record of the institution of circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his house. This chapter is not, like the Decalogue or Deuteronomy, the text of a treaty but an historical narrative describing the ratification ceremony of the covenant. The narrative, however, consists largely of the words that God spoke to Abraham

<sup>1</sup> See my "Law Covenant", *The Westminster Theological Journal* XXVII (November, 1964), 1, pp. 1-20, especially n. 30 (hereafter, "Law Covenant").

on that occasion and those words comprise the standard elements found in ancient vassal treaties.<sup>2</sup>

Corresponding to the usual preamble with its introduction of the speaker is the Lord's declaration to Abraham: "I am God Almighty" (v. 1b).<sup>3</sup> Prominently featured are the stipulations of this covenant, including the so-called *Grundsatz-erklärung*, a general statement of the nature of the covenantal relationship: Yahweh will be a God to Abraham and his descendants (v. 7) and Abraham is to walk before him in true loyalty (v. 1c). The special obligation laid upon the covenant servants is that of circumcision (vv. 9-14). The communal performance of this rite on that very day served to consummate the ratificatory proceedings of this particular covenantal engagement (vv. 23-27). But the obligation of circumcision was to continue beyond that day as a permanent duty of the Abrahamic community. Certain obligations are assumed by the Lord of the covenant also, as is the case in some of the extra-biblical treaties, though rarely. These are appropriately expressed in the form of promises (vv. 2, 4-8). Since in this covenant the Suzerain is also the divine Witness, the promissory obligations which Yahweh undertakes as Suzerain are also a blessing sanction which he will honor as the divine Witness when he beholds faithfulness in the covenant servant. Another element of the treaty pattern, *i. e.*, the sanctions, is thus included here among the stipulations.<sup>4</sup> Curse sanction appears too, appended to the stipulation regarding circumcision (v. 14). Also in the category of divine promise or

<sup>2</sup> In his doctoral dissertation, *Zur Datierung der "Genesis-P-Stücke"*, Kampen, 1964, Samuel R. Külling argues from the treaty pattern in Genesis 17 to the unity and early date of the chapter. He indicates the wider implications of his conclusions for documentary theories that regard Genesis 17 as part of the supposed P source. On the treaty pattern generally see my *Treaty of the Great King*, Grand Rapids, 1936 (hereafter, *TGK*).

<sup>3</sup> Although the account in Genesis 17 does not include the customary historical prologue, the somewhat earlier covenant revelation to Abraham recorded in Genesis 15:7 contains a Decalogue-like combination of titula-ture and history: "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees". Cf. Josh. 24:2 ff. for another version of this in a later his-torical prologue.

<sup>4</sup> See "Law Covenant", p. 20, n. 29.

blessing sanction is the further revelation centering in the role of Sarah (vv. 15–21).

In short, the transaction recorded in Genesis 17 may be identified as a covenant of the vassal type, an administration of the lordship of the covenant Giver, binding his servant to himself in consecrated service under dual sanctions, blessing and curse.

Of special importance in the establishment of vassal covenants was the function of the oath. It was by an oath that the vassal expressed his incorporation within the sphere of the lord's jurisdiction. This oath invoked the covenant sanctions, more precisely, the curse, so that curse became a synonym for oath. And this oath-curse was customarily dramatized in symbolic rites, the ritual actions portraying the doom that was verbally specified in the self-maledictory oath.<sup>5</sup> An interesting example of such an oath-rite is found in the eighth century B. C. treaty of Ashurnirari V and Mati'ilu:

This ram is not brought from his herd for sacrifice, nor is he brought out for a *garitu*-festival, nor is he brought out for a *kinitu*-festival, nor is he brought out for (a rite for) a sick man, nor is he brought out for slaughter a[s . . .] It is to make the treaty of Ashurnirari, King of Assyria, with Mati'ilu that he is brought out. If Mati'ilu [sins] against the treaty sworn by the gods, just as this ram is broug[ht here] from his herd and to his herd will not return [*and stand*] at its head, so may Mati'ilu with his sons, [his nobles,] the people of his land [be brought] far from his land and to his land not return [*to stand*] at the head of his land.

This head is not the head of a ram; it is the head of Mati'ilu, the head of his sons, his nobles, the people of his land. If those named [sin] against this treaty, as the head of this ram is c[ut off,] his leg put in his mouth [. . .] so may the head of those named be cut off [. . .] This shoulder is not the shoulder of a ram, it is the shoulder of the one named, it is the shoulder of [his sons, his nobles,] the people of his land. If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, as the shou[lder of this ram] is torn out, [. . .] so may the

<sup>5</sup> Some of the similes used in prophetic threats of judgment in the Old Testament are found to reflect the formulae recited at these substitution rites depicting the curses of the covenant oath. Cf., e. g., Pss. 37:20; 68:3 (2).

[shoulder of the one na]med, [his] sons, [his nobles,] the people of [his land] be torn out [. . .]" (col. 1:10 ff.).<sup>6</sup>

Oath-curse was, moreover, practically synonymous with covenant (*cf.*, *e. g.*, Deut. 29:11 (12)) and the substitution rites symbolizing the oath-curse coalesced with the rites which ratified the covenant. In the treaty just cited, for example, it is the ram which is brought out for the explicit purpose of making the treaty that serves at the same time expressly to represent the vassal people suffering the curse of the oath of allegiance sworn by Mati'ilu. The ram cut off from the herd never to return, the ram with its head and other members severed, symbolized the curse fate of the covenant breaker. But it was this same cutting off of the ram that made the covenant.<sup>7</sup> The practice of slaying an animal in the ceremony of covenant ratification is widely attested<sup>8</sup> and out of this common rite arose the familiar biblical and extra-biblical terminology of "cutting a covenant" and the synonymous "cutting a curse".<sup>9</sup>

It is generally recognized that a dismembering ritual like that described in Genesis 15 is to be explained by reference to the complex of concepts and ceremonies we have just described.<sup>10</sup> But here too is the historical-juridical context for the understanding of the vassal covenant of Genesis 17 and, more particularly, for the interpretation of its cutting off rite

<sup>6</sup> The translation is that given in D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, Rome, 1936, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> McCarthy (*op. cit.*, pp. 55 ff.) rightly rejects the interpretation that sees in the cutting up of an animal to make a covenant the idea of an association of life effected through the mystic force of the sacrificial blood. He defends the common view that the ceremony is a *Drohritus*, an enacted curse threat against the swearer of the oath lest he dare violate it.

<sup>8</sup> The kind of animal used varied; sheep, ass, puppy, and pig are among those mentioned in extra-biblical texts. For a discussion of covenant ceremonies, including Greek and Roman, which involved a young animal and a herb and of the possible relevance of this for the Hebrew Passover lamb and hyssop see G. E. Mendenhall, "Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest-Semitic Covenant Making", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 133 (February, 1954), pp. 26-30. *Cf.* F. C. Fensham, "Did a Treaty Between the Israelites and Kenites Exist?", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 175 (October, 1964), pp. 51-54.

<sup>9</sup> See Gen. 15:9 ff., 18; Jer. 34:18. *Cf.* McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 ff.

<sup>10</sup> See further below and *cf.* "Law Covenant", p. 4.

of circumcision. This means that circumcision was the rite by which the covenant of Genesis 17 was "cut". It means further that circumcision symbolized the oath-curse by which the Abrahamic community confessed themselves under the judicial authority and more precisely under the sword of God Almighty.<sup>11</sup>

What is suggested by the broad structure of Genesis 17 is confirmed by the particulars about circumcision given in verses 9–14. Circumcision is called God's covenant, his covenant in the flesh of his people (vv. 9, 10, 13). This identification of covenant with circumcision reminds us at once of the coalescence of the covenant with its oath-curse in the extra-biblical treaties. Moreover, the meaning of circumcision as symbol of the oath-curse is actually expressed in so many words in verse 14. There the threat of the curse sanction sounds against the one who breaks the covenant by not obeying the command of circumcision: "(he) shall be cut off". The use of the verb *kārat* in this specific description of the curse clearly echoes the idiom of cutting a covenant (*kārat b'rit*) and it is an unmistakable allusion to the nature of the rite of circumcision. So in this, the primary passage for the interpretation of circumcision, the general and specific considerations unitedly point to the conclusion that circumcision was the sign of the oath-curse of the covenant ratification. In the cutting off of the foreskin the judgment of excision from the covenant relationship was symbolized.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Josh. 5:13; Rom. 13:4; Rev. 19:15, 16. The Joshua 5 theophany account follows the record of the circumcising of the generation of the wilderness wandering (Josh. 5:2 ff.). It is as if the sword of the captain of the host of the Lord had been turned away from the uncircumcised nation by their cutting the covenant allegiance oath anew through circumcision and only then could be directed against the Canaanites to cut them off from the land. Cf. Ezek 28:10; 31:18; 32:10 ff. for the association of the death of the uncircumcised with that of the victim of the sword. On this usage in Ezekiel, cf. O. Eissfeldt, "Schwerterschlagene bei Hesekeiel" in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, ed. H. H. Rowley, New York, 1950, pp. 73–81. Cf., too, the cutting off curse of the hypocrite in IQS ii, 16, 17 and the appeal made to it by O. Betz to interpret Matthew 24:51 and Acts 1:18 in "The Dichotomized Servant and the End of Judas Iscariot", *Revue de Qumran* 17, 5 (Oct. 1964), pp. 43–58.

<sup>12</sup> A more precise analysis of the implications of the circumcision of the foreskin for the curse significance of circumcision will be found below.

### *B. Sign of Consecration*

The oath whose curse sanction circumcision symbolized was an oath of allegiance. It was an avowal of Yahweh as covenant Lord, a commitment in loyalty to him. As the symbolized curse which sealed this pledge of allegiance, circumcision partook of the import of the oath. It was, therefore, a sign of consecration. Hence Israel is commanded: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord" (Jer. 4:4).

Circumcision's consecratory import appears in the figurative use made of the idea in the law of the fruit trees in Leviticus 19:23-25. For the first three years the fruit was regarded as "uncircumcised" and might not be eaten. The fruit of the fourth year was to be consecrated in joyful praise to the Lord and then Israel might eat of the fruit of the fifth year.<sup>13</sup> According to this pattern it was the act of consecrating the tree in its firstfruit to the Lord that terminated the state of uncircumcision and so constituted the circumcision of the tree.

For Abraham the consecratory purpose of circumcision was brought home in another cutting ritual he was afterwards called to perform. When Isaac the son of promise was born, Abraham had circumcised him on the eighth day as God had commanded (Gen. 21:4). But later God summoned Abraham to take up the knife again and to perfect Isaac's circumcision by cutting him off altogether from among the living (Gen. 22:1 ff.). The identification of this cutting off of Isaac as "a burnt offering" (v. 2), the form of sacrifice expressive of total consecration, illuminates the meaning of these knife rituals. Circumcision, whether partial or complete, was an act of consecration.

With this demand laid upon Abraham to perfect the circumcision of his son, he was confronted with the dilemma of circumcision-consecration. The son of Adam who would consecrate himself to God in the obedience of covenant service can do so only by passing through the judgment curse which circumcision symbolizes. Isaac must be cut off in death at the altar of God. In the circumcision of the foreskin on the

<sup>13</sup> Law #60 of the Code of Hammurapi also specifies the fifth year as that in which the produce of the orchard began to be shared by the owner and gardener.

eight day he had passed under the judgment knife of God apart from God's altar in a merely symbolic, token act of conditional malediction. But this cutting off of the whole body of Isaac's flesh to be consumed in the fire of the altar of God was a falling under the actual judgment curse. This was an infliction in reality of that curse which was but symbolized by the ordinary circumcision made with hands. How then can there be a realization of the proper purpose of the redemptive covenant administered to Abraham? How can Isaac be consecrated to living service in the favor of God if he must be consecrated in death as an object of divine condemnation? And how can there be a fulfillment of the decree of election if the whole redemptive program aborts here and now in the damnation of Isaac?

The answer to this dilemma began to unfold in an earlier knife rite, or circumcision, in which Abraham had participated. Genesis 15 tells us of a covenant cutting and a theophany which Abraham witnessed amid darkness and horror — the only proper setting for this Old Testament Golgotha. There in the passage of God, in the divided theophanic symbol of smoking furnace and flaming torch between the dismembered creatures, the mystery of the abandonment of the Son of God emerged beforehand. For what Abraham witnessed was the strange self-malediction of the Lord of the covenant who would himself undergo the covenant's curse of cutting asunder rather than fail to lead his servant into the promised fulness of beatitude.

From this knife ceremony Abraham might later elicit the meaning of the cutting rite which God appointed to him as the sign of the covenant in his flesh. And remembering this same divine oath-curse of dismembering, Abraham on the mount of Moriah might more fully comprehend what it meant that God had stayed the knife of judgment in his hand and had showed him Isaac's substitute caught by its horns in the thicket. When the hour of darkness should come, it was the Lord who would himself be Isaac's sacrificial ram. What God had before declared himself ready to do in order to fulfill the covenant promise to Abraham, he now by the ram intimates that he will do — he will himself come under the judgment knife and suffer the curse as a substitute for sinners.

Read together in the light of fulfillment, the three cutting

rituals of Genesis 15, 17, and 22 proclaim the mystery of a divine circumcision — the circumcision of God in the crucifixion of his only-begotten. Paul called it “the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11). The circumcision of the infant Jesus in obedience to Genesis 17, that partial and symbolic cutting off, corresponded to the ritual of Genesis 15 as a passing of one who was divine under the curse threat of the covenant oath. That was the moment, prophetically chosen, to name him “Jesus”. But it was the circumcision of Christ in crucifixion that answered to the burnt-offering of Genesis 22 as a perfecting of circumcision, a “putting off” not merely of a token part but “of the (whole) body of the flesh” (Col. 2:11), not simply a symbolic oath-cursing but a cutting off of “the body of his flesh through death” (Col. 1:22) in accursed darkness and dereliction.

Here then was the direction for faith to look for the solution to the dilemma of circumcision as a sign of consecration. By the demand to slay Isaac, God reminds us that all the ordinary generation of Adam, even Abraham and his promised seed, are covenant breakers and must be consecrated to him by coming to the place of the curse. But beholding the ram on Moriah and God’s own oath ritual of dismembering, may not even Old Testament faith have discerned the way of grace, the way of identification with God in his cutting off in the dread darkness, the way that cannot but lead through the curse into blessing, beyond death unto life?<sup>14</sup> The prophet who later wrote of the messianic Servant that “he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people” (Isa. 53:8b) might have articulated this Old Testament identification faith in some such assurance to the faithful as this: You were cut off with the Servant in circumcision, wherein also you were buried with him, whose grave is appointed with the wicked, and you were also raised with him, for he shall be exalted and divide the spoil with the strong.

That, in any case, is the gospel of circumcision according to Paul. In the Colossians 2 passage already cited Paul affirms the union of the Christian with Christ in his crucifixion-circumcision: “in whom ye were also circumcised with a cir-

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Heb. 11:19.



cumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (vv. 11, 12, *ARV*). That Paul here interprets circumcision as a dying or death is clear from the sequence of ideas: circumcision, burial, resurrection (*cf.* Rom. 6:3, 4). This is confirmed by the exposition of circumcision as a "putting (or stripping) off",<sup>15</sup> the latter being in turn synonymous with "putting to death" (Col. 3:5-9).<sup>16</sup> As a death in union with Christ, the representative sin-bearer, in his crucifixion, the Christian's circumcision-death is an undergoing of the wrath of God against sin, a falling under his sword of judgment. It is a judicial death as the penalty for sin.<sup>17</sup> Yet, to be united with Christ in his death is also to be raised with him whom death could not hold in his resurrection unto justification. So it is that circumcision, which in itself as a symbolic action signifies the sword of the Lord cutting off his false servants, as a sign of the Covenant of Redemption takes on, alongside the import of condemnation, that of justification, the blessing that may come through the curse.

Paul traces this wider import of circumcision beyond justification so as to include regeneration and sanctification. The appropriate expression and inevitable accompaniment of our judicial circumcision-death in Christ is the death of the old man, our dying to the dominion of sin. Paul interprets the circumcision-putting off as such a spiritual transformation, if not in Col. 2:11b. ff.,<sup>18</sup> yet clearly so in Col. 3:5-9. The element of subjective, spiritual-moral qualification thus occupies a place in the Pauline doctrine of circumcision as a derivative from the rite's prior meaning as a sign of the objective curse of the covenant.

<sup>15</sup> The noun *ἀπεκδύσις*, "removal, stripping off", is used in Col. 2:11 and the verb *ἀπεκδύομαι* in Col. 2:15. The noun is found only here in Scripture and elsewhere only in dependence on Paul. The verb is found only here and in Col. 3:9, which is, therefore, to be regarded as a further exposition of circumcision.

<sup>16</sup> For the equivalence with "crucifying" see also Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20; 5:24; 6:12-15.

<sup>17</sup> Note Paul's juridical development of his theme in Col. 2:13 ff.

<sup>18</sup> For a further discussion of the exegesis of this passage see below.

Elsewhere, too, in both the Old and New Testaments the idea appears in the form of demand, declaration, and promise that when the consecration sworn in the circumcision oath is fulfilled in the power of the redemptive principle operative in the covenant, it becomes a matter of heart-consecration in the obedience of love to the covenant Lord. A specific, spiritualized usage developed according to which the redemptively consecrated heart and various other organs of expression for such a heart, like the lips and ears, were spoken of as circumcised. In fact, as touching the righteousness of the law (or the proper purpose of the covenant), Paul warned that the circumcision of the flesh without circumcision of the heart was uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25-29; *cf.* Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:24, 25 (25, 26); Acts 7:51; Rom. 4:11; Phil. 3:3).

*Conclusions:* The theology of circumcision can be summarized in the ideas of malediction, consecration, identification, justification, and spiritual qualification. The ancient rituals of covenant ratification, both biblical and their international parallels, provide the original historical orientation for the interpretation of this ordinance. In this light circumcision is found to be an oath rite and, as such, a pledge of consecration and a symbol of malediction. That is its primary, symbolic significance.

Beyond that, the broader import of circumcision is determined by the specific nature of that covenant of which it is declared to be a sign and especially, since circumcision is a sanction sign, by the peculiar nature of the judgment in which that covenant issues. As for the covenant, it was a law covenant, not a simple guarantee of blessing but an administration of the lordship of God, a covenant therefore which confronted the servant with dual sanctions, curse and blessing. And the carrying out of the sanctions in these oath-ratified covenants was regarded as the rendering of a direct verdict by the God (gods) of the oath, that is, as a trial by ordeal.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> According to the ideology of the international treaties the covenant relationship had a religious basis, being established under the sanctions of the gods. Hence the military engagement occasioned by the violation of the treaty was a trial by ordeal, a judgment of the oath deities. Note, for example, in the Tukulti-Ninurta historical epic the account of the

Hence, by circumcision, the sign of the consecratory oath of the Abrahamic Covenant, a man confessed himself to be under the juridical authority of Yahweh and committed himself to the ordeal of his Lord's judgment for the final verdict on his life. The sign of circumcision thus pointed to the eschatological judicial ordeal with its awful sanctions of eternal weal or woe.

In the case of a covenant with the fallen sons of Adam, their nature as covenant breakers from their youth would seem to preclude any outcome for the divine ordeal other than condemnation. Yet the very fact that God makes a covenant with such subjects reveals that along with justice the principle of redemptive grace is operative here with its totally new and unpredictable possibilities. The covenant is a law covenant but it is a redemptive law covenant. Accordingly, its consummating judgment is a redemptive judgment, the curse of which can be suffered not only (not even properly) by the covenant servant in himself; it may also be undergone by him in the divine Redeemer-Substitute. In the one case the curse is curse and no more; in the other, the curse becomes the way to beatitude. Redemptive judgment thus consists in an execution of the covenant's dual sanctions in the form of curse and blessing-through-curse.<sup>20</sup> This, therefore, is what circumcision signifies. The original maledictory meaning of circumcision continues throughout the broad spectrum of its meaning, curse being an integral, if penultimate, element even in the judgment of the blessed.

"And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein" (Zech. 13:8). Here the potential symbolized in circumcision is prophetically viewed in its historical actualization as the prophet interprets the future of the

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victory of the Assyrians over the Babylonians in consequence of the offences of the Babylonian king, Kashtiliash, and of the siding of all the gods with Tukulti-Ninurta. See further, McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 92 f.

<sup>20</sup> The blessing is attained through the curse suffered by Christ but it is also true that the blessing is a resultant of Christ's infliction of the curse on the enemies of the blessed. That is the principle expressed in the eschatological concept of the final decisive conflict between the saints and the Satanic hordes.

covenant as a fulfillment of the malediction invoked at its beginning.

Judgment will befall the covenant community, a time of cutting off. For two-thirds the circumcision-judgment will be unto death. But a third part will be left in whom the consecration pledged in circumcision will be realized according to the proper purpose of redemptive covenant. Of them the Lord says, "It is my people"; and they respond, "The Lord is my God" (v. 9b). Even this destiny, however, is reached only by a passage of this remnant "through the fire" (v. 9a); they too must undergo the ordeal symbolized by circumcision. And Zechariah penetrates yet deeper into the mystery of circumcision when he speaks of God's judgment sword wielded against a God-man: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones" (v. 7). Here Old Testament prophecy proclaims the New Testament's deliverance out of the malediction of human circumcision by pointing to the malediction-benediction of the circumcision-resurrection of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

## II. BAPTISM, SIGN OF JUDGMENT

In view of the conclusions we have reached concerning circumcision we are bound to ask ourselves whether traditional approaches to Christian baptism may not have unduly restricted its import too. According to Reformed theology, baptism is a sacramental seal of the benefits of Christ's grace, a sign of union with the triune God and of those judicial and spiritual blessings that are secured in Christ. But this theology, appealing (rightly) to the unity of the divine covenants, has maintained that the significance of baptism corresponds to that of circumcision. Does then the New Testament encourage, or even clearly require us to interpret baptism, not exclusively as a sign of blessing, but, like circumcision, as a sign of Christ's redemptive judgment with its benedictions and maledictions alike? Must we enlarge our theology of baptism so as to see in it a more comprehensive symbol of the

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Matt. 26:31, 32; Mk. 14:27, 28.

eschatological judgment that consummates the covenant of which baptism is a sign?<sup>22</sup>

What follows is not a general survey of the New Testament teaching concerning baptism. The emphasis will be one-sided because our purpose is simply to call attention to what we believe to be a neglected element in the meaning of this ordinance of Christ. Although silence is not then to be construed necessarily as rejection of other aspects of the matter, it may be acknowledged at once that the incorporation of the new element would seem to require a change in the total bearing and the central thrust of the traditional doctrine of baptism.

### *A. The Baptism of John*

However the precise relationship between the baptism administered by John the Forerunner and that of the Christian church is to be defined, the significance of the earlier rite naturally entered into the apostolic conception of baptism as ordained for them by the Lord Jesus. John indeed compared his ministry and that of Jesus explicitly in terms of baptism (Matt. 3:11, 12). It is, therefore, important to observe that in the revelation associated with John, baptism is emphatically a sign of eschatological judgment.

#### *1. Messenger of Ultimatum*

In order to see the mission of John the Forerunner in proper historical perspective it will be useful to review certain procedures followed in ancient covenant administration. When a vassal failed to satisfy the obligations of the sworn treaty, the suzerain instituted a covenant lawsuit against him. The legal process was conducted by messengers. In the first of its two distinct phases messengers delivered one or more warnings. These were couched in a form that reflected the pattern of

<sup>22</sup> See C. F. D. Moule, "The Judgment Theme in the Sacraments" in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (C. H. Dodd *Festschrift*), ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube, Cambridge, 1956, pp. 464-481. Moule develops the thesis that the New Testament regards baptism and holy communion as anticipations of the last judgment.

the original treaty. Stylistically, interrogation was a distinctive feature. The vassal was reminded of the suzerain's benefits and of the treaty stipulations, explanation of his offences was demanded, and he was admonished to mend his ways. He was also confronted anew with the curses of the covenant, now in the form of an ultimatum, and warned of the vanity of all hope of escape through recourse to any alien quarter. If the messenger of the great king was rejected, imprisoned, and especially if he was killed, the legal process moved into its next phase. This was the declaration of war as an execution of the sacred sanctions of the treaty, and so as a visitation of the oath deities against the offender, a trial by ordeal.<sup>23</sup>

The mission of the Old Testament prophets, those messengers of Yahweh to enforce the covenant mediated to Israel through Moses, is surely to be understood within the judicial framework of the covenant lawsuit. So too the mission of John the Baptist. John was sent with the word of ultimatum from Yahweh to his covenant violating vassal, Israel.

Was it not precisely this judicial process that Jesus had in mind when he interpreted the succession of divine messengers in the parable of the vineyard?<sup>24</sup> The servants of the parable were sent by the "lord of the vineyard" to demand for him his

<sup>23</sup> On this legal process see Julien Harvey, "Le 'Rîb-Pattern', réquisitoire prophétique sur la rupture de l'alliance", *Biblica* 43 (1962) 2, pp. 172-196. Cf. my *TGK*, p. 139. Since the ways of the gods were portrayed after human analogues, it is not surprising to find evidence of such legal procedure in mythological texts as well as in historical-legal documents. There is, for example, the episode in the Ugaritic epic of Baal (Gordon *UH* 137) where the god Yamm sends his messenger-witnesses (*mlak ym t'ât tpt nhr*) with an ultimatum to the assembly of the gods. The messengers address them in the name of Yamm, "your lord" and "your master" (*b'lk m adnk m*), while the terror stricken gods are acknowledged by El as "thy tributaries" (*mnhyk*) and Yamm is promised his "tribute" (*argmn*); compare the use of this term in the account of Niqmad's tribute to his Hittite suzerain, Shuppiluliuma in Gordon *UH* 118:18,24). Significantly, it is narrated that Baal was on the verge of slaying the messengers. Such a rejection of the ultimatum would have challenged Yamm to enter the second stage of his lawsuit. And, of course, as it falls out, the case is determined in a trial by ordeal through individual combat, Baal vanquishing the Sea-dragon and securing for himself the eternal dominion.

<sup>24</sup> See Matt. 21:33 ff.; Mk. 12:1 ff.; Lk. 20:9 ff.

due. But the husbandmen repudiated their obligations, handled the messengers shamefully, beat them, stoned them, sent them away empty, even killed some of them. That the rejection of John was particularly in view in this parable is indicated by its location immediately after the record of Jesus' counter-challenge to the Jewish authorities with respect to the origin of John's baptism.<sup>25</sup> And Jesus himself was of course the lord of the vineyard's son, who was cast out and slain. Because Israel had repudiated his lordship and despised his ultimatum, God would inflict on them the vengeance of the covenant.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Jesus, as the final messenger of the covenant, was declaring the verdict against Israel in the very process of speaking unto them this parable.

It is possible to discern reflections of the ancient covenant lawsuit paradigm in these words of Jesus. Parabolic though it is in form, this discourse was part of a legal conflict of Jesus with the officialdom of Israel over the precise subject of covenant authority.<sup>27</sup> The parable served to remind them of the benefits bestowed by the Lord of the covenant: he had planted the vineyard, hedged it about, digged the winepress, and built the tower. The parable also confronted the vassals with the treaty stipulations and their disloyalty in failing to present their tribute at the appointed season. Nor is the interrogative element missing; it was by a question that Jesus elicited from the recalcitrants themselves their own verdict of destruction and disinheritance.<sup>28</sup> And the whole discourse issued in a solemn decree of judgment.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Matt. 21:23-32; Mk. 11:27-33; Lk. 20:1-8.

<sup>26</sup> For supplementation of the announcement of destruction, see the parable of the marriage of the King's son which follows immediately in Matthew (22:2 ff.).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Matt. 21:23; Mk. 11:28; Lk. 20:2.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Matt. 21:40,41.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Matt. 21:42 f.; Mk. 12:10 f.; Lk. 20:17 f. Also structured according to the pattern of the covenant lawsuit is the song of the vineyard in Isa. 5:1 ff., on which our Lord's parable is an evident variation. The judicial character of the song is plainly indicated by Yahweh's summons: "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard" (v. 3). The parallel between this song and Jesus' parable thus penetrates beyond the common figure of the vineyard to a common covenantal crisis and judicial process.

To the same effect had been Malachi's prophetic interpretation of the coming Lord and his Forerunner; he too depicted them as the bearers of the ultimatum and the final verdict. For Malachi spoke of two messengers, the one called "my [*i. e.*, the Lord's] messenger" and the other, "the messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3:1). Of the first he wrote: "he shall prepare the way before me".<sup>30</sup> Again, Malachi spoke of a coming of "Elijah" (*i. e.*, John)<sup>31</sup> as a precursor of "the great and terrible day of the Lord". His mission was to be one of warning lest Israel's Lord smite them "with a curse" (Mal. 3:23, 24 (4:5, 6)). For at his fiery advent the Lord would refine his people by judgment (*cf.* Mal. 3:2 ff.).<sup>32</sup>

What is narrated in the Gospels concerning the ministry of John comports fully with the understanding of his role as that of messenger of the covenant to declare the Lord's ultimatum of eschatological judgment. The voice in the wilderness cried, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). It warned of "the wrath to come" and of the vanity of reliance on external earthly relationships, even descent from Abraham. If the trees did not bring forth satisfactory fruit, if they were not properly circumcised unto the Lord (*cf.* Lev. 19:23-25), then they must be cursed as a cumbrance to the ground and cut off. The axe was even now "laid unto the root" to inflict this judgment of circumcision.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> A similar figure is used in the Nimrud treaty of Esarhaddon to describe the vassal's obligation to accept the lordship of the crown prince Ashurbanipal when the time of his accession to the throne had come: "You will set a fair path at his feet" (line 54, translation of D. J. Wiseman in *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon*, London, 1958, p. 34). The same demand expressed in the same imagery was attributed by Isaiah (40:3) to the voice that should cry in the wilderness, the voice with which John identified himself (Jn. 1:23; *cf.* Matt. 3:3; Mk. 1:3; Lk. 3:4). On the use and importance of Isaiah 40:3 in the Qumran community (*cf.* IQS viii, 13, 14) see W. H. Brownlee, *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible*, New York, 1964, pp. 83 ff., 110 ff.

<sup>31</sup> *Cf.* Matt. 11:14; 17:12, 13; Mk. 9:12, 13; Lk. 1:17.

<sup>32</sup> Malachi's own role as a messenger of the covenant lawsuit, already suggested by his name and manifest in the whole tenor of his message, is epitomized in his closing words (3:22-24 (4:4-6)) as he recalls the covenant transaction at Horeb and directs Israel's attention to the threatening eschatological curse.

<sup>33</sup> *Cf.* Matt. 3:7 ff.; Lk. 3:7 ff.



One would expect that the baptism of John as the sign of such a mission of ultimatum would portray by its own symbolic form the threatened ordeal of divine judgment. Of course, in the usually alleged ritual antecedents of John's baptism (*viz.*, the Levitical lustrations, proselyte baptism, the Qumran washings) and frequently in the figurative use of water in the prophets<sup>34</sup> it is the cleansing property of water that is in view. Moreover, John's baptism is called a "baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). Consequently, the baptismal waters of John have been understood as symbolic of a washing away of the uncleanness of sin. But the possibility must be probed whether this water rite did not dramatize more plainly and pointedly the dominant theme in John's proclamation (particularly in the earlier stage before the baptism of Jesus), namely, the impending judicial ordeal which would discriminate and separate between the chaff and the wheat, rendering a verdict of acceptance but also of rejection. The fact is that for such an interpretation of the rite there is ample biblical-historical justification.

## 2. *Symbolic Water Ordeal*

Appeal to the gods for judicial decision was a standard feature in ancient legal procedure. Varieties of trial by ordeal ranged all the way from the oath of the individual sworn under sanctions to be executed by the oath deities to international wars in settlement of covenant controversy, the disposition of the conflict being again the decision of the oath gods invoked in the treaties. The most graphic example of the ordeal technique in Israelite judicial practice was the jealousy ordeal prescribed in Numbers 5. A more familiar variety of ordeal was the drawing of lots to expose the guilty.<sup>35</sup> But apart from prescribed court procedure the principle of ordeal comes to expression in every judicial intervention of God in history.

The two common elemental forces that functioned as ordeal

<sup>34</sup> Cf., e. g., Ezek. 36:25; Zech. 13:1.

<sup>35</sup> E. g., Jos. 7:14; Jon. 1:7. According to one theory, the terms Urim and Thummim derive respectively from roots meaning "curse" and "be perfect". The objects so designated would then serve as ordeal devices, rendering one or the other verdicts indicated by their names.

powers were water and fire. So it is too, as Peter observes, in cosmic history. God's judgment of the ancient world was by water and the day of judgment awaiting the present heaven and earth will be an ordeal by fire.<sup>36</sup>

The water ordeal was long current in the ancient Near East. It was practised throughout the Mesopotamian world and it is attested as early as the earliest known law code, that of the Sumerian Ur-Nammu.

Illustrative is the case dealt with in the second law of Hammurapi's Code. The accused was required to cast himself into the river. The word used for river in this law is preceded by the determinative for deity. The concept was, therefore, that the accused was casting himself into the hands of the divine judge who would declare the verdict. Emergence from the divine waters of ordeal would signify vindication: "If the River shows that man to be innocent and he comes forth safe", he shall dispossess his false accuser and the latter shall be put to death. But, "if the River overpowers him, his accuser shall take possession of his estate".<sup>37</sup>

Archetype of water ordeals was the Noahic deluge. The main features of the subsequent divine-river trials were all found in the judgment of the Flood: the direct revelation of divine verdict, the use of water as the ordeal element, the overpowering of the condemned and the deliverance of the justified, and the entrance of the ark-saved heirs of the new world into the possession of the erstwhile estates of the ungodly.

The other outstanding water ordeals of Old Testament history were those through which Moses and Joshua led Israel at the Red Sea and the Jordan. These too were acts of redemptive judgment wherein God vindicated the cause of those who called upon his name and condemned their adversaries. The exodus ordeal, with Israel coming forth safe and the Egyptians overwhelmed in the depths, strikingly exemplified the dual potential of the ordeal process. In the Jordan

<sup>36</sup> See II Pet. 3:5-7.

<sup>37</sup> That a similar river ordeal was practised in the Ugarit area seems to be indicated by the use in Ugaritic mythology of the epithet "Judge River" for the god Yamm (Sea). Cf. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature*, Rome, 1949, p. 11, n. 1.

ordeal, the dispossession of the condemned by the acquitted was prominent. At that historical juncture the rightful ownership of Canaan was precisely the legal issue at stake and God declared in favor of Israel by delivering them from Jordan's overflowing torrents. Thereby Israel's contemplated conquest of the land was vindicated as a holy war, a judgment of God. And the melting hearts of the Amorite and Canaanite kings, who grasped the legal significance of the episode as a divine verdict against them, was the inevitable psychological result (which would contribute in turn to the fulfillment of the verdict) in a culture where, even if superstitiously, the reality of the sacred ordeal was accepted.<sup>38</sup>

Since, then, the most memorable divine judgments of all covenant history had been trials by water ordeal and since John was sent to deliver the ultimatum of divine judgment, it does not appear too bold an interpretation of the baptismal sign of his mission to see in it a symbolic water ordeal, a dramatic enactment of the imminent messianic judgment. In such a visualization of the coming judgment John will have been resuming the prophetic tradition of picturing the messianic mission as a second Red Sea judgment (and so as a water ordeal).<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, read again in the light of the history of covenant ordeals, the whole record of John's ministry points to the understanding of his water rite as an ordeal sign rather than as a mere ceremonial bath of purification. The description of John's baptism as "unto the remission of sins", which is usually regarded as suggesting the idea of spiritual cleansing, is even more compatible with the forensic conception of a verdict of acquittal rendered in a judicial ordeal. The time had come when here in the Jordan River, where once Yahweh had declared through an ordeal that the promised land belonged to Israel, he was requiring the Israelites to confess their forfeiture of the blessings of his kingdom and their liability to the wrath to come. Yet John's proclamation was a preaching of "good tidings" to the people (Lk. 3:18) because

<sup>38</sup> See Josh. 5:1; cf. 2:10, 11; Exod. 15:13 ff. The legal pattern of a trial by ordeal with its judicial cutting off and inheritance of land is pervasive in Psalm 37 (see esp. vv. 9 ff., 22, 33 f.).

<sup>39</sup> See e. g. Isa. 11:10-16 (cf. 27:1, 12, 13; 51:10, 11); Zech. 10:10, 11.

it invited the repentant to anticipate the messianic judgment in a symbolic ordeal in the Jordan, so securing for themselves beforehand a verdict of remission of sin against the coming judgment. To seal a holy remnant by baptism unto the messianic kingdom was the proper purpose of the bearer of the ultimatum of the great King.

Further support for the interpretation of a baptismal rite as a sign of ordeal is found in the biblical use of βαπτίζω (and βάπτισμα) to denote historic ordeals.<sup>40</sup> Paul described Israel's Red Sea ordeal as a being baptized (I Cor. 10:2) and Peter in effect calls the Noahic deluge ordeal a baptism (I Pet. 3:21). To these passages we shall want to return. But of particular relevance at this point is the fact that John the Baptist himself used the verb βαπτίζω for the impending ordeal in which the One mightier than he would wield his winnowing fork to separate from the covenant kingdom those whose circumcision had by want of Abrahamic faith become uncircumcision and who must therefore be cut off from the congregation of Israel and devoted to unquenchable flames. With reference to this judicially discriminating ordeal with its dual destinies of garner and Gehenna John declared: "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire" (Matt. 3:11 f.; Lk. 3:16 f.; cf. Mk. 1:8).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Our concern here is not with the metaphorical use of βαπτίζω in the sense of "overwhelm" (as in debts) but with the semantic development along the line of its technical religious usage.

<sup>41</sup> One of the Qumran hymns (IQS, 3:28 ff.) depicts an eschatological river of fire, "the torrents of Belial", and it has been suggested that possibly John had this in mind when he spoke of Jesus baptizing with fire. Some would trace this image to Persian eschatology, which speaks of a river of molten metal through which all men must pass and in the ordeal process be either purified or destroyed. (Cf. W. H. Brownlee, "John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls", in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. Krister Stendahl, New York, 1957, p. 42.) For the background of John's thought, however, we must remember that fire was along with water a traditional ancient ordeal element. In fact, in the very prophecy where the Old Testament delineates the mission of the Lord and his Forerunner as final messengers of the covenant lawsuit, the messianic judgment is portrayed as an ordeal by fire with dual effects. For evildoers the fire of that day is the burning of an oven to consume them, but for those who fear God's name it is the healing rays of the sun to refine them (Mal. 3:19, 20 (4:1, 2); cf. 3:2, 3). And in connection with

More than that, John instituted a comparison between his own baptismal rite and the baptismal ordeal to be executed by the coming One: "I indeed baptize you with water . . . he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire". John called attention to the great difference; his own baptism was only a symbol whereas the coming One would baptize men in an actual ordeal with the very elements of divine power. But the significant fact at present is not that John's baptism was only a symbol but that, according to his own exposition of it, what John's baptism symbolized was the coming messianic judgment. That is certainly the force of his double use of "baptize" in this comparison.

Jesus' reception of John's baptism can be more easily understood on this approach. As covenant Servant, Jesus submitted in symbol to the judgment of the God of the covenant in the waters of baptism. The event appropriately concluded with a divine verdict, the verdict of justification expressed by the heavenly voice and sealed by the Spirit's anointing, Messiah's earnest of the kingdom inheritance (Matt. 3:16, 17; Mk. 1:10, 11; Lk. 3:22; *cf.* Jn. 1:32, 33; Ps. 2:7 f.).<sup>42</sup> For Jesus, as the Lamb of God, to submit to the symbol of judgment was to offer himself up to the curse of the covenant. By his baptism Jesus was consecrating himself unto his sacrificial death in the judicial ordeal of the Cross.<sup>43</sup> Such an understanding of his

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the idea of a river of judgment fire, Daniel 7:9, 10 is of interest. From the throne of the Ancient of Days as he sits for judgment there issues a fiery stream. By it the horn making great kingdom claims is consumed (vv. 11, 26), while the kingdom taken from him is given to the vindicated saints of the Most High as an eternal possession (vv. 26, 27). The total structure of the passage thus follows the pattern of a judicial ordeal. Compare also the delivering-destroying heavenly fire and the lake of fire and brimstone in Rev. 20:9 ff. See too our remarks on I Cor. 10:1 ff. below.

<sup>42</sup> Satan contested the verdict of sonship and that led to the ordeal by combat between Jesus and Satan, beginning with the wilderness temptation immediately after Jesus' baptism and culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection-vindication of the victorious Christ, the prelude to his reception of all the kingdoms of the world (the issue under dispute in the ordeal; *cf.* esp. Matt. 4:8 ff.; Lk. 4:5 ff.). See further the discussion of Col. 2:11 ff. below. *Cf.* Rom. 1:4.

<sup>43</sup> Agreeably, the heavenly verdict identifies Jesus as the Servant of Isaiah's songs (*cf.* Isa. 42:1), the one who must be led as a lamb to the

baptism is reflected in Jesus' own reference to his coming passion as a baptism: "I have a baptism to be baptized with" (Lk. 12:50; cf. Mk. 10:38).<sup>44</sup>

Further background for Jesus' conceptualizing of his sufferings as a water ordeal (and at the same time an additional antecedent for John's introduction of a water rite symbolic of judicial ordeal) is found in those supplicatory Psalms in which the righteous servant pleads for deliverance from overwhelming waters. Of particular interest is Psalm 69, from which the New Testament draws so deeply in its explication of the judicial sufferings of Christ: "I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me . . . . Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up" (vv. 2b, 15a; cf. vv. 1, 2a, 14).<sup>45</sup> The currency of this imagery in the days of John and Jesus is attested by the Qumran hymns.<sup>46</sup> The ultimate judicial origin of the figure in the literal practice of trial by water is evidenced by the judicial atmosphere and structuring of Psalms in which it appears. The suppliant pleads in the language of the law court. Against the lying accusations of his adversaries he protests his innocence and appeals for a manifestation of divine justice, that is, for deliverance out of his ordeal.<sup>47</sup> The suppliant Jonah found it possible to make literal use of this terminology of water ordeal in his appeal from the depths, and Jesus saw in Jonah's trial

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slaughter and have laid upon him the iniquities of all his people. Cf. in this connection the comments of Cullmann (*Baptism in the New Testament*, Chicago, 1950, pp. 20 f.) on the Baptist's testimony in John 1:29-34.

<sup>44</sup> In the context of that statement Jesus seems to allude in other ways too to the Forerunner's witness to him. He says that his mission is one of casting fire on the earth (Lk. 12:49; cf. Matt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16) and that it will result in a division among men (Lk. 12:51 ff.; cf. Matt. 3:12; Lk. 3:17).

<sup>45</sup> See also Pss. 18:16, 17 (15, 16); 42:8 (7); cf. 68:23 (22); 124:4, 5; 144:7.

<sup>46</sup> See, e. g., IQH 3:19 ff.; 5 (pervasively); 6:22 ff., cf. 32 ff.

<sup>47</sup> Note, for example, Pss. 18:7 (6), (cf. I Kg. 8:31 f.), 21-25 (20-24); 43:1 (viewed as part of a single complex comprising Pss. 42 and 43); 69 (throughout, considered particularly in its messianic realization). Of interest here are the form critical views of H. Schmidt concerning the so-called individual laments and especially the identity of the enemies of the Psalmist.

by water the sign of his own judgment ordeal in the heart of the earth.<sup>48</sup>

Synonymous with the motif of the ordeal by water is that of ordeal by combat with sea-monsters. Thus, the Red Sea water ordeal becomes in certain Old Testament passages a conflict of Yahweh against Leviathan.<sup>49</sup> Then in the New Testament there is a typological application of this imagery to Jesus' conflict with Satan in the course of his humiliation unto death.<sup>50</sup> Hence, on our understanding of John's baptism in general and of his baptism of Jesus in particular, Jesus' experience in the Jordan would have been a symbolic anticipation of his ensuing victorious combat with the Satanic-Dragon. We cannot, therefore, but view with new appreciation the liturgies of the ancient church when they speak of Jesus crushing the head of the dragon in his descent into the river for baptism.<sup>51</sup>

*Conclusions:* John the Baptist was sent as a messenger of the Old Covenant to its final generation. His concern was not to prepare the world at large for the coming of Christ but to summon Israel unto the Lord to whom they had sworn allegiance at Sinai, ere his wrath broke upon them and the

<sup>48</sup> Jon. 2:2 ff. (1 ff.); Matt. 12:39, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Pss. 74:12-15; 89:10, 11 (9, 10); Isa. 51:9, 10. We are thereby reminded that the Lord was present with his people in the passage through the sea, that he underwent their ordeal, and that their salvation depended on their identification with him.

<sup>50</sup> See especially Revelation 12, which symbolizes the Satanic enmity as both dragon and flood. Note the points of contact between this vision and IQH 5. Cf. footnote 42 above.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Per Lundberg, *La typologie baptismale dans l'ancienne Église*, Leipzig and Uppsala, 1942, pp. 10 ff., 225 ff., 229 ff. Early baptismal prayers recited the Lord's supernatural way in the waters in events like creation, the deluge, and the Red Sea and Jordan crossings. Singularly apposite is the anchoring of God's redemptive acts of subduing and dividing the ordeal waves in his creation acts of dividing and bounding the chaos waters in order that the dry land, inheritance of man, might appear. (It may be recalled here that in ancient mythology the slaying of the chaos dragon is the necessary preliminary to the establishment of the world order.) There is indeed an allegorical strain in these ancient prayers, but they did achieve a live sense of identification with the eschatological current of redemptive history, something our denatured modern baptismal forms would do well to recapture.

Mosaic kingdom was terminated in the flames of messianic judgment. The demand which John brought to Israel was focused in his call to baptism. This baptism was not an ordinance to be observed by Israel in their generations but a special sign for that terminal generation epitomizing the particular crisis in covenant history represented by the mission of John as messenger of the Lord's ultimatum.

From the angle of repentance and faith, John's ultimatum could be seen as a gracious invitation to the marriage feast of the Suzerain's Son; and John's baptism, as a seal of the remission of sins. Bright with promise in this regard was Jesus' submission to John's baptism. For the passing of Jesus through the divine judgment in the water rite in the Jordan meant to John's baptism what the passing of Yahweh through the curse of the knife rite of Genesis 15 meant to Abraham's circumcision. In each case the divine action constituted an invitation to all recipients of these covenant signs of consecration to identify themselves by faith with the Lord himself in their passage through the ordeal. So they might be assured of emerging from the overwhelming curse with a blessing. Jesus' passage through the water ordeal with the others who were baptized in the Jordan was also one in meaning with the Lord's presence with Israel in the theophany pillar during the passage through the Red Sea, and in the ark of the covenant during their crossing of the Jordan.<sup>52</sup> And the meaning of all these acts of the Lord of the covenant is expressed in the promise: "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour" (Isa. 43:1-3a).

Viewed from a more comprehensive vantage point, John's baptism was a sign of the ordeal through which Israel must

<sup>52</sup> Notice the cursing of the curse in these episodes where the ordeal waters themselves become the objects of the circumcision curse of division and cutting off.



pass to receive a judgment of either curse or blessing, for it represented the demand of a suzerainty-law covenant, an engagement sealed by dual sanctions.<sup>53</sup> The actual judgment, experienced by that generation to which John was sent, was an ordeal unto the cursing and casting off of Israel, a remnant only being excepted.<sup>54</sup> The city and the sanctuary were destroyed and the end thereof was with a flood, a pouring out of desolation.<sup>55</sup> To this overflowing wrath the waters of John's baptism had pointed, as well as to the remission of sins received by the remnant according to the election of grace.

By his message and baptism John thus proclaimed again to the seed of Abraham the meaning of their circumcision. Circumcision was no guarantee of inviolable privilege. It was a sign of the divine ordeal in which the axe, laid unto the roots of the unfruitful trees cursed by Messiah, would cut them off.<sup>56</sup> John's baptism was in effect a re-circumcising.

*(to be concluded)*

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<sup>53</sup> See "Law Covenant", pp. 11 ff.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Rom. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Dan. 9:26, 27.

<sup>56</sup> Matt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9.