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Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism

JOACHIM JEREMIAS GAVE CONSIDERABLE attention to the inscrip-tional evidence in presenting his history of infant baptism in the early church.¹ Kurt Aland's reply to Jeremias showed that the inscriptions add nothing to what is known from literary sources concerning the time when infant baptism began. Christian inscriptions commence in the third century and by that time infant baptism is already attested.² Aland appears to have confirmed the judgment of early twentieth-century critical scholars that there is no certain evidence for the practice of infant baptism before the late second century.³

Aland argued that the introduction of infant baptism is to be attributed to a belief in original sin. A change in attitude toward children from regarding them as innocent to regarding them as tainted with sinfulness can be seen in Origen and Cyprian.⁴ This change combined with a decline

1. Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten*, 49–50, 59–60, 88–95, 100–101, 105–7; ET = *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 41–42, 55–56, 75–80, 85, 89–90. Some points are reaffirmed more briefly in Jeremias, *Nochmals*, 42–46; ET = *Origins of Infant Baptism*, 49–53.

2. Aland, *Die Säuglingstaufe im Neuen Testament und in der Alten Kirche*, 48–53; ET, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*, 75–79.

3. Jeremias acknowledges that there is no direct *provable* evidence before Tertul-lian—*Nochmals*, 5 (ET = *Origins*, 9–10).

4. Aland, *Säuglingstaufe*, 75 (ET = *Did the Early Church*, 103–4).

in eschatological expectations that the Lord would return before children passed from an age of innocence made baptism a necessity.⁵

Aland's theological explanation of the origin of infant baptism, however, has not held up as well as his historical arguments. Why the retreating eschatological expectation did not affect the practice of baptism until late in the second century is not clear. The eschatological outlook was the strongest in North Africa where infant baptism had its earliest and most widespread acceptance.⁶ More significantly, the eschatological atmosphere could be argued as working in the opposite direction. Jeremias suggested that it was the understanding of baptism as an eschatological sacrament which made it plausible for children as well as their parents to receive this sign of salvation before the imminent overthrow of the present world order.⁷

The relationship between infant baptism and original sin appears, as Jeremias noted, to be the reverse of that stated by Aland.⁸ The practice of infant baptism was an argument for infant sinfulness rather than infant guilt being the basis for infant baptism (at least in the early sources). The argument of Augustine in this regard is well known. The practice of baptizing infants was by his time general and was one of his strongest points against the Pelagians:

The inevitable conclusion from these truths is this, that, as nothing else is effected when infants are baptized except that they are incorporated into the church, in other words, that they are united with the body and members of Christ, unless this benefit has been bestowed upon them, they are manifestly in danger of damnation. Damned, however, they could not be if they really had no sin. Now, since their tender age could not possibly have contracted sin in its own life, it remains for us, even if we are as yet unable to understand, at least to believe that infants inherit original sin.⁹

Cyprian and Origen introduced the idea of a stain or pollution attaching to birth and did so in the context of a consideration of infant baptism.

5. *Ibid.*, 77–78; *Taufe und Kindertaufe*, 37–39.

6. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 418.

7. Jeremias, *Kindertaufe*, 28 (ET = *Infant Baptism*, 23); *Nochmals*, 69–72 (ET = *Origins*, 83–84).

8. Jeremias, *Nochmals*, 62 (ET = *Origins*, 73–74).

9. *De pecc. mer. et rem., et de bapt. parv.* III. 39; cf. I. 23, 28, and 39; III. 2; *C. Julian. Pel.* III. 5. 11; *De gratia Chr. et de pecc. orig.* II. 2–4.

Cyprian speaking for the North African bishops in favour of conferring baptism immediately after birth and not waiting until the eighth day says:

If forgiveness of sins is granted, when they afterwards come to believe, even to the worst transgressors and to those who have previously sinned much against God, and if no one is held back from baptism and grace; how much less ought an infant to be held back, who having been born recently has not sinned, except in that being born physically according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death by his first birth. He approaches that much more easily to the reception of the forgiveness of sins because the sins remitted to him are not his own, but those of another. (*Ep.* lxiv [lviii].5)

The line of argument is that if baptism is not denied to the worst of sinners, it should not be denied (or delayed) to the new born. Cyprian recognizes that they have no sins of their own; therefore, he can only refer the forgiveness to the sins of Adam. By his birth the infant contracts the death which Adam's sins brought into the world, and so in a sense the infant is in touch with Adam's sins.¹⁰ Origen more explicitly indicates that the idea of baptizing infants raised the question, "For the forgiveness of whose sins?" His answer does not move much beyond the idea of a ceremonial or physical impurity associated with birth:

I take this occasion to discuss something which our brothers often inquire about. Infants are baptized for the remission of sins. Of what kinds? Or when did they sin? But since "No one is exempt from stain," one removes the stain by the mystery of baptism. For this reason infants also are baptized. For "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."¹¹

The movement is clearly from the existing practice to the doctrine and not from the doctrine to the practice.¹² Whatever influence the doctrine of original sin had in establishing a fairly uniform practice after Augustine's

10. Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, 79–87. It is usually assumed that Cyprian is talking about normal practice, but in view of the evidence presented below one may raise a question whether this is a discussion only about the age for emergency baptism.

11. *Hom. Luc.* XIV. 5. Cf. *Hom. Lev.* VIII. 3 with reference to Job 14:4 and Ps 51:5 and *Comm. Rom.* V. 9 with reference to Lev 12:8 and Ps 51:5 in justification for baptizing infants for the remission of sins.

12. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, 220–26.

time, it seems not to have been the reason for the introduction of infant baptism.

If we are convinced by Aland that there is no sure evidence for infant baptism before Tertullian, and if we agree with Jeremias that original sin was not the explanation for its origin, then we are obligated to offer an alternative explanation. One who is not willing to use theology to fill in the blanks left by history will not be satisfied to stop where the researches of Jeremias and Aland have left us.

It is here that the inscriptions may offer assistance. Although most of the inscriptions are difficult to date and those which carry dates are later than the time for which there is literary testimony to the practice of infant baptism, they do reveal the popular Christian religious sentiments. They indicate the motives operative in infant baptism. They give a specificity and scope of evidence which the surviving literary records do not provide.

The collection by Ernst Diehl affords an excellent instrument by which to study the Latin evidence.¹³ The Greek Christian inscriptions do not yet have a comparable corpus, so the same comprehensiveness is not possible in studying them.¹⁴ A consideration of the inscriptions as a whole leaves some unmistakable impressions. Moreover, they suggest a specific setting in which infant baptism took its rise and which is consistent with the surviving literary evidence.

Only those inscriptions which undeniably refer to baptism and state when it was conferred permit definite conclusions. Inscriptions employing the terms “in peace,” “innocent,” and “believer” have not been found especially helpful in themselves for determining the age of baptism. *In pace* has often been appealed to as an indication that the person was baptized and so died “in the peace” of the church. There are many cases where this is likely,¹⁵ but if one assumes the sinlessness or innocence of children, there is no reason why *in pace* would not be used of children apart from baptism. That there was no necessary connection between dying or resting “in peace” and baptism may be seen from Diehl no. 1509B: “Boniface, a

13. *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*. Numbers will be to this edition unless otherwise stated.

14. See the collections on this subject by Didier, *Le Baptême des enfants dans la tradition de l'église*; and H. Kraft, *Texte zur Geschichte der Taufe, besonders der Kindertaufe in der alten Kirche*.

15. Notably is this the case where a *fidelis* is said to have lived in peace (*vixit in pace*) for a given period of time—nos. 1346, 1348, 5349, 1349A, 1351, 1372, 1381A, et al. *Fidelis in pace* was characteristic of North Africa (LeBlant, *Rev. Arch.*, 1881, 240).

hearer in peace, who lived 1 year and 4 months.” The child evidently had been enrolled as a catechumen, died unbaptized, but “in peace.”

The word “innocent” (*innocentia*) had no necessary suggestion of sinlessness. As well as being used of children from infancy on,¹⁶ it is even used of quite elderly persons: “more or less 50 years” (no. 3444, A.D. 397), 36 years old (no. 461), and even 80 years old (no. 2932). Did these persons die recently baptized? More likely the meaning is “blameless,” “upright.”

“Believer” or “faithful” (*fidelis, pistoſ*) means “baptized” and is used of persons of varying ages: an infant (no. 3160), 4 year old (1334), 8 year old (1349), 33 year old (1347), etc.¹⁷ Unless specifically stated, no firm conclusions can be drawn as to when the person became a “believer.” The wording of an inscription like 1366 (near Aquileia) makes one think of an emergency baptism, but this is not explicit:

To the divine dead. For the well-deserving son Covoideonus who lived 9 years, 2 months, 7 days. Buried December 28. He departed a believer in peace. His grieving parents made this according to a vow.

No doubt attaches to the important 1549, now in the Louvre and dated c. AD 314:

Her parents set this up for Julia Florentina, their dearest and most innocent infant who was made a believer. She was born a pagan on the day before the nones of March before dawn when Zoilus was censor of the province. She lived eighteen months and twenty-two days and was made a believer in the eighth hour of the night, almost drawing her last breath. She survived four more hours so that she entered again on the customary things. She died at Hybla in the first hour of the day on September 25
...¹⁸

Little Julia was baptized clearly because she was on the point of death, and that accords with the information in a great many inscriptions.

The word baptism is rare, but the ceremony is referred to by such expressions as “made a believer” (*fidelis facta*, as in no. 1549 above), “received grace,” and neophyte. One of the earliest dated inscriptions to

16. No. 3489 has a brother 11 years old and a sister 2 years old, whose “innocent souls deservedly went to God, assured of eternal life.”

17. The word “Christian” is rarer than “believer” and I have not found it applied to children.

18. See observations by Mohrmann, “Encore une fois: *paganus*,” 113–14.

allude to baptism is quite typical of the later inscriptions: no. 3315, dated AD 268, from the catacomb of Callistus:

Pastor, Titiana, Marciana, and Chreste made this for Marcianus, a well-deserving son in Christ the Lord. He lived 12 years, 2 months, and . . . days. He received grace [*crat(iam) (sic) accepit*] on September 20 when the consuls were Marinianus and Pater-nus the second time. He gave up (his soul) on September 21. May you live among the saints in eternity.

From Diehl's numbers 1523–43 the following are pertinent:

- 1523 (Salona, late 4th century)—For Flavia, dearest infant, who with sound mind obtained the grace [*gratiam consecuta*] of the glorious font on Easter day and survived after holy baptism five months. She lived 3 years, 10 months, 7 days. The parents, Flavian and Archelais, for their pious daughter. Burial on the 18th of August.
- 1524 (Rome, early 4th century)—IXQUC N(eofwtistwn?) Postu-mius Eutenion, a believer, who obtained holy grace the day before his birth day at a very late hour and died. He lived six years and was buried on the 11th of July on the day of Jupiter on which he was born. His soul is with the saints in peace. Felicissimus, Eutheria, and Festa his grandmother, for their worthy son Postumius.
- 1525 (Capua, AD 371)—Here is laid Fortunia, who lived more or less 4 years. The parents set this up for their dearest daughter. She obtained (grace) on July 27 . . . and died on July 25 [*sic*, evidently the workman exchanged the dates]. Gratian for the second time and Probus were the consuls.
- 1527 (Rome)—The boy Maurus, age five years and three months, was buried on the nones of August. He obtained grace at two or three.
- 1528 (North Africa)—. . . obtained (the grace) of God on December 5 and lived in this world after the day of obtaining until December 7 and died . . .
- 1529 (Rome)—For the well-deserving Antonia Cyriaceti who lived 19 years, 2 months, 26 days. Received (the grace) of God and died a virgin on the fourth day. Julius Benedictus her father set this up for his sweet and incomparable daughter. November 20.

- 1530 (Rome)—Blessed Crescentine, my dear sweet wife, who lived 33 years, 2 months. She received (grace) on June 29 and was buried on October 27. Well-deserving.
- 1531 (Rome, Catacomb of Priscilla, third century)—Sweet Tyche lived one year, 10 months, 15 days. Received (grace) on the 8th day before the Kalends . . . Gave up (her soul) on the same day.
- 1532 (Rome, Catacomb of Priscilla, third century)—Irene who lived with her parents 10 months and 6 days received (grace) on April 7 and gave up (her soul) on April 13.
- 1535 (Rome)—To the divine dead. For Euphrosune, dear wife of Kampano, who lived with him 12 full years, 2 months, 5 days. She passed away in her 35th year. After the day of her receiving (grace) she lived 57 days.
- 1536a—For the well-deserving Simplicius who lived 51 years and after his reception (of grace) 27 days. Buried on February 1 in peace.
- 1539 (Rome, Catacomb of Domitilla, AD 338)—In the consulship of Ursus and Polemius the girl named Felite, more or less 30 years old, obtained (grace) on March 26 and died in peace after April 29 on the day of Mercury at the 9th hour.
- 1540—Euphronia, daughter of Euphronius and her mother, killed in a shipwreck. Born November 1, obtained (grace) April 11, died May 1.[/BL]

Diehl's numbers 1477–1507, as well as many others, use the word “neophyte” (“newly baptized”) for the deceased. Where ages are given they are mostly young. A few examples may be cited:

- 1477 (Rome, St. Agnes outside the walls, AD 348)—Flavius Aurelius, son of Leo, marvelously endowed with the innocence of generous goodness and industry, who lived 6 years, 8 months, 11 days. A neophyte, he rested (in peace) on July 2 in the consulship of Julius Philip and Sallias . . .
- 1478 (Rome, AD 370)—For the well-deserving Perpetuus in peace, who lived more or less 30 years . . . Buried April 13, died a neophyte . . .
- 1478A (Rome, A.D. 371)—For Romanus, well-deserving neophyte, who lived 9 years, 15 days. May he rest in the Lord's peace. Flavius Gratian Augustus for the second time and Petronius Probus consuls.

- 1480 (Rome, AD 385)—In the consulship of Flavius Arcadius and Baudone on the 22nd of June died Leontius a neophyte who lived more or less 28 years, 5 months, 15 days. Well-deserving, in peace.
- 1481 (Rome, AD 389)—Aristo, an innocent child, who lived 8 months, a neophyte, departed on June 4, Timasius and Promotus being consuls.
- 1484 (Rome, Catacomb of Callistus)—Innocentius a neophyte lived 23 years.
- 1484B (Rome, Cemetery Cyriacae)—For Paulinus, a neophyte, in peace, who lived 8 years.
- 1484C (Ravenna)—For Proiectus, an infant neophyte, who lived 2 years, 7 months.
- 1485A (Rome, Catacomb of Pontianus)—For Domitian, innocent neophyte, who lived 3 years, 30 days. Buried May 24.
- 1485B (Rome, Catacomb of Praetextatus)—Mercury a neophyte is buried here. He lived 42 years, 2 months, 15 days. Eugenia while she lived made this.
- 1485C (Rome, Catacomb of Praetextatus)—Pisentus, an innocent soul, who lived 1 year, 8 months, 13 days, a neophyte, buried on September 13 in peace.
- 1485D (Rome, Capitoline Museum)—For the dear son Casiacinus who lived six years and 3 days, a neophyte, buried on May 5. Well-deserving, in peace.
- 1487—For Zosimus, who lived 5 years, 8 months, 13 days, neophyte in Christ. Donatus his father and Justa his mother for their well-deserving son.
- 1488B (Naples)—For the well-deserving Eugenia of happy memory who lived not 19 years, a neophyte.
- 2764 (Rome, Catacomb of Callistus)—For Felix, a well-deserving son, who lived 23 years, 10 days. He departed a virgin with reference to the world and a neophyte in peace. His parents made this. Buried August 2. [/BL]

Neophytes could come in all ages: from 24 days (no. 1497) or 80 days (4462B) to 42 years (1483) or 59 years (3352).

A few of the deceased are described as catechumens instead of neophytes. Diehl's no. 1508 (dated AD 397) is a 60-year-old catechumen. No.

1509A from Rome reads, “Lucilianus for his son Bacius Valerius who lived 9 years, 8 months, 22 days, a catechumen.” Note 1509B quoted above about a “hearer” who died in peace.

The Greek inscriptions which have been brought into the discussion yield the same picture.

- CIG IV. 9810—Achillia, a neophyte, fell asleep in her first year, fifth month, on February 24.
- CIG IV. 9855—Here lies Macaria, daughter of John of the village Nikeratos. She lived 3 years, 3 months, 16 days. She died a believer on the 24th of the month Sandikou in the 11th consulship of Honorius Augustus and of Constantius.¹⁹ [/BL]

It is noteworthy that all of the inscriptions which mention a time of baptism place this near the time of death. The explicit inscriptional evidence is not an argument for infant baptism as the normal practice. Rather, the evidence points to the opposite conclusion. The inscriptions do not tell the whole story, but as far as they go they provide an argument that in the third and fourth centuries infant baptism was abnormal. All of the above cited examples may be considered cases of “emergency baptism.” Death was near, and the person received baptism “on his death-bed” as it were. Jeremias has pointed to the practice of the delay of baptism in the fourth century,²⁰ but the third-century inscriptions show the same practice. Why is baptism not mentioned except when it was administered near death? Any effort to argue from silence will be subjective. Instead of trying to fill in the silence in the archaeological record with conjectures (as has been done with the literary record), we should listen to what the existing evidence is saying. The newborn were not routinely baptized in the period of our early inscriptions. Baptism was administered before death, at whatever age. This fact offers the most plausible explanation of the origin of infant baptism. One early inscription says it explicitly:

19. The other Greek inscriptions introduced by Jeremias do not help: the Zosimus inscription (*Kindertaufe*, 59 [ET = *Infant Baptism*, 56]) actually gives no information on the time of baptism, and the Dionysius inscription (*Kindertaufe*, 90 [ET = *Infant Baptism*, 77]) gives no indication of baptism.

20. Jeremias, *Kindertaufe*, 102–7 [ET = *Infant Baptism*, 87–91]. Jeremias argues that the third-century examples (nos. 1611C, 1343, 3891C, 1531, 1532, 3315) are children of non-Christians. This seems unlikely: why then were they baptized and buried in a Christian cemetery? At least the parents would have been catechumens. We may leave this question aside as we look for the motivation.

Sacred to the divine dead. Florentius made this monument for his well-deserving son Appronianus, who lived one year, nine months, and five days. Since he was dearly loved by his grandmother, and she saw that he was going to die, she asked from the church that he might depart from the world a believer. (Diehl, no. 1343, from the Catacomb of Priscilla, third century)

The discussion centering on the likelihood that the father was a pagan and the bearing of this on the baptism has diverted attention from the most important thing which this inscription has to say, namely the desire that the child die a “believer,” i.e., “baptized.” Why was there this strong desire, reflected in all the “emergency baptisms” above, even though baptism was not administered earlier?

Since the inscriptions are epitaphs, reception of baptism must have been considered an important preparation for the afterlife. As the inscriptions indicate, the approach of death was the occasion for the baptism. Many children must have died unbaptized, and so the urge for baptism soon after birth became strong. I would suggest that John iii. 5 (cited by Origen above) supplied the biblical basis for the Christian concern about children in the after-life. This logion was the favourite baptismal text of the second century.²¹ John Chrysostom continued to defend infant baptism in terms of its positive benefits while rejecting a doctrine of original sin:

You have seen how numerous are the gifts of baptism. Although many men think that the only gift it confers is the remission of sins, we have counted its honors to the number of ten. It is on this account that we baptize even infants, although they are sinless, that they may be given the further gifts of sanctification, righteousness, filial adoption, and inheritance, that they may be brothers and members of Christ, and become dwelling places for the Spirit.²²

John 3:5 has remained a proof-text for infant baptism in the Catholic tradition. The universal understanding of baptism as for the remission of sins gave impetus to the doctrine of original sin which then in turn became the theological basis for infant baptism.

John 3:5 could be thought as debarring any unbaptized person from heaven. Baptism was the rite which assured a blessed hereafter. The request

21. Hermas, *Sim.* IX. xvi. 3; Justin, *Apol. I.* 61; Theophilus, *Ad Autol.* II. xvi; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III. xvii. 1f.; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* IV. xxv; Tertullian, *De bapt.* 12.

22. *Bapt. Lect.* III. 6. Cf. Gregory Nazianzus, *Carmina* I. i. 9, lines 87–92; his *Or.* XL. xxviii supports the interpretation advanced in this article.

from parents (or a grandparent, as above) for baptism for a gravely sick child would be natural and would be hard to refuse. Even an opponent of infant baptism like Tertullian appears to allow for emergency baptism as a regular practice:

It follows that deferment of baptism is more profitable, in accordance with each person's character and attitude, and even age; and especially so as regards children. For what need is there, if there really is no need, for even their sponsors to be brought into peril. (*De bapt.* 18.4)

Tertullian stood at the point where there was pressure from some to extend the emergency measure to other circumstances. It is not uncommon for emergency procedures to become regular practice. That is, I submit, what happened here. If baptism was a necessary precaution before death, it would be easy to make the precautionary measure normal, especially as it gained the support of powerful theological reasons. The initiative in infant baptism, therefore, lay with parents of sick children who asked of the church that they might not die unbaptized. These parents then gratefully recorded the fact of the baptism at the burial site.

The practice of baptism before death exerted an influence in two directions. The association of baptism with the time of death might cause baptism to be put off until the end of life, so that its saving benefits could be applied to the entire life. Thus occurred the delay of baptism which became a problem in the fourth century. Baptism in adult years when there was no immediate threat of death, to be observed in the lives of several prominent church leaders in the fourth century, however, was not the same thing as the death-bed baptism of Constantine and others. On the other hand, the desire to die baptized, or to have one's children die baptized, could exert an influence in the opposite direction. The high mortality rate of infants in the ancient world, to which the Christian inscriptions are a powerful if mournful witness, would encourage the practice of giving baptism soon after birth as insurance no matter what might happen. The inscriptions say that it was in such natural, human feelings that we are to find the real origin of a practice which later acquired such significant theological support.