

## CHAPTER 4

### BAPTISM

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest baptism is a symbolic ritual. As with all symbolic rites, it carries *meaning*, because it is performed for a *reason* and adds *value* to people's lives (chapter 1; cf Beattie 1968:69-70). The aim<sup>1</sup> of this chapter is thus to investigate the *reason why* the first followers of Jesus underwent baptism, what it could have *meant* for them and what kind of *value* it could have added to their lives. I shall also discuss the origin of the earliest baptism, since this might illuminate the role alternate states of consciousness (as discussed in chapter 2) played in this ritual. At the end of chapter 1, I summarized the argument as follows: By means of the rites of baptism and the Eucharist, early Jesus-groups "re-enacted" alternate states of consciousness that Jesus "showed" dynamically during his lifetime, and which they were "told" about by the earliest Jesus-followers, who employed anti-language.

In this chapter, I shall suggest that by means of the ritual of baptism, Jesus-followers were initiated into a new movement, the "family of God". This implied a status transformation, which in turn resulted in new roles and responsibilities for the baptized (cf Turner 1987:380-383, 386). It seems that as if by means of the ritual of baptism, the early Jesus-followers believed that in a symbolic fashion they were buried and resurrected with Christ, and thus participated in the salvation that Christ wrought. During baptism they also experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, as Jesus probably did when he lived on earth (see Stevenson 1989:66), by means of alternate states of consciousness. They expressed this experience by way of anti-language, since ordinary language could not express this "extra-ordinary" status transformation, the acquiring of a new social identity. In the following chapter, I shall discuss the Eucharist, the ceremony of integration. By means of participation in the Eucharist these new roles and responsibilities were confirmed.

This chapter is structured as follows: Firstly, I shall give attention to the *reason* why the earliest Jesus-followers participated in a baptismal practice, which will entail an examination of the foundation of the earliest baptism. Subsequently, I shall discuss the *value* that baptism added to the lives of these followers, which will entail an examination of baptismal formulae for traces of anti-language. Lastly, I shall explore the *meaning* baptism could have had for the earliest Jesus-followers, which will entail a discussion of baptism as a cultural ritual of initiation and symbol of status transformation.

## **4.2 REASON: THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARLIEST BAPTISM**

### **4.2.1 Introduction**

In this section, I shall briefly discuss the possible foundation and origins of the earliest baptism. This topic has been of great scholarly interest in the past and even today it continues to stimulate debate (see e.g., Cullmann [1950] 1969; Pelser 1981; Collins 1989; Stevenson 1989; Bradshaw 2002). It is not my intention to offer a complete survey of all the issues at stake. I shall merely refer to certain aspects that I regard as valuable for the topic discussed in this chapter.

In the following section, I shall investigate the importance of the question of origins, as well as the possible foundation and origins of the earliest baptism. Subsequently, I shall spend some time on the baptismal practice of John the Baptist, which most probably played an important role in the foundation of the early Jesus-followers' baptism. After this, I shall outline the similarities between baptism and circumcision, which probably constitute an important reason why *baptism* became the initiation rite of the early Jesus-followers. Jesus' own baptism is also of some importance in this regard and will therefore also be discussed. Lastly, I shall suggest some preliminary findings.

## 4.2.2 Origins of the earliest baptism

### 4.2.2.1 Introduction

When one is carrying out research regarding the origin of baptism (or the Eucharist), a frequently asked question is: “Why bother to try to find how early Christians worshiped?” Stevenson (1989:9-12) states that although many people object to looking for the origins of a rite like the earliest baptism, especially regarding accessibility, relevance, and whether it is normative for today, he is convinced that some information in this regard *is* accessible. Although times and ways of worship change, he holds the opinion that we cannot regard the way in which the earliest Jesus-followers worshipped as irrelevant. As a matter of fact, according to him, to study the era of origins could provide us with basic norms that may challenge the way in which we worship today. In this regard, Stevenson (1989:12; emphasis by Stevenson) comments:

This is not to suggest...that all liturgies have to be ideologically sound and that we can only worship authentically if we are doing it in continuity with generations long since passed on. But it is to affirm that mere knowledge of how, for example, early Christians valued baptism ought to awaken sleepy Christians born again not of water and the Spirit but of secular consumerism to look once more at how Christian initiation is practiced in their locality. Of course, how the early Christians thought cannot, in some ways, be how we think. Everybody knows that the earth is not flat. But not everybody knows what riches are to be found in, for example, some early Eucharistic prayers, which sometimes use the sort of simple, symbolic language that bypasses many of the doctrinal problems that festered through the Middle Ages and came to a head at the Reformation. We don't have to *imitate* the early centuries – but there can be little doubt that they propose to us certain significant norms that ought to challenge our own discipleship and the quality and depth of our worship.

For Stevenson (1989:12-13) the issue goes even deeper. To say that the worship of antiquity is accessible, relevant, and in some sense, normative is to take several steps along the road of our own self-understanding. We are creatures of change, because our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us alter with the passage of time. To maintain that “early Christian” worship is important, is to express crucial things about ourselves and our own needs. “As Christians we are people with a story, and part of our own progress through history is to hold a continuing conversation with our roots” (Stevenson 1989:12).

On the other hand, Bradshaw (2002:x) remarks that we know much less of the liturgical practices of the first three centuries than we once thought we did, adding that what we do know about patterns of worship in that period points towards considerable variety. The “classical shape of Christian liturgy” is to a large degree the result of an assimilation of different traditions to one another in the fourth century, rather than the survival of one pattern of “Christian” worship from the earliest apostolic times or even from Jesus himself. That which emerges in this post-Nicene era is frequently a liturgical compromise, rather than the triumph of one way of doing over all others. Bradshaw (2002:x) explains this statement as follows:

This means that what then becomes the mainstream liturgical tradition of the church in East and West is often quite unlike what any single Christian group was doing prior to the fourth century. A real mutation had taken place at that time, and many primitive customs had either disappeared or had been greatly altered from their former appearance.

Over the years have emerged numerous different methods for interpreting liturgical practices among the earliest Jesus-followers, for example the philological method, the structural approach, the organic approach, the comparative method, and the hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>2</sup> Since none of these methods is perfect, one may feel that to reconstruct patterns of “early Christian” worship is doomed to failure, because “it is not simply a matter of joining up the

dots on a sheet of otherwise plain paper, but rather of finding the dots in the first place, buried as they are among countless others of different shades and hues, and of doing so with a blindfold over one's eyes" (Bradshaw 2002:20). But although the task is not easy, and we shall most probably never be able to learn everything we would like to know about the church's early worship, it is not impossible to say, even if only in a provisional way, that a certain amount of information about how "early Christian" worship began and developed in the first few centuries, is accessible. Bradshaw (2002:20) considers that "[w]hen the dots are carefully joined, a faint picture can indeed emerge."

Although this is no easy task, I shall investigate the possible origins of the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers in the remainder of this section. If we understand where this practice stemmed from, it may be easier to determine the *reason* why they participated in baptism. Traditionally, the view was held that the practice of baptism in the "early church" resulted from the command of the risen Lord in Matthew 28:16-20 (see Collins 1989:37). But since this passage is most probably not authentic<sup>3</sup> (see Beasley-Murray 1962:77-92; Barth 1981: 13-17; Pelsler 1987:559-560; Bradshaw 2002:60), the answer must lie somewhere else.

The first uncertainty that needs to be clarified is whether the earliest baptism originated with Jesus himself or only among his followers after his resurrection. "Christians" appear to have known and practiced baptism from the earliest times. Mitchell (1995:243-246) maintains that Paul, for example, underwent a baptism that seems not to have been that of John, perhaps fifty years after Jesus' death. In like vein, Stevenson (1989:34) comments that Paul's description of baptism as dying and rising with Christ (Rm 6:3-11), suggests that the reason for being baptized is that Jesus rose from the dead. This might be why the earliest followers of Jesus chose baptism as their initiation ritual. Although this implies that the rite of baptism did not begin with Jesus' own baptism, his baptism most probably played a role in its coming into being.

Where did the baptism practiced by the earliest Jesus-followers' originate? Baptism and other types of ritual baths were rather common in antiquity, in the Israelite tradition (the "parent religion" of "Christianity"), as well as in the Greco-Roman mystery religions, which makes it difficult to determine the answer. The origins of "Christian" baptism have been sought in the mystery religions, in the Old Testament regulations concerning ceremonial cleansing, in proselyte baptism and in the baptism practices of sects such as Qumran (see Barth 1981:37-43). A brief consideration of all these possibilities follows.

#### **4.2.2.2 Greco-Roman mystery religions**

There are indeed similarities between the initiation rites of the mystery religions and the earliest baptism. But the differences are greater. One similarity comprises the idea of dying and rising in, for example, the Taurobolium initiation rite (see Meyer 1987:8, 12). Some mystery cults required a ceremonial washing or baptismal ritual before participation in religious practices was allowed: for example the cults of Isis, Mithras, and Eleusis (see Pelsner 1981:247; Meyer 1987:155-221; Pilch 1996c:8). Regarding the evaluation of Paul's use of traditions in Romans 6, Wedderburn (1983:349-350) argues that the link between dying and rising with Christ on the one hand and the rite of baptism on the other may be a secondary one. The former may encompass a theological idea (it need not be Paul's own for this argument to make sense) which he uses to interpret baptism – to show his readers its consequences and implications for ethics. Wedderburn (1983:350) adds:

If that is so then it would be less plausible to regard baptism as the indispensable and original context for this theological idea; yet that is what it must be if the Christian rite of initiation is the entry-point for such an idea to come over into early Christianity from the initiatory rites of the Hellenistic mysteries, as many assert.

Pelser (1981:248; cf Thom 2001:401-402) also doubts whether the mystery religions exerted a direct influence on the early Christian baptism, since most of the mysteries reached their zenith in post-New Testament times.

#### **4.2.2.3 Ceremonial cleansing in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, Naaman was cleansed of his skin problem by bathing in the Jordan (2 Ki 5:14). The high priest was also required to perform different kinds of purification rites (Lv 15:5-13; 16:4, 24). Prophetic symbolism speaks of God's people being cleansed with pure water in preparation for the advent of the messianic age (Ezk 36:25-28) (see Pelser 1981:247; Stevenson 1989:34; Pilch 1996c:8; Bradshaw 2002:59-60). The tradition and practice of Levitical ablutions is closely related to John's baptismal ritual, which apparently also involved total immersion in water. The prophetic-apocalyptic tradition also exhibited an aspect that was important for John's baptism – the expectation of a future, definitive intervention of God. The ethical use of ablution imagery is also significant (e.g., Is 1:16-17; Ezk 36:25-28). God's transformation of people in eschatological restoration was to encompass a new spirit and a new heart. This new creation would begin with a divine sprinkling of clean water upon the people to cleanse them from their sins and acts of idolatry (Collins 1989:32-36).

#### **4.2.2.4 Proselyte baptism**

Proselyte baptism has been considered as a possible influence on the baptism of the early Jesus-followers (Jeremias 1958:34-44), but the earliest indisputable evidence for a proselyte water rite is dated as late as the end of the first century,<sup>4</sup> when the baptism of the early Jesus-followers was already well established (Pelser 1981:247-250; Koester 1982:72; cf Mitchell 1995:246; Bradshaw 2002:59-60). Proselyte baptism was a kind of transition rite which was performed only once in a person's life. In this respect it was more similar to the earliest baptism than to the purification baths which were prescribed in the Old Testament. Further, proselyte baptism is observed by witnesses, and could be called a purification rite, which is also true of the early Jesus-followers' baptism.

But proselyte baptism was not associated with forgiveness of sins, nor was it connected with conversion and repentance in a critical, eschatological perspective. It was also performed by the proselyte himself or herself, whereas in the baptism of the early Jesus-followers the one baptized was passively baptized by another person (Collins 1989:32-36; Hartman 1992:34).

#### **4.2.2.5 The Qumran community**

We do not possess enough information concerning initiation rites in Israelite sects to compare them with the baptism of the early Jesus-followers, except for that regarding the Qumran community. Although similarities exist between the rites of these two communities, the rites at Qumran were repeated washings related to the need for ritual purity and do not seem to have included an initiatory baptism (Pelser 1981:250-251; Mitchell 1995:246; Pilch 1996c:8; Bradshaw 2002:59-60). The baptism of John did exhibit similarities with the ritual washings at Qumran: both involved withdrawal to the desert to await the Lord; both were linked to an ascetic lifestyle; both included total immersion in water; and both had an eschatological context. But these features were not unique to John and the community at Qumran. Many differences occur too: a priestly, exclusive community versus the activity of a prophetic, charismatic leader in a public situation; a ritual practiced at least once daily versus an apparently once-and-for-all ritual; and a self-enacted ritual versus a ritual administered by John (Collins 1989:32-36; Webb 1994:184).

#### **4.2.2.6 Provisional findings**

Although one can detect similarities between the baptism of the early Jesus-followers and the above-mentioned practices, none of these practices satisfactorily answer the question concerning the origins of the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers (cf Jeremias 1958:23-50; Oepke 1968:532-536; Meyer 1987:17-30, 155-196; Pearson 1999:42-62; see Pelsler 1981:247-251). On the other hand, many scholars suggest that “early Christian” baptism originated in the baptismal practice of John<sup>5</sup> (Oepke 1968:536-538; Reicke 1987:219; Collins



1989:28; 1996:218; Theißen & Merz 1996:193-194; Bradshaw 2002:59-60; Esler 2003:204).

#### **4.2.3 The “foundation” of the earliest baptism in the activity of John the Baptist**

The question I intend to consider here is whether there is continuity between the baptism of John, the ministry of Jesus and the (diverse) baptismal practices of first-century believers. Collins (1989:28) points out that since the late nineteenth century, New Testament scholars have recognized that the history of “early Christianity” in a sense began with John the Baptist. Jesus differed from John in lifestyle and teaching (see Theißen & Merz 1996:194-196). In Luke 7:31-35 (Mt 11:16-19) John is described as someone who does not eat bread or drink wine, while in contrast Jesus is portrayed as a “glutton and drunkard”. Furthermore, John proclaimed that people needed to repent, because the kingdom of God was at hand, while Jesus proclaimed that one could already experience the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, Jesus was baptized by John, which suggests that the Jesus-movement had its roots in the activity of John, leading Collins (1989:28) to the conclusion that most probably the baptism of the early Jesus-followers also originated in the baptism of John<sup>6</sup>(cf Meier 1997:266).

The relationship between the activity of John and that of Jesus is portrayed differently in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Gospel of John. According to the Synoptics Jesus’ activity of teaching and healing began only after John was arrested (Mk 1:14; Mt 4:12-17; implicitly Lk 3:18-23), and there is no indication whether Jesus or his disciples baptized during the life of the historical Jesus. The Gospel of John on the other hand describes Jesus’ public activity as overlapping with John’s and it states that Jesus did baptize people (Jn 3:22-30), although these statements are corrected in John 4:1-3, where it is reported that it was not actually Jesus who baptized people, but his disciples (see Collins 1989:36). Whether the Synoptics or John portray what really happened has been much disputed. Collins’ (1989:36-38; 1996:230-232) opinion is that the Gospel of John

is more accurate at this point, because there is no plausible theological reason why the tradition that Jesus and his disciples baptized people would be invented.

Furthermore, the report of Jesus' baptizing creates a difficulty for the evangelist. This issue can be explained as follows: In John 1:33 Jesus was presented as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, but the description in John 3-4 does not imply that Jesus' baptism was any different from John's. According to John 7:30 the Spirit is only given to Jesus after his "exaltation". Collins (1989:37) argues:

If Jesus administered baptism of a kind similar to John's, one would expect continuity between the baptism of John and early Christian baptism. The discontinuity is as great as the continuity in the cases of the gospel of Matthew and the letters of Paul, but there is striking continuity between John's baptism and the baptism to which Peter invited the Jews assembled in Jerusalem on Pentecost according to the second chapter of Acts.

Webb (1994:219-223) also considers that Jesus did baptize for a period. He contends that Jesus began his public ministry as a baptizer associated with John's movement. But Jesus moved beyond that initial ministry so that his later ministry revealed significant points of discontinuity with John, while at other points Jesus remained in continuity with John (cf Mitchell 1995:243-246). In important ways John provided a foundation upon which Jesus was able to build. In the opinion of Webb (1994:229), from a historical perspective John's ministry thus did in some way function to "prepare the way" for Jesus: "We may conclude at the historical level what the early Christians concluded at a theological level: John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus." However, most scholars (e.g., Pelsler 1981:251-252; Jeremias 1973:50-55; Boers 1989:39-40; Funk & the Jesus Seminar 1998:529; Theißen 1999:126-127) regard John's preaching and baptism *only* as preparation for Jesus' ministry and in general do not believe that Jesus baptized others himself. Nonetheless, most scholars agree that it is likely that the early Jesus-followers inherited their baptismal practice from John the

Baptist, who baptized numerous people in the Jordan, including Jesus, whose baptism was most certainly historical – given the embarrassment it caused – and not an etiological legend to explain the origin of the ritual (Esler 2003:204).

Esler (2003:204; see Schweizer 1970:177) maintains that John's baptism was related to the remission of sins in view of an imminent and radical transformation of the world. Furthermore, John's baptism entailed dipping the person seeking baptism under the water. The similarities between the Jesus-movement's baptism and John's, in each of these respects, suggest the former's adaptation of this practice. Hartman (1992:33-38; 1993:195-197; see Barth 1981:23-43) concurs, but he adds that the enumeration of a series of similarities does not answer the question of why the early Jesus-followers began to baptize with the Johannine baptism. Presumably, it was of some importance that Jesus had undergone John's baptism. This will point be discussed in the following section.

Before this is done, I should like to investigate the nature of the baptism performed by John (see Boers 1989:31; Webb 1994:189-197; Theißen & Merz 1996:184-193). John's baptism was most probably influenced by the Levitical washings, which entailed a full immersion in water,<sup>7</sup> and the prophetic-apocalyptic tradition, according to which a definite intervention of God was expected in the future (see Collins 1989:36; 1996:218-229; Theißen & Merz 1996:187-194). John created a new rite by altering the ritual washings of the Second Temple period to a single baptism functioning as an initiation into God's "eschatological" kingdom. By performing this rite (baptism for the forgiveness of sins) only a few miles from the Jerusalem temple, John challenged the traditional rites of atonement. John's baptism proclaimed a new life for those who repented and were willing to live according to a radically new ethic (Theißen 1999:126-128). The significance of John's baptism is best understood in terms of a prophetic reinterpretation of the purity ideology: obedience to the new ethic safeguards one against apocalyptic judgment (cf Pelser 1981:252-253; Webb 1994:182-185; Collins 1996:229; Hooker 1997:9-13; see Koester 1982:71;

Crossan 1996:46-49; Theißen 1999:126, 287). BurrIDGE and Gould (2004:39) elaborate as follows:

If a non-Jewish man wanted to become a convert to Judaism, then he could be circumcised. A far more popular method – and open to women as well – was to become what was known as a God-fearer, a pious fellow-traveller, and the way to do this was to be baptized, as a way of washing away your impurity. What was different about John was that he was suggesting that even the people of God needed to be baptized.

According to Collins (1989:38) the assumption of unbroken continuity between the baptism of John and that of Jesus' disciples offers advantages<sup>8</sup> (cf Barth 1981:17-35). It explains why the crowd of persons referred to in Acts 1:15 are not said to have undergone any particularly "Christian" baptismal ritual, and it explains why the basic function of baptism as reflected in Peter's Pentecost sermon is similar to the baptism of John. But two new elements have been added: In the first place, we read in Acts 2:38 that baptism occurs "in the name of Jesus Christ". This implied that the reception of baptism had become an outward sign of faith in God through Jesus (cf Hartman 1992:33-38; 1993:195-197).

Collins (1989:38-39) writes that when John baptized, reception of his baptism implied acceptance of his message, namely that the end was at hand, as well as repentance. It further implied recognition by the baptismal candidate that the will of God was manifest in the preaching of John. When Jesus' disciples baptized people, their baptism similarly implied that the candidate accepted the teachings of Jesus. Subsequently, a shift took place, because after the crucifixion and the appearances of the risen Lord, the followers of Jesus did not possess the same direct authority that John and Jesus had. Reception of baptism at the hands of the disciples implied acceptance that there was a need for repentance in preparation for the full manifestation of the kingdom of God. It also implied the recognition that the will of God was manifest in the death of Jesus, as well as that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Because of this connection between

baptism and acceptance of what God had done in Jesus, the early Jesus-followers' baptismal ritual became an initiation rite into a community (cf Schnackenburg [1974] 1981:45-46). In this regard Collins (1989:39) avers that although the picture of the "Christian" community in Jerusalem which is painted in Acts is an idealized one, there is no reason to doubt that a new group identity formed early (see chapter 3).

The other new element comprises the association of baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:38). In his sermon Peter provides a *pesher-like* interpretation of Joel 2:28-32. In the Biblical tradition the Spirit of God rested only on certain individuals, such as kings, prophets, and judges. The Joel prophecy looked forward to the day when the gift of the Spirit would be democratized. The "early Christians" claimed that this day had arrived (1 Cor 6:11; 12:13; Gl 3:27-29) (Collins 1989:39-40). Cullmann's (1969:9-11; see Pelser 1987:559-560) interpretation of the Holy Spirit's association with the baptism of the early Jesus-followers is as follows: Jesus did not baptize, but after his death, his followers again baptized. Jesus is therefore not the founder of baptism, but to what extent is it traceable to him? The first question that needs to be asked in this regard is: why does the transmission of the Holy Spirit within the "church" take the form of baptism? It is understandable that proselyte baptism and Johannine baptism should be represented as an act of washing, because their effect was that of the forgiveness of sins. Just as ordinary water takes away the uncleanness of the body, so the water of baptism will take away sins. Cullmann (1969:11-14) explains that although immersion in water does not have anything to do with the gift of the Holy Spirit, "Christians" still need forgiveness of sins. This is why the "Christian sacrament" of the Holy Spirit remained a baptism. But it is no longer the washing away that purifies, but rather the immersion in the water, because the person being baptized is "buried with Christ" (Rm 6:4).<sup>9</sup> This signifies forgiveness of sins, and the emergence from this burial with him means "walking in newness of life" (Rm 6:4), in other words, "walking in the Spirit" (Gl 5:16) (cf Schnackenburg 1981:45-46).

The anchorage of baptism in the life of Jesus of Nazareth therefore entailed three consequences: the forgiveness of sins is now based on the redemptive death of Jesus; forgiveness of sins and transmission of the Holy Spirit come to share in a close theological connection; and both are set in a significant relation to one and the same external baptismal act, so that both the immersion and the emergence become significant (Cullmann 1969:14-15). Since Jesus also received the Holy Spirit at his own baptism, it is easy to understand why the gift of the Spirit was associated with baptism after Jesus' death (see Cullmann 1969:21).

By way of summary it can be argued that Jesus, after his baptism, returned to Galilee where he lived according to the ethic intended by John's baptism (Van Aarde 2001a:55-57). Although John expected an imminent end and Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as a present fulfilled reality (Jeremias 1973:50-56; cf Koester 1982:73; 1992:14-15), they agreed on the fundamental distinction between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world (Van Aarde 2001a:72). The continuity of the understanding that John, Jesus, and the early Jesus-followers evinced regarding the reason for baptism can be deduced (cf Bultmann 1972:253; Pelser 1981:252-252). The early followers of Jesus reinterpreted the baptism with water as a spiritual baptism, which represents "another reality". In the past scholars referred to this as an "eschatological" event.<sup>10</sup> However, early Jesus-followers understood baptism with water spiritually (representing a "mythical" experience of an alternate state of consciousness in "historical time" – cf Eliade 1955:68-70, 104-105; see Otzen 1973:15), that is as a symbolic reference to their participation in the death of Jesus (a baptism into the death of Jesus – see Paul in Rm 6:4) (cf Theißen 1999:125-126). A transformation of "iconic relationships" took place. The symbolic action of baptism with water was reinterpreted as a symbolic baptism into the death of Jesus. The symbol of water<sup>11</sup> refers to purity and reminds participants of the traditional purity ideology which was challenged by John. The symbol of death indicates impurity and reminds participants of how Jesus had brought an end to the previous ideology by means of his death. This is "a dissolution of the iconic relationships" (Theißen

1999:128). The previous ritual taboo (contact with the dead) has been terminated. This radical change requires an adaptation of ritual practice and it implies a radically new ethic.

#### 4.2.4 Baptism and circumcision

The *reason* for baptism as a symbol for overcoming a social taboo is rooted in history. The “cult” of the early Jesus-followers consisted of a symbol structured on the basis of the cult of the Second Temple period (cf Theißen 1999:286). In order to become part of Israel an individual was obliged to undergo an initiation rite – circumcision.<sup>12</sup> By this means a male baby was made part of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gn 17:7-14). This rite took place on the eighth day after birth. For Israel it physically signified becoming part of the people of God (see Knobel 1987:392-393; Hyatt 1989:629-631; Sim 1998:15-18).

The religion of the earliest Jesus-followers soon became an autonomous symbolic system, which originated with Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of God after his baptism by John (cf Theißen 1999:286-292). Circumcision was exclusively for men, whereas Jesus’ message contained *new values*. For instance, no distinction was made between men and women. Jesus understood God’s presence differently. This meant that a new initiation rite had to be developed. Baptism as the initiation rite made it possible for *all* people to become part of the kingdom of God<sup>13</sup> (cf Cullmann 1969:56-57).

Circumcision initiates people into Israel in a physical manner. In the Gospels the kingdom of God stands in relation to the redefined Israel who live in the presence of God. Paul views this “Israel of God” (Gl 6:16) as a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). In the Gospels and in Paul’s letters the expression “kingdom” carries a political connotation (cf Elliot 2000:25). The kingdom of God is an alternative to the kingdom of Caesar in Rome (see Crossan 1998:413). A life in the presence of God means that one should simply enter it as a child (Mk 10:14-15). In order for an adult to live as a child, an alternative state of being is required. A rite could

bring about this cultural-psychological alternate state of consciousness. Through baptism people who became part of the kingdom of God underwent a symbolic status transformation from the biological-physical world to the world of God.

#### **4.2.5 The baptism of Jesus**

One of the events where we can easily observe the experience of an alternate state of consciousness is the baptism of Jesus (see chapter 1). As I remarked earlier in this chapter, Jesus most probably did not baptize people, but was himself baptized by John. Shortly after Jesus' death the earliest Jesus-groups institutionalized baptism as a means of entry into their newly-found community. Because Jesus' baptism must have been important for them in this regard, it is necessary to devote some time to a consideration of Jesus' own baptism.

Jesus' baptism is recorded in Mark 1:9-11, Matthew 3:13-17, Luke 3:21-22 and John 1:29-34. In this regard, Davies (1995:52) writes:

One day in or about the year 28 CE Jesus of Nazareth came to the Jordan River along with scores of other people. There, having repented of his sins, he was baptized by John, son of Zechariah. He saw the heavens torn open and the spirit descended upon him like a dove and he heard a voice from heaven say, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." Then the spirit drove him out into the desert where he was tempted by the devil.

Scholars debate the authenticity of Jesus' baptism. Did it occur historically or was it a fiction invented to serve the needs of the Jesus-movement? As I mentioned earlier, most scholars in fact argue that Jesus' baptism was a historical event (see e.g., Davies 1995:52). Meier (1991:168-184) describes the primary criteria<sup>14</sup> by which the historicity of sayings or events in the Gospels may be evaluated, and names Jesus' baptism as an event that can be regarded as historical (see Webb 1994:214-218). Collins (1989:36; cf Crossan 1994:44-45; Funk & the Jesus Seminar 1998:528-529; Burrige & Gould 2004:39) concurs that one of the



few strong points of consensus regarding the historical Jesus is that he was baptized by John. In contrast, there are scholars who regard the story of Jesus' baptism as having been told to serve mythic purposes (e.g., Mack 1988:54).

Numerous explanations also exist for the reason why Jesus was baptized.<sup>15</sup> Pilch (1996c:19-21) explains that Jesus presumably leaves his family and village to visit John in order to be baptized. This was a highly symbolic move, since in the first-century Mediterranean world the family comprised one of the central social institutions. Individuals possessed no identity or meaningful existence apart from their family. A person not embedded in a family was as good as dead. Jesus has taken what seems to be a very shameful step away from his family. But the answer to this predicament lies in his baptism. A voice from the torn-open heavens declares Jesus to be Son of God, beloved of the Father (Mk 1:9-11). The limited understanding of reproduction in the ancient world made it almost impossible to prove who the actual father of a child was. For this reason, only when a father acknowledged a baby as his own did a child become his son or daughter. In the first-century Mediterranean world Jesus' true identity was a critically important matter. A son of an artisan from an unimportant village possessed no legitimacy as a public figure. But the legitimacy of the son of God as a public figure is incontestable. The baptism of Jesus was therefore different from the other baptisms by John, because it accorded Jesus a new identity (Stevenson 1989:34). This influenced the baptism of the early Jesus-followers, since every individual who was baptized became part of a new family and received a new identity – such a person occupied a new role in society, accompanied by new rights and responsibilities (cf Van Staden 1991:194-195). Pilch (2002a:108) goes further in writing that Jesus' baptism can be interpreted as the call of Jesus to become a holy man ("shaman") (see chapter 2). At their baptism early Jesus-followers most probably also experienced alternate states of consciousness (as Jesus did), during which they received the Holy Spirit (cf Barth 1981:60-72).

DeMaris (2002:152; cf Craffert & Botha 2005:5-32) concurs and remarks that it would not be possible to reach these conclusions without the help of the social sciences. As I mentioned in chapter 1, social sciences can advance the work of historical study:

If a social-scientific approach cannot always contribute to determining the historicity of an account's specific features, it is essential for identifying events and their sequence that would have been plausible in the culture of first-century Judea. Making such a determination is useful because historical reconstruction of the ancient world relies heavily on plausibility and probability to do its work and to make its case.

DeMaris (2002:130-144) concludes therefore that the alternate state of consciousness which Jesus experienced during his baptism<sup>16</sup> might even be historically more plausible than the baptism itself. I argue that both Jesus' baptism and the alternate state of consciousness which he experienced at his baptism can be described as "historical", since alternate states of consciousness were common in the lives of the people who inhabited the first-century Mediterranean world.

DeMaris (2002:137-138) maintains that although communities and individuals usually depend on rituals to induce alternate states of consciousness, spontaneous entry into such states also occurs. One aspect which a social-scientific approach cannot determine with much certainty is the specific ritual that induced the occurrences reported in Mark 1:10-11. In this regard, DeMaris (2002:138) contends:

The account has an affinity to an established pattern of anointing and spirit possession or bestowal of God's Spirit in ancient Israelite society, and it also resembles the later experience of many entering the Jesus movement, namely, baptism's imparting of the Holy Spirit. If a ritual other than baptism triggered Jesus' altered state of consciousness, it is easy to

account for displacement of that ritual by baptism in the account as it now stands.

Since it is possible to enter an alternate state of consciousness without any ritual prompting, DeMaris (2002:138) considers that this could have been the case at Jesus' baptism:

The followers of Jesus may have introduced the baptismal rite into the story of his possession because of the stigma attached to spontaneous possession. Cultures like that of ancient Judea typically recognize both positive and negative possession and associate the former with ritual activity. Joining a baptismal report to Jesus' entry into an altered state would have identified what happened to him as positive rather than negative, that is, as possession by the Holy Spirit and not by a demon.

In the view of Neufeld (2005:1-2) people in the Israelite tradition possessed a highly articulated sense of the place of alternate states of consciousness, of who could claim them, of how to recognize the legitimacy of these states, and of what functions they served, if any. He shows that not all alternate states of consciousness were recognized as legitimate, especially during times of intense competition for authority in the society. In particular during the introduction of religious innovations not acceptable to the elite, alternate states of consciousness became a means of legitimating such claims. In my opinion Jesus' baptism served this function – namely to legitimize his authority in contrast to that of the temple tradition.

Van Aarde (2001a:47) understands Jesus' baptism as a ritual event through which "sinful sickness" (e.g., the stigma of being a fatherless son) was addressed and healed. He argues that Jesus desired to be baptized because of his unfortunate relationship with his family and his critique of the patriarchal family as such. In Van Aarde's (2001a:47) words, Jesus "started a ministry of

healing/forgiving ‘sinners’ with the help of disciples who were also called upon to act as healed healers.”

#### 4.2.6 Preliminary findings

At this stage, it can therefore be posited that the foundation of the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers can, at least in part, be traced back to the baptism of John. It could also have been influenced to a certain degree by the other ritual washings known from the Israelite tradition and Greco-Roman mystery religions. But we shall probably never be able to know for certain what motivated the early followers of Jesus to initiate new members into their community by means of baptism. Yet it is possible to conclude that this baptism added *value* to their lives.

Having discussed Jesus’ “showing” in this section, in the following section, I shall examine different baptismal formulae. In these formulae one can observe a definite usage of anti-language, which denotes the earliest Jesus-followers’ “telling” of what Jesus “showed”. Since anti-language not only comprised of the characteristics of an anti-society (see chapter 1), like that formed by the earliest Jesus-followers, but also constituted a way by means of which alternate states of consciousness could be expressed, this concept might aid us to understand more fully the *value* that baptism added to the lives of the earliest Jesus-followers.

### 4.3 VALUE: BAPTISMAL FORMULAE AS ANTI-LANGUAGE

#### 4.3.1 Introduction

We can be sure that the earliest Jesus-followers participated in baptism in order to become members of the Jesus-movement, because this purpose is recorded in the New Testament and in other early sources. But since the earliest texts available to us date from about 50 CE (the letters of Paul) (see Pelsaert [s a]d:14-15; Kümmel [1975] 1978:256; Duling & Perrin 1994:222), we cannot be certain exactly when, how and why the baptismal practice began. The only references

regarding the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers are found in certain texts, which clearly indicate that anti-language was probably the way in which the alternate states of consciousness experienced during baptism could be verbalized. By means of these texts the early Jesus-followers “told” others why baptism added *value* to their lives.

In this section, I shall firstly examine baptismal formulae in the New Testament and other “early Christian” literature. Secondly, I shall undertake a cursory examination of the similarities between the earliest baptism and the Greco-Roman mystery religions, since this could help to illuminate the role which alternate states of consciousness, as expressed in anti-language, played in the earliest baptism.

Before we examine these texts, a few preliminary remarks are appropriate. If we take note of the dominant tendency in scholarly research regarding the origin and early history of “Christian” baptism, we observe a trend towards a single harmonized picture.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis falls on the similarity of the various traditions to one another rather than on their diversity, which leads to the impression that the earliest Jesus-movement initiated new converts everywhere in basically the same manner, with only minor observable differences<sup>18</sup> (see Bradshaw 2002:144-145). But Bradshaw (2002:146) holds the opinion that the traditional claim that the early initiation practice was fundamentally identical in every place cannot be sustained:

The major centers of early Christianity were not nearly so uniform in the elements of their baptismal practice as many others have tended to conclude, and a very different picture emerges if we observe not what appears to have been common but what was distinctive or unique about the baptismal process in each place.<sup>19</sup>

Even in the New Testament one reads not a unique testimony regarding baptism, but varying testimonies stemming from different circles in the earliest Jesus-

movement. It seems as if the earliest Jesus-groups flexibly altered practices to fit their situation (see Pelsner 1981:265; Mitchell 1995:242).

Bradshaw (2002:60-61) considers that whatever the origins of the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers, it appears that from early times it became the usual – though perhaps not yet universal – custom to initiate new converts into the early Jesus-movement. Baptism was performed in a river, a pool, or a domestic bath-house. What else besides the immersion might have been involved is not made explicit in the New Testament. There may possibly have been a preliminary period of instruction, especially when converts came from a Gentile background, and this ritual most probably included a confession of faith in Jesus, in one form or another. One point that is clear from the New Testament is that the process of becoming a Jesus-follower was interpreted and expressed in a variety of different ways. For example, in some traditions the emphasis was placed on the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:38); in others the metaphor of birth into new life was used (Jn 3:5-6; Tt 3:5-7); in still others baptism was understood as enlightenment (Heb 6:4; 10:32; 1 Pt 2:9); and in Paul's theology the primary image was that of union with Christ through participation in his death and resurrection (Rm 6:2-11). This variation in baptismal theology suggests that the baptismal ritual itself may have varied from place to place. Bradshaw (2002:169-170) concludes therefore:

What can be said to have emerged as common to rites by the time that the third century is reached, out of the apparent diversity of practice of earlier times, are certain fundamental ritual elements – preparatory instruction, renunciation and act of faith, anointing, immersion, and perhaps also imposition of hands – but each of these still tends to take a different form and, at least to some extent, a different meaning in the various local or regional traditions, and they have been combined with one another in differing sequences, with the result that there are just too many variations in structure and theology to allow us to construct a single picture in anything but the very broadest terms. To emphasize what is

common and to ignore what is distinctive of individual churches – or worse still, to force the evidence to fit some preconceived notion of a normative pattern – is seriously to distort our understanding of the variety of primitive Christian practice, and to lay a false foundation for the modern revision of initiation rites.

The evidence for baptismal formulae found in the New Testament will now be evaluated.

#### **4.3.2 Baptismal formulae in the New Testament**

Many references to baptism occur in the New Testament, but I do not intend to offer a complete survey of all the available baptismal texts in this section. The texts I shall refer to will merely serve as illustrations. According to Hartman (1992:8), Galatians 3:26-29 is one of the oldest texts in the New Testament that addresses this subject (cf Pelser [s a]d:11-13). 1 Corinthians (6:9-11; 1:14-17) and 2 Corinthians are probably of the same date – about 55 CE (cf Du Toit 1984:64, 92-93, 105-106). In these texts it is evident that Paul takes the baptismal rite for granted (cf Pelser [s a]d:11-13). There are good reasons to believe that from the beginning entrance into the Jesus-movement normally meant that the neophyte was baptized. This is self-evident to the author of Acts (Ac 2:38-41; 8:36-38; 10:44-48; 16:15, 33) as well as to the authors of other independent traditions, like the Johannine tradition (Jn 3:5), the Matthean tradition (Mt 28:19),<sup>20</sup> and, prior these, to Paul and those Jesus-followers before him and contemporary with him, of whom he bears indirect witness in his letters (e.g., Rm 6:3). Since Paul takes it as a matter of course that he himself was baptized (1 Cor 12:13), this implies that about five years after the death of Jesus (approximately the time of Paul's conversion) there were already Jesus-followers to whom it was natural that newly converted persons should be baptized<sup>21</sup> (Hartman 1992:32).

As I indicated earlier in this chapter, from the beginning baptism seems to have been performed “into the name of Jesus the Lord” or “into the name of Jesus the

Messiah” (Hartman 1993:192). According to Hartman (1993:192), these formulae indicate features of early “christological” thinking. He believes that the formula “(baptize) into the name of the Lord Jesus” represents the oldest layer of baptismal traditions and that it derives from Hebrew and Aramaic rites: “The ‘name’ ‘into’ which the rite was performed indicated a fundamental reference of the rite; thus it also, indirectly, separated the rite from other similar rites which were performed ‘into’ other ‘names’” (Hartman 1993:192-193). Hartman (1993:193) suggests that when the phrase “into the name...” was used in connection with the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers, it was the result of a literal translation of a Semitic phrase employed in the Aramaic-speaking early church and indicated the fundamental reference of the rite concerned. The Aramaic origin of the formula points to its early date (Hartman 1993:195).

The basic meaning of the ritual of baptism as a washing, a cleansing from sin, which probably originated with John the Baptist (see the previous section) was expressed in “early Christian” writings until the second century (Ac 2; 22:16; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 15:29; Eph 5:25-27; 2Mac 12:39-45; Herm, *Man* 4.3.1) (cf Schnackenburg 1981:47). According to Stevenson (1989:35), one of the first accounts of baptism is to be found in the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 8:26-40). He argues that in this story we find the seeds of what became the standard procedure in the liturgies that developed all over the “Christian” world in the early centuries. Stevenson (1989:35) elaborates as follows:

The convert first of all expresses interest – and has the Scriptures explained to him which might last some time. That becomes the profession of faith, backed up by a series of instructions beforehand. Then both minister and convert go back into the water and the baptism takes place, probably using water quite lavishly. The minister...identifies himself with what is going on by being there in the water.

The early centuries added many features to this bare procedure, which were expressed mainly by means of anti-language. Symbolism played a very important



role in this regard. We notice this if we for instance consider *water*, which connoted washing, for the forgiveness of sins. It meant the pouring out of the Spirit, like the water being poured over the head of a baptized person. It meant taking part in Jesus' death and burial in a symbolic way (cf Wedderburn 1987:368).

Other interpretations of baptism thus arose and developed alongside the original one, such as the notion of baptism as God's seal placed on "Christians", authorizing them and guaranteeing their protection, in Paul's letters (2 Cor 1:21-22; cf Rm 4:11), in the deutero-Pauline letters (Eph 1:13-14; 4:30), and in the Shepherd of Hermas (Herm, *Sim* 9.16.1-4). Suggestions that baptism was viewed as an initiation ritual can be found in Acts 2:38, 41-42; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:26-29; and Colossians 2:11 (Collins 1989:40-41). Two sayings attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic tradition seem to use the word baptism metaphorically to connote death, especially the death of Jesus (Mk 10:38-39; Lk 12:50). Here the operative symbol has shifted from cleansing, that leads to a pure and holy life, to death that leads to new life. These sayings are similar to Paul's interpretation of baptism in Romans 6.<sup>22</sup> For Collins (1989:42) in "Romans 6:1-14 the ritual of baptism is explicitly interpreted as a reenactment of the death and resurrection of Jesus in which the baptized person appropriates the significance of that death for him- or herself. In this understanding of the ritual, the experience of the Christian is firmly and vividly grounded in the story of the death and resurrection of Christ."<sup>23</sup>

Here one may observe a tension between the outward performance and the religious significance of the earliest baptism. Owing to its reference to the death of Jesus, the new rite of baptism lost its visible or "iconic" character. Where a cleansing with water can easily be understood as an image of inner cleansing, this ritual now possessed an aniconic character. Baptism is not an image of the death of Jesus – there is no visible relationship between baptism and death/burial (Theißen 1999:132; see Pelsler 1981:254-255). The *ethical value*

which early Jesus-followers attached to baptism was not illustrated by an iconic association between the ritual event of baptism and its religious *meaning*. A narrative now communicated this *value* and *meaning*, thereby conveying the *reason* why the early followers of Jesus performed the ritual of baptism.

Strictly speaking, Paul does not identify baptism with death, but with being buried<sup>24</sup> (Rm 6:4) (see Wedderburn 1987:368-371). Just as burial is a confirmation that death has taken place, so baptism as being buried with Christ is the external confirmation of one's spiritual dying with Christ (Theißen 1999:134). The metaphor of grave and burial enters the realm of taboos<sup>25</sup> (cf Sumner 1959:30; Weber 1964:32-45). For Israelites graves were unclean. In the early interpretation of baptism it is perceived as the grave where the old person is left behind in order that the person may attain new life and salvation. People who were baptized died symbolically and attained salvation (Theißen 1999:134; see Mc Fague 1983:15; Soskice 1985:15). Being baptized expresses symbolically the overcoming of anxieties related to social contact. In Galatians 3:28 Paul hands down a baptismal tradition according to which those who were baptized "clothed" themselves with Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". If one envisages how many taboos must have been imposed to maintain the social differences mentioned here, one can judge the magnitude of the step taken by the baptized towards overcoming such social taboos (Theißen 1999:134).

The reference to baptism as dying and rising with Christ indicates that the first Jesus-followers saw baptism as a symbol – to be precise a symbol expressed in anti-language. To be dipped underneath the water has literally nothing to do with Jesus' dying and rising from death, but by means of baptism the earliest Jesus-followers thought themselves to be participating in Jesus' death and resurrection. And the concept made sense to them, since they experienced this "event" during alternate states of consciousness. Afterwards they understood themselves to be new people.

According to Cullmann (1969:71) one of the oldest baptismal rituals appears in Acts 8:36-37. He argues this on the basis of the short confession in verse 37: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”.<sup>26</sup> Cullmann (1969:71) is of the opinion that this confession dates from the earliest period. On the occasion of baptism the confession was developed further and broadened to a “three-membered formula”, since the Holy Spirit had to be mentioned as a baptismal gift. Cullmann motivates his conclusion by indicating the liturgical answer, *eīcestin* (“it is lawful”) in verse 37, that is given to the liturgical question in verse 36, and employs Acts 10:47, 11:17, Matthew 3:13-14 and the Gospel of the Ebionites (Epiphanius 10:13) to demonstrate that this liturgical question was customarily placed at the beginning of the baptismal ceremony (even in the first century). In all of these examples the verb *xwlu/ein* (“prevent”) appears when baptism is referred to. Since the question whether there was any reason hindering the baptism of a candidate could have been asked from time to time in the first century before the completion of baptism, it might have become a ritual question. For Cullmann (1969:71-76) this would explain why the eunuch in Acts 8:36 surprisingly asked what *prevents* him from being baptized, and not something like “Can I be baptized?”

Cullmann (1969:76-78) perceives another baptismal formula in Mark 10:13-14. Although baptism is not mentioned here, he regards this passage as such a formula because these verses exhibit the same structure as the examples mentioned above. The situation here is identical to that in the baptismal stories. All the same elements are present: those who are to be blessed; those who make request for their blessing; those who may wish to reject the request; the person who performs the blessing and accepts the request; and the formula *mh\ xwlu/ete au0ta/* (“forbid them not”). Cullmann is of the opinion that the people who wished to transmit this story of the blessing of children, desired a solution to the question of infant baptism. Jeremias (1958:51-68) concurs but Aland (1963:12) does not. Schweizer (1970:177) agrees with Cullmann, pointing out that in Mark 10:15 Jesus promises entry into the kingdom of God to whoever

receives it like a child.<sup>27</sup> The phrase “do not hinder them” in verse 14, also appears in early Christian baptismal liturgies from Acts 8:36 onwards (see Cullmann 1969:524-525). Schweizer (1970:177) continues that John 3:5 (“...no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit”) evinces a tradition that understood this saying in the light of baptism. The formulation “to enter into the kingdom of God” is foreign to John, because he never speaks of the kingdom of God. This demonstrates that he quotes a traditional phrase, which is identical with the phrase used in Mark 10:15. According to Schweizer this indicates that the child-like receiving of the kingdom in the subordinate clause of Mark 10:15 has been interpreted by the “early church” in the light of its understanding of baptism as “being born from water and Spirit”. By taking the arguments of the above mentioned scholars, as well as others, into account, Van Aarde (2004a:132-136, 140) contends that Mark 10:13-16 does not refer to baptism; it rather indicates Jesus’ reversal of the hierarchical assumptions of his day, by making the child, and not the father, the model for entry into the reign of God.

Another clear example of anti-language is observable in Colossians 2:11, where baptism is called circumcision, but it is immediately qualified as a circumcision that is not done by hands (cf Dunn 1996:154-158). In this case, Lohse (1971:102; cf Pelser [s a]d:133) argues, circumcision was not understood as a sign of the covenant which required obedience to the Old Testament law and effected entrance into fellowship with Israel’s patriarchs, though it was understood like this in the communities in Galatia. It can rather be viewed as a sacramental rite by which a person entered the community and gained access to salvation. Lohse (1971:102) explains this point as follows:

The reference to the phrase “putting off the body of flesh”...suggests the practices of mystery cults. In the initiation rites the devotee had to lay aside what previously had served him as clothing so that he could be filled with divine power. Jewish terminology, in this case, would clearly function as a means of giving greater authority and appeal to the

sacramental rite of initiation. The phrase “body of flesh”...characterizes the human body in its earthly frailty wherein it is subject to suffering, death, and dissolution....It must be stripped off if the devotee wants to experience the divinizing vision and be filled with divine power. Before the initiation rites the initiate must remove his clothes and take a purificatory bath. After fasting during the period of preparation before the deity's feast, he is clothed with sacred garments....In this act his soul experiences rebirth, i.e. transformation by divine power.

Lohse (1971:102) concludes therefore that when “circumcision” was understood as “putting off the body of flesh” it had nothing to do with the Israelite interpretation of circumcision, but that this cultic act had assumed a meaning that corresponded with the Gnostic way of viewing the world, because this is what Gnosticism taught – to flee the world and open up one's way to the heavenly homeland. Lohse (1971:102-103) considers that against this background the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers gains new meaning, especially since the circumcision is not “done by hands”. In the Old Testament this phrase refers to the graven images the pagans created for themselves, and thus implies negative connotations. On the other hand, something not made by hand must be created by God himself. The author of Colossians thus points to baptism as the work of God. God himself accomplished the change from the old to the new life. In verse 12 the author of Colossians says that this circumcision of Christ which every member of the community has experienced is nothing other than being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ (cf Uitman 1955:60-61).

In the opinion of Lohse (1971:103-104) the same kind of expression also underlies Romans 6:4-5. The early Jesus-followers believed that Christ died for their sins, that he was buried and that God raised him from the dead (1 Cor 15:3-5). They believed themselves to be linked to this event by an indissoluble bond, because they had died with him in baptism and have been laid in the grave, so that their old lives have been put aside. In Rom 6 Paul's concern is to demonstrate that it is therefore impossible to still live under the dominion of “sin”,

since the “old” person had been crucified with Christ (Rm 6:6). Paul adds that in baptism believers have been linked to the resurrection of Christ. All these factors imply a new existence for the baptized.

Lohse (1971:104) elaborates that in Colossians, as in Romans 6, we read that in baptism we have died with Christ. But in contrast to Romans 6 the emphasis falls on the fact that the baptized have already been raised with Christ in baptism. What is still to take place in the future is not the resurrection of the dead, but the revelation of that life which was received in baptism and is now still hidden “with Christ in God” (Col 2:12). Lohse (1971:105) understands the saying “to be raised with Christ” as denoting nothing else than to receive forgiveness of sins (Col 2:13); this is not the same fanatical enthusiasm that we read about in 2 Timothy 2:18, according to which “the resurrection has already taken place”. Lohse (1971:106) therefore arrives at the conclusion that these verses signify that where there is openness towards the power of God, which is operative in the Gospel, there this receptivity creates new life. And Colossians describes this new life as being raised with Christ, summoning its readers to put aside the old person and to put on the new person who lives according to the will of his or her creator. In Colossians 2:13 the point is once again stressed – death has been vanquished and life attained, but only where fellowship with Christ exists. In Galatians 3:27, Colossians 3:9 and in Ephesians 4:24 the reader once again encounters anti-language that is related to baptism, namely in the phrases “put off” and “put on”. Berger (2003:41) observes that the socio-psychological function of clothes in antiquity was to indicate one’s social role. Through the close bond with Jesus Christ that baptism establishes, each baptized individual is outfitted with some quality of Jesus that transforms all relationships – all the baptized become joint members of one new society. Berger (2003:41) points out that the effect of this “putting on Christ” is the disappearance of all distinctions between human beings, distinctions that have previously been expressed by means of differences in clothing: “Thus their ‘old clothes’ had served as insignia of their respective social roles.” For the people in the New Testament, there was

a much closer relation between clothing and the self than there is among us today. In those days a person's relationships were symbolized by the clothing he or she wore, which in turn meant that clothing shaped the quality of one's life. Berger (2003:42) writes: "Thus, when it is said that someone 'puts on Christ,' what is meant is that a new role is accorded to that person, a role in which he or she is then expected to grow."

Lohse (1971:141) concurs that the image of taking off and putting on a garment was widespread in antiquity and was employed in the mystery religions in order to interpret the action of initiation. As an example he refers to the account of Isis' rites that Apuleius gives in the *Metamorphoses*, where he describes how the initiate was clothed in twelve robes during the initiation ceremony and received a garment adorned with images of animals. The putting on of the garment consecrated the initiate – such a person was filled with the powers of the cosmos, experienced a transformation within himself or herself and received a share of the divine power of life. Lohse explains that Gnostic texts understand the image of putting on or receiving the garment as expressing that the redemption had truly occurred, a redemption which is accomplished when the person is taken up into the divine world and suffused with its light and power. Regarding Paul, Lohse (1971:141-142) observes:

When Paul employs the image of putting off and putting on, he describes neither an ontological transformation of man nor the release of a divine kernel so as to allow it to develop fully and to let man possess salvation. Rather, the image illustrates the change of rule that has taken place in baptism. The baptized have been transferred into the domain of Christ's rule and are called to conduct their lives in obedience.

Paul continues that the old person needs to be put aside and the new person needs to be donned (Col 3:10). In Colossians 3:11 we read that what separates people from one another in the world has been abolished in the community of Jesus Christ. There is "no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised,

barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” This unity in Christ is grounded in baptism. The author of Colossians speaks about people stemming from completely diverse origins, who have been gathered together in unity in Christ through allegiance to one Lord. Although they continue to occupy the roles that the world assigns to them as Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, where the “body of Christ” exists there the differences which separate people from one another are abolished (Lohse 1971:142-144). This expression can also be viewed as an instance of anti-language, because although Paul proclaims that there is neither male nor female, for example, people did not literally lose their gender. Men stayed men and women stayed women, but in contrast to the way in which their society functioned, both men and women were welcome in the community of Christ (cf Elliott 2002:84-85).

Using the above mentioned texts as examples, Bradshaw (2002:56) warns against the danger of reading later practices back into New Testament times. He points out that in Galatians 3:27 we read that the baptized “put on” Christ, and that Colossians 3:9-10 and Ephesians 4:22-24 speak of putting off the old nature and putting on the new. This leads to the question of whether these images were occasioned by an already existing baptismal custom of stripping off one’s clothing before being immersed and of being clothed with a white garment after emerging from the water, as one notices in fourth-century evidence. Or are these only metaphors, which – much later – encouraged or gave rise to the liturgical usage? It is possible that the development could have been from metaphor to later literal fulfillment, but it could also have taken place from early practice to literary image (Bradshaw 2002:57; cf Stevenson 1989:34).

In 1 Peter 3:19-22 one comes across a reference to baptism that must be understood analogically. The author compares the time of the flood and the period in which the text was written. The purpose of 1 Peter 3:8-4:6 is to encourage the recipients to verbalize their faith in spite of the risk. They are assured that God hears their appeals; that Jesus has authority over all powers



and that God is waiting to vindicate them at the final judgment (see Westfall 1999:134). The use of anti-language can be observed, in the comparison of the water that saved the eight people in the ark with the redemptive qualities of the water in baptism.

Analyzing the Gospel of John, Schweizer (1970:177) considers that in the interpretation of the pre-Johannine church, baptism (understood as a rebirth by water and Spirit) guaranteed entry into the coming kingdom of God. John uses the same phrase in a different way. He no longer expects a coming kingdom: for him it is primarily a present reality that the believer is already able to experience. He accepts baptism as an ecclesiastical rite, but does not evidence much interest in it. His own formulation can be found in John 3:3: "...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again". To be born again was connected with the rite of baptism, which was understood to bring about the kingdom of God: "In it, what the apocalypticists expected from a future parousia, already happens" (Schweizer 1970:177). Schweizer (1970:178-179) shows that John was not the first person to display such an understanding. In the time of Paul, the Corinthians also thought that they were living in a new aeon (1 Cor 4:8; 12:2; 13:1-2; 14:27, 32; 15:12) (see Schweizer 1970:178). In Colossians 1:13 the term "kingdom", which is rare in the Pauline letters, occurs again. The context of this verse is that of conversion, and the terminology reminds us of the baptism of Jesus (Mk 1:11). The assertion here is that the baptized are saved from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of God. This kingdom is no longer a future reality to be hoped for: it is present and the believers are now living in it. Thus, baptism represents the anticipation of the change in the aeons – by it the believer is transported into the coming kingdom, and the only way in which this was possible, was by means of experiencing alternate states of consciousness. In Titus 3:5 baptism, according to Schweizer (1970:178-179; cf Klijn 1994:140), is termed "the washing of rebirth". This term is not the usual one for being reborn; it is, rather, used apocalyptically (see Schweizer 1970:179). In the same verse baptism is termed "renewal by the Holy Spirit", which probably means the new

“eschatological” creation effected by God’s Spirit. This is an expression of the common “Christian” belief that in the work of the Spirit given by baptism the coming aeon has irrupted into this present one.

Paul understands baptism as the beginning of a path that leads to the final consummation. He does not deny that in baptism the old aeon of sin has been ended definitely and that in the Spirit the firstfruits of the coming life have been given to the “church”. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 Paul asserts that dying to the old life has already definitely happened in baptism, but that rising to the final state of eternal life still lies in the future. But in some way the future life penetrates the continuing earthly existence of the baptized, because the Spirit is already present (see also Rm 8:11-14, 29-30) (Schweizer 1970:180).

Thus, according to Schweizer (1970:180), Mark 10:15,<sup>28</sup> John 3:5 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 demonstrate that baptism was understood in a broad section of the early Jesus-movement as offering admission to the kingdom of God. For Paul, and also probably for the tradition which was taken up by John, this was a future event promised by God to the baptized. For John (and Col 1:13) the transfer into Christ’s kingdom has already been effected in baptism. Titus 3:5 shows that this result has probably been identified with the apocalyptic rebirth of the whole cosmos. It was the experience of the Spirit in baptism that led to the adoption of such apocalyptic views. Hebrews 6:5 states that the baptized are already tasting the powers of the future aeon, which leads Schweizer (1970:180) to conclude that Paul’s “corrections of a more enthusiastic understanding show that ideas of this kind were widespread and that the Corinthians understood the presence of the Spirit, not as a mere pledge of firstfruits like Paul, but as the new... apocalyptic ‘living with Christ’”. Hence, it seems as if baptism, in certain circles, was first conceived of as God’s guarantee of one’s participation in the coming kingdom of God. More and more, however, it came to signify admission into the present kingdom of God, and was understood as one’s being raised with

Christ to the life of the new aeon. The experience of the Spirit seemed to demonstrate that the new aeon in the church had already irrupted into this world – resurrection was already an accomplished fact, since it had taken place with Christ in baptism. Against this enthusiasm, Paul declares that the rising with Christ lies in the future. According to his preaching, the dying to the old life of sin takes place in baptism, because a person is baptized into the death of Christ. There is also a new life, but a paradoxical one – this life was required to validate itself in the obedience of the believer. This meant that a baptized person would suffer with Christ, but this suffering would lead to one's final glorification and life with Christ (Rm 6:4; 8:17) (Schweizer 1970:181).

In this section, I have indicated that anti-language, as the verbalization of alternate states of consciousness, was part and parcel of the baptismal procedure as this is described in the New Testament. However, the New Testament is not the only place where texts regarding baptism can be located. We find examples of anti-language in non-Biblical references to baptism as well. Certain instances follow.

#### 4.3.3 Baptismal formulae in non-Biblical texts

Except for the texts in the New Testament (discussed in the previous section), other sources<sup>29</sup> also exist which contain information regarding the liturgical practices of the early church (Bradshaw 2002:73-117; cf Esler 2003:204). Examples of these include the following:<sup>30</sup>

Ancient church orders:

- *Didache* (first or second century, Syria).
- *Didascalia Apostolorum* (c 230, Syria).
- *Apostolic Church Order* (c 300, Egypt).
- *Traditio apostolica* (c 215, possibly Rome).
- *Canones Hippolyti* (336-340, Egypt).
- *Apostolic Constitutions* (c 380, Syria).

- *Testamentum Domini* (possibly fifth century, Syria).

Other major liturgical sources (arranged geographically):<sup>31</sup>

- *Rome*: Justin Martyr (*Apologia* [earliest extant substantial description of Christian worship]; c 150); *Shepherd of Hermas* (mid-second century); *Traditio apostolica* (attributed to Hippolytus; a very questionable testimony, about 215/217); Innocent I (letter to Decentius of Gubbio, 416); Leo the Great (sermons, 440-461).
- *North Africa*: Tertullian<sup>32</sup> (converted in c 195; reliability questionable); Cyprian (bishop of Carthage from 248-258); Augustine (bishop of Hippo Regius from 396-430).
- *North Italy*: Ambrose (bishop, c 339-397); Chromatius (bishop of Aquileia, c 388-407); Gaudentius (who became bishop of Brescia, c 397); Zeno (bishop of Verona, 361-c 375); Maximus (bishop of Turin, fifth century); Peter Crysologus (bishop of Ravenna, 5<sup>th</sup> century).
- *Gaul and Spain*: Irenaeus (bishop of Lyons, late second century).
- *Egypt*: Clement of Alexandria (c 150-c 215); Origen (c 185-c 254); *Canones Hippolyti* (early fourth century, reliability questionable); *Sacramentary of Serapion* (attributed to a fourth-century bishop of Thmuis in lower Egypt); Strasbourg Papyrus 254 (fourth or fifth century); Anaphora of St Mark (assumed its current form by the time of the Council of Chalcedon); Anaphora of St Basil (somewhere between 600 and 800, contents probably belong to first half of fourth century or earlier).
- *Syria*: Apart from the *Didache*, some of the main sources which may shed light on early liturgical practices in this region are the apocryphal scriptures, especially the *Acts of John* (late second or early third century),

the *Acts of Thomas* (third century, probably from East Syria), and the *Syriac Acts of John* (fourth or fifth century); John Chrysostom (c 347-407); Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles; Theodore of Mopsuestia (ordained as presbyter at Antioch about 383, served until 392, when he became bishop of Mopsuestia); Aphraates (early fourth century, East Syria); Ephrem (hymns, c 306-373); Cyrillonas of Edessa (fourth-century poet); Narsai (fifth century); Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari (parts of this Eucharistic prayer could be dated as early as the second or third century); Third Anaphora of St. Peter; Anaphora of Nestorius; Anaphora of Theodore.

- *Jerusalem: Catecheses ad illuminandos* (written by Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem from 350-387; his catechetical lectures were delivered while he was still a presbyter); *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* (travel diary by female pilgrim to the Holy Land in the fourth century); *The Armenian and Georgian Lectionaries* (the former dates from the first half of fifth century, while the latter represents a later stage of development of the same material); *The Liturgy of St. James* (ninth century).

A brief examination of some of these texts suggests a picture of what could probably have taken place during the earliest baptismal procedures, and the probable connection with alternate states of consciousness as expressed in anti-language once again becomes clear (see Pretorius 1980:18). Referring to *Didache 7*, Roy (1987:72) comments: "The spontaneity and immediacy with which baptism was first administered meant of necessity that the rite was kept simple; a simple washing in water as the latter was available." No restriction at first seemed to exist as to who performed the act of baptizing (Roy 1987:73; see Ac 11:19-21). According to Mitchell (1995:249) the instructions in *Didache 7*<sup>33</sup> concerning baptism were very brief at the earliest stage of redaction.<sup>34</sup>

They most probably read as follows:

<sup>1a</sup>Concerning baptism, baptize in this manner:

<sup>1c</sup>In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running (“living”) water.

<sup>4a</sup>And before the baptism, both the one who is baptizing and the one who is being baptized should fast, along with any others who can.<sup>35</sup>

As early as the second century this simple ritual altered. As local churches became more structured, so did the preparation for baptism. Toward the end of the second century, we read of people called *catechumens*.<sup>36</sup> This word stems from the Greek word “to teach”. A *catechumen* was required to learn and live the meaning of Christianity before initiation could take place. According to Oetting ([1964] 1970:29) during this time inquiry was made into the motives, character, and occupation of the candidate. No one living in adultery, no civil or military official of the state, no actor, gladiator, artist, or magician was introduced until these occupations were given up.<sup>37</sup> Since there had existed no such restrictions in the *earliest* Jesus-movement, we can conclude (by taking note of these restrictions) that already in the second century, matters had changed.

Instruction was given in the “Christian” way of life as expounded in the life of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. Before a *catechumen* was admitted to baptism it was determined whether he or she lived soberly, visited the sick, and had grasped the “Christian” life. *Catechumens* were already considered as “Christians”. In the assemblies they could take part in the singing, the reading of the Scriptures, and in certain of the prayers, but they were not allowed to take part in the Eucharist and several other rites, such as initiation and ordination. They were sent out of the church after the first part of the Eucharist, just before the sharing of the peace and the preparation of the altar table. In some places the *catechumenate* lasted only a few months, while in others the period was three years (Stevenson 1989:38-39). When the *catechumens* were sufficiently

prepared, they had the right to present themselves for baptism.<sup>38</sup> This they usually did, but they were not obliged to receive it immediately, and some persons put off making any definite commitment.<sup>39</sup>

Even though we do not know exactly what the ritual of baptism entailed before this period, the way in which this ritual is described in both the New Testament and the non-Biblical texts at least bears witness to the likely presence of alternate states of consciousness, because of the anti-language employed to describe the ritual.

#### **4.3.4 Baptism and the Greco-Roman mystery religions**

As I have already mentioned, numerous similarities exist between the earliest baptism and some of the Greco-Roman mystery religions (Wedderburn 1987:90-98). In this section, I shall offer a cursory view of two examples of mystery religions, to highlight the important role that alternate states of consciousness as well as the verbalization thereof in anti-language, played in rites.

The first example relates to the cult of Kybele, the Great Mother of Anatolia, who was worshiped by the Greeks from ancient times in Phrygia (a region in the highlands of central Anatolia) and in Lydia (see Burkert 1987:5-6). She was honored as a mother goddess of fertility, but her particular power was evidenced in the untamed forests and mountains. In works of art she was commonly portrayed holding a *tympanon* (a tambourine) and wearing a towered mural crown (she protected towns and castles), and she was accompanied by her lions, since she was the mistress of the wild animals (see Finegan 1989:193-196). From the second century on, the Romans also began to worship her and her lover Attis. This worship was associated with exotic festivals, flamboyant *Galli* (eunuchs of the Great Mother) and *Metragyrtai* (mendicant priests of the Great Mother), and the gory *taurobolia* (ritual slaughter of bulls) (see Meyer 1987:113-115).

The connection with baptism can be perceived in the *taurobolium*. The “Christian” Latin poet, Prudentius (b. 348-d; after 405 CE) wrote with disgust about this ritual. It consisted of the sacrificing of an animal above a pit into which a devotee descended, in order to be drenched with the blood for the sake of spiritual purification. By the time of Prudentius, the *taurobolium* functioned as a bloody baptism, conferring rebirth upon the person bathed in this manner. One late inscription (376 CE) suggests that a person who submitted to the bath of blood was “reborn for eternity” (Meyer 1987:128-129).

The inducement of alternate states of consciousness in this mystery religion could have been caused by the passionate singing and dancing (Meyer 1987:113-114). Furthermore, when the spring ceremonies began, days were spent in fasting from bread, wine, and other food, as was also the case in the earliest baptism.

The second example stems from the Egyptian mysteries of Isis and Osiris (see Tam Tinh 1982:101-117). Of all the many gods worshiped in Egypt, Isis, Osiris, and their divine family were among the most influential. Isis, a mother goddess of remarkable magical powers, is closely identified with the throne of the pharaoh. According to the Egyptian myth, she guarantees an orderly succession on the throne of Egypt from one pharaoh to another. Osiris is Isis’ brother and husband. He possesses generative powers that enable the Egyptian land watered by the Nile to be fertile and productive of crops. Politically Osiris is the prototype of the pharaoh, specifically the deceased pharaoh who vacates the throne in the upper world and functions as ruler of the underworld (Meyer 1987:157). The “mysteries” of Isis and Osiris were different from Greco-Roman mysteries – the former comprised a mystery play about the succession of the pharaohs as well as the funerary ritual of mummification and burial. But by the Hellenistic period the worship of Isis and Osiris had become established in one or other form among the Greeks and slightly later also among the Romans (Meyer 1987:158; cf Finegan 1989:196-199; Pearson 1999:42-62).



Usually the experience of initiation was taken as an experience of death. During this ritual the initiate saw the sun. This could have been light in the darkness, created by priests manipulating torches at a key point in the ritual, but it is also in accord with ancient Egyptian descriptions of the realm of death – for they believed that the Sun traveled through the underworld during the night. The morning after the initiation the initiated person is thought to have been reborn. This day was consequently one of feasting and celebration (Meyer 1987:158). The similarities with the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers are apparent. Another similarity is found in the custom that newcomers wore new clothes after the initiation (Meyer 1987:189-190). Alternate states of consciousness could have been induced because of the prescribed fasting that took place over the ten days before the initiation and which resulted in visions (see Meyer 1987:187).

These two examples illustrate that alternate states of consciousness most likely played an important part in rituals, whether these rituals were performed by early Jesus-followers or participants in mystery religions. Anti-language was the easiest way in which these experiences could be verbalized.

This concludes my discussion of the “telling” of the earliest Jesus-followers. To repeat what I remarked earlier – it was not possible to talk about this “out of the ordinary” happening, the experience of alternate states of consciousness during baptism, in ordinary language. By means of studying the anti-language employed to express this experience, we were able to argue that alternate states of consciousness played an important part in the earliest Jesus-followers’ initiation and status transformation ritual. This not only added *value* to their lives, but they also experienced initiation into the “family of God” as *meaningful*, and therefore they “re-enacted” the alternate states of consciousness Jesus “showed” during his own baptism, about which they were “told” in anti-language. In the following section, I shall consider the *meaning* the earliest baptism held for the followers of Jesus.

#### **4.4 MEANING: BAPTISM AS A CULTURAL RITUAL INITIATION SYMBOL OF AN ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE**

##### **4.4.1 Introduction**

As I mentioned in chapters 1 and 3, the earliest Jesus-followers formed an anti-society. People became members of this society because it imparted *meaning* to their lives; and this took place by means of the initiation and status transformation ritual of baptism. Once one became a member of this new society, the Eucharist served as a ceremony of integration.

Although Jesus was not the “founder” of the earliest baptism, I argue that in a sense his own baptism, during which he experienced an alternate state of consciousness as well as a status transformation, played an important role in the earliest Jesus-followers’ choice of baptism as initiation ritual. They thus “re-enacted” what Jesus “showed”.

To indicate what this “re-enactment” entailed, I shall firstly discuss baptism as a ritual of initiation and status transformation; then I shall consider the role alternate states of consciousness played in the earliest baptism; subsequently the place of baptism in an anti-society will be investigated and lastly I shall examine the *meaning* of baptism for the earliest Jesus-followers.

##### **4.4.2 Baptism as ritual of initiation and status transformation**

###### **4.4.2.1 Introduction**

By means of the ritual of baptism, people could become members of the anti-society which the earliest Jesus-followers formed (cf Barth 1981:11-12; Lindemann 2003:262). This implied that they also gained new identities, because in the “family of God” people were accorded new roles and responsibilities. The three stages characteristic of initiation rituals, namely separation, liminality-*communitas*, and aggregation (see chapter 3), can easily be distinguished in the

baptism practiced in the early stages of the Jesus-movement. Esler (2003:211-212) elaborates as follows:

#### **4.4.2.2 Separation**

This phase consisted of the period of instruction, the *catechuminate*. During this stage initiates were separated from their old identities and introduced to the norms of the group as well as to the skills needed for effective functioning as part of the group.

#### **4.4.2.3 Liminality-*communitas***

The liminal phase consisted of total immersion in water, which formed the heart of the ritual. Turner (1977: 95) describes this phase in another context as follows:

They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system – in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behavior is normally passive or humble....It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new status in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.

In line with this description the candidates for baptism probably stripped naked and the women removed all their jewelry. This symbolized the abandonment of their old existence, especially the sinfulness that had been part of their old lives. After this action they handed themselves over to the baptizer, "...to be subjected to his will in pushing them under the water, thus humbly and passively letting themselves be fashioned anew" (Esler 2003:211). All the distinctions between the initiands disappear and equality and unity are emphasized (see McVann 1991a:153; 1991b:340). This situation can be described as one of *communitas*.

Esler (2003:211) emphasizes the powerful cognitive and emotional experience that this must have entailed. The cleansing immersion in living water underlined the distinctiveness of the Jesus-movement from the world the new members had left behind.

#### **4.4.2.4 Aggregation**

After the baptism, incorporation into the “family of God” took place. The candidates dried and clothed themselves and were brought into the assembly where the faithful were gathered. They gave each other “the kiss of peace” to indicate their kinship. For the first time they were allowed to participate in the Eucharist, the ceremony of integration into the community.

#### **4.4.3 The earliest baptism and alternate states of consciousness**

Oetting (1970:28-30; Roy 1987:73; cf Duchesne 1909:366-367) describes the ritual of baptism<sup>40</sup> as follows: In preparation for baptism the candidate was required to fast for one or two days, and was usually joined in this fast by certain friends. The baptismal water was purified by exorcizing the elemental spirits which dwelt in it, and was prepared for the sacred ceremony. In a special rite of exorcism the priest placed his hand upon the candidate, blew on him or her, and anointed his or her forehead, ears, and nose, which was followed by a renewed fast for the night. Early in the morning, at cock-crow (during Easter night), the baptism began. After the candidate undressed, he or she was required solemnly to renounce Satan and all his works, to which he or she had been subject up until then. Another anointing with exorcising oil followed. Subsequently, the candidate went down into the water, naked,<sup>41</sup> and took the new oath of service to God, the “sacramentum”, by uttering the three-fold baptismal creed (belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit),<sup>42</sup> whereupon he or she was immersed<sup>43</sup> three times in the water.<sup>44</sup> Afterwards, everyone moved from the place of baptism into the church, where the bishop transferred the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized by laying on of hands, anointing, making the sign of the cross, and giving a kiss.<sup>45</sup> The candidate then received his or her first communion, together with milk and

honey, symbolizing the entrance into the Promised Land (cf *Did 7*, Just, *Apol 61*; *Apocryphal Acts of Judas Thomas*).

Esler (2003:206) confirms this action and explains further that in at least the first generation of the Jesus-movement baptism was the occasion at which a believer received the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup> The people who received the Holy Spirit experienced this event as God entering them. The result was a variety of alternate states of consciousness, including trances, audition, visions, glossolalia, and prophecy, which usually led to feelings of peace and happiness<sup>47</sup> (Esler 1994:48; 2003:207). Esler (2003:217) describes this union with Christ by means of baptism as follows:

Those who were baptized received the Spirit of God within and henceforth the Spirit lived there. For Paul this was virtually the equivalent of saying that they had the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:10). Thus baptism was an overwhelming encounter with God and Christ, an encounter charged with visionary experiences of light and manifested in an eruption of glossolalia and other ecstatic phenomena. For his early followers, Christ was actually present in baptism and this presence was central to the ritual. Immersion in the depth and silence of the water ritually corresponded to sharing in Christ's death, while elevation into the air and possession by the Spirit of God/Christ, with associated receipt of charismatic gifts, brought them into closest conjunction with the risen Lord.

This description of how baptism was probably performed at an early stage in the history of the Jesus-movement makes it clear that alternate states of consciousness played an important part in this ritual. Favorable conditions for inducing alternate states of consciousness included the fasting before the ritual took place, as well as the time it was enacted – right through the night until the next morning.

#### 4.4.4 Anti-society and the earliest baptism

##### 4.4.4.1 Introduction

Esler (2003:209) maintains that from the viewpoint of social identity theory, the subject of baptism falls under the rubric of joining, or becoming a member, of the group. As I indicated in chapter 1, the group which the earliest Jesus-followers formed can be termed an anti-society. In order for one to become a member of such a society, three phenomena are necessary, namely reconnoitering the group, changes in one's self-concept, and initiation into the group. Esler (2003:209-210) discusses these as follows.

##### 4.4.4.2 Reconnoitering the group

*Reconnaissance* is undertaken by people who consider joining a group voluntarily. It involves weighing the benefits against the costs, in other words, discovering what the group can offer them and what they will have to do in return. The benefits offered by membership of the Jesus-movement were many. Esler (2003:209) names the euphoria produced by experiencing the Spirit of God entering a person, accompanied by the charismatic gifts (e.g., Rm 8:1-17). The members were also expected to treat one another in a manner characterized by the type of love that typified the movement, namely *agaphe* (see Rm 12:9-21; 13:8-10). In this regard, Esler (2003:209-210) observes:

In a society marked by social stratification, that all members were expected to treat one another in accordance with the (often countercultural) demands of *agaphe* must have made the movement considerably attractive, especially when the poor and destitute could also expect support and sustenance from members with more resources....

A negative feature of membership in the Jesus-movement would have been the breaking of ties with practices such as idolatry that were embedded in local patterns of familial and civic life. Jesus-followers could be accused of atheism in

relation to the traditional gods and goddesses upon whose support the state relied, which could lead to persecution (see e.g., Rm 5:3).

Time spent in preparation for baptism (the *catechumenate*) would have ensured the newcomers' suitability from the point of view of the movement, while from the newcomers' perspective, this would have been the period when they would have reconnoitered the movement, weighing the advantages against the disadvantages (Esler 2003:210).

#### **4.4.4.3 Changes in self-concept**

Our sense of who we are is ultimately tied up with our group membership. Therefore, one of the major consequences of becoming a member of a group is a change in the way we see ourselves – a redefinition of who we are – which leads to implications for our self-esteem. This point also applies to a group like the Jesus-followers in the first century, in whose case major changes in self-concept would be involved, since after baptism one was a whole new person (Esler 2003:210). Esler (2003:210) maintains that since they would have gradually internalized their membership of the Jesus-movement as part of their self-concept, the high value and prestige they attached to membership (which had encouraged them to join) would have increased their sense of self-worth.

#### **4.4.4.4 Initiation into the group**

Initiation into the group was the final step in this process. It was regarded as very important and took place by means of a ritual (Esler 2003:210).

#### **4.4.5 The meaning of the baptism of the early Jesus-followers as acceptance into the “family of God”**

To become a member of the new group, described as the “family of God” by the earliest Jesus-followers, was therefore a major step. Esler (2003) utilizes Paul's letter to the Romans as an example to explain this issue. On the grounds of Paul's frequent usage of the first person plural in Romans 6:1-8,<sup>48</sup> Esler

(2003:212) is of the opinion that there is a strong personal dimension to what Paul writes in this pericope. He contends that this is the case because the Jesus-followers in Rome and Paul have something in common, namely the ritual (baptism) by means of which they entered into the “mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection” (Esler 2003:212). In Esler’s view, from a social identity perspective, Paul uses the repeated first person plurals to strengthen his claim to exercise leadership over the Jesus-followers in Rome, by making clear that he shares the same identity with them as well as the same means by which they acquired it.

In Romans 6:3 Paul begins with a general question: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Jesus Christ...?” By means of this question he is reminding his audience of some facts they most probably already know. Esler (2003:213) considers that baptism “into Christ” seems to be roughly equivalent to an older and more common expression, namely baptism “into/in the name of Jesus Christ”. Paul probably assumed that his audience thought that the ritual of baptism somehow united one with Christ, possibly in the sense of entering the community formed under his protection and lordship (cf Wedderburn 1987:54, 59). But in the next part of his question Paul appears to enter an area of interpretation with which they may not have been familiar: “[Don’t you know that all of us] were baptized into his death?” He needs to explain to them how the process of baptism relates to Christ’s death. In Romans 6:4-5 Paul then offers two parallel descriptions of how baptism relates to Christ’s death and resurrection. According to Esler (2003:213), the imagery involved seems only to be effective if Paul has baptism by means of total immersion in mind. He elaborates this as follows:

First, he says, “Therefore we have been buried together with (suneta&fhmen) him through baptism into death,” thus indicating the immersion stage of the ritual, burial in water, “in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so might we also walk in the newness of life” (v. 4), thus intimating, in turn, the emergence of the believer out of the water and his or her donning clothes



to commence the new life, or, in our terminology, the new identity in Christ. The next verse restates this with a different emphasis: “For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death we will also be united with him in the likeness of his resurrection.” This clarifies that resurrection is involved in the new life.

In Luke-Acts we read that John the Baptist expected one “stronger” than he to introduce a final baptism – one with fire and spirit (Lk 3:16-17; Ac 8:14-17). This indicates that the followers of Jesus identified him as this “stronger one” (Jn 1:33; 3:22, 26; 4:1-2) (see Collins 1996:233-234). “Baptism with the Spirit” is synonymous with being baptized in the “name of Jesus” (Mt 28:19; Ac 2:38) (cf Oepke 1968:539-540; Collins 1996:235). This baptism was John’s baptism for the “forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4). The general conviction of early Jesus-followers was that the forgiveness of sins had been made possible through the death of Jesus (see 1 Cor 15:3-5; 2 Cor 5:21; Rm 4:24-25; 6:3-11, 22-23). In this regard Theißen (1999:129; cf Van Aarde & Pelsler 2001:37-40) writes:

Thus there was an intrinsic necessity for baptism for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus also to be related to the death of Jesus. The salvation gained through the death of Jesus was promised to the baptized through baptism as the forgiveness of sins – through a verbal promise and the non-verbal language of the rite.

Two possible historical reasons exist for this later interpretation of baptism as a symbolic dying and being buried with Christ. The first comprises the symbolic dramatization of the experience of death in Hellenistic-Semitic and Greco-Roman initiation rites (e.g., the Isis cult) (cf Van Staden 2001:582). In an analogy to this practice, the early Jesus-followers interpreted baptism as a symbolic experience of death. Secondly, in “early Christianity” the metaphorical act of baptism could result in actual death because of Roman imperial antagonism towards this “superstition” (see, e.g., the reference, from hindsight, to the death of the sons of Zebedee in Mk 10:38) (cf Collins 1996:237; Theißen 1999:129).

In “early Christian” literature the link between baptism and death is first perceived in the writings of Paul (e.g., Rm 6:4) (see Hooker 1997:9; Campbell 1999:273-293). Paul’s message to the Gentiles called for a radical conversion, both mentally and socially. Symbolically, it required of the person to die with Christ, in order to begin a completely new life with Christ (Theißen 1999:129-130). For the Mediterranean personality this new life symbolized an alternate state of consciousness.

Cullmann’s (1969:30) opinion regarding Romans 6:3-6 holds that Paul describes *what* takes place in baptism here: the person baptized is “planted” with the dead and risen Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul defines *how* this participation in the death and resurrection of Christ in baptism proceeds: “...by one Spirit we are all baptised into one body....” From the context it is evident that this “body” is the body of Christ, the church. For Cullmann, in order to determine the meaning of baptism, both these passages must be taken together. The body of Christ is qualitatively increased by baptism.

Esler (2003:212) situates the emphasis a little differently, suggesting that in Romans 6:3-10 Paul explains baptism by focusing on why sin no longer has power over Jesus-followers. Esler points out how the actions of Christ and the experience of the people who believe in him are synthesized in baptism: “Yet the mythos concerning Christ is fairly sparse in its details: he was crucified, he died (a death in which he died to sin), he was buried, he was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, and he will never die again”. Paul does not describe precisely *how* Christ’s fate ended the dominion of sin, only *that* it did. According to Esler (2003:212), Paul’s interest in Romans 6:3-10 does not lie in the theological reason why Christ’s death and resurrection broke the power of sin and established human righteousness, but in describing how humans “obtain the benefits of his self-sacrifice by replicating his experience in baptism and thus being incorporated into him” (cf Berger 2003:122).

In Romans 6:6 Paul states that “we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin...” Esler (2003:213-214; cf Cullmann 1969:23) considers that here Paul is still referring to baptism and its effects.<sup>49</sup> It is in baptism that the old self of the believer is crucified with Christ, the word *sunestaurw&qh* matching “we were buried with” (*suneta/fhmen*) in verse 4. In the next verse Paul clarifies that this old identity is replaced by a new one, writing “for he who has died is ‘righteoused’ from sin”, he becomes a *di/kaioj* (“righteous person”).

Paul thus identifies baptism as being the locus of the destruction of the old identity and the acquisition of the new, the exalted status which is expressed by its necessary association with righteousness. Subsequently, Paul reminds his audience that this identity exhibits a future dimension. In verse 8 he points out: “Now if we died with Christ”, that is, in baptism, “we believe that we will also live with him”. In verses 9 to 10 Paul returns to Christ, who, being raised from the dead, is no longer subject to death’s lordship, for he has died once and for all to sin and lives for God (Esler 2003:214; cf Cullmann 1969:48-49).

Esler (2003:215-216) then poses the question how we are to understand the relationship between Christ and the person whose belief in him has been manifested in baptism. For him it is obvious that Christ did not literally die and rise at every baptism: “Yet a central part of ritual is to bring past events into the present *in a socially and religiously significant sense*” (Esler 2003:216; emphasis by Esler). Neunheuser (1968:143) remarks that baptism is an act of initiation “...whereby the redemptive death of Christ ...is cultically made present in the shape of a visible rite....” Perhaps the most extreme version of the presence of the past in ritual is represented in Lévi-Strauss’s ([1966] 1968:237) claim that “historical rites bring the past into the present”. He proposed that in “historical rites” the sacred and beneficial atmosphere of the mythical period is re-created and becomes a present reality. Thus, ritual regularly serves to make the past “present” in a way that effects real religious and social results (see chapter 3).

This point is evident if we keep in mind that the earliest Jesus-followers adopted an apocalyptic worldview and that they understood time in a different manner from than the way in which we do today (see chapter 1).

Esler (2003:217) contends that in using the expression “in Christ Jesus” (Rm 6:11-14), Paul desires his audience to understand the death and resurrection of Christ (made available to them in baptism) as providing a new foundation for their experience and identity. Every manifestation of the life of the baptized person is conditioned by his or her being in Christ; in fact a baptized person becomes a manifestation of the personality of Jesus Christ. Schweitzer (1953:125) maintains in this regard:

Though the expression has thus almost the character of a formula, it is no mere formula for Paul. For him every manifestation of the life of the baptized man is conditioned by his being in Christ. Grafted into the corporeity of Christ, he loses his creatively individual existence and his natural personality. Henceforth he is only a form of manifestation of the personality of Jesus Christ, which dominates that corporeity.

We come across the same expression in Galatians. Elliott (2003:178-187) remarks that Galatians 3:28 is a baptismal formula in threefold form that predates the Pauline mission and that is cited by Paul to assert the new social reality brought about by affiliation with Jesus Christ and baptismal conversion. For Elliott this three-fold statement declares that ethnic, social, and gender distinctions conventionally made in society are irrelevant for determining who is “in Christ” as a result of baptism and the confession of Jesus as Christ and Lord.<sup>50</sup> Such inclusion in Christ is determined by baptism and faith in God and in Jesus as the Christ, a faith of which “Judeans and Greeks”, slaves and free persons, males and females are all capable. This amounts to an elimination of discrimination, not an abolition of differentiation. Ethnic, legal, and social differences remain, but for followers of Jesus these are not determinative of union with Christ Jesus; faith alone is (see also 1 Cor 12:13; Col 4:1). People

who are distinguished from each other by law and separated by social practice and gender are integrated into one single community by means of baptism into Christ (cf Zizioulas 1985:28).

In contrast to scholars such as Crossan (1992:298), who uses the term “egalitarian” in reference to Jesus’ attitude regarding reversal of status, Elliott (2002:88) argues that to refer to the earliest Jesus-movement as egalitarian is an anachronistic statement which reflects a modern conception and valuation of equality. He considers that rather than mentioning equality, we should refer to the inclusiveness of the believing community and the oneness and unity of people who are “in Christ” (Elliott 2003:178).

Elliott (2002:84-85) elaborates this argument by saying that Jesus’ “teaching of reversal of status...did not constitute an elimination of status differentiation. Rather statuses of first and last, master-slave, rich-poor remained but were inverted.” To Elliott, within the Jesus-movement, differences of age, gender, class, and ethnicity were not eliminated, but remained as demarcations of status and identity. Children did not all of a sudden become leaders; slaves were not liberated and made equal to masters; women were not put on a social par with men; the disparity between poor and rich did not disappear. But – the sufferings caused by inequity were to be alleviated by almsgiving, generosity, and compassion toward one’s fellow human beings (cf Elliott 2003:181).

Elliott (2002:87; 2003:195) therefore concludes that Jesus did not proclaim a “radical egalitarianism”, eradicating the family and its structure of authority, because the family was in fact very important to Jesus. Rather, the new community of Jesus-followers led their lives according to the rules of the family – they could be described as God’s new “surrogate family” (cf Zizioulas 1985:28). What Jesus proclaimed, as the hallmark of the reign of God, was a “radical inclusivity” that relativized all conventional lines of discrimination and exclusion, as well as enjoining radical familial loyalty to God as Father and to one another

as brothers and sisters. Jesus consequently redefined the family along religious and moral, rather than biological, lines. Zizioulas (1985:28) concurs that baptism for the earliest Jesus-followers meant two things: a death of the “old person” – of the way in which personal identity was acquired through biological birth; and a birth – the emergence of an identity through a new set of relationships, provided by the church as the communion of the Spirit. Whereas, biological identity is always bound by necessity, spiritual birth involves freedom. The spiritual person does not simply act differently than the natural person; the spiritual person *is* different.

The family as the root metaphor of the believing community was crucial in terms of “achieving the social cohesion necessary for ensuring the independent viability of the movement and its resistance to external social and political pressures urging conformity and assimilation” (Elliott 2003:198). Elliott (2003:198-199) writes that the use of a household tradition served the aim

...not of assimilating to the Greco-Roman patterns of domination, but of resisting pressures to conform under the assurance that one’s place of belonging was in the *oikos tou theou*, not the emperor’s *patria*, that one’s father was not the Roman emperor claiming to be *pater patriae*, but the merciful heavenly father/progenitor who raised Jesus from the dead and brought about a regeneration to new life (1 Pet. 1:3; Tit. 3:5-7; John 3:1-18), that one’s closest allies and supporters were “brothers” and “sisters” in the faith, and that one’s ultimate familial loyalty (= *pistis*) was to none but this heavenly father, his resurrected child, and one’s fellow siblings in the faith.

Returning to Romans, Esler (2003:218-219) considers that by relating baptism to one’s liberation from the power of sin, Paul offers a totally different explanation from the one he provides in Galatians 3:26-28, where he celebrates the abolition of boundaries. In Galatians he argues that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because all are one in Jesus Christ. But in Romans

Paul appears to be maintaining the importance of difference, especially in relation to the significance of “Judean” identity. To Esler (2003:218) the last thing Paul wants to say in Romans is that there is “neither Judean nor Greek”. In Romans Paul argues that all people are subject to sin, and subsequently he demonstrates that “non-Judeans” and “Judeans” succumb to the power of sin by means of different routes – “non-Judeans” in the absence of the law and “Judeans” while under it. Esler (2003:219) explains:

Paul’s strategy in reconciling Judeans and non-Judeans thus accords with the discovery of modern social psychologists that the establishment of a common ingroup identity will only succeed if the two subgroups concerned do not feel that their distinctive identities are threatened in the process – this is the ‘equal status-different dimensions condition’ that is a prerequisite to their successful recategorization.

When Paul then spells out the meaning of baptism in Romans 6:3-10 in relation to breaking the power of sin, Esler (2003:219) contends that he is not erasing the difference between “Judeans” and “non-Judeans”, because it is part of the picture that they fall victim to sin in different ways.

This view is confirmed in the way Paul structures his argument following Romans 6:1-15, by addressing himself first to the “non-Judean” Jesus-followers (Rm 6:15-23) and then to the “Judeans” (Rm 7):

That is, having spent much of chaps. 5-6 speaking of his addressees and himself as sharing the same ingroup identity, for example by the frequent use of first person plural verbs and pronouns, he now indicates that he has not forgotten the two subgroup identities that comprise his audience in the manner that modern social psychologists have suggested is essential if a process of recategorization is to be successful.

In conclusion it can therefore be suggested that the earliest Jesus-followers crossed taboo-boundaries in being baptized. They “re-enacted” what they were

“told” Jesus had “showed”. After being baptized they became members of a new society, in which they were required to live according to a specific ethic, which imparted *meaning* to their lives.<sup>51</sup> The ethics of Jesus brought about a “new world” (Duling & Perrin 1994:356). Although his ethics manifested itself throughout Jesus’ life, his death and resurrection constituted its zenith. The historical *foundation* of baptism among the Jesus-followers was based in the fact that Jesus abandoned the old value system (through his death) and led his followers (through his resurrection) to a new life in the service of God.

Particularly new in this value system were the love of one’s neighbor and humility (or renunciation of status) (Theißen 1999:63, 343-360; cf Schrage 1988:70-73, 76-78, 99, 106-107). These two *values* correlate with the fundamental dimensions of social relationships. Love of the neighbor has to do with the relationship between the in-group and the out-group (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:88-89). “Christian” love transcends this boundary. The renunciation of status encompasses abolishing a hierarchy of status: “high” or “low” positions for people (see Theißen 1999:64, 287).

This value system led to a *meaningful*, alternative lifestyle, made possible by means of the experience of alternate states of consciousness during baptism (and the Eucharist). Baptism comprised the initiation into this alternative lifestyle. In the first century a transition of this kind was imagined in an apocalyptic<sup>52</sup> worldview. In the Mediterranean culture of the first century a “spiritual” experience, such as a transformation of baptism with water to a baptism into death, pertains to what we would term “alternate states of consciousness”.

Alternate states of consciousness take their shape from the culture in which they appear (see chapter 2). Within the first-century Mediterranean social world these states usually manifested themselves where people believed that they were suffering on account of the powers of external demonic forces, which brought about disasters such as illness, death or conflict. Although they were powerless



amidst their crises, they “escaped” their world by taking refuge in a symbolic world where God was in control. Such a “spiritual” existence makes sense in the context of an alternative state of life in the presence of God.

Because of their apocalyptic worldview, Jesus-followers let themselves be baptized and by this ritual depicted their transition to this alternative lifestyle. The *reason* for baptism was to partake in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The *meaning* of their baptism denoted the appropriation of new *values* and a changed lifestyle. This new lifestyle not only impacted on their own lives. Their renunciation of status and their love for their neighbors also imparted meaning to the lives of others.

#### 4.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, I have theorized that the earliest baptism (like the earliest Eucharist) comprised an anti-language verbalization of alternate states of consciousness. By means of baptism, the earliest followers of Jesus experienced the presence of God directly in their lives, through receiving the Holy Spirit. They spoke about this in anti-language, since ordinary language was not adequate to verbalize such an extraordinary experience. These factors left a lasting effect on their lives – they were initiated into a community where they attempted to live according to the example Jesus has set, because they believed that they participated in his death and resurrection.

The *reason* why the earliest Jesus-followers placed such a strong emphasis on baptism, stemmed from the assumption that by means of his alternate states of consciousness, Jesus “showed” them what it meant to gain a new identity. The earliest Jesus-followers “told” this to others (by means of anti-language, which we can trace back in early texts bearing witness to the earliest baptism), because of the *value* baptism and the consequent membership of the “family of God” added to their lives. Every new member “re-enacted” Jesus’ baptism, because it imparted *meaning* to their existence.

I argue that baptism as a cultural ritual initiation and status transformation symbol thus explains the *reason* why the earliest followers of Jesus let themselves be baptized, the *value* they attached to their baptism and the *meaning* that it offered for their lives. Baptism reminded them of John's temple critique and Jesus' death as the termination of the temple ideology. It expressed the dissolution of selfish and exclusive social taboos. Not least, baptism provided the motivation for Jesus-followers to live ethically according to Jesus' vision and to discover existential meaning despite the threat of being killed themselves.

## ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 4

<sup>1</sup> Much research regarding baptism focuses on the way in which baptism was performed in the early church and consequently on how it must be performed today (see e.g., Cullmann 1969; Barth 1981; Pelser 1981; Roy 1987; Yates 1993; König 1995; Wright 2002). The main point of debate is whether baptism must be performed on children or on adults, and whether immersion in or sprinkling with water was the way in which baptism was administered. This study does not focus on these issues.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Bradshaw 2002:1-20.

<sup>3</sup> One of the main reasons for this deduction is that the earliest baptism seems at first to have been “in the name of Jesus” rather than in that of the Trinity, as recorded in Matthew 28:16-20 (Bradshaw 2002:60).

<sup>4</sup> If proselyte baptism originated before the time of John, his baptism could be understood as a reinterpretation of that ritual, because similarities exist. But we have no evidence that the former emerged before the end of the first or beginning of the second century (Collins 1989:32-36).

<sup>5</sup> The baptism of John was most probably the best known baptismal practice in the early church; it features prominently in early Christian literature (see Ac 10:37-38; 13:24-25; Gospel of the Nazarenes, in Hiëronimus, *Contra Pelagius* 3.2; *GEb*, in Epiphanius, *Haer* 30.13.7 – see Tatum 1994:89-90).

<sup>6</sup> In order to comprehend the origins of the baptism of the early Jesus-followers, it is, thus, important to understand the nature of the baptism performed by John. The sources Collins (1989:28) thinks are the most reliable are Q (which is recoverable through a comparison of Mt and Lk), the four canonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and Josephus. Collins (1989:29-30) points out that the idea that John prepared the way for Jesus the Messiah reflects a typical Christian bias and is probably not historical. However, behind this Christian picture of John there might be a historical tradition that John presented himself as a forerunner, but that instead of speaking of a human messiah, he preached about a direct divine intervention.

<sup>7</sup> In Second Temple “Judaism” bathing was a common form of ablution. In the Hebrew Bible flowing (“living”) water was required for the most severe forms of uncleanness and it was also associated with repentance and forgiveness. John’s use of flowing water for his baptism of repentance for forgiveness is, thus, understandable (Webb 1994:188-189). Cullmann (1969:9-11), on the other hand, argues that John was influenced by the practice of Israelite proselyte baptism.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Pelser (1981:251-253) considers that there is no direct link between the baptism of John and the baptism of the earliest Jesus-followers. John saw his baptism and ministry only as a forerunner of that of Jesus. But this does not mean that John’s baptism did not influence the early Christian baptism. John’s baptism was primarily intended to symbolize repentance and conversion, and most probably also the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>9</sup> The parallelism between “being baptized” and “dying with Christ” is not only found in Rm 6:4, but is traceable through the whole of the New Testament. Examples are 1 Cor 1:13, Heb 6:4-6, 1 Jn 5:3 (Cullmann 1969:15).

<sup>10</sup> Collins (1989:37-42) points out that it is important to understand the connections between resurrection, eschatology and baptism. Among the Palestinian Jews of Jesus’ time, and also in the *Didache*, there was a widespread conviction that in the end time the dead would rise (Mt 24:30-31; 1 Cor 15:52; *Did* 16:6). To say that Jesus had been raised was, thus, not to declare a

fact about the fate of Jesus' body, but to affirm the conclusion that the new "eschatological" era has arrived, in which there will be a new relationship between God and humanity. To speak of a "christianized" Johannine baptism would most probably be the best explanation for this (see Hartman 1992:32-38). Mitchell (1995:247-248; emphasis by Mitchell) agrees: "It is the *eschatological horizon* that links John, Jesus, and the Christian rite. Of course, Christians did not simply repeat John's baptism. They altered its eschatological significance, exchanging John's emphasis upon repentance/forgiveness/God's wrathful judgment for Jesus' insistence upon God's compassionate presence as already arriving in the human world. Johannine 'forgiveness' suggested the cancellation of sins/debts, but Jesus' forgiveness implied...*God's own self-bestowal*. What is 'given' in forgiveness, according to Jesus, is nothing less than God's superabundant gift of self, God's self-communicating incarnation" (see Sheehan 1986:66). Hence, in the "early church", believers did not simply repeat John's baptism, they christianized it. Baptism became a ritual event that was carried out *in(to) the name of Jesus*, uniting the believer to the "eschatological" reality that was manifested by and experienced in Jesus' words and works, and confirmed by Jesus' resurrection. Although Jesus himself probably did not include baptism in his earthly ministry, the early Christians reappropriated it as a ritual means by which to link themselves (not so much to Jesus, but) to what Jesus stood for – the proclamation of God's gracious and definite arrival in turbulent secular life (see *Did 7*).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the element of water in baptism, the following features are evident: water is rich in properties that allow for different functions. One of these functions is to promote life. Without water, life would not exist. Water not only produces life, but also beauty. Water is, thus, life-giving and life-enhancing. But water is also death-dealing. In huge amounts, it destroys all in its path. West (2001:127-128), therefore, arrives at the conclusion that in the sacrament of baptism, the "Christian" community, acting as the body of Christ, utilizes the image of water in both its death-dealing and life-giving functions. We observe this especially in the way the early church practiced baptism. The person being baptized first had to "die" by going down naked into the dark waters of a cistern or font located in or near the place of worship. Then the person would be "resurrected" ("come to life") when he or she emerged out of the waters. Baptism was (and still is) a sacrament of initiation whereby the person became a member of the "Christian" community, bound by the meaning that shaped the identity and mission of Jesus. Jesus took on a love that transformed him into a person who loved God and others. In the last word of his life, in his "Last Supper" and death, Jesus uttered the culminating and most dramatic expression of this love. This final word was answered by God's word of resurrection: Jesus went down into the "waters" of death and emerged into risen life as the climax of a lifelong pattern of dying and rising. To become a member of the "Christian" community is to share in Jesus' meaning, which is to accept a love that deals death to the selfish self so that the loving self might rise up.

<sup>12</sup> Circumcision was practiced by many societies in the ancient Middle East. However, the origins of circumcision are obscure. Although scholars originally thought that it had originated in Egypt and then moved east and north into the Semitic world, recent archeological discoveries hold that it began in the northwest Semitic world and moved south where the Egyptians adopted it. The meaning of the procedure varied (see Pilch 1996c:13-14).

<sup>13</sup> Cullmann (1969:65) holds the opinion that baptism became the fulfillment of circumcision. Roy (1987:85-86, 112) does not concur. He argues that if baptism replaced circumcision, then Israelite Jesus-followers would not have circumcised their children any longer, but this was not the case. Circumcision was emphatically retained and practiced alongside baptism. I consider with Roy that circumcision was still practiced among some of the early Jesus-followers who stemmed from the Israelite tradition, but the point I wish to make here is that baptism replaced circumcision as the *initiation* ritual (cf Ferguson 1988: 485-496).

<sup>14</sup> These criteria comprise:

- the “criterion of embarrassment” – Jesus’ followers would not have invented sayings or events that undercut their claims regarding Jesus and so provided evidence to those who opposed such claims;
- the “criterion of discontinuity” – words or deeds of Jesus that cannot be derived either from “Judaism” at the time of Jesus or from the “early church”;
- the “criterion of multiple attestation” – the presumption that the more numerous the independent sources that contain an account of a deed or saying of Jesus the more likely it is to be an authentic account;
- the “criterion of coherence” – that if a saying or deed is coherent with an established set of authentic sayings or deeds it is also likely to be authentic;
- and the “criterion of rejection and execution” – that an account of Jesus’ career must account for, or at least allow for, the fact of his execution (Davies 1995:53; cf Meier 1991:168-177; Van Aarde 2004a:127-129).

<sup>15</sup> One example is found in the explanation of Cullmann (1969:16-18). He poses the question: if people were baptized for forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus, despite his sinlessness, submit himself to baptism? He answers that at the moment of his baptism Jesus receives the commission to undertake the role of the suffering servant of God, who takes on himself the sins of his people. Cullmann’s motivation for this is that the heavenly voice in Mark 1:10-11 and Matthew 3:16-17 which commissions Jesus, is a citation from Is 42:1 (where it is stated that the servant of God must suffer for his people). Cullmann says that Jn 1:29-34 constitutes, so to speak, the first commentary on the Synoptic account. Cullmann (1969:20-21) is of the opinion that the author of the Fourth Gospel also understood Jesus’ baptism in the sense of proclaiming him the suffering servant: “Individual participation in the death and resurrection of Christ in Baptism is possible only after Christ has completed his general Baptism; and this is the reason why he himself was baptized by John, and why those received into the Church today are baptized” (Cullmann 1969:22). Another explanation is that by Davies (1995:54, 65; cf Strijdom 1998), who writes that Jesus’ baptism was the beginning of his career and that he underwent a spontaneous possession experience. Jesus saw the heavens torn open and a spirit descended in the form of a dove (Mk 1:9-10). During an initial possession experience visual hallucinations are not uncommon. Most likely, “Christians” believed that Jesus saw the spirit descend in the form of a dove because that was what Jesus saw and he told them about this event. Since a voice declared Jesus as the son of God (Mk 1:11; Jn 1:32-34), Jesus most probably believed that the spirit of God was such that when the spirit was active in him he was transformed into the Son of God (Davies 1995:61). Davies (1995:64) explains this as follows: “Throughout the story of Jesus’ baptism, the events related fit remarkably well with what one might predict in regard to an individual who came to baptism for repentance and who then received a spontaneous possession experience.”

<sup>16</sup> DeMaris (2002:147) understands the alternate state of consciousness that Jesus experienced at his baptism as possession trance (see chapter 2; Davies 1995:52-54). In cultures where possession trance comprises the typical alternate state of consciousness, spirit possession is triggered by ritual activity (see Goodman 1988a:37). DeMaris (2002:147-148) maintains: “Jesus’ baptismal scene as Mark describes it fits this sequence of features well: the ritual action of the baptism triggers spirit possession – the Spirit descending like a dove into Jesus – an altered state of consciousness – Jesus’ visual and aural encounter with the spirit world, that is, the heavens splitting and God speaking (Mark 1:10-11). The graphic language of possession softened over time; Luke and Matthew have the dove descending *upon* Jesus (*epi*; Matt 3:16; Luke 3:22) instead of *into* him (*eis*; Mark 1:10)...Moreover, Luke and Matthew eliminated Mark’s striking image of the Spirit driving or casting Jesus into the desert in the scene that follows (Mark 1:12; cf Matt 4:1; Luke 4:1). Only the Markan version preserves the vivid description of a spirit outside Jesus entering him and subsequently controlling him” (cf Davies 1995:171-172). DeMaris (2002:148) realizes that not every element in Mark’s account has an equal claim to historical reliability. The basic sequence of ritual action inducing possession trance is likely, but whether

John's baptism was the triggering rite is not certain. Another issue is that Jesus probably did enter an alternate state of consciousness in the form of spirit possession, but the features and content of what he encountered are historically less certain. Biblical scholars generally dismiss the historical reliability of what happens in Mark 1:10-11 because it resonates strongly with parts of the Israelite religious tradition, such as Genesis 22, Isaiah 42 and 64, and Psalm 2. But a social-scientific interpretation views such a resonance differently. In cultures with institutionalized alternate states of consciousness, people who experience these states will encounter what they have been socialized to expect. Since Jesus grew up in Israelite society we can assume that he knew and could have drawn from the stories of his culture in order to articulate what took place in his possession trance. DeMaris (2002:148-149) perceives another possible source for the specific features of Jesus' ritually induced possession trance in the experience of those who underwent baptismal entry into the Jesus-movement. He indicates that two key features of the Markan baptismal account recur in other passages in which baptismal language appears: Spirit bestowal and filial identification. Some groups in the Jesus-movement linked spirit possession or the bestowal of the Holy Spirit to baptism (Ac 2:38, 1 Cor 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor 1:21-22), and the Markan baptismal scene mirrors this link. DeMaris adds that filial or adoption language commonly occurs in the context of baptism (Gl 3:26-29; Rm 8:14-16). The same thing happened at Jesus' baptism, where the voice from heaven announces Jesus' divine sonship. Since baptism marked and enacted one's entry into the family of believers, it is not surprising that baptism evokes such language. These two common features suggest to many scholars (see DeMaris 2002:149) the shaping of Mark 1:9-11 according to the practice and perspective of the Jesus-movement. It is possible that some of the details of Jesus' ritual entry into a possession trance stemmed from the Jesus-movement and are, thus, not historically accurate, because if the Gospel writer intertwined community baptismal practice with a narrative about Jesus, what better place to begin the story than with Jesus' baptism (DeMaris 2002:148-149)? But the possibility also exists that activities other than the rite of baptism could have induced Jesus' alternate state of consciousness. These are sleep deprivation, solitude, fasting, or prayer. Or maybe there was no ritual. Alternate states of consciousness can occur spontaneously, usually in an individual's initial experiences of possession (see chapter 2). Since Jesus' baptismal vision represents the first report we have of Jesus going into a possession trance, perhaps it happened spontaneously. But because this is considered negative in many societies, as indicating demon-possession, apologetic motivations probably lie behind the introduction of baptism to the possession report (DeMaris 2002:149-151).

<sup>17</sup> This is also the case with the Eucharist (see Bradshaw 2002:144-145).

<sup>18</sup> In studies done during the early twentieth-century, there was a tendency to treat evidence from one geographical region as representing the custom of the universal "church", in the absence of any clear testimony to the contrary from other sources, and also to regard later Western practice as the normative standard against which deviations can be measured (Bradshaw 2002:144-145). One example of this is when Duchesne (1904:292-293), in his survey of "early Christian" worship, affirmed that "[t]he ceremonies of Christian initiation, such as they are described in authorities from the end of the second century onwards, consisted of three essential rites – Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion." This tripartite ritual was preceded by a *catechumenate* and "ordinarily administered" at Easter "from the earliest times".

<sup>19</sup> See Bradshaw (2002:144-170) for a summary and critical survey of the information we have (and the reflection of scholars thereupon) regarding the origin and early practice of the initiation ritual of the early Jesus-movement.

<sup>20</sup> Although Mt 28:19 is not historically reliable (Van Aarde & Pelsler 2001:37), it could reflect the importance of the baptismal practices in Jesus-groups.

<sup>21</sup> See Hartman (1992:32-33) for other views.

<sup>22</sup> For a differing perspective, see Morgan (1983:278-302). He holds the opinion that Rm 6:5 does not refer directly to baptism. According to him Paul referred to the believers' death to sin, a death which in its rejection of sin is a likeness of Christ's death. Davies (1995:184) on the other hand does regard Rm 6:1-11 as referring to baptism, but he describes Paul's understanding of baptism in this case in a distinctive way, namely, as a possession experience: "The experience of possession is...an experience of one's primary-persona exiting and of another persona entering. Diverse metaphors might be used for this...." Paul uses the metaphor to die and to rise again. The primary-persona identity declines and a second persona, the Spirit of Christ, arises. The significance of Christians' experience of death and resurrection was retrojected biographically back to the mythic occasion of Jesus' death and resurrection, giving personal and mythic significance to reports that some of Jesus' followers had seen him after he died. This most probably happened not long after the Pentecost event (Davies 1995:184).

<sup>23</sup> Collins (1989:42) adds: "These qualities of reenactment of a foundational story and the identification of the participant with the protagonist of the story are strikingly reminiscent of what is known about the initiation rituals of certain mystery religions, notably the Eleusinian mysteries and the Isis mysteries" (see Meyer 1987:17-30, 160-172, 176-193). Collins (1989:42) explains that at least forty years after Paul's death, the notion of death and rebirth was also attached to proselyte baptism in the Israelite tradition. Christian and rabbinic baptism both have their ultimate roots in the ritual washings of Leviticus (cf earlier discussion). Both came to function as rituals of initiation. The major difference is the relation of this ritual to "eschatology". Both expect a fulfillment but the two communities place themselves on different sides of the turning point between the two ages.

<sup>24</sup> To elaborate on the theme of burial, Petersen (1986:217) offers an interesting opinion that is worth mentioning, although his understanding of the "new society" of Jesus-followers differs from my view. He states that Pauline baptism can most comprehensively be explained in terms of the widely attested, cross-cultural phenomenon of secondary or double burial. Pilch (1995a:289) points out that although it is not mentioned in the New Testament, the practice of secondary burial was very common in the first century. Petersen (1986:218-222) argues that for Paul the baptismal burial marks the beginning of a process that will be completed when Christ returns, raises the people who have died, transforms the bodies of the believers into glorious bodies, and when all believers will become children of God in the kingdom of the Father. For the believer baptismal burial, thus, signifies the end of one form of life and the beginning of a transitional physical and social life that will terminate with the receiving of a new bodily form and a new social life in the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor 5-7; 12:13; Gl 3:26-4:7). This transitional period is of limited duration, because Paul expected Christ's return within his own lifetime: "For these reasons the church is a temporary form of social existence for those that have 'died' but have not yet been 'reborn' in their new bodily and social life" (Petersen 1986:218).

Secondary or double burial refers to the practice of a first, temporary burial in one place, which is followed by a final interment elsewhere. The second burial takes place after sufficient time has passed for organic matter to decompose and be separated from the bones: "The handling of the deceased's *remains*, however, is only a part of the total phenomenon because each of the three moments, the initial interment, the dessiccatory process, and the final interment, is universally accompanied by a basically common concern for the fate of the deceased *person*" (Petersen 1986:222). The social actions undertaken with respect to the corpse from the first burial to the last are universally comprehended within a symbolic system oriented to the fate of the person during the whole process. These symbols vary according to the local cultural idiom, but are consistent in treating the fate of the person in terms of a transformation of social status. According to Hertz (1960:27-86) double burial shows that death is not completed in one act: it implies a procedure that is considered terminated only when the dissolution of the body has ended. Death is also not seen as destruction, but as a transition – while the old body falls into ruins, a new body takes shape, with which the soul will enter into another existence. To achieve this, the correct rites need to be performed. There is a kind of symmetry between the condition of the body (which must wait

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a certain time before it can enter its final tomb), and the condition of the soul (which will be admitted into the land of the dead only when the last funeral rites are accomplished). Death, thus, marks the passage from one existence to another – from the visible society to the invisible. It is a temporary exclusion of the individual from human society (see Petersen 1986:223-225).

Although Paul never mentions secondary burial, Petersen (1986:226) claims that the ideas associated with it are present, especially in the notions of the believers' process of bodily transformation and incorporation into the kingdom of God as children of God. Petersen (1986:226), therefore, asserts that "Paul speaks of the deceased person who is involved in the process of social transition, not of the deceased's remains which are in the process of dessication. Viewed from this angle, Christ's parousia and subsequent actions in relation to the deceased person are the corollaries on a symbolic level of the society's actions in relation to the deceased's remains. Christ's parousia is therefore the symbolic corollary of a second burial. And corresponding to this corollary is the relationship between the dessication of 'flesh and blood' on the biological level and the 'putting on' of Christ on the symbolic level. Paul speaks from the perspective of the new man, not of the old one." Petersen (1986:226) concludes by arguing that modeled on the phenomenon of double burial, Pauline baptism is a ritual celebrating both the separation of believers from their former social states and their commencement of a transitional process of bodily transformation that will be completed at a certain moment in the future. Then they will be given a new form and will be incorporated into a new social reality (see 1 Cor 15:36b-38).

<sup>25</sup> According to Beattie (1968:215-216) the word "taboo" comes from Polynesia – there it means what is forbidden on pain of some ritual sanction, that is, of some penalty which is believed to be brought about by the mere fact of performing the forbidden act. It is believed that the breach of a taboo places the offender in a condition of ritual danger, and in many cultures this can only be relieved, if it can be relieved at all, by the performance of a specific cleansing ritual.

<sup>26</sup> Ac 8:37 is omitted in most manuscripts (in the NIV as well).

<sup>27</sup> Crossan (1992:267) makes an interesting remark regarding children in the *Gospel of Thomas*. He comments that here baptismal regeneration involved the destruction of duality, "...of that between the inner soul and the outer body, between the heavenly, androgynous image of God and its earthly, bifurcated counterpart, but most especially...between the female and male, so that sexual differentiation was negated by celibate asceticism." This fitted with the Gospel's overall asceticism, a world-negating isolation that mocked Jewish asceticism in favor of a far more radical, total, and cosmic abandonment (see *GTh* 6:1; 14:1, 27). According to Crossan (1992:267) this makes it clear why an infant is chosen as a metaphor for those entering the kingdom – a child is considered asexual and is, therefore, an appropriate image for the ideal "Christian" in the *Gospel of Thomas*, a Christian who is an ascetic celibate. A kingdom of children is a kingdom of the celibate.

<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, Van Aarde (2004a) argues that Mark 10:15 does not refer to baptism.

<sup>29</sup> Whitaker (1960:1-218) provides translations of all the principal documents from which our knowledge of the church's baptismal rite is drawn (see Thurian & Wainwright 1983:5-8; Dix [1968] 1992:xi, xxxv-xxxvii, 23-39).

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed description of the origin of the ancient church orders, how reliable they are, their relationship and dependence on one another and the content of every church order, see Bradshaw 2002:73-97. For a critical discussion regarding the other liturgical sources, see Bradshaw 2002: 98-117.

<sup>31</sup> Since early sources are limited in number, later sources which may shed a light on earlier liturgical practices are also mentioned.



<sup>32</sup> Esler (2003:204) says that Tertullian's *De Baptismo*, written in Carthage (c 200), is the earliest Christian exposition of baptism that we have.

<sup>33</sup> According to Mitchell (1995:248), the baptismal liturgy of the *Didache* provides a reflection of a "Jewish-Christian" group (most probably from first-century Antioch) who wished to remain faithful to the *Torah*. It is a community who preached what Jesus preached, but who did not necessarily preach *Jesus*. They reappropriated practices which were repudiated by Jesus (e.g., fasting, liturgical prayer, baptism), explaining and defending these within an "eschatological" (and not a christological) horizon.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion concerning the baptismal liturgy in the *Didache*, see Mitchell (1995:248-255).

<sup>35</sup> Greek text of *Did* 9:1-4 (see Pretorius 1980:20):

<sup>1a</sup> Peri\ de\ tou= bapti/smatoj, ou3tw bapti/sate:

<sup>1b</sup> ei0j to\ olnoma tou= patro\j kai\ tou= ui9ou= kai\ tou= a9gi/ou pneu/matoj e0n u3dati zw=nti.

<sup>4a</sup> pro\ de\ tou= bapti/smatoj pronhsteusa/tw o9 bapti/zwn kai\ o9 baptizo/menoj kai\ ei! tinej a!lloi du/nantai:

<sup>36</sup> The word "catechism" – the body of Christian teaching which became very popular in the later Middle Ages and thereafter – derives from the word "*catechumen*" (Stevenson 1989:38).

<sup>37</sup> In *Didache* 7 references are made to baptism, but none of the so-called "classical" elements that are regarded as essential for the celebration of "Christian" baptism in the course of the liturgical history are found here (Mitchell 1995:226-227). The community for which the *Didache* was written faced controversial issues about *Torah* observance and table fellowship (Mitchell 1995:238-240). According to Mitchell (1995:240) the redactor of the *Didache* implied that a minimum of adherence to "Jewish" *halakoth*, which govern ritual purity, is essential for baptism, which in turn is essential for participation in the community meal. Most probably, in the baptized community of the *Didache*, stricter members (e.g., Israelites with a Pharisaic background) would have found it impossible to conduct table fellowship with other Jews or with Gentile converts who observed less strict rules of ritual purity. Thus, in the *Didache*, baptism does not guarantee Eucharistic unity.

<sup>38</sup> A person could stay a catechumen as long as he or she wanted to. If such a person felt the desire to complete the initiation, and the rulers of the church deemed such a person worthy to be baptized, he or she passed into the category of the "elect" or "competents". At the beginning of Lent the names of those who were to be baptized on the evening of Easter were written down. During these solemn forty days they were obliged to be present frequently at church, in order to undergo exorcisms and to hear preparatory instruction on baptism. It was at Easter that baptism was ordinarily administered from the earliest times (Tert, *Bapt* 19). The vigil of Easter Sunday was devoted to this ceremony. If somebody could not participate in the initiation on this day, it was postponed to a later date in Eastertide. The last day for this purpose, Pentecost, soon came to be regarded as a second baptismal festival. The rites in regard to the *catechuminate* and baptism varied according to the country (Duchesne 1904:292-294; see Bradshaw 2002:118-122 for a critique of Duchesne's method of argumentation). After baptism the newly initiated participated in the holy mysteries for the first time. It was daybreak before this solemn ceremony came to an end (Duchesne 1904:315). These customs of course created the perfect circumstances for experiencing alternate states of consciousness.

<sup>39</sup> Baptism was regarded as so important that some people started to recommend delaying it, for example Tertullian toward the end of the second century. This brought about a debate whether

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children should be baptized or not. Not to baptize children would mean excluding them from the Eucharist too. If children were not old enough to answer for themselves, sponsors from their families undertook this duty. Children were baptized first, before the adults. Anointing took place before and after baptism, and the bishop, who presided over the entire service, laid his hand on the newly baptized just before the second anointing. This laying on of hands began what was later on in the West called confirmation. As Christianity spread through the west of Europe in later years, the areas over which bishops presided (dioceses) became larger, with the result that the local bishop could not be present at every service of baptism. Hence, the part of the rite which consisted of laying his hand on the candidates became separated from the rest of the service and was performed as the giving of the Spirit when he could visit the local churches. At the Reformation, Anglicans and others kept the rites of confirmation but stipulated that it should be performed only when people were old enough to understand. It, thus, also became a rite of conscious commitment to Christ (Stevenson 1989:39-40).

<sup>40</sup> A similar account is available in the description of Judas' baptism of King Gūdnaphar, the king of India, in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*: "And the king gave orders that the bath should be closed for seven days, and that no man should bathe in it. And when...the seven days were done, on the eighth day they three entered into the bath by night that Judas might baptize them. And many lamps were lighted in the bath. And when they had entered into the bath-house, Judas went in before them. And our Lord appeared unto them, and said to them: 'Peace be with you, my brethren.' And they heard the voice only, but the form they did not see, whose it was, for till now they had not been baptized. And Judas went up and stood upon the edge of the cistern, and poured oil upon their heads, and said: 'Come, holy name of the Messiah; come, power of grace...come, Spirit of holiness, and purify their reins and their hearts.' And he baptized them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit of holiness. And when they had come up out of the water, a youth appeared to them, and he was holding a lighted taper; and the light of the lamps became pale through its light....And when it dawned and was morning, he broke the Eucharist and let them partake of the table of the Messiah; and they were glad and rejoicing" (Wright [1871] 1968:166-167). The seven days represent a time of preparation like the two days of fasting. We do not know when oil entered the baptismal liturgy. Eventually, it was used twice, once over the whole body before baptism and then just on the head as a perfume when the bath was over. The single use of oil in the baptism of King Gūdnaphar is a symbol of the descent of the Spirit. Symbolism is also evident in the light which is brought into the baptismal chamber. In time, this became a candle that was given to the newly baptized when they moved from the baptistery to the church. Everyone else would have had a candle or lamp, since the service began late at night and ended early in the morning. Being able to see in the dark became a symbol – possessing the light of Christ (Stevenson 1989:37-38). This description of baptism makes it clear that the candidates probably experienced alternate states of consciousness. The fasting beforehand, the darkness, and the lamps could all have played an important role in inducing alternate states of consciousness, which led to the experience of the presence of the Lord.

<sup>41</sup> Hippolytus describes baptism as taking place after the candidates had removed their clothing. It seems that the nakedness of male and female persons was not a matter of concern. According to Esler (2003:205) this could reflect the common practice of naked men and woman bathing together in the Roman public baths: "After disrobing, each candidate enters the tank with the person who will effect the baptism, the baptizer apparently pushing that candidate's head under the water. This happened three times according to Hippolytus...."

<sup>42</sup> In some other instances it is said that the elder stated the affirmations of faith while the initiate simply affirmed acceptance.

<sup>43</sup> According to *Didache* 7, immersion should take place in running water. But this was not a very strict rule: "If no running water is available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible, otherwise warm. If neither is practicable, then pour water three times on the head...."

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(Stevenson 1989:35). Esler (2003:204-205) remarks that in the early period at least, the person being baptized was probably pushed right under the water, head and all. He argues thus because of the suggestion in the Gospel accounts that Jesus saw the heavens rent asunder when he came up out of the water, as if the fact that his face was under water would have prevented his seeing this earlier. In Acts 8:38-39 we notice a similar effect in Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. The source of water used for this baptism in an urban setting is puzzling. It is possible that the people involved went to the nearest river, because in the *Didache* there is a preference for "living" (running) water. In *De Baptismo*, Tertullian comments that it does not matter what sort of water is used, in that "there is no difference between those whom John 'dipped in the Jordan' and Peter in the Tiber". Tertullian apparently made this remark incidentally while proving another point, which could, therefore, constitute evidence that he thought that Peter had baptized in the Tiber – using a nearby river, in other words. In the *Traditio apostolica*, Hippolytus mentions a baptismal tank which is fed with running water (probably from one of the city's aqueducts). This leads Esler (2003:205) to the conclusion that baptism in the Tiber may have become too risky after Jesus-followers began to be persecuted, in Nero's reign especially. He adds that another possibility is baptism in one of Rome's baths. If we take into account that the priests of Isis at Cenchreae made use of the "nearest bath" for the customary ablution of the initiate, this might be a possibility – especially if the baptism occurred when the baths were less frequented.

<sup>44</sup> Oetting (1970:29) argues that the *Didache*, Justin Martyr, and Hippolytus make it clear that the common form of baptism in the early church was immersion. This symbolized dying and rising again with Christ. But pictures in the Roman catacombs depict the initiate being drenched with water poured from a seashell; and Cyprian (*Letter* 69, 7-11) comments that the manner in which the water was applied was of minor importance as long as it was carried out by a priest of the true church.

<sup>45</sup> Although we know that the Eucharistic meal was a repeated event that involved the whole community as a community, baptism was an event that could not be repeated, and had an impact on an individual within the community. But Esler (2003:208) constitutes that it is highly likely that baptism occurred in the presence of the community. He bases his argument on the fact that Hippolytus records that after baptism the candidates could give the "kiss of peace" to the rest of the congregation for the first time, which is presumably evidence for the presence of the rest of the community.

<sup>46</sup> In this regard, Esler (2003:206) writes (my emphasis): "The presence of the Spirit that Christ-followers experienced so powerfully at baptism *may* have led to the reworking of Jesus' baptism by water in the Jordan so as to include the feature of the Spirit descending like a dove upon him."

<sup>47</sup> In Rm 8:1-17, Paul describes a life in the Spirit. Although he does not mention baptism as the direct beginning of this life, Esler (2003:208) contends that it is reasonable to impute this belief to him.

<sup>48</sup> Although I concur with Esler, I consider it worthwhile to mention the different opinion of Cranfield (1994/95:41-42), namely, that Rm 6:3-4a indicates that the Roman Jesus-followers' baptism is intimately connected with their relationship to Christ's death. They were baptized into his death; through their baptism they were buried with him into his death. But a number of passages in Paul's letters speak of the Jesus-followers' death with Christ and new life in him as based on the gospel events themselves yet make no mention of baptism (e.g., Rm 7:4, 6; 2 Cor 5:14-15, 17; Gl 2:19-20), which could indicate that Paul did not think of baptism as actually effecting this death with Christ. Baptism does not establish the relationship. It attests a relationship already established. Thus, for Paul, baptism, which, as the act of the person baptized, is the outward confirmation of the human decision of faith, is, as God's act, the sign and seal and pledge that the benefits of Christ's death for all people really do apply to this individual human being in particular. Cranfield (1994/95:42), thus, concludes: "Our baptism is God's

confirmation, God's guarantee, of the fact that Christ's death was for us," that God sees us as having died in his death.

<sup>49</sup> See Moo (1996:364) for a different opinion, namely, that after Romans 6:4 Paul never writes about baptism again.

<sup>50</sup> Davies (1995:185; cf Ludwig 1966:78) understands this passage from the viewpoint of possession theory. To Davies Paul insists that in a group possessed by the same spirit, all who are possessed necessarily have an identical new persona and so are metaphorically one body, and in theory, psychologically one person; all are one person in Jesus Christ. And because of this there cannot be any distinction on the basis of ethnic, gender, or class differences (Gl 3:26-28). The logic of Paul's paradigm regarding possession is based on two axioms. First, from monotheism: there is only one Spirit. Second, from possession theory generally: a person possessed acquires the identity of the possessing entity. Distinctions in the manifestations of the possession experience are distinctions in the "gifts" of one Spirit. Unpossessed people are individuated; but individuals possessed by one Spirit constitute one person. Paul writes that this one person in Jesus Christ may metaphorically be considered the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:1-31).

<sup>51</sup> Symbols function as expressions of a new value system. Thompson (1998:55) describes the ethic of the earliest Jesus-followers, as the existential meaningfulness of the life of the baptized, using a contemporary metaphor: "Access to the holy internet started with the 'gateway' of faith and baptism, which was free, but not cheap. Belonging to the body of Christ meant immediate access to the network of Christian believers, but communication also depended on the 'protocol software' of hospitality, without which no church could meet and no message could travel."

<sup>52</sup> As I explained in chapter 1, apocalyptic thinking comes to the fore when religious people feel that they cannot alter their unbearable circumstances by themselves. Then they reach out to God for help. They believe that God will soon bring an end to this wicked world and call a righteous world into existence (cf Rist 1989:157; Van Aarde 1994b:79-80).