



“One Baptism”

What Did Paul Mean?

At Tell Mar Elyas are ruins from one of the largest Byzantine churches in Jordan. Many believe this to be Tishbe, the hometown of the prophet Elijah. Shown in the foreground is a large stone tub, thought to be a baptistry.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (38/0783)

By Bobby Kelly

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE I LEARNED for reading Paul's letters was to remember he wrote to specific churches to address specific difficulties, or crises. Ephesians, however, challenges this principle. The fact that the earliest manuscripts omit the designation "in Ephesus" in verse 1 combined with the lack of any personal references with the exception of Tychicus (Eph. 6:21) suggest Paul intended this to be a circular letter read either in various churches around Ephesus or even churches in a variety of cities in western Asia Minor, such as Ephesus, Colossae, and Laodicea.¹ The result is a letter with general themes that had wide appeal in various churches. While scholars do not agree on the letter's *primary* theme, unity is one theme on which most scholars agree.² Recognizing this theme of unity can help readers better understand what Paul meant when he spoke of "one baptism."

One People

The theme of unity is hardwired into the structure of Ephesians. The letter divides naturally into two main sections: Chapters 1-3 constitute a prolonged and powerful

prayer celebrating God's eternal purpose of unifying all things in Christ. Chapters 4-6 present the church's obligations in light of God's eternal purpose. Following the letter opening (1:1-2), Paul offered praise to God for election, adoption, and redemption (vv. 3-14). But the heart of the prayer is that God would, "bring everything together in the Messiah, both things in heaven and things on earth in Him" (v. 10).³ The theme of unity emerges again in 2:11-22, when Paul declared that Jesus' death both removed the dividing wall between God and human beings and broke down the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. In the church, the unity between Jew and Gentile anticipated a future when God would unite the entire creation in worship and confession of Jesus as Lord. Thus, God's eternal plan, the mystery now revealed, is the unity of all things in Christ.

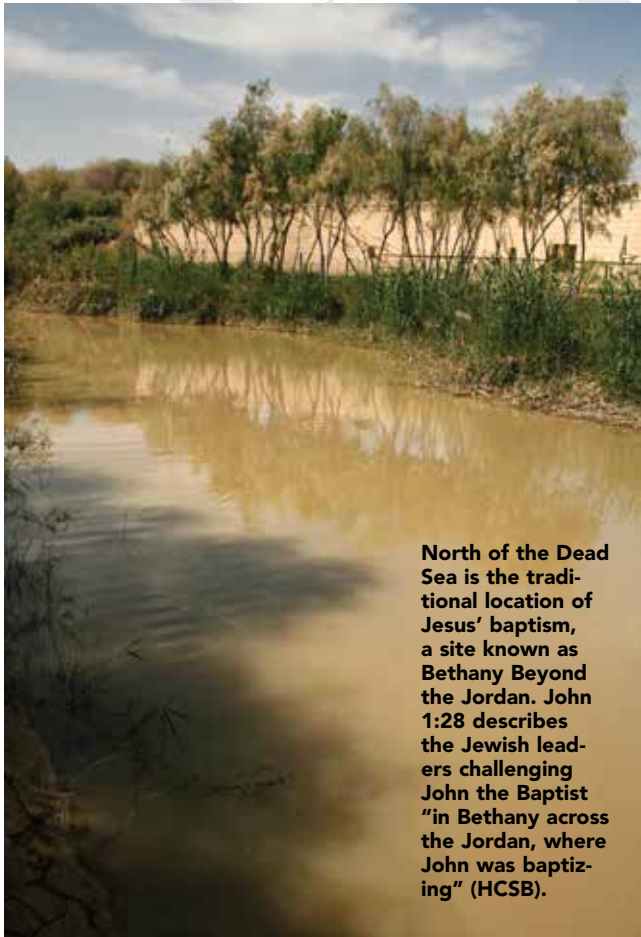
One Baptism

Following the emphasis on unity in Christ in Ephesians 1-3, Paul, not surprisingly, opened the exhortation section in chapter 4 with the appeal, "diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us" (v. 3). He followed with a series of seven short declarations that continued the

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The odium at Ephesus, which originally held about 1,500 people, was primarily a concert venue.



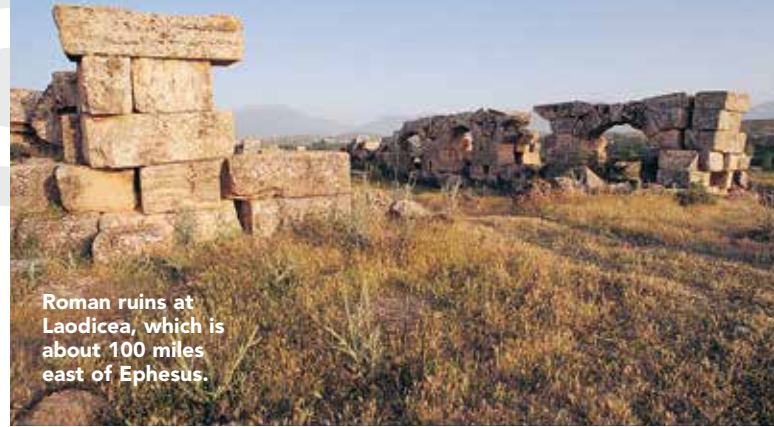
North of the Dead Sea is the traditional location of Jesus' baptism, a site known as Bethany Beyond the Jordan. John 1:28 describes the Jewish leaders challenging John the Baptist "in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing" (HCSB).

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theme of unity, each beginning with the number "one." The seven statements are organized around the three persons of the Trinity: "one Spirit," "one Lord," and "one God" (vv. 4,5,6).

The first triad joined "one body" and "one hope" together with the "one Spirit" (v. 4). The term "body" was most certainly a reference to the body of Christ, that is, the church. The church in this sense encompassed all believers, past and present, Jew and Gentile, joined together into one new humanity. The local congregations at Ephesus and other surrounding cities would provide a then-present, visible manifestation of this universal and timeless expression of the church.⁴ The "one Spirit," that is, the Holy Spirit, is the power at work that seals (1:13), builds up (2:22), and unifies the church (4:3). In Ephesians 1:18, Paul explained the "one hope" they were called to in connection with "the glorious riches of His inheritance among the saints." Prior to confessing Jesus as Lord, Paul's audience was without hope (2:12), but now, because of the blood of Christ, they had absolute confidence in a future inheritance based on their reconciliation with God the Father.

The second triad joined "one faith" and "one baptism"



Roman ruins at Laodicea, which is about 100 miles east of Ephesus.

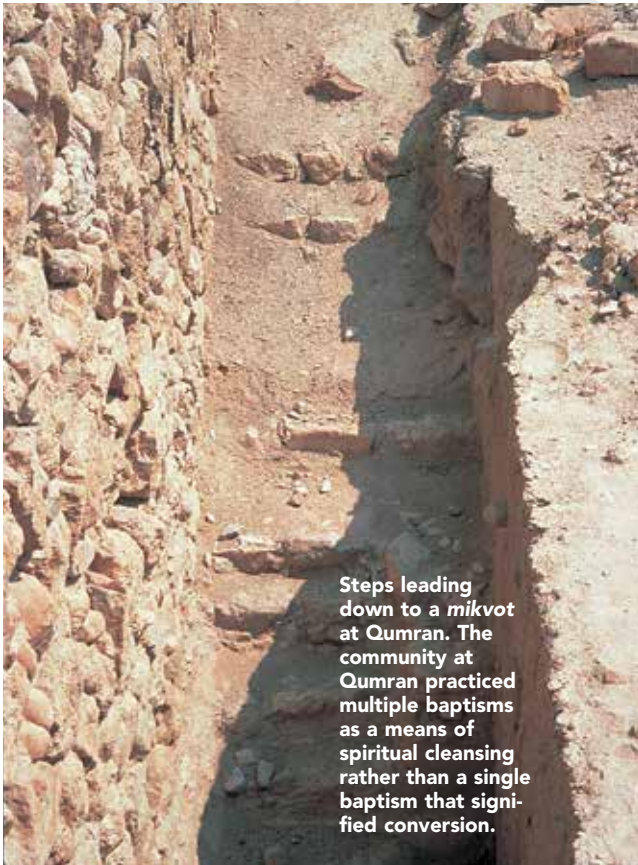
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (11/31/10)

together with "one Lord," the eternal Son of God, Jesus the Messiah (4:5). Neither faith nor baptism makes sense apart from union with Christ the Lord. The reference to "one faith" could mean the content of what Christians believe, or it could refer to trust in Jesus.⁵ More likely in this context "faith" means the content or substance of what one believes.⁶ The final statement of the second triad is "one baptism." Several possibilities exist as to what Paul meant.

(1) It could refer to water baptism.⁷ The meaning of the Greek term *baptisma*, "immersion" or "washing," would seem to confirm this interpretation.⁸ Paul used the term to refer to water baptism in other letters. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:12-17, Paul determined that the disunity in the Corinthian church was caused by their allegiance to their favorite apostle, whether Peter, Apollos, or Paul. Paul addressed the issue by emphasizing the insignificance of the apostles compared to Christ. Although the Corinthians might have been baptized by an apostle, they were baptized into Christ: "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name" (1 Cor. 1:14-15).

(2) It could refer to Holy Spirit baptism. While *baptisma* does refer to immersion, it does not demand immersion in water, thus leaving the possibility that it could refer to immersion in the Holy Spirit.⁹ In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul joined baptism, the Holy Spirit, and Christian unity together in a manner that supports this interpretation: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The greatest obstacle to this understanding is the structure of Ephesians 4:4-6. Paul designed the initial triad of "one body" and "one hope" around the "one Spirit." "One baptism," however, is part of the second triad structured around "one Lord." Only water baptism was accompanied by a confession of faith in Jesus as Lord (see Acts 11:16 and 19:5) and thereby the new believer was baptized into the one Lord.

(3) A third interpretation assumes Paul had water baptism in mind, but not the ordinance itself, but rather baptism metaphorically as the inner reality of identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.¹⁰ Numerous texts make this a strong option. Paul made this connection:



Steps leading down to a mikvot at Qumran. The community at Qumran practiced multiple baptisms as a means of spiritual cleansing rather than a single baptism that signified conversion.

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Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life. For if we have been joined with Him in the likeness of His death, we will certainly also be in the likeness of His resurrection. (Rom. 6:3-5)

In addition, Galatians 3:26-29 used baptism metaphorically as clothing to refer to the common experience of all people, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, being in Christ. Finally, Colossians 2:12 asserted: “Having been buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” Whenever Paul employed the term “baptism,” he always had something of the literal, water baptism in mind. Often, however, Paul assumed the literal and moved to the union of believers into Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. Based on context and other texts in Paul, “one baptism” in Ephesians 4:5 seems to be one of these instances.

Lesson

Several implications emerge from a metaphorical reading of “one baptism” in Ephesians 4:4-6. To begin, although Paul did not reference “one baptism” in this text as a defense of immersion as the only proper mode of baptism, the metaphor did not work unless the mode of baptism was immersion. This reading also dispenses with questions of the legitimacy of re-baptizing people. Since the Christian is baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Rom. 6:3-5 above), baptism is a once-for-all historic event. Only a couple of possible biblical texts could be used to support re-baptizing. In Acts 19:1-7, Paul “re-baptized” 12 men at Ephesus who had experienced only John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance and had not ever heard of the Holy Spirit. Everything in the text indicates these men lacked the bare essentials necessary to be genuine Christians. The baptism they experienced in Acts 19:5 was not “re-baptism” but the “one baptism” into Christ. Also, one could interpret the plural “washings” or “baptisms” in Hebrews 6:2 as a repeated ordinance. Likely, however, the writer of Hebrews referred to the ongoing ceremonial washings that were so typical of first-century Judaism and not the repetition of Christian baptism.¹¹

The “one baptism” of Ephesians 4:4-6 thus emphasized the one message that all Christians have believed and the one name into which all Christians are baptized. It also served as a visible representation of the believer’s death, burial, and resurrection with Christ.

The church’s unity then and now is rooted in the trinitarian God. The one baptism, along with the one body, one hope, and one faith are four ways in which believers are joined together with God and other believers. 🕯

1. Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 78-79; and D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 488-90.

2. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 102.

3. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

4. Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 281.

5. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 516-17.

6. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 283; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 258.

7. See O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 284; Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 240; Ernest Best, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1998), 369.

8. “βαπτισμα” (*baptisma*, baptism) in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [BDAG], trans. and ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 132; see also “βαπτίζω” (*baptizo*, immerse) in BDAG, 131.

9. Thielman, *Ephesians*, 258.

10. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 518; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 259.

11. George H. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 205.

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