

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY MEANING OF BAPTISM? SOME TRANSLATIONAL DIFFICULTIES

Fred Karlson

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I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

A majority of translations, in both English and foreign version, prefer to transliterate the word “baptism,” or to translate it as “immersion” or “plunge.” A number of Greek lexicons give “dipping” or “immersion” as the primary meaning. In exceptional cases where the word takes on metaphorical significance, these lexicons explain “baptism” by various means – identification, union, etc. James W. Dale's work on Baptism, *Classic Baptism, Johannic Baptism, and Judaic Baptism*, suggested the following as a definition: “...whatever is capable of thoroughly changing the character, state, or condition of any object, is capable of baptizing that object: and by such change of character, state, or condition does, in fact, baptize it.”¹ He argued that the primary meaning of the word is not the mode applied, whether “immersion, pouring, or sprinkling.” His approach examined the exceptional uses and reminds us of the grammarian's proverb: “The exception proves the rule.” Dale attempted to find a definition that would include all cases of the use of the word. If one were to accept his definition, or any other, there still remains the question of how to translate “baptism.”

The entire discussion reminds us of the difficulties of translating some words from a source to a target language into anything other than a transliteration, since a single “calque”² or linguistic copy often remains elusive for translating certain specialized words into meaningful and under-standable language. An alternative recourse would involve using an equivalent expression, a paraphrastic approach, or to apply several different expressions depending on the context. Unfortunately, this final solution obscures for the reader that the underlying Greek word is *baptisma* or *baptismos*.

II. A DEFINITION OF *baptizō*, *baptisma*, *baptismos*, *baptō*

Trying to get a hold on the essential meaning of baptism can be somewhat elusive. Most lexicons attempt to distinguish between a literal meaning and a figurative meaning. The literal meaning for *baptizō* is invariably listed as “to dip, immerse, wash.”³ Arndt and Gingrich give the figurative meaning of “baptism” as a type of Israel's passage through the Red Sea, martyrdom, and being overwhelmed by something.⁴ Thayer adds that it can imply following Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2), uniting all believers to one body (1 Corinthians 12:13), bringing them into fellowship with Christ (Galatians 3:28), imbuing them richly with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), and overwhelming unbelievers with fire in the day of judgment (Matthew 3:11).⁵

¹ Dale, James W. *Johannic Baptism*, Waucona, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1993, vi.

² Vinay, J.-P. et Darbelnet, J., *Stylistique Comparée du français et de l'anglais*, Paris: Didier, 1968, 47-48.

³ Arndt, William F. and Gingrich, F. Wilbur, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973, 131-32; Thayer, Joseph Henry, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1951, 94-95.

⁴ Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*.

⁵ Thayer, *op. cit.*

Speaking for the Baptist denominational position, A.T. Robertson held that the word “baptism” even in its figurative use always means “immersion.”⁶ “There is nothing in the NT to offset this obvious and inevitable interpretation.”⁷ Dale’s works are listed in his bibliography, but Robertson did not interact with his theory. John Broadus shared similar views on the equivalency of baptism and immersion, and responded to Dale’s theory, finding it “nebulous” and “a figment of Dr. Dale’s fancy.”⁸ By contrast, B.B. Warfield stated that if the mode of baptism must be duplicated to conform with NT practices, then the same criteria should also be applied for the Lord’s Supper. It should always be done in an upper room, after an evening meal, and when reclining.⁹

The word group for “baptism” does not always mean “to dip” or “to immerse,” and there do exist examples from the Greek Scriptures to show this. Isaiah 21:4 in the LXX literally reads “lawlessness baptizes me,” having the sense of “overwhelms me.” The Hebrew *ba’ath* has the meaning of “terrify,” except in the Piel where its intensity can picture “to overwhelm.”¹⁰ This verse is rendered in the NKJV by “fearfulness frightened me,” and in the NIV with “fear makes me tremble,” but in the NASB by “horror overwhelms me,” and by the JPS with “terror hath overwhelmed me.” In Daniel 4:30 (LXX), *baptō* represents the Hebrew *tseba*, which means “to dip or to wet.”¹¹ Yet here, because of the nature of the “dew from heaven,” it is not translated “dipped” but instead “drenched” (4:33 NASB, NIV, NLT, TNK) or “wet” (4:33, KJV, NKJV).

The baptism of the Spirit is twice referred to in Acts as that which the Holy Spirit poured out (*ekcheō* - 2:33; 10:45), and twice referred to as a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy concerning the “pouring out” of the Spirit in the last days upon all flesh (2:17,18). In Hebrews 9:10, *baptismois* is translated “washings” (KJV, NKJV, NASB), “ceremonial washings” (NIV), and “ritual washing” (NLT), referring to the various washings prescribed in the Levitical law. A number of these requirements are found in Leviticus 11:25, 28, and 40, where the Hebrew *kabac* and the Greek of the LXX *plunō* represent the normal word for “wash.”¹²

In 1 Kings 18:32-38, Elijah built an altar and offered sacrifices upon it, after drenching the altar and the sacrifices with four barrels of water. Even the trench about the altar was filled with water. Dale cited several of the Greek fathers, Origen, Basil Magnus, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Latin father, Ambrose, who commented on this passage. In each case, they spoke of Elijah baptizing (Gr. *baptizō*, Lt. baptizo) the altar and sacrifices with water, even though the water was applied by pouring.¹³ God responds by consuming the whole of it with fire, but only by the prayer of Elijah and not by the prayers of the prophets of Baal. Origen connects this episode with the words of John the Baptist in Luke 3:16, arguing that Elijah was a type of Christ who baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His interpretation reminds us of John 1:25: “They asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the

⁶ Robertson, A.T., “Baptism, (The Baptist Interpretation),” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia (ISBE)*, ed. by James Orr, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976, I, 386.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁸ Broadus, John A., “Immersion Essential to Christian Baptism, Chapter 1. The Question at Issue,” <http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/broadus/immersionbroadus.htm>.

⁹ Warfield, B.B. “Baptism,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. By Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1952, I, *CCEL Edition v0.1*, URL at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc01/articles/baptism.html>.

¹⁰ Brown, Francis, Driver, S.R. and Briggs, Charles A., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, 129-30.

¹¹ Tregelles, Samuel Prideaux, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952, 701.

¹² Holladay, William L., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Kohler and Walter Baumgartner*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988, 151; Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*, 680.

¹³ Dale, James W., *Judaic Baptism*, Waucona, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1991, 328-42.

Prophet?” John the Baptist answered by saying that One was coming who was greater than he, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit for He is the Son of God (John 1:27, 33-34).

III. IS THE MODE OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM SIGNIFICANT?

The modes of immersion, pouring, and sprinkling depict various aspects of Christian baptism. It is perhaps unfair to say that one of them does a better job than another.

Immersionists, for example, argue that their mode of water baptism best illustrates the core ingredients of the Good News—Jesus died, was buried, and rose again for our sins. On closer examination, however, the historic account tells us that Jesus died, then was buried and rose again. When a believer submits to the waters of baptism, the chronology is slightly changed, for the believer is symbolically buried in the waters, simultaneously dies with Christ, and then is raised again. Being buried in the waters does not picture so much Christ’s action for us, as it does the believer’s union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Erickson is careful to state this in his defense of immersion as the mode of choice:

In Romans 6:3-5, Paul appears to be contending that there is a significant connection between how baptism is administered (one is lowered into the water and then raised out of it) and what it symbolizes (death to sin and new life in Christ—and beyond that, baptism symbolizes the basis of the believer’s death to sin and new life: the death, burial and resurrection of Christ).¹⁴

Pouring and sprinkling are terms of Scripture often used to picture Christ’s death for us. In Matthew 26:28, Jesus tells us in the upper room that the cup of the new covenant represents His blood “shed” for our sins (cf. Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). The “shedding” or “pouring out” (*ekcheō*) of blood was common terminology for death in the NT (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:50; Acts 22:20; Romans 3:15; Revelation 16:6). In addition, the sprinkling of Christ’s blood is used twice to refer to His death for our sins (Hebrews 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2).

Likewise, “pouring” is a recurrent image of the Holy Spirit’s action in baptizing the church. Besides the previously mentioned references to Spirit Baptism in Acts, there is Romans 5:5 where the love of God is “shed abroad” by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us. Titus 3:5-6 refers to the saving work of the Spirit in the believer, as that which he “shed” upon us through Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 52:25 (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV), we have the mention that the Servant, despite being marred in his visage and form, will “sprinkle – *nazah*” many nations. This image may refer to the Servant’s blood or to the gift of the Spirit, or to both. It is this terminology that leads many to see pouring and sprinkling as appropriate modes of Christian baptism, highlighting either the death of Christ or the gift of the Spirit.¹⁵

IV. THE VIEW OF JAMES W. DALE

James W. Dale argued that baptism is not primarily modal nor necessarily associated with water, but that “in all kindred baptisms, there is a declaration of controlling power exerted by a given influence over its object.”¹⁶ In his view, the subjects of baptism, whether humans or vessels, such as pots and pans, do not control the baptism but they do limit its application.¹⁷ The baptism of John was not different in modality from the Jewish baptisms of the day, but in their character.¹⁸ One must add here that both John’s baptism and the baptism of converts to Judaism were focused on repentance, but John’s baptism uniquely focused on Jesus as the coming Messiah. Nevertheless, Dale’s principle holds true, for both baptisms were asking

¹⁴ Erickson, Millard J., *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992, 1104.

¹⁵ Reymond, Robert L., *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, 818-21; www.biblecentre.net; Warfield, Benjamin, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Dale, James W., *Johannic Baptism.*, 84.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

the baptized to acknowledge the controlling influence of God's rule over their lives. The Qumran sectaries emphasized that true repentance recognized a submission to God's rule. 1QS 3:4f. attests this:

...a man who persists in the stubbornness of his heart "cannot be cleared by mere ceremonies of atonement, nor cleansed by any waters of ablution, nor sanctified by immersion in lakes or rivers, nor purified by any bath...Unclean, unclean, he remains so long as he rejects the government of God and refuses the discipline of communion with him."¹⁹

A modern-day example illustrates how the Watchtower Society recognizes the importance of the confession one uses in "Christian baptism." For many years, two questions were posed to the Watchtower baptismal candidates:

(1) "Have you repented of your sins and turned around, recognizing yourself before Jehovah God as a condemned sinner who needs salvation, and have you acknowledged to him that this salvation proceeds from him, the Father, through his Son Jesus Christ?" and, (2) "On the basis of this faith in God and in his provision for salvation, have you dedicated yourself unreservedly to God to do his will henceforth as he reveals it to you through Jesus Christ and through the Bible under the enlightening power of the holy spirit?"²⁰

Then on June 1, 1985, *The Watchtower* magazine presented new questions to replace those used previously:

"On the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have you repented of your sins and dedicated your-self to Jehovah to do his will? Do you understand that your dedication and baptism identify you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with God's spirit-directed organization?" (page 30)²¹

This change in the confession leaves out faith in Christ, and adds that the baptized is to do Jehovah's will as a new member of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. The controlling influence of the baptism in this case has changed. This illustrates the importance of the confession as part of the rite, for it defines its direction and goal. Water baptism is to be a visible sign of an inward spiritual reality. Martin Luther said, echoing the words of Augustine: "Without the word of God the water is simple water, and no baptism."²²

This concept of the controlling influence is important to Dale's theory. He pointed to the expression of baptism by wine. The mere drinking of wine or "dipping" as such does not suffice for a "baptism by wine." Only the profuse drinking of wine can cause it to influence one's faculties so that one is inebriated and thus baptized.²³ Dale gave the following example: "Ishmael baptized Gedaliah by drunkenness into insensibility and sleep."²⁴ He then asked: "Are these baptisms figurative? Is drunkenness or sleep not a physical condition?"²⁵

¹⁹ cited from Beasley-Murray, G.R., "Baptism, Wash," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, Vol. 1, 152.

²⁰ David Reed, "Baptism, Subject by Subject - Answers for Jehovah's Witnesses," 2000 bible study centre™ DIGITAL LIBRARY, <http://www.biblecentre.net>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Dau, W.H.T., "Baptism (Lutheran doctrine)," *ISBE*, I, 395.

²³ Dale, *op. cit.*, 80. This helps to explain Acts 2:13, where: "Others mocking said, 'They are full of new wine.'" The outsiders could not comprehend the baptism of the Spirit, for it was not part of their experience, but they did understand the effects of the baptism of wine. The disciples were full of the Spirit, not of wine (Ephesians 5:18).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

Dale cited other baptisms—the baptism of Otho by debt, of the Sophists by questions, of Demosthenes by contentious words, as well as others by grief, taxes or diseases.²⁶ With these examples, Dale concluded that one could not prove that the definition of baptism is modal, nor that it must be connected with water, whether literally or by extension as in a figure.²⁷ What is important is identifying the controlling influence of the baptism. It is important here to add, in defense of Dale, that “immersion” and “overwhelm” are not equivalents. One can say that one is “immersed in his work” which implies that he is fully engaged thereby, or he may say that he is “overwhelmed by his work” which signifies that he is exhausted by it. Dale’s definition states that in baptism the agent controls or influences the subject. If we are “immersed in work,” the subject is in control, that is, the worker is focusing on his work. If we are “overwhelmed by work,” then the agent is in control, and the work is now controlling the behavior of the worker. It is this latter view for the meaning of baptism that Dale espoused.

V. THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLITERATED WORDS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Translators of the Bible must decide what to do with transliterated words. The majority of all Bible translations resort to some use of this method. Transliterations essentially are a representation of the same form of the spelling of a word from a source language to a target language, nearly always using a new script adopted for the target language. Transliterations occur for two principal reasons: 1. there is no easier solution for representing a given word in the target language, and 2. Church tradition trumps all other reasons for employing a meaningful equivalent.

Transliterations occur in the Bible in a number of semantic domain categories. The liturgical usage finds such words as “alleluia, amen, hosanna, and selah.” The social-religious category gives us a sampling of the following: “Christ, Messiah, Pharaoh, rabbi, rabbouni, and Sabbath.” Words used for designating measurement include but are not limited to “bath, bekah, cab, denarius, ephah, gerah, hin, homer, mina, seah, shekel, stadium, stater, and talent.” Terms that are employed in the agricultural domain include “cinnamon, myrrh, and shittim.” There are also a number of mineralogical terms, such as “jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst,” all found in Revelation 21:19-20. Finally, there is the word “baptism” which may remain the most difficult, due to its liturgical and theological significance.

The translator must review each choice made for a given word, whether it is translated or transliterated. One is concerned with meaningful communication. The use of an unknown word communicates little, and easily leads to misinterpretation. This then demands that a glossary be added to explain all unfamiliar, foreign and transliterated words. However, one cannot be sure that the typical Bible reader will avail himself or herself with the nuisance of looking up in the glossary every highlighted or marked word that indicates a transliteration. Hence, we see some of the challenges that one faces.

VI. A PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE USE OF TRANSLITERATIONS

Translators want to use language that is accurately and easily understood. The first task is to make sure that one understands the source language. Once this is done, one can often find one-word equivalents that are precise, near, or even roughly accurate from one language to another. When these do not exist, loanwords may be found in neighboring languages within the culture that are also understood by the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86; references for some of these, while not given in Dale, can be found in Liddell, Henry George, and Scott, Robert, “baptizō,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1878, 283; and Oepke, A., “baptō, baptizō, baptismos, baptisma, baptistēs,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974, I, 530.

²⁷ Dale, *op. cit.*, 90; Oepke took a contrary view when he wrote: “*baptizein* means technically to ‘baptize in water.’ Hence it is unnecessary to specify a medium.” *Op. cit.*, I, 535, fn. 50.

target language. For instance, the words “judgment” and “world” do not exist in the Sarh family of languages in Chad, Africa. Nevertheless, the transliterated Arabic words “saria” and “dunia” are commonly understood and used by Sarh speakers, and these words respectively are accurate equivalents for “judgment” and “world.”

For another example, Sarh language translators did not recognize for me, drawings of “acacia” wood from the UBS manual for Fauna and Flora.²⁸ But when its Hebrew equivalent is pronounced in the local Chadian-Arabic dialect as “sitti,” the speakers confirmed the drawing and its description as a bush known to them in arid regions of Chad as the equivalent for “acacia” wood.

When loanwords in the target language or a known neighboring language are not known by the speakers, then one can find equivalent expressions. “Deliverance,” for example, in the Sarh language family is typically represented by “cutting off the head.” This is in reference to removing the chains of slavery and the consequent freedom of one’s head and so one’s life in a synecdochic expression, that is, a part for the whole.

When none of these methods suffices, then transliteration of the source word is employed. However, this tool must be wisely used if it is to be effective.

VII. WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Before we decide on the best way to translate “baptism,” it is imperative that we understand what the word is meant to convey. For most readers, “baptism” is a foreign word with many possible churchly and traditional implications. Louw and Nida recommend finding “another term or expression [that] has already been employed and is widely accepted by groups practicing various types or forms of baptism. In some languages, for example, one may employ an expression such as ‘to enter the water’ or ‘to undergo the ritual involving water.’”²⁹

“Baptism” is a specialized word with a wide variety of applications. It most certainly posits a relation either effected or symbolized. In every case, the agent has the power to change the one being baptized. A material that is dyed by dipping has its color changed. A washing purifies, either superficially or essentially. A baptism into another person signifies “a following, a sharing, or uniting” with that person. The Spirit in baptism gives life, while fire in baptism destroys or punishes. Similarly, debts, fears, studies, and wine all have the power to overwhelm one when one is “baptized” by them.

VIII. VARIOUS TRANSLATIONS OF “BAPTISM” EMPLOYED IN BIBLE VERSIONS

It is helpful to see what other Bible versions have done to solve the problem of how to translate “baptism and baptize.” We will offer only those solutions, which do not overly rely on the transliteration method. In some cases, these versions have coupled the word “baptism” with an equivalent expression. This is sometimes referred to by translators as “crossing the bridge twice.” Some see this technique as an advantage, because it allows one to keep the transliterated word coupled with a meaningful translation of the same that fits the context. The following is a sampling of various translations.³⁰

Yakan Back Translation (YBT - Philippines) Matthew 3:11 I bathe you with water so that it can be seen that you regret and leave your sins. But somebody will come here after me, he is more powerful than I am. I am not even worthy to carry his shoes. That

²⁸ *Fauna and Flora of the Bible*, New York: United Bible Societies, 1980, 87-88.

²⁹ Louw, Johannes P. and Nida, Eugene A., Eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domain*, Second Edition, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989, Vol. 1, 538.

³⁰ All of these citations from various Bible versions are taken from *Translator’s Workplace Version 3.0*, SIL International, 1999.

one will bathe you with something different. To some of you he will send the Holy Spirit and some he will bathe with fire.

YBT Matthew 28.19 Therefore go and tell all tribes so that they will also follow me. Bathe them as a sign that they now follow God and me, the Son of God and the Spirit of God.

YBT Luke 12.50 There are persecutions which I have to experience. I have difficulties/am-made-heavy as long as it is not yet over/finished.

YBT Acts 22.16 “Na, do not delay,” Ananiyas said to me. “Get up so you can be baptized, as a sign that you now belong to Isa. Pray to Isa the Lord so that/and he will forgive your sins.”

Revised English Bible (REB) Romans 6:3 Have you forgotten that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death?

New Century Version (NCV) Romans 6:3 Did you forget that all of us became part of Christ when we were baptized? We shared his death in our baptism.

Contemporary English Version (CEV) Romans 6:3 Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death?

New Living Translation (NLT) Romans 6.3 Or have you forgotten that when we became Christians and were baptized to become one with Christ Jesus, we died with him?

Today's English Version (TEV) 1 Corinthians 10.2 In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptized as followers of Moses.

God's Word to the Nations 1 Corinthians 10:2 They were all united with Moses by baptism in the cloud and in the sea.

Western Bukidnon Manobo Back Translation (Philippines) 1 Corinthians 10.2 And these things that they did, it was as if they were baptized by means of the cloud and the sea so they might be disciples of Moses.

YBT 1 Corinthians 10.1 My brothers, I will remind you what happened to our forefathers the Yahudi at the time when they followed Musa in those old times. They were all overshadowed by a cloud, a sign that God went with them. They also all crossed on foot in the middle of the sea which they call the Red Sea and nothing happened to them. 2 Figuratively as if they were all bathed in the cloud and in the sea and that was the sign that they were followers/disciples of Musa.

CEV 1 Corinthians 12.13 Some of us are Jews, and others are Gentiles. Some of us are slaves, and others are free. But God's Spirit baptized each of us and made us part of the body of Christ. Now we each drink from that same Spirit.

YBT 1 Corinthians 12.13 Likewise all of us who trust in Isa Almasi, if we are Yahudi or non-Yahudi, slaves or not, we are bathed that means we all are equally included by God's Spirit into this body. Therefore we are just like one body because we are equally indwelt by God's Spirit.

YBT 1 Peter 3:21 Their salvation in old times is an example/figure of our salvation now when we are bathed in water. The meaning of this bathing is not that the dirt from our bodies is removed, but it is a sign that we have asked forgiveness from God so that our mind is no longer troubled. We can be forgiven because Isa Almasi is alive again from his death...

In a conversation with a naturalized U.S. citizen from mainland China, he shared that the traditional Chinese Scriptures represented “baptism” with “immerse and believe.” The Chinese NIV, however, has three renderings for the “baptism” word group:³¹

1. wash – Matthew 28:19,20; 1 Corinthians 10:2; 12:13;
2. a washing ceremony – 1 Corinthians 1:13-17; 1 Peter 3:21;
3. and accept wash and wash away the sin – Acts 22:16.

IX. SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In place of transliteration, we will suggest the following possible translations – “placed into, plunging, united to, or washed.” Here are some Biblical examples that might work.

Matthew 3:11 - Truly, I give a *washing* with water for those of you whose hearts are changed. There is one who comes after me who is greater than I. I am not worthy to take up his sandals. He will *wash* you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Luke 12:50 - “But I have a *plunging into death* to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!

The reader may object that the words “into death” have been added. Please note that a number of lexicons make a connection between baptism, death and martyrdom.³² Moulton and Milligan wrote that *baptizō* was well understood in certain contexts as being overwhelmed by calamities, which “strikingly illustrates our Lord’s speaking of His Passion as a ‘baptism.’”³³ Luther’s catechism reminds us that baptism is a dying to sin, and our duty daily is to put to death the sinful deeds of our body (Romans 8:13).

Baptizing with water signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and *die*, with all sins and evil lusts; and, again, a new man should come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever (Smaller Catechism).³⁴

Romans 6:3 - Or do you not know that as many of us as were *placed* into Christ Jesus were *placed* into His death?

Galatians 3:27 - For as many of you as have been *placed* into Christ have put on Christ.

Being placed into Christ is a simple way of showing identification with Him. Identification is frequently mentioned as an essential meaning of Christian baptism.³⁵ Vine states that baptizing them into the Name “would indicate that the ‘baptized’ person was closely bound to, or became the property of, the one into whose name he was ‘baptized.’”³⁶

Some may object that we do not explicitly mention “water” in Romans 6:3. But this reading would also imply that our relationship of being united to Christ in his death, burial and resurrection is contingent

³¹ *Union – NIV, Chinese-English Bible*, Hymnody and Bible House, 1990.

³² “*baptismos*, dipping, immersion, has in classical literature the connotation of perishing, like the vb. *baptizō*.” Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 144; cf. Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*, 131.

³³ Moulton, James Hope and Milligan, George, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, 102.

³⁴ Dau, W.H.T., “Baptism (Lutheran Doctrine),” *ISBE*, I, 399.

³⁵ Thayer, *op. cit.*, 94; Renn, Stephen D., ed. *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, Word Studies for Key English Bible Words*, 2000 bible study centre™ DIGITAL LIBRARY, www.biblecentre.net.

³⁶ Vine, “baptism, baptist, baptize,” *Expository Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2000 bible study centre™ DIGITAL LIBRARY, www.biblecentre.net.

upon water baptism. Experience would indicate otherwise. This same problem can be repeated with Galatians 3:27. The ceremony of water baptism surely signifies, among other things, the putting on of the garments of Christ's righteousness. However, it introduces a theological difficulty if one equates the two by explicitly mentioning "water" in Galatians 3:27.

1 Corinthians 10:1-2 - Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were *united* to Moses in the cloud and in the sea...

1 Corinthians 10:2 will not allow us to speak of water baptism, since the passage says that the baptism was into Moses, not the water or the cloud. Weymouth's translation gives: "All were baptized in the cloud and in the sea to be followers of Moses. His use of "baptized" obscures for us the solution which should be readily apparent—the Old Testament account of this event tells us that they all walked through the sea on dry ground (Exodus 14:21-31). Strictly speaking, it was at the Re(e)d Sea while following the pillar of a cloud, that the people of Israel decided to follow Moses. Dale's definition of "baptism" as the influence of the agent upon the subject echoes the words of Calvin when he wrote in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 10:2:

They were, says he, baptized in Moses, that is, under the ministry or guidance of Moses. For I take the particle *eis* to be used here instead of *en*, agreeably to the common usage of Scripture, because we are assuredly baptized in the name of Christ, and not of any mere man, as he has stated in 1 Co 1:13 and that for two reasons. These are, *first*, because we are by baptism initiated {5 – "Nous nous assuietissons et basons serment;" —"We submit ourselves, and make oath."} into the doctrine of Christ alone; and, *secondly*, because his name alone is invoked, inasmuch as baptism is founded on his influence alone. They were, therefore, baptized in Moses, that is, under his guidance or ministry, as has been already stated.³⁷

John Gill, who holds a strong almost doctrinaire immersionist position, gives the following meaning for "baptism into Moses" in his commentary:

For instance, their following Moses into the sea, which is meant by their being "baptized into him," was an acknowledgment of their regard unto him, as their guide and governor, as baptism is a following of Christ, who has left us an example that we should tread in his steps; and is an owning him to be our prophet to teach us, and lead us the way; and it is a profession of our faith in him, as our surety and Saviour, and a subjection to him as our King and Governor. This their baptism in the sea was after their coming out of Egypt, and at their first entrance on their journey to Canaan's land, as our baptism is, or should be, after a person is brought out of worse than Egyptian bondage and darkness, and has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and at the beginning of his profession of him, and entrance on his Christian race.³⁸

1 Corinthians 12:13 - For by one Spirit we were all *placed* into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

Colossians 2:11-12 - In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in *washing*. In this you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

1 Peter 3:21 There is also an antitype which now saves us—*washing*. This is not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

³⁷ Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries*. Online Bible, Version 1.42, 2004.

³⁸ Gill, John. *John Gill's Expositor*. Online Bible, version 1.42, 2004.

X. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Bible translation seeks to meet the needs of readers, but what do readers want? They are looking for two basic things—they want their Bible to speak to them with authority, and they want it to communicate to them in meaningful ways. The challenge for the translator is to balance these two factors.

In most third-world situations, early converts are gaining Bible knowledge through translations that are the dominant evangelical versions in standard European languages. When the Scriptures are translated into their own mother tongues, the new Bible is evaluated on the basis of the original version that they were accustomed to reading. Any wording, that differs from the European version, immediately becomes suspect. At the same time, the same reader will also admit that the newer version is more understandable and meaningful, because it is using vocabulary and expressions that are native to the mother tongue. The same phenomenon can be found here at home, where older American English speakers will remark that a verse read from the NIV bears no familiarity with its counterpart from the KJV. When one points out, word-by-word, that all the data is there from the original biblical language, the same readers still maintain a considerable degree of suspicion. The issue of authority is here being challenged by a newer version that is more readily understood, but which is less familiar.

Transliterations are only one piece of the puzzle that challenge Bible translators. Cultural and historical expectations from Bible readers challenge the goal of providing Scriptures in meaningful communication.

A final consideration should also be addressed. Literal translations claim to be better study Bibles because they have correspondences to the original biblical languages that are more easily mapped and traced. When a version uses several different words or expressions to translate one given Greek word, this is said to complicate the matter. One asks: “How are we to know when and where ‘baptism’ occurs, if you do not use the original word?” This is a legitimate concern, but it unfortunately obscures the issue that some words possess a wide and varied meaning that cannot be represented by a single word or expression. In all of this, the Bible translator is remains challenged to render accurately the word of God from one language to another.