

Excursus 52

Washing, Anointing, and Clothing Among Early Christians

THE book of Exodus recounts that Aaron was “wash[ed],” “anoint[ed],” and clothed in “holy garments... so that he [might] minister unto [the Lord] in the priest’s office.”¹²¹² Washing, anointing, and clothing ceremonies are also variously described in the records of the early Christian church. In these records, the distinction between baptism and other rites of washing is often unclear, and the order in which various ordinances were said to have been administered is not consistent from one source to another.¹²¹³

Hamblin discusses an early Christian initiation ritual in the purported *Secret Gospel of Mark* where a young man dressed only in a linen cloth was taught “the mystery of the kingdom of God” by Jesus.¹²¹⁴ Tertullian describes a practice in his day of anointing all newly “baptized” Christians, stating that this is “a practice derived from the old discipline, wherein on entering the priesthood, men were wont to be anointed with oil from a horn, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses. Whence Aaron is called ‘Christ,’ from the ‘*chrism*,’ which is the unction.”¹²¹⁵ Likewise the *Didascalia*, a document from the early third century, describes an anointing for both women deacons and for men: “The bishop is to lay on hands and anoint the head only, ‘as of old priests and kings were anointed in Israel’—presumably on the crown of the head. After this, apparently, the candidates were anointed all over, and then were baptized with a formula or invocation. Instruction followed...”¹²¹⁶ The *Gospel of Philip* was written by “a community whose rite involves stripping naked, baptism in water [washing] followed by *chrism* [anointing], and possibly putting on a white garment representing light or enlightenment.”¹²¹⁷

Anointings are performed today by the Roman Catholic Church in the sacrament of “Extreme Unction,” now more often called the “Anointing of the Sick.” The rite includes anointing of “the organs of the five external senses (eyes, ears, nostrils, lips, hands), of the feet, and, for men (where the custom exists and the condition of the patient permits of his being moved), of the loins or reins.” In the Eastern Church, the “parts usually anointed are the forehead, chin, cheeks, hands, nostrils, and breast.”¹²¹⁸

Noting that “temple initiation eventually merged with the baptismal initiation,” Tvedtnes¹²¹⁹ gives the following summary of the five catechetical lectures delivered by the fourth-century bishop St. Cyril to newly-baptized Christians:

In the first lecture (19:10-11), he speaks of the converts being “clothed in the garment of salvation, even Jesus Christ.” And reminds them that “these things were done in the outer chamber. But if God will, when in the succeeding lectures on the Mysteries we have entered into the Holy of Holies, we shall there know the symbolical meaning of the things which are there

1212 Exodus 40:12-13. See *Excursus 3: Temple Blessings in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood*, p. 519.

1213 See, e.g., B. D. Spinks, *Baptism*, p. 22. See *Endnote E-216*, p. 756.

1214 W. J. Hamblin, *Initiation*, p. 207. See M. Smith, *Secret Gospel*, pp. 15-16 for the story of the discovery of the document. See J. Dart, *Decoding* for subsequent research on the *Secret Gospel*.

1215 Tertullian, *Baptism*, 7, p. 672.

1216 B. D. Spinks, *Baptism*, p. 19.

1217 *Ibid.*, p. 25. For arguments seeking to connect ordinances described in the *Gospel of Philip* (as well as anointings described in the canonical gospels) to Egyptian ritual, see A. Roberts, *Anointing*, pp. 86-126.

1218 P. J. Toner, *Extreme Unction*, p. 716.

1219 J. A. Tvedtnes, *Rituals*; cf. J. E. Seaich, *Ancient Texts 1995*, pp. 878-879.