

The Baptism of First Peter 3:21 In Its Context

For several reasons, this is a rather frustrating passage, folks, but I did my best to work through it with as much of an open/Berean mind as is humanly possible.

In another study I grueled through in 2013 called *Baptism In Jesus' Name for Consistent Preterists or Baptism After All Things Fulfilled*, I concluded that water immersion in the name of Jesus (and even Spirit baptism for that matter) was only for the first-generation church-bride as a sign of her purification for her marriage to the Groom when He returned for her. I'm obviously not going to go through all that again here, but I did determine that it was necessary to do an in-depth study of First Peter 3:18-21 as well, so here it is. (As with that 2013 study, this one will also likely not make much sense to someone who doesn't claim to be a full preterist in the first, so keep that in mind IF you decide to continue.)

There are several words and phrases which made this passage difficult to accurately interpret (at least satisfactorily for me): {1} To what do the terms "flesh" and "Spirit" in verse 18 refer? {2} Is the "baptism" in verse 21 the fulfillment of a picture or the picture of something yet to be fulfilled? {3} What does the present active tense of "saves" in verse 21 indicate? {4} What's the correct rendering of the "conscience" clause of verse 21? And what did Peter mean by it? {5} To what does "the filth of the flesh" in verse 21 refer? And finally {6} what's the nature of the "baptism" in verse 21? (BTW, all I'm going to say related to verses 19-20 is that I believe Peter was referring to the Lord's preaching to the flood victims through Noah as mentioned [2 Pet. 2:5]; cf. "the Spirit of Christ who was in them" [1 Pet. 1:11].) So, before answering these queries, we should of course recite the passage:

The NKJV reads, "Christ suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison who formerly were disobedient when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared in which eight souls were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us [should be "you"], namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." So on to [Question Number One](#):

To what do the terms "flesh" & "Spirit" in verse 18 refer? Some folks have said that they believe Peter was using Paul's covenant language in Romans 8:1-13 here, meaning that the flesh was employed as a metaphor for the Old Covenant (OC), while the Spirit was employed as a metaphor for the New Covenant (NC); without getting too deep into it, this would essentially mean that, according to verse 18, Peter was saying that Jesus was put to death in the OC mode of existence and made alive in the NC mode of existence, that is that He was "the firstborn of among many" in the NC family of God (Rom. 8:29). Now, while this "a" truth, I don't believe that's what Peter had in mind because it doesn't mesh with what he went on to write in verses 19-20; i.e., it makes no sense to me that Jesus preached to the flood victims (whether while dead before being made alive or through Noah during his own day) in a NC mode of existence. So the only other option in my mind is to take Peter more naturally to mean that (just as sacrifices were always carried out in the OC times) Jesus died in the biological body God gave Him (Heb. 10:5) and was then made alive by the Spirit which, incidentally, does correspond to a verse in Romans 8, namely verse 11. ☺ ... [Question Number Two](#):

Is the "baptism" in verse 21 the fulfillment of a picture or the picture of something unfulfilled? You're likely wondering why I ask this when—traditionally speaking—it seems so clear that this baptism is the fulfillment of Noah's flood waters. Right? Well, consider the following: Some versions like the NKJV transliterated Peter's word as "antitype," while other versions (perhaps realizing a problem with doing that) translated it as "figure," "likeness," "image," "symbol," "copy," and even "type." So why might there be an issue with "antitype"? Because of what we've traditionally been taught: See, we've always heard that "types" were OC pictures (such as ceremonies/rituals) that represented spiritual/eternal realities—or "antitypes"—that have been fulfilled in the NC. However, even though in English this is how we understand the terms, such isn't the way the *Koine* Greek word "antitype" was used in all of Greek Scripture: Firstly, the word isn't found at all in the Septuagint, and it's only found one other time in the New Testament—Hebrews 9:24. Since there's nothing in Peter's passage which demands any particular definition of it, and since there *is* something in Hebrews 9 that does, then we need to consult it in order to understand the only other inspired usage of the word: "Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands which are antitypes of the true." Did you catch that? Because it's obvious that Paul employed the word "antitypes" in relation to the man-made temple, the NKJV chose to translate it as "copies." Greek lexicographers see the problem as well: W. E. Vine, for example, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, said of baptism in First Peter 3:21 that it "forms a corresponding type, not an antitype," i.e. as we generally use the word today. So...

Why would Greek scholars have difficulty with this? Well, it's likely because they know the following principle of biblical types/antitypes (again, as we generally use that word): Following the lead of the inspired Apostle in First Corinthians 15:46b who said, "first the natural, then the spiritual," not only does a type always come first (depicting something to follow), but it's also always of a physical nature (e.g. a ceremony or ritual, depicting something spiritual and eternal in its fulfilled reality), which of course means that not only is a type never spiritual or figurative in nature, but it never depicts another type. So this all means that Peter was speaking of baptism as being a type or picture as is found so often in the Hebrew or Old Testament Scriptures; i.e., Peter wasn't saying that baptism was the fulfillment of any type, shadow, or picture (such as the water of Noah's flood), but that IT in itself was a picture of something to be fulfilled in its future. So here's what Peter appears to have been saying (and I spent a GREAT amount time with the original before formulating this rendition): "And [there's] a symbol [of that] which is now saving you—baptism." Now, on to Question Number Three:

What does the present active tense of "sozei" in verse 21 indicate? (*Sozei* is the word rendered as "saves" in the NKJV.) Firstly, the present tense means that what Peter was actually saying was that baptism "is saving you" or "is in the process of saving you (plural)," and Peter even added the adverb "now" to stress the on-going, present tense action. Secondly, the active voice means that Peter was personifying baptism so that it could be understood as acting upon them, saving them. So think about this: *Since Peter was writing to people who were already Christians*, then, whatever the baptism was that Peter had in mind, it was working on that first-generation, betrothed bride-church; i.e., it was still doing something to/for her. All right, on to Question Number Four:

What's the correct rendering of the "conscience" clause of verse 21? And what did Peter mean by it? Well, let's dig a little deeper into it. Firstly, the word "answer" in the NKJV is likely misleading, for the original word actually referred to an inquiry in the sense of an appeal or plea for something, which means that baptism was an appeal to God; this should remind us of Acts 22:16 in which Ananias told Saul to go get baptized, "calling on the name of the Lord," a phrase modifying and defining what happens in baptism. Now, the question is this: Was Peter saying that this baptism was an appeal "of" a good conscience or "for" one (i.e., grammatically speaking, a subjective genitive or an objective genitive)? Sad to say, there isn't a way to know with total certainty from the Greek syntax, so such has to be determined by context, even if that context must be a remote one, which, in this case, it must be, and we can find it back again in Hebrews 9:9-14. Placing ourselves in AD 63 when Hebrews was penned (and condensing the passage a just little), we discover that the tabernacle/temple "is symbolic for the present time in which gifts and sacrifices are being offered which can not make him who carries out the service perfect in regard to the conscience—concerned only with ... fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. But Christ came as High Priest of the good things about to come with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is not of this [Old Covenant] creation.... Not with [animal] blood, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place.... For if [animal] blood ... sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh..., how much more shall [in that future time of reformation] the blood of Christ ... cleanse your conscience...?" So...

Why future? Because High Priest Jesus had not yet returned from out of the Most Holy Place with accomplished salvation (Heb. 9:28). Hence it makes sense that baptism was not merely a commitment to God during that first-generation period of transition, but also simultaneously it was their way of pleading for the acceptance and fulfillment of the Messiah's sacrifice by God that He may return and impute His righteousness to them, thus purifying their consciences. (Listen, if you haven't already read/heard my study mentioned earlier, you surely should in order to gain a better grasp of this entire future-atonement concept to which baptism pointed; I spend time with Peter's own language in this regard in Acts 3:18ff.) By the way, I found at least 22 versions which translate this conscience-clause in First Peter 3:21 as an appeal to God "FOR" a good or pure conscience. OK, having now this understanding of this clause, we can attempt to answer Question Number Five:

To what does "the filth of the flesh" in verse 21 refer? Consider a couple of very interesting things about this: Firstly, the original reads more like this: not removing "flesh of filth," a phrase I actually found in a couple of writings online referring to evil or sin; in fact, some of you may have heard of a 90's black metal group called "Cradle of Filth" and one of its albums called *The Principle of Evil Made Flesh*. See, Peter didn't choose the usual word here for the biological body (*soma*); rather he chose the word (*sarx*) that's so often found in relation to sin, as in "sinful flesh" in Romans 8:3; actually, *sarx* is the word Paul chose to use all through Romans 8 when contrasting the Law (which was the strength of sin, 1 Cor. 15:56) with the Spirit (i.e. Old Covenant vs. New Covenant, if you will). Later Peter even wrote to these same folks about the sinful lusts of *sarx* (2 Pet. 2:18). Furthermore, the Greek word for "filth" here (*rhupos*, like *sarx*) is also usually used in relation to the defilement of sin and defined as "depravity" by Thayer; listen to James: "remove all filthiness (*rhupos*) and rampant wickedness" (1:21). So my point is this:

Peter wasn't referring to washing dirt from a biological body; he was actually saying that, like any other physical ritual (like those we just read about in Heb. 9:10), the baptism he had in mind here didn't/wouldn't/couldn't remove the pollution of sin. But what it did do was appeal to God for a pure conscience which would come with the future removal of sin at the finished work of Christ, fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 9:24ff. So lastly...

To what baptism was Peter referring? Well, let's summarize the criteria: {1} everyone surely agrees that Peter was writing to the betrothed bride of Christ; {2} he began our text here by writing of the Groom being "made alive by the Spirit," i.e. he began speaking of "salvation," if you will, being accomplished by the Spirit for the Groom, meaning Peter was referring to something spiritual in nature; {3} he then wrote to this betrothed one of a baptism that pictured an ongoing action of something related to cleansing of the conscience yet to be fulfilled in her; {4} they, as Hebrew people, all knew that pictures (types) have never been able to remove the pollution of sin from anyone, not to mention that, once they were fulfilled, those pictures weren't to continue being bound; and lastly {5} what this baptism pictured was directly connected to the resurrection of Jesus Christ which is how this context began as a finished work of the Spirit upon the Groom which made Him the firstborn among many—the many who would soon become His wedded one, creating a union to forever thereafter produce children like you and me. So...

With all that before, do we even need to re-ask the question? No, but let's do so anyway: To what baptism was Peter referring? The obvious answer is water baptism, BUT not apart from its inextricable connection to the fulfillment of the mission of the Spirit which is of course what actually did the saving. (Cf. John 3:5-6 and 1 Cor. 12:13 for at least two passages which relate water with the Spirit and vice versa.) Thus (skipping the parenthetical of verses 19-20), the way it should be read is like this: "Christ [the Groom] ... [was] put to death in the flesh but resurrected by the Spirit... And [there's] a symbol [of that] which is now saving you [the bride]—baptism ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

[Tony E. Denton, October 2017.]