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Il battesimo gnostico: Dottrine, simboli e riti iniziatici nello gnosticismo

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Birger A. Pearson
Emeritus, University of California
Santa Barbara, California

This book began as a dissertation directed by the late Professor Ugo Bianchi at the University of Rome “La Sapienza.” Its twelve chapters plus introduction cover the history of Gnostic baptismal practices from the prehistory of Gnosticism to the present (the Mandaean).

In part A of his introduction, Cosentino defines baptism, discusses its origins and characteristics, and discusses the use of ablutions among the Essenes (including the Qumran community), proselyte baptism, and the special cases of Bannus and John the Baptist. He stresses the differences between the apocalyptic dualism found at Qumran and Gnostic dualism. Qumran *da'ath* is different from the gnosis of Gnosticism and can be seen as a kind of “pre-” or “proto-Gnosticism.” In part B of the introduction, he discusses the major theories advanced by scholars as to the definition and origins of Gnosticism. Adopting a standard history of religions approach, he stresses that Gnosticism is a definable phenomenon, but with diverse variations. He also notes that Gnosticism is basically “parasitical” in relation to other religions. Most ancient Gnostic groups were Christian. Cosentino argues that, from the Jewish world to Gnosticism, “Gnostics became parasites on Christianity” (45, quoting van Groningen).

Chapter 1 is devoted to baptism in the “Great Church.” In a process of liturgical development during the first three centuries, Cosentino finds that by the end of the third century Christian baptism consisted of seven basic ritual elements: prebaptismal catechesis, immersion in water, a preference for “living” (flowing) water, baptism done in the name of Jesus or the name of the Holy Trinity, baptism accompanied by a “seal”

(*sphragis*), and baptism accompanied by anointing with oil, either before or after the immersion.

In chapter 2 Cosentino takes up some problems posed by texts of the Syrian church. The texts discussed are the Odes of Solomon, citing arguments pro and con regarding its “Gnostic” character, Acts of John 94–96 (the hymn of Christ), the Acts of Thomas, especially the “bridal chamber” sacrament in chapters 6–7), and some sayings in the Gospel of Thomas. While Cosentino is certainly right in seeing Valentinian influence in the Acts of John, he is less convincing in arguing for Valentinian influence on the Acts of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas.

Chapter 3 is entitled “The Corpus Hermeticum” but consists essentially of a discussion of tractate 4, the “Mixing Bowl” (*Krater*). The use of the verb *baptizo* in that text is explained as use of a ritual term as a metaphor for spiritual initiation into gnosis. Cosentino sees some possible Christian influence in that text, a viewpoint that I would not share.

Chapter 4 is devoted to baptismal sects that are not strictly “Gnostic”: the Ebionites and the Elchasaites. He points to the contradictory nature of the sources regarding the Ebionites. In his discussion of the Elchasaites, he stresses the purificatory function of their repeated ablutions. Only in a later stage did the Elchasaite community develop an initiatory baptism.

Cosentino takes up what little evidence we have for Samaritan Gnosticism as reflected by Simon Magus and Menander in chapter 5. Irenaeus says nothing about Simonian baptism but mentions a baptism practiced by Menander. A Simonian baptism is certainly a historical possibility. Cosentino notes that the Pseudo-Clementines depict Simon as a disciple of John the Baptist.

Chapter 6 is devoted to baptism in the texts of the Sethian Gnostics. He discusses at some length the efforts of scholars from Hans-Martin Schenke on to delimit a “Sethian” form of Gnosticism. Unfortunately, he does not seem to have had access to John Turner’s magnum opus, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (BCNH “Études” 6, 2001). He is willing to expand the usual list of Sethian writings to include the Paraphrase of Shem (NHC VII,1), which is certainly erroneous. Fortunately, in his actual discussion of Sethian baptism in Sethian texts, he does not include the Paraphrase of Shem, which he discusses in chapter 10.

The second part of chapter 6 takes up baptismal references in Sethian texts. These include the Gospel of the Egyptians (NHC III,2; IV,2) and Trimorphic Protennoia (NHC XIII,1), with special reference to the “five seals”; Zostrianos (VIII,1), with its multiple baptisms in

a heavenly ascent; and the Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; BG,2). The variety of practices reflected in our sources can be explained by positing different groups of “Sethian” Gnostics. We can notice in his discussion considerable reliance on the magisterial work of Jean-Marie Sevrin, *Le dossier baptismal Séthien: Études sur la sacramentaire gnostique* (BCNH “Études” 2, 1986). He concludes that Sethian baptism is like a “mirror”: the terrestrial rites reflect heavenly realities as revealed in gnosis. The Christian elements found in some Sethian texts are secondary as to the real meaning of Sethian baptism. But if that is the case, why does Cosentino not posit, with Schenke, Sevrin, Turner, and others, a non-Christian origin for Sethian baptism?

Chapter 7 is devoted to a discussion of Gnostic interpretations of certain key New Testament texts: baptism for the dead (1 Cor 15:29–30); the baptism of Jesus; the “descent” and “ascent” of Jesus; and baptism of fire (“Holy Spirit and fire,” Matt 3:11 par).

Valentinian baptism and other rites are taken up in chapter 8. Cosentino begins with a discussion of the Alexandrian Valentinus and the Valentinian schools that developed from his work. He rejects the view of Marksches that Valentinus was not really a “Gnostic.” He cites Irenaeus’s testimony that Valentinus adapted his teaching to that of certain “Gnostics.” Unfortunately, he refers to the Gnostics discussed by Irenaeus in *Adv. haer.* 1.30 as “Ophites.” Irenaeus never refers to “Ophites” in his writings.

Cosentino then discusses Valentinian baptismal practices reflected in the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, the testimonies of the church fathers, and three of the Valentinian Nag Hammadi tractates, the Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3), the Gospel of Truth (NHC I,3), and the Tripartite Tractate (I,5). In his lengthy discussion of the Gospel of Philip he discusses the five ritual elements referred to at 67,27–30: baptism, chrism, Eucharist, redemption, and bridal chamber, on which there has been much scholarly disagreement. Are “redemption” and “bridal chamber” real earthly rituals, or do they belong to the celestial plane? Cosentino explains the seeming contradictions found in ritual references in the Gospel of Philip as reflecting different Valentinian sources. As to the “bridal chamber,” he is willing to posit a real marriage rite, including sexual intercourse, as well as a rite of initiation, involving the proleptic union of the soul with its heavenly angel. It is too bad that Cosentino did not have access to Einar Thomassen’s important book, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians”* (NHMS 60, 2006). Thomassen (rightly, in my opinion) does not believe that the “bridal chamber” refers to a separate ritual.

In chapter 9 Cosentino takes up for discussion the three baptisms found in the late Egyptian Gnostic texts Pistis Sophia and the Second Book of Jeu. In those texts Jesus administers to his disciples elaborate rituals involving baptisms of water, fire, and the Holy Spirit. Cosentino states that the sect in which these texts originated practiced a

series of initiation rites. These have two main functions: to effect the liberation of the soul from the world and to confirm the gnosis received in Jesus' teachings.

In chapter 10 Cosentino discusses Gnostic groups that rejected water baptism, believing that material rituals are of no use. These include the "Archontics" according to Epiphanius (*Pan.* 40), the Paraphrase of Shem, and a group of antibaptist heretics discussed by Tertullian at the beginning of his treatise *On Baptism*. He posits Valentinian influence on the Archontics, but this is clearly not correct. They are closely related to the Sethians (discussed by Epiphanius in *Pan.* 39). Nor does Epiphanius anywhere in his discussion of the Archontics refer to a rite of extreme unction, such as is posited by Cosentino. As to the Paraphrase of Shem, he argues that it is not clear whether the author's antibaptist polemic is directed against Christian groups or other Baptist groups. And as for Tertullian's antibaptist sect (identified in different manuscripts as "Cainites" or "Gaians"), no conclusion can be reached as to who they were.

Chapter 11 deals with the medieval Christian heresies of a Gnostic type: the Bogomil sect that developed in tenth-century Bulgaria and the Cathari in Provence. Cosentino points to the uncertainty as to the origin of the Bogomils and posits for the Cathari influence of the Bogomil heresy.

Chapter 12 is devoted to Mandaean baptism. With Mandaeism, we have to do with a Gnostic religion from late antiquity that has endured to our time. Cosentino does not take up the vexing problem of Mandaean origins, concentrating instead on the rituals. There are three types of baptismal ablutions. The *rishama* is a purificatory daily ritual, the *tamasha* performed for ritual impurities. The most important ceremony is the *masbuta*, an elaborate series of rituals involving immersions in flowing water. The latter is usually performed on Sundays and involves a number of ministrants. The *masbuta* ritual includes the *pihta*, consumption of bread with water. Cosentino posits influence from the Christian Eucharist on that rite. Given the anti-Christian stance of the Mandaeans, I find that very unlikely.

Cosentino also discusses two other Mandaean ceremonies. The *'ngirta* is a ceremony for a dying person administered by a minister and involving a "message" of salvation. The *masiqta* ("ascent") is a ritual for the dead to help the soul ascend to the Light World.

I cannot agree with Cosentino that Gnostic baptism derives from a post-Christian baptismal practice and not pre-Christian.

In a final chapter of conclusions, Cosentino sees Gnostic baptismal rituals as tied to an elaborate mythology whose function is to bridge the gap between this world and the

world above and to provide the possibility of liberating the soul from the body. In all cases gnosis is primary. He argues that Gnostic baptismal practices, including those of the Mandeans, are influenced by Christian baptismal rituals, a point of view with which I cannot agree.

While I have pointed out some areas of disagreement concerning some of Cosentino's arguments, I would nevertheless conclude that this book is an important survey of the history of Gnostic baptism and contains a wealth of information. An up-dated English version would be welcome.