



Sunken baptismal font with mosaics symbolic of life in the water, in the air, and on the ground. Below the water level are pictured a dolphin, fish, and anchor—symbols for the crucified Christ, Christians, and the cross respectively. Courtesy The Liturgical Press.

Reviews

Re-examining Baptismal Fonts: Baptismal Space for the Contemporary Church. The Liturgical Press, St. John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, MN, 56321-7500 (Order of St. Benedict). 1991. 36 min. Videocassette. \$59.50.

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This richly colorful video encourages the Christian community to reexamine the significance of baptism and redesign the space where their baptisms are performed in view of an awakened interest in the theology of baptism. It pleads for visual enhancement of the baptismal experience in order to teach the many-layered symbols of baptism in greater depth. But of greater interest to Latter-day Saints is the video's treatment of the decline of baptism by immersion in the early Christian period. Before reviewing the video, however, I will consider briefly the history of baptism as a background for the video's presentation of ancient Christian baptismal sites and baptismal symbolism.

Historical Background of Christian Baptism

Water was widely used in the ancient world as a means of ritual purification.¹ The law of Moses required washing as a cleansing of certain impurities before participation in religious acts (Lev. 14-15; Num. 19), and the temple of Solomon had a brazen sea in which the priests washed prior to their temple service. A significant passage in the Mishnah, at the end of the tractate Yoma, deals with the Day of Atonement, a fast day which included the solemn immersion of the high priest in waters of purification: "Blessed are ye, O Israel. Before whom are ye made clean and who makes you clean? Your Father in heaven: as it is written, *And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean.*"² Because sprinkling

as well as immersion was used for ritual purification in the law of Moses (see Num. 19:9–13), some early Christians may have concluded that sprinkling was as valid as immersion for baptism.³ The rabbis linked Ezekiel 36:25 with Jeremiah 17:13, which contains a play on the word for the baptismal water and the word for hope: “*O Lord the hope (mikweh) of Israel*;—as the *Mikweh* cleanses the unclean so does the Holy One, blessed be he, cleanse Israel.”⁴ Another rabbinic saying links baptism with the coming of the Messiah: “To receive the spirit of God, or to be permitted to stand in the presence of God (His Shekinah), man must undergo Baptism . . . , wherefore in the Messianic time God will Himself pour water of purification upon Israel in accordance with Ezek. xxxvi:25.”⁵

In addition, the Jews built synagogues near sources of water which could be used for ritual purifications. In the period before A.D. 70, they built immersion pools (*mikvaoth*) for performing ceremonial washings.⁶ *Mikvaoth* generally consisted of two pools connected by a channel to permit pure or “living” water to flow into the bathing pool to purify it. Rabbinic literature specified a minimum capacity (seventy-five gallons) and size that would permit covering the entire body. These regulation pools appear amid the ruins of Herodian Jerusalem near the temple mount as well as at Qumran, where they were used for ritual washing by the Jewish Essenes. Finally, Gentiles converting to Judaism were required to immerse themselves as part of their initiation into the Abrahamic covenant.⁷

That the Jews may have had a vague memory of baptism and an expectation that the Messiah would restore baptism may be inferred from their asking John the Baptist if he was the Messiah (John 1:19–23). At some uncertain point in Israelite antiquity, baptism by immersion had disappeared, even though baptism had been revealed to Adam as an essential ordinance (Moses 6:64–65). God laments to Abraham the loss of ordinances such as baptism:

My people have gone astray from my precepts, and have not kept mine ordinances, which I gave unto their fathers; And they have not observed mine anointing, and the burial, or baptism wherewith I commanded them; But have turned from the commandment, and taken unto themselves the washing of children, and the blood of sprinkling; And have said that the blood of the righteous Abel was shed for sins; and have not known wherein they are accountable before me. (JST Gen. 17:4–7)

Whereupon, the Lord gave Abraham circumcision as a token of the covenant between God and Israel. The relationship between circumcision and baptism as covenants is not clarified in the Bible.

John the Baptist restored baptism by immersion to Israel. New Testament baptisms were performed by immersion as biblical language and metaphor indicate. Various scriptures describe baptism as being buried or planted in the water (Rom. 6:4-6) and coming up “out of the water” (Matt. 3:16). The Greek word *baptizo* is given in the standard lexicons of the Greek New Testament as “dip” or “immerse,” not “pour” or “sprinkle.”

From these simple beginnings, however, the ordinance took on more elaborate forms. In the second century, Tertullian reported the practice of the *trine* immersion (also mentioned in the *Didache*), or one immersion for each person of the trinity, but acknowledged that it was more than the Lord prescribed in the Gospel.⁸ This triple practice was abandoned by some because heretics practiced baptism with three immersions to indicate a division of the Godhead, which division the mainstream church had renounced. Nevertheless, the single and triple forms persisted, the eastern churches preserving the triple immersion and the western having various practices.⁹

The substitution of pouring or sprinkling for immersion was probably late and gradual and finally triumphed in the West.¹⁰ The only indication of pouring in the second century comes from the *Didache*, which says:

1. . . . “Baptise in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” in running [or living] water; 2. but if thou hast no running water, baptise in other water, and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. 3. But if thou hast neither, pour water three times on the head “in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹¹

This passage from the *Didache* may be an interpolation from a later period, probably the third century.¹²

It also became customary to exorcise the converts previous to their receiving baptism. This exorcism, which at first only called on them to renounce the devil and all his works, was subsequently modified so as to include certain prayers; adjurations in the name of Christ, commanding the demons to quit the persons about to be baptized; and imposition of hands.¹³ Breathing upon (insufflation)

the catechumen (prebaptism convert) was next added and was administered both before baptism to signify the expulsion of the devil and after immersion to symbolize the gift of the Holy Ghost. Cyril of Jerusalem exhorted his catechumens to receive exorcism with diligence in the time of catechising; for whether it was insufflation or exorcism, it was thought to be salutary to the soul.¹⁴

Tertullian described an additional practice of his time in which the newly baptized person was given a portion of milk and honey to denote his entrance into the promised land of Canaan and his belonging to the spiritual Israel.¹⁵

Another addition included anointing the breast of the baptismal candidate with oil before baptism and with unguent (ointment) after. The custom developed of the convert wearing white garments, usually for eight days following baptism. These were metaphorically called the garments of Christ or the mystical garments. Among the added customs was the washing of the feet of the baptized neophyte (new convert). The additions of dismissing the devil, anointing the initiate with oil, and donning white garments suggest that residues of the temple endowment may have persisted in the memory of these later Christians as they merged elements of temple ordinances with baptism.

Visualizing Baptism

In the video, Sister Anita Stauffer points out that water is the stuff of creation and of life; in other words, life begins in the water in the womb, and nothing can endure without water. But water also has destructive powers as in Noah's flood and the closing of the Red Sea over Pharaoh and his soldiers (both of which represent baptisms; see 1 Pet. 3:20-21 and 1 Cor. 10:2). Baptism partakes of both these aspects of water in that the person being baptized descends into the water of death, a watery tomb, and there receives new life as in a womb. Her allusion is to Romans 6:4-6:

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

The believer is crucified and buried (planted) with Christ and spiritually resurrected into a newness of life.

Sister Anita traces the decline of the centrality of baptism in Christianity as manifested by the changing shape and size of baptismal fonts, illustrating her lecture with photographs of archaeological remains. She begins in the first three centuries, showing that baptisms were most frequently performed in natural, “living” bodies of water—rivers, lakes, and streams—where an abundance of water supplied the life and death symbols of baptism. With the end of Christian persecution at the conversion of Constantine in A.D. 313, the fourth to sixth centuries saw baptism move indoors to large pools dug into the ground, often in separate buildings adjacent to cathedrals. These buildings were constructed separately for greater privacy because those being baptized were required to be nude. Adult baptism, the norm, was most commonly performed at Easter in large pools where affusion (pouring) or immersion could be practiced. For example, Ambrose baptized Augustine of Hippo by affusion in Milan in an octagonal pool (still extant). The pool measures twenty feet across with two steps on each of seven of the sides. Leading down into shallow water, the steps represent the descent into a watery grave and then the ascent on the opposite side to new birth.

Sister Anita praises a font from a catacomb in North Africa that capitalized on the meanings of baptism with beautiful mosaics of a dolphin (symbolizing the crucified Christ), an anchor (the cross), and little fishes (Christians). The depiction apparently alludes to a statement by the third-century Tertullian, who wrote, “We being little fish, as Jesus Christ is our great fish, begin our life in the water. And only as we abide in the water are we safe and sound.”

In the seventh to ninth centuries, the pools were built *upon* the ground and came to be used primarily for infant baptism, apparently because of the infant mortality rate as well as the emerging doctrine of original sin. Expanding on the video’s discussion of infant baptism, one may note that the first explicit evidence for baptism of very young children appears in Tertullian’s *On Baptism*, written approximately A.D. 200. In this instruction, Tertullian objected to infant baptism: “Let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, by the mid-third century, baptism of infants was accepted as a

well-established tradition supposedly dating from the earliest period of Christian history. In his sermons, Origen cited this tradition to prove that infants inherited sin and guilt.¹⁷ At about the same time, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote that, although infants have not committed willful acts of sin, as descendants of Adam they have “contracted the contagion of the ancient death” at the instant of birth and thus must receive forgiveness, not of their own, but of Adam’s sin.¹⁸ Later, original sin was to be the principal basis for infant baptism.¹⁹ From the mid-third century on, baptism of infants was standard practice in both East and West.²⁰ The emperor Justinian I made infant baptism compulsory in the sixth century. By contrast, the early Christian documents contain frequent reference to the *sinlessness* of children.²¹

From the tenth to sixteenth centuries, the now much smaller fonts were built on stands primarily in the narthex (entry or gathering place) of the church, that is, outside the worship area proper. During this period, font covers were fashioned and even locked onto the fonts (because the covers were frequently stolen for use

in witchcraft). Here the symbols of baptism had almost completely disappeared—even the small amount of water cannot be seen, nor its symbolism appreciated.

From the seventeenth century to the present, increasingly smaller fonts were constructed that came to look like birdbaths in which, Sister Anita observes, baptism approaches “dry cleaning.” She makes a plea for fonts that allow for *immersion*, a method she defines as water

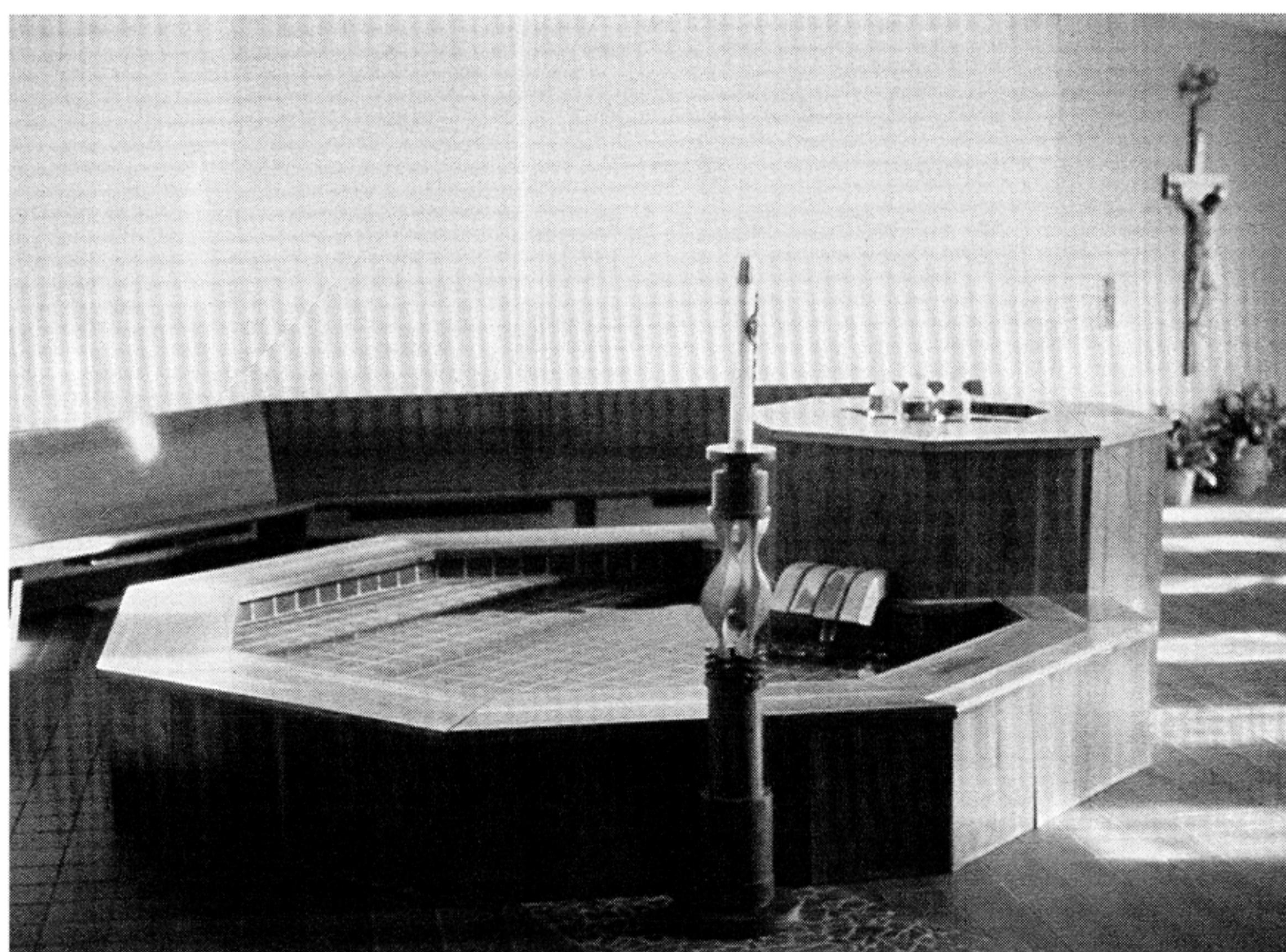


Font for immersion of infants. Placed above the ground, this font is made of engraved stone. Courtesy The Liturgical Press.

poured over the neophyte; that is, by her definition, affusion is a form of immersion. She uses *submersion* to mean being placed beneath the water.

She pleads as well for the realization that the font is not a piece of furniture, but should be architecturally part of a well-defined space in the worship area. She shows striking views of modern churches in which the font has been constructed on an axis with the altar. In one new church, the octagonal font is 3 1/2 feet deep, has steps down into the water, and holds 10,000 gallons of water. Painted aquatic imagery appears along the passageway leading to the font at a level low enough for children to see. Splashes of color, which stream through stained-glass windows set up high above the font area, play on walls and water. A shelf area on the top of the font walls holds anointing oils.

Latter-day Saints interested in promoting a deeper understanding of the development of modern Christianity from the early Christian period, as well as an enhanced awareness of the scriptural symbols attached to baptism, could find this video worthwhile.



An unusual baptismal pool in a modern Catholic building. This large font holds 10,000 gallons of water. Courtesy The Liturgical Press.

NOTES

¹See Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 93–96, which discusses Egyptian ceremonies of ritual purification. See also Robert A. Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 143–48.

²Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933; reprint, 1983), 172; italics in original.

³See Thomas F. Torrance, “The Origins of Baptism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 11 (1958): 158–71.

⁴Danby, *Mishnah*, 172; italics in original.

⁵Quoted in “Baptism,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1902), 2:499.

⁶See William Sanford LaSor, “Jewish Miqva’ot and Christian Baptism,” *Through Their Eyes* (November 1986): 14–15.

⁷See Torrance, “Origins of Baptism,” 167–71.

⁸Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3, translation in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978–81), 3:94 (hereafter cited as *ANF*).

⁹“Baptism,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1990), 132.

¹⁰*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:416.

¹¹*Didache*, 7:1–3, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library Series, vols. 9–10 (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1912), 9:319, 321.

¹²I thank John Gee for this suggestion.

¹³Tertullian, *Apology*, 23, translation in *ANF* 3:37–38.

¹⁴Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis*, 9, translation in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 7:3; see also Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 279–83.

¹⁵Tertullian, *De Corona Militis*, 15, translation in *ANF* 3:94.

¹⁶Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18, translation in *ANF* 3:678.

¹⁷See Origen (about A.D. 250) in *Commentary on Romans*, 5.9.

¹⁸Cyprian, *Epistle*, 58.5, translation in *ANF* 5:354.

¹⁹“Baptism,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 133.

²⁰Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 306–82; Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978).

²¹Hermas, *Similitudes*, 9.29.1–3, translation in *ANF* 2:53; *Epistle of Barnabas*, 6, translation in *ANF* 1:144; Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 14, translation in *ANF* 2:156.