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Book Review of Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions, Robin M. Jensen

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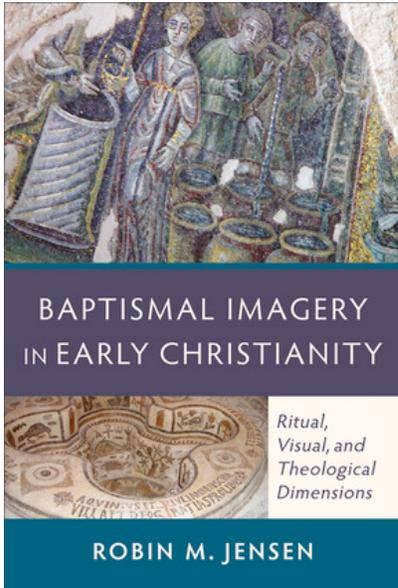
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Robin M. Jensen

Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. Pp. xviii + 238.
Paper. \$24.99. ISBN 9780801048326.

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Robin M. Jensen is Luce Chancellor's Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship at Vanderbilt University and brings together her expertise in this enjoyable book. *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity* is a study of how visual images and the decoration of ritual space in early Christian places of worship "express and transmit certain theological and sacramental values or themes" regarding baptism (1). While her study does not attempt to provide a single, comprehensive description of a consistent practice of baptism as a rite of initiation in the early church, Jensen offers "a collection of both textual and material data" that informs us about the early practice of baptism (4). Her goal also is "to demonstrate the complexity of this sacrament by considering its textual and nontextual illustrations, ritual processes, and ritual spaces" (4).

The practice and theological meaning of baptism in the early church were diverse, as is evident from Jensen's survey of documents from early church fathers. Five core motifs categorize early baptism and shape the chapters of this book. As the subtitle of the book announces, for each of these motifs the author explores the ritual, visual, and theological dimensions of baptism. Each chapter begins with a description of the key biblical passages on which the core motif is based and is followed by a discussion of what church fathers have said on these passages. The chapter ends with a discussion of how this motif was

depicted in art forms in early Christian churches and how it was portrayed or symbolized in baptism rituals.

The first motif explored is baptism as a ritual of cleansing from sin and sickness. The story of Christian baptism begins with John the Baptist's baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River (Matt 3; Mark 1; Luke 3), an event that is seen as "the source, authorization, and paradigm for Christian baptism" (7). In this first chapter Jensen explores how early Christian writers understood this event in the life of Jesus and other biblical stories associated with water: the narratives of destructive waters (the flood or the drowning of Pharaoh's armies in the Red Sea) and healing waters (Naaman the Syrian, miracle by the pool of Bethesda). These narratives augmented the early Christians' theology of baptism and its association with purification and cleansing. The rituals of anointing the body and water immersion best symbolized these concepts.

The second motif explored is baptism as a rite of initiation into the Christian community. In early Christianity joining an illicit sect required renouncing Roman gods and taking on a new identity. In some circumstances, refusing to honor Roman gods was seen as sedition or treason (54). Early Christians, therefore, appealed to certain key texts or metaphors to make baptism a ritual of incorporation or initiation into the Christian community, as such a new community for the neophytes. Galatians 3:28 and other passages that spoke of adoption into God's family were key to undergirding this theology. Jensen gives examples of this motif in the homiletical usage of many New Testament images of communities (e.g., athletes, soldiers) and in baptism rituals (the participation of sponsors, making the sign of the cross, and giving the holy kiss to new Christians).

Baptism as a means of sanctification and illumination is the third motif Jensen explores. This chapter considers the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit, which "was essential for baptism and was transmitted through a specific rite, separate from the water bath but performed alongside it" (91). In the book of Acts, the apostles' invitation to repent and receive the Holy Spirit through baptism (Acts 2:38) was understood by the early church as an essential element of the ritual of baptism. Despite the importance of oil and anointing in the later tradition, "a survey of the earliest literature offers little evidence for baptismal anointing" (96). The laying on of hands was also part of the ritual in some areas. By the fourth century, however, the rite of baptism was elaborated to include one or any combination of other actions: the imposition of hands, an anointing with oil, and the sealing with the sign of the cross (106). Thus, the use of oil, candles, fire during the ritual of baptism and the depiction of a dove on walls of baptisteries were symbols associated with a baptismal theology of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and illumines the lives of new Christians.

The fourth motif explored is baptism as a ritual symbolizing participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Two key New Testament texts are crucial to this aspect of baptism: Rom 6:5, which speaks of one's participation in Christ's death and resurrection; and John 3:3–5, which introduces the concept of new birth. This motif was concretely expressed through both architectural design and ritual actions. The spaces of baptism were constructed sometimes to allude to the grave (association with Jesus' death and resurrection) and the maternal womb (for the new birth). The ritual practices of triple immersion, the stripping of candidates, and the reclothing in white garments of neophytes supported the idea of shedding the old person and putting on Christ. Baptism at Easter emphasized the new believer's participation in Christ's passion while also symbolizing rebirth and future resurrection (138).

The final motif surveyed is baptism as a rite symbolizing the beginning of a new life. This motif has a dimension that transcends person and place in which baptism becomes an eschatological event symbolizing the restoration of the lost paradise. The biblical imageries of Christ as the second Adam and the crossing of the Jordan River influenced this motif. Jensen also understands that the construction of baptismal fonts in an octagonal shape (given the symbolic significance of the number eight in the early church) alluded to the eschatological regeneration of creation (204–8).

Overall this book is very well written and well researched. Jensen does a magnificent job of presenting these five core motifs of baptism in early Christian documents and art. Her excellent knowledge of ancient literature is evident and her analysis of art forms very enlightening. I appreciated her thorough survey of what various ancient authors said about these motifs and their understanding of the biblical texts and imageries. Thus the book can serve as a good resource about baptism and provide fresh, new insights into the practice of baptism in the early church. Any student of early church history and theology will appreciate its value.

Jensen's explanations of the biblical, theological, and ritualistic foundations of each motif of baptism are very well done. One area, however, is unfortunately weak: the visual illustrations. In total, the book has forty-nine black and white images to illustrate and support Jensen's thoughts on each of the core motifs. In some instances the photos are adequate, but in many cases they are either too small, do not provide enough details, or simply are confusing and indecipherable. For a book that addresses the visual aspects of baptism in the early church, this is an unfortunate weakness, although understandable, since publishing a book with color photos would make it very expensive. Maybe I could recommend to the author that, if possible and feasible, a website of these photos and likely many others could be set up to accompany and supplement the book. I think this

would be a great contribution to her work and to anyone who wishes to further explore early Christian art.