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Sealing as a term for Baptism*

MANY exegetes see in some of the New Testament references to "sealing" an early designation of Christian Baptism, and in older Nonconformity the Lord's Supper was often intimated by saying, "The Seals will be administered."¹ Harnack (*History of Dogma*, I, p. 207) says the word evinces "a Hellenic conception. Baptism in being called the seal, is regarded as the guarantee of a blessing, not the blessing itself, at least the relation to it remains obscure. . . . The expression probably arose from the language of the mysteries." The later use of the term in reference to baptism is undoubted, but the alleged New Testament references call for discussion.

The verb σφραγίζω occurs twenty-five times in the New Testament, eighteen of these being in the Apocalypse, and the noun σφραγίς sixteen times, thirteen of them in the Apocalypse. Apart from a literal use of the verb in *Matthew* (xxviii. 66) and two occurrences in *John* (iii. 33; vi. 27), the term is confined to Paul and the author of the Apocalypse. Most of the uses are plainly literal, but thirteen instances (verb 8, noun 5) can be classed as figurative. Of these metaphorical uses the following can have no reference to baptism:—

(a) Verb—*John* iii. 33. He that hath received his witness hath set his seal to this, that God is true.

John vi. 27. Him the Father . . . hath sealed.

Rom. xv. 28. When I have sealed to them this fruit.

Apoc. x. 4. Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not.

Apoc. xxii. 10. Seal not up the words of the prophecy of this book.

(b) Noun—*Rom.* iv. 11. The sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith.

1 *Cor.* ix. 2. The seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord.

2 *Tim.* ii. 19. The firm foundation of God standeth, having this seal.

Apoc. vii. 2. I saw another angel . . . having the seal of the living God.

Apoc. ix. 4. Such men as have not the seal of God on their foreheads.

* This is a further selection from the late Dr. Evans' notes on baptism. (See *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. xv. p. 19). Like the earlier article it has had some editorial revision.

¹ Smyth, the "Se-Baptist," calls Baptism and the Lord's Supper the Seals of the Covenant (*Paralles*, p. 419).

Massie (*H.D.B.*, IV, pp. 426f.) says the ideas included in the figurative uses of the term include "ownership, authentication, security and destination." Sanday and Headlam's paraphrase of *Rom. iv.* 11 runs thus: "Circumcision was given to him afterwards, like a seal affixed to a document, to authenticate a state of things already existing." A. G. Hebert (s. v. in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, S.C.M. Press) groups the metaphorical uses of the word under three heads: (i) to secure by a seal; (ii) to seal up a book, because it is finished, and nothing more is to be added: so a vision or a prophecy may be sealed up; (iii) to seal documents and so confirm and attest them.

Any possibility of a reference to baptism in *Apoc. ix.* 4 seems to be excluded (a) by the words "on their foreheads," a localisation of the seal which seems incongruous with the thought of baptism,² and (b) the suggestion of Oman (*Book of Revelation*, p. 121 and cf. Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, pp. 240ff.) that the description is to be taken literally. Oman writes, discussing *Apoc. xiii.* 16-17: "A circular stamp-plate has been preserved with 'In the 35th year of Caesar' engraved round it. . . . As business could not be done without sealed documents, the device seems to have been hit upon of making the wearing of this stamp on the forehead or the right hand the licence to buy or sell." This suggests a comparison with "the seal of God" in *ix.* 4. Oman sees in the verse an allusion to an attempt by the pagan priesthood to compel the worship of the imperial image by "an effective economic pressure." (c) A third objection to the application of the words to baptism is stated by Swete (*Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 97) "The seal, being in the hands of an angel, can hardly be sacramental" (cf. *Apoc. vii.* 2f.).

We are left with three Pauline passages which may refer to baptism, and the above discussion has shown that Paul could use the image of "sealing" with varying applications. The passages are *2 Cor. i.* 22, *Ephes. i.* 13 and *Ephes iv.* 30.

(a) *2 Cor. i.* 22. "God . . . also sealed us, and gave us the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts." Bernard (*Expositors' Greek Testament, in loc.*) says the aorists *σφραγισάμενος* and *δούς* point to acts completed at a definite moment in the past; and this can only mean the moment of baptism." The same view is taken by Anderson Scott (*Peake's Commentary*, p. 850). If stress is laid upon the aorist, however, we must bring *χρίσας* also into consideration. It

² But Hebert regards this idea in *Apoc. vii.* 1-3, as one which "falls readily into a baptismal context". He connects it with *Apoc. xiv.* 1 and says, "we are reminded of the mark (*tau*) set on the foreheads of the faithful in *Ezek. ix.* 4 . . . Whether there existed already in the baptismal rites of the apostolic age some sort of anointing on the forehead, is a question which cannot be answered from the N.T. evidence, since the writers nowhere describe the rite which was used." Editorial note.

seems then to be a true exegesis of the passage which sees in the three participles (anointing, sealing and giving) *one* act expressed by three sets of imagery, yet all referring to the Holy Spirit (cf. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the N.T.*, pp. 192f.). Moreover, the experience alluded to is one not peculiar to the apostles but common to the whole Christian community. Older commentators referred *βεβαίωσις* to all Christians, since Paul says *ἡμᾶς σὺν ὑμῖν*, but limited the following words to Paul and his fellow ministers, since he now only says *ἡμᾶς*. Moffatt translates: "It is God who confirms me along with you in Christ, who consecrated me, who stamped me with his seal and gave me the Spirit as a pledge in my heart." In the immediate context, however, it is notable that when Paul uses the plural he defines it; cf. verse 19, "proclaimed among you by us, by myself and Silvanus and Timotheus," and in verse 23 he passes to the singular. When reference is made to experiences peculiar to himself in *Gal. i*, the singular personal pronoun is employed. It seems unlikely that the words in *2 Cor. i. 22* can be limited to the apostle. They may, however, be restricted to Paul and his fellow ministers, as named in verse 19; if so, any reference to a baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit fails. On the other hand, had Paul intended to narrow the reference in verse 21 we should have expected him to make the fact plainer than it is.

The experience in question is one in which the Holy Spirit is received, in such fashion as to appoint and equip for service, as "anointing" appointed and equipped the priest or the prophet; it leaves manifest traces, as recognisable as a "seal": it is an inward ("in our hearts") pledge. (Von Stromberg, *Studien zur Theorie und Praxis der Taufe, in der Christlichen Kirche der ersten zwei Jahrhunderte*, Berlin, 1913, paraphrases it as "the earnest-money, the security for our share in redemption.") Is this definite experience of the Holy Spirit to be regarded as occurring in the moment of baptism? It is undubitable that the New Testament frequently associates baptism with an experience of the Holy Spirit; there are, however, occasions where the two experiences are dissociated. Wheeler Robinson (*The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 192ff.) compares baptism with "prophetic symbolism," prophetic action which is "what Paul might have called an *'arrabôn'*, an earnest of what will be. . . . The act is psychologically more intense than the accompanying word, and produces a greater effect on those who perform it and those who witness it, but this is not the whole conception of it. It 'realises' the unseen in the philosophical as well as in the psychological sense; it makes a difference which might be called in our terminology, ontological. With something of this realism we may conceive the earliest believers (who were Semites) entering the waters.

of baptism. . . . They did something that corresponded with the spoken word, and *helped to bring it about.*" Robinson insists that it "is so much more than mere 'representation.' There can be no question here of a charge of sacramental 'magic,' for the baptized person is a conscious believer, and the efficacy of the rite depends upon his conscious and believing participation in it. But equally there can be no question of 'mere symbolism,' for the act is the partial and fragmentary, but very real, accomplishment of a divine work, the work of the Holy Spirit."

Such an interpretation certainly helps us to realise how, to such a convinced and understanding believer, the act of baptism would be the occasion of a realised reception of the Holy Spirit. It does not, however, help us to decide whether the reception of the Holy Spirit implies baptism. The phraseology of *2 Cor. i. 21f.*, certainly seems to suggest an experience at the beginning of the Christian life, but *Acts x. 44* and *xix. 1-7* indicate that, in the judgment of Paul's companion Luke, the one event could happen independently of the other. "The vital point in our knowledge of the Gospel lies in our answer to the question, how is the Holy Spirit given?" (Hirsch in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 1924, Number 17, quoted by Robinson, *op cit*, p. 198). It seems to the writer that a reference to baptism in this passage remains merely conjectural.

(b) *Ephes. i. 13*. In whom, having also believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is an earnest of our inheritance; and

(c) *Ephes. iv. 30* (Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, in whom ye were sealed unto the day of redemption) may be treated together, since they involve similar imagery. In each case the verb "sealed" is an aorist. Rawlinson (*Peake's Commentary*, p. 863) thinks the reference "may possibly suggest an eschatological sacrament," but is doubtful as to whether there is any allusion to "confirmation." Salmond (*E.G.T.*, in loc) approves of the view of *Ephes. i. 13*, which "makes the defining participles ἀκούσαντες (with its clause) and πιστεύσαντες important preparations for the statement of privilege in the ἐσφραγίσθητε, each contributing something proper in its own place to the order of ideas." Whatever is meant by "sealing," therefore, it is an experience preceded by "hearing" and "believing." The "sealing" is effected by the instrumentality of the Spirit of promise, i.e., the promised Holy Spirit. Verses 3-14 are directed to show that Gentiles, "you also," share with the Jews in the blessings of the Christian Faith. It seems likely, therefore, that the "promise of the Spirit" refers to the Old Testament promises, and these connect the bestowal of the Spirit with moral and spiritual dispositions rather than with the performance of any rite. This seems to tell against the

identification of "sealing" with baptism. Von Stromberg lays much emphasis upon the aorists employed in *Ephes. i. 13* and *iv. 30*; "Paul refers the sealing with the Holy Spirit to a particular moment." Robertson, however (*Grammar of the Greek N.T.*, pp. 831ff.) calls attention to what he calls "the constative (summary) use of the aorist" by which "repeated or separate actions are . . . grouped together," e.g., *John ii. 20*; *Matt. xxii. 28*; *2 Cor. xi. 25*. "The aorist is the truly narrative tense, the imperfect the truly descriptive one; and both may be used of the same transaction" (Clyde, *Greek Syntax*, p. 77, quoted by Robertson, p. 840). These statements make it perilous to insist that the employment of an aorist tense means a definite reference "to a particular moment." In any case, that Paul could think of the believer's reception of the Holy Spirit as occurring at a definite point of time does not establish the coincidence of that reception with the moment of baptism.

It appears correct to say with Salmond (*op. cit.*) that whilst ecclesiastical Greek came to use *σφραγίς* as a term for baptism, "there is no instance of that in the New Testament." So also Lightfoot says (*Apostolic Fathers*, II, p. 226): "It may be doubted whether St. Paul (*σφραγισάμενος 2 Cor. i. 22*, cf., *Ephes. iv. 30*) or St. John (*Rev. ix. 4*, *τὴν σφραγίδα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ τῶν μετώπων*) used the image with any direct reference to baptism."

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