

Purification through Baptism:

A Ritualistic Approach to Christological Participation in Romans 6:1-11

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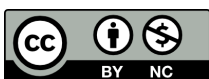
Abstract

In Romans 6:1-11, Paul introduces a fundamental paradigm shift for ethical living from law adherence to the believer's union with Christ. However, Paul's understanding of this reality has been fraught with debate. Thus, in the following paper, I will argue that Paul's use of βαπτίζω reveals a third approach, the ritualistic approach, that seeks to reconcile both forensic and participatory understandings to Paul's exhortation to the Roman Christ-followers. Through Paul's use of βαπτίζω, it is evident that one's union with the justifying death and resurrection of Christ is participation in Christ's work as a purification offering on behalf of humanity. Through participating in Christ's purifying work, the believer is cleansed from the reign of impurity and is enabled to dwell in the presence of God, presently through ethical living, and in the future in totality.

Introduction

Within the field of New Testament studies, interpretation of Romans 6:1-11 has been fraught with debate. Whereas many scholars have traditionally understood Paul's exhortation through a forensic approach, the admonition to walk in the newness of life based upon God's act of bearing the penalty of humanity's sin in the person of Christ,¹ many scholars now support a participatory

¹ Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 313.



approach, understanding Paul's exhortation as founded upon God's liberation of humanity from the sinister rule of sin through their union with Christ.² Evidently, both views reveal valuable insights into the interpretation of the passage, however, neither incorporate the ritualistic description of Christ's sacrifice as depicted in the earlier chapters of Romans (e.g., Romans 3:25-26).³ In this paper, I will argue that Paul's use of the word, βαπτίζω, reveals a third approach, the ritualistic approach that reconciles both the forensic and participatory approaches, as the foundation by which Paul exhorts the Roman Christ-followers. I will assert that Paul's use of βαπτίζω carries the complete understanding of the Levitical purity system, leading him to understand Christ's sacrifice as a purification offering by which believers participate in. Consequently, the believer's participation in the final purification offering of Christ becomes the foundation for hope and righteous living apart from adherence to the law. My argument will progress as follows. Firstly, I will situate Romans 6:1-11 within the larger framework of the epistle. Secondly, I will outline the historical interpretations of Romans 6:1-11 and assert the validity of a harmonized approach that draws upon both forensic and participatory approaches. Thirdly, I will introduce the ritualistic approach by asserting the validity of interpreting Romans 6:1-11 through the ritualistic perspective of Romans 3:21-26, namely, through Paul's use of ἱλαστήριον. Next, I will explore the presence of ritual purity in Romans 6 with regards to early Jewish and early Christian understandings of baptism and ritual washing. Finally, I will detail the ritualistic approach as the foundational understanding of Paul's exhortation to the Roman Christ-followers by adopting the Levitical purity laws as an interpretative lens for this passage.

Context

Romans 6:1-11 finds itself within the larger flow of Paul's argument to the Roman Christ-followers. In chapters 1-5, Paul articulates his thesis of proclaiming the gospel, the power of God for salvation, to the Jew and to the Gentile (1:16-17). To the Jew, the inclusion of Gentiles apart from law observance may come as a surprise, but Paul argues that his gospel does not imply that God has betrayed his covenant. Rather, it is Israel who has been unfaithful to the covenant by believing themselves to be bearers of exceptional divine favour, founded upon their election and reception of the law, while disobeying the ethical commands of God (2:17-29). Paul asserts that God is an impartial judge who evaluates fairly between Jew and Gentile, creating equality within humanity under the power of sin (3:9). Consequently, it may seem that if God were to act justly, he must condemn Israel for their immoral behaviour and subsequently, be unfaithful to his covenant to Israel (3:1-8). As a result, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that in the sacrificial death of Christ, God has created a way to deal justly with sin without giving preferential treatment to Israel, while

² Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 306.

³ Dunn, 180.

also staying faithful to his covenant (3:21-31). Specifically, the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God marks the way by which God deals with the sin of all humanity, both Jew and Gentile together, while acting in faithfulness to his chosen people in the work of Christ.⁴

Beginning in chapter 6, having just introduced the idea of Gentile inclusion apart from law observance, the question of the law is now addressed. Whereas the Jew and God-fearing Gentile regarded the law as the way by which God's rule and human flourishing occur, they are now left wondering how to participate in God's ethical character apart from the law.⁵ Consequently, Paul now asserts that the ability for ethical living comes through the believer's union in Christ, free from the power of sin (5:12-21). Paul insists that where the law failed to create in the believer a heart able to obey God, one's life in Christ now forms the basis for righteous living that leads to human flourishing.

The Historical Positions of Romans 6:1-11

Building upon chapter 5, a description of humanity's inclusion in Adam (the old age dominated by the power of sin)⁶ or Christ (the new age under the rule of God), Paul now exhorts believers to walk in the way of God apart from law adherence by detailing the believer's participation in Christ. Specifically, Paul uses the imagery of realm transfer. Those who were once in the realm of sin's dominion, those who were in Adam, have now been relocated to the realm of God's rule, in Christ,⁷ and now bear a new identity, enabling the ability to walk in newness of life.⁸ For Paul, God brings about this reality through the righteous act of Christ (δικαίωμα, 5:18) which brings righteousness, a declaration of acquittal, to all who are in him.⁹ The dilemma that Paul now addresses is the believer's participation in the new reality, free from the dominion of sin, while also living within the old reality, where the effects of sin still dominate.¹⁰

Romans 6 begins with a possible objection from Paul's audience regarding humanity's proper behaviour in response to the abundance of God's grace. In response to Paul's statement regarding the victory of grace over sin and the law's alignment with sin (5:20-21), Paul anticipates an objection from the church in Rome, namely, whether they should sin so that grace may increase.

⁴ Dunn, 1–300.

⁵ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 9.

⁶ de Boer, "Paul's Mythologizing Program In Romans 5-8," 14. de Boer understands Paul to be mythologizing the notion of sin and death. In Romans 5-8, rather than understanding sin as an act of humanity, sin is understood as a power that enslaves humanity to walk against the will of God.

⁷ de Boer, 20.

⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 350.

⁹ Westerholm, "Righteousness, Cosmic and Microcosmic," 35.

¹⁰ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 302.

In this situation, rather than viewing their potential objection as a desire to sin, it is possible that the Roman Christ-followers viewed Paul's notion of grace appalling since it undermined the law, their means to respond piously to grace.¹¹

As a result, Paul responds in verses 2-4 with an emphatic assertion that the Roman Christians are not to walk in sin since they have died to sin (οἵτινες ἀπεθάνομεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ) through their baptism into the death of Christ (εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθημεν). Using 6:10 to interpret 6:2, scholars have come to a common understanding that through the death of Christ, something has happened to the believer in relation to sin. However, two different interpretations arise when describing the mechanics of this event.¹²

Those who understand 6:2 and 6:10 as describing two different events take the traditional forensic approach, understanding the dative phrase τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ as a dative of reference,¹³ describing Christ as one identified with sin (the sin of humanity) and so deserving of punishment (death).¹⁴ In this situation, the believer's baptism signifies their personal death to sin as a mirror to Christ's death to sin, rather than participation in Christ's own historic death. God, witnessing the believer's personal death to sin, considers the benefits of Christ's death as directly applied onto the believer; while the believer, having experienced Christ's sacrificial death, displays an act of faithful allegiance to God in response to Christ's work.¹⁵

Those who perceive 6:2 and 6:10 as describing the same event favour the participatory approach, understanding the same dative phrase τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ also as a dative of reference, but as describing Christ's identification with humanity under the power of sin, rather than Christ's association with sin. In this approach, Christ's death and full identification with humanity effectively bring victory over death and liberation to humanity from the dominion of sin.¹⁶ Believers partake in Christ's liberation from sin through their baptism as it becomes a symbol of their participation in the historic death and victory of Christ.¹⁷ Moreover, the participatory approach gains further traction as Paul uses the phrase εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ in verse 3. Εἰς carries the same connotations as the preposition ἐν, defined as "in" or "within."¹⁸ Thus, it is likely that Paul describes the believer's participation and indwelling within Christ's own death rather than the believer's personal death in conformity to the death of Christ.¹⁹ Understanding the believer's participation in Christ's death, it

¹¹ Dunn, 326.

¹² Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 58.

¹³ Schreiner, *Romans*, 320; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 382. See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 154. For an expansion on the dative of reference.

¹⁴ Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 60.

¹⁵ Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 299.

¹⁶ Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 826.

¹⁷ Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 62.

¹⁸ Sabou, 106.

¹⁹ Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 614; Moses, *Practices of Power*, 59.

is now more likely to understand the dative phrase τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ as a dative of reference where Christ identifies with the believer under the power of sin itself.

Interestingly, modern proponents of the forensic approach recognize the participatory elements portrayed in Romans 6. Schreiner, commenting on verse 2, recognizes sin primarily as a power, rather than the heinous acts of humanity.²⁰ Specifically, Schreiner understands sin as a malevolent force that entered the world through Adam, and thus, enslaved humanity under its rule. Moo, coming to a similar conclusion in his interpretation of verse 10, understands sin as a “ruling power.”²¹ In this way, Schreiner combines the participatory and forensic approaches by detailing the reality that those participating under the rule of sin are ultimately led to commit specific acts of sin by which they are guilty.²² Thus, Schreiner views participation in Christ and freedom from the powers of sin as incorporated into a forensic framework whereby freedom from sin comes through the divine declaration of acquittal. For Schreiner, it is those who have been justified (δεδικαίωται, v. 7), counted righteous and forgiven of their acts of sin who are freed from the power of sin and now participate under the rule of God (cf. 6:18, 20, 22).²³

Moreover, verses 3-4 describe the believer’s baptism (βαπτίζω) as the mechanism by which the believer participates in the death of Christ. In the interpretation of this passage most scholars have come to the agreement that Paul is speaking of water baptism as a shorthand for the believer’s conversion-initiation, the moment an individual believes in Christ and is initiated into the community.²⁴ In this situation, Paul comprehends no difference between baptism and conversion-initiation as he understands baptism as a burial symbol for those who have already joined in the death of Christ.²⁵ Consequently, the believer’s liberation from the realm of sin occurs not primarily in the moment of their baptism, but in the moment of Christ’s historic death on Calvary. However, it is important to note that though liberation occurs in the moment of conversion, baptism still plays an important cosmological role in one’s freedom from the power of sin. Moses argues that baptism is a “practice of power” that effectively guards the believer from the forces of sin and death.²⁶ Baptism, alongside other practices, such as the Eucharist, keeps the believer from

²⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 304.

²¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 403.

²² Schreiner, *Romans*, 304.

²³ Schreiner, 319; Compare Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 401, who seems to disregard the forensic nature of δεδικαίωται in verse 7, even though he seems to lean forensic in his overall reading of Romans. For Moo, δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας simply describes “freedom from the powers of sin.”

²⁴ Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 91; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 383; Schreiner, *Romans*, 306; Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 303.

²⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 398.

²⁶ Moses, *Practices of Power*, 39. Moses makes the claim that Paul understands certain practices to either open an individual up to the powers of sin (such as participating in meals offered to idols, 1 Cor 8) or open an individual up to the powers of righteousness. In this way, the practice of baptism helps to aid the believer in remaining in the protection of Christ to overcome the powers of evil.

participating in the realm of sin and consequently, keeps one oriented towards Christ's trajectory of a new life towards God.²⁷

By participating in the death of Christ, the believer bears a new identity as one who has also died to sin, and consequently, found freedom from the reign of sin.²⁸ Notably, while Paul avoids explicitly describing the believer's baptism as an image for the believer's resurrection, Paul describes a relationship in which those who have died with Christ in baptism can now walk in the newness of life empowered by and under the rule of Christ's resurrection.²⁹ Evidently, the believer's identity is shifted in baptism as, while they are not yet resurrected fully with Christ, they still participate in Christ's resurrection and God's rule through walking in conformity to Christ.³⁰ Overall, Paul's vision of baptism in relation to the redemptive act of Christ can be summed up in three points. Firstly, the baptizand is related to and subsequently involved in the historic death and resurrection of Christ, forming a new identity within the believer. Secondly, the believer's relation to the Christ event corresponds to a personal event in the believer, whereby the old self under the dominion of sin is put to death and a new life is raised in Christ. Thirdly, this new life, enabled by the resurrection of Christ, corresponds to the continual act of putting to death the old self (who desires to return to the dominion of sin) through the resurrection power received in the present.³¹ Evidently, Paul understands that proper obedience in response to the grace of God does not come through law observance, but through the creation of a new self in the death and resurrection of Christ.

This is further displayed through Paul's use of the term "Christ" (Χριστος, 6:4) and "burial" (συνθάπτω, 6:4). Χριστος, described as the "Anointed One," was understood from the second century BCE onwards as the Davidic king who brings liberation to the people of God (e.g., Romans 1:3 echoing 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2).³² As the Anointed Davidic king, Christ, through his death and resurrection, wages war and secures victory against the powers of sin and death for his people. People partake in this liberation through their burial with Christ.³³ It is important to note that Paul does not use συνθάπτω to describe the believer's individual death, but to describe the believer's participation in the death of Christ.³⁴ Therefore, συνθάπτω primarily indicates one's belongingness to another, as witnessed in the familial burial accounts of the Hebrew Bible that describe one's

²⁷ Moses, 59.

²⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 363.

²⁹ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 330; Moses, *Practices of Power*, 61.

³⁰ Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 826.

³¹ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 132.

³² Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 66.

³³ Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 87.

³⁴ Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 91; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 388–89; Chester, 'Consider Yourselves Dead,' 362.

inclusion in a particular family or lineage (cf. Gen 49:29-32; 2 Kgs 14:16; 2 Chr 21:1).³⁵ As a result, by describing the believer's burial with Christ through baptism, Paul is describing the believer's belongingness to the family of Christ and, consequently, the believer's participation in the liberation of Christ. This union with Christ therefore enables the believer to walk in the newness of life in accordance with Christ in the present.

Paul further expands upon the believer's union with Christ in verses 5-7 by introducing the term "united" (σύμφυτος), a term depicting the growth and cultivation of agriculture.³⁶ By using σύμφυτος, Paul describes a natural unity and growth between Christ and the believer just as a grafted branch becomes one with the plant.³⁷ Paul introduces the idea of σύμφυτος using the term "become" (γίνομαι, 6:5) in the first-person plural perfect tense. Evidently, Paul is emphasizing the historical reality of Christ's death in the past as one that continues to bear continuing benefits, namely, the power of new life and the hope of future resurrection, in the believer's life through the believer's σύμφυτος with Christ.³⁸

Notably, Paul is describing the believer as one caught between the eschatological reality of participation in the likeness of Christ's death, expressed through one's present freedom from the dominion of sin, and the future hope of partaking in Christ's resurrection.³⁹ This present reality of one's new identity in Christ under the dominion of God now leads to a commandment for obedience apart from law adherence as noted by Paul's use of the term ὁμιώμα (6:5). While scholars debate the meaning of ὁμιώμα, the most likely perspective understands Paul's use of the term as depicting "form" instead of "likeness."⁴⁰ Specifically, when Paul is speaking of the form of Christ's death and resurrection by which the believer is united to, he understands the believer as partaking in the same type of death and resurrection experienced by Christ.⁴¹ Interestingly, in verse 5, the emphasis, therefore, is on the believer's future complete union with Christ through the believer's transformation into the form of Christ's death and resurrection themselves. However, the translation of ὁμιώμα as "form" is not mutually exclusive from the idea of "likeness."⁴² In this way, the idea of ὁμιώμα as "likeness" communicates the believer's present conformity to the death of Christ through one's daily activity of dying to the rule of sin and death and of walking in the newness of life under the rule of God (see 6:11-22, cf. 5:14; 8:3).⁴³ Consequently, having begun one's conformity to the death of Christ in present age, the believer

³⁵ Sabou, 91.

³⁶ Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 145.

³⁷ Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 114.

³⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 401.

³⁹ Dunn, 332.

⁴⁰ BDAG, s.v. "ὁμιωμα 2b"

⁴¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 370.

⁴² Moses, *Practices of Power*, 61.

⁴³ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 371; Moses, *Practices of Power*, 61.

can hope for the eschatological future by which they will finally be fully conformed to the resurrection of Christ through the resurrection of their bodies.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Paul's idea of liberation has not yet been explicitly mentioned. Paul understands the believer's union with Christ within the backdrop of an eschatological battle between grace and sin by building upon chapter 5's description of the old age, in Adam, and the new age, in Christ. Nevertheless, Paul now speaks of humanity's deliverance from the enslavement of sin in verses 6-7,⁴⁵ and describes both the identity of the believer as one objectively crucified with Christ, bringing about the abolition of the old self in the old age, while also detailing the subjective reality of the individual's gradual conformity to the ὁμοιώμα of Christ's death through daily acts of righteous living.⁴⁶ However, where the NRSV translates 6:7 as, "for whoever has died is freed from sin," alluding to a participatory and apocalyptic interpretation of the passage, Paul states in the Greek ὁ γὰρ ἀποθανὼν δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας (literally translated "for whoever has died has been justified from sin"), using δικαίω (justify) instead of ἐλευθερώω (set free).⁴⁷ Thus, Paul connects God's forensic work in Christ with the believer's liberative participation in Christ.⁴⁸

Perhaps an interpretive clue may be found in Paul's imperative for the believer to consider (λογίζομαι) themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus in 6:11. Through the use of λογίζομαι, Paul draws a verbal connection to Romans 4:3 where Abraham, through his faith in

⁴⁴ Moses, 61.

⁴⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 403.

⁴⁶ See Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 308-311. Scholars who take a traditional forensic approach come to the same conclusion but understand the mechanics of Paul's statement differently. Both camps understand σύμφυτοι γεγονάμεν τῷ ὁμοιώματι as describing the individual's conformity to Christ, particularly, the believer's conformity as displayed through the daily living of a righteous life empowered by Christ's resurrection. Compared to those adhering to the participatory approach, those favouring the traditional forensic approach understand verse 6 as illustrating the believer's attainment of a righteous status before God due to Christ's work of bearing the penalty of sinful humanity through his death.

⁴⁷ Chester, *Conversion at Corinth*, 334. Chester concedes that δικαίω in this context must bear participatory connotations. However, he claims that participatory connotations must not be understood at the expense of forensic understandings. In this way, Chester understands δικαίω as denoting both freedom from the enslavement of sin as well as freedom from the guilt that results from transgressions. Consequently, while some may be tempted to view Romans 1-4 as describing a forensic perspective and Romans 6-8 as describing a participatory perspective, Chester understands Paul's use of δικαίω in 6:7 as showing his readers that these two perspectives are ultimately connected.

⁴⁸ Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 826, states that δικαίω takes on a forensic liberative usage. However, Campbell does not expound upon the forensic usage of δικαίω. Rather, Campbell uses δικαίω to denote liberation from the oppressive powers of sin and death. In this sense, Campbell does not incorporate the judicial connotations of δικαίω; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 401. Moo states that "justified from sin" means "released from the powers of sin." In this way, Moo also does not consider the juridical connotations of δικαίω but chooses to solely focus on the liberative and participatory elements of δικαίω.

God, was considered (ἐλογίσθη) righteous (δικαιοσύνη, justified) before God.⁴⁹ Consequently, the believer participates in the crucifixion of Christ and finds freedom from the power of sin (6:6) through their new status as those who are justified (considered righteous) from sin (6:7). In this way, as those who are liberated from the power of sin and receive a new status of righteousness, forgiven from the guilt of sin,⁵⁰ Paul exhorts the believers to continually consider (λογίζομαι) themselves dead to sin the same way that God considered (ἐλογίσθη) Abraham, and now the Roman believers, righteous (δικαιοσύνη, 4:3).⁵¹

Paul concludes his discussion regarding the end of the old age and the believer's participation in the new age in verses 8-11. Paul completes his assertion of the believer's union with Christ by drawing a parallel between Christ's death and resurrection to the believer's duty to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God. Foundationally, Paul is outlining a reality in which what is true of Christ is also true of the believer for the believer participates in Christ.⁵² Beginning in verse 9, Paul describes the finality of Christ's death. Assured that Christ has been raised from the dead, Paul draws the conclusion that Christ will, therefore, never again be subjected to the rule of death.⁵³ Evidently, Paul understood Christ's resurrection as an act of liberation from the realm of death's reign. Complimenting verse 9, Paul describes the current life of the liberated Christ in verse 10, namely, a life lived towards God. Having established a description of Christ, Paul creates a parallel between Christ and the believer by commanding the Roman Christ-followers to consider (λογίξεσθε, the idea of belief)⁵⁴ themselves dead to sin, removed from the realm of sin's reign, and alive to God, relocated to the realm of God's reign in Christ, with the purpose of walking obediently in the newness of life.⁵⁵

Overall, the historic participatory position of Romans 6:1-11 understands the believer as one who is united to the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ's death and resurrection are understood as the act by which the rule of sin is defeated and deliverance of humanity into the rule of God in Christ is established. However, the participatory position functions properly only when interpreted alongside the forensic approach as denoted by δικαίω in 6:7. Thus, in chapter 6, Paul exhorts

⁴⁹ Chester, 'Consider Yourselves Dead,' 359.

⁵⁰ Chester, *Conversion at Corinth*, 334.

⁵¹ Chester, 'Consider Yourselves Dead,' 359.

⁵² Jewett, *Romans*, 405.

⁵³ Jewett, 405.

⁵⁴ BDAG, s.v. "λογίζομαι 1b"

⁵⁵ See Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 313-316. Scholars who take the traditional forensic approach, once again, come to the same conclusion but understand the mechanics of Paul's statement differently. Traditional forensic scholars understand verses 9-10 as depicting Christ's freedom from the rule of sin by identifying with sinful humanity and bearing the full penalty of condemnation in his own flesh. Having been raised from a state of condemnation, Christ now directs his life according to the way of God, prompting Paul to draw a parallel imperative to the believer.

the Roman church to walk in obedience to God apart from the law as a member of God's rule freed from the power of sin. This righteous living has been enabled through the believer's participation in Christ's victory over the dominion of sin and their justification before God through their baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.

The Presence of a Ritualistic Approach in Romans 3:21-26

As mentioned previously, Romans 6:1-11, a text usually understood as denoting Paul's participatory thought, has shown itself to bear forensic elements through the use of *δικαιώω* in 6:7. Consequently, it is now apt to interpret Romans 6:1-11 through Paul's prior use of *δικαιώω*, specifically, in Romans 3:21-26 (*δικαιούμενοι*, 6:24), a text usually referred to as the locus of Paul's forensic thought and where Paul introduces ritualistic elements to his understanding of God's work in Christ.

Interestingly, as in Romans 6:1-11, forensic and participatory elements are also present within Romans 3:21-26. Having detailed God's wrath against all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles alike (1:18-3:20), Paul now presents the reality that God has revealed his saving righteousness through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who believe (3:21-22).⁵⁶ This saving righteousness of God is now expressed in two ways. Paul states that those who experience the saving righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*) of God are those who are justified (*δικαιώω*) by his grace and who also now participate in the redemption (*ἀπολύτρωσις*) of Jesus Christ. Using *δικαιώω*, Paul indicates that believers have been forgiven of their sins (6:23) and now stand as those who bear a righteous status in relation to God. Thus, Paul, using *δικαιώω* adopts legal imagery to describe the believer as acquitted by God from the charges and guilt of sin.⁵⁷

However, Paul couples this forensic language with participatory language by describing the believer's justification as achieved through the redemption (*ἀπολύτρωσις*) found in Christ Jesus. The use of *ἀπολύτρωσις* (and the *λυτ-* group generally) hearkens back to the LXX's use of the word, denoting the liberation experienced by Israel from Egypt (e.g., Deut 7:8; 9:26; 15:15; 24:18) and the exile (Isa 41:14; 42:1).⁵⁸ In this way, Paul presents the work of Christ as bringing liberation

⁵⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 178; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 241–46.

⁵⁷ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 248; Schreiner, *Romans*, 189; Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 422.

⁵⁸ Moo, 248; Schreiner, *Romans*, 189; Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 423; Campbell, *Deliverance*, 657. Debates surrounding whether *ἀπολύτρωσις* describes a liberation in which a price is paid (as per Moo and Schreiner) cannot be outlined in this paper. However, it is important to note that Campbell, who rejects the traditional forensic reading of this passage, makes it clear that the text never explicitly describes a payment. Rather, according to Campbell, the focus is on Christ's liberative work.

from the power of sin (3:9) the same way that God had previously delivered Israel from the powers of Egypt and Babylon.

Entering verse 25, Paul now describes this gift of justification and redemption as accomplished through the person of Christ who God put forward as a ἰλαστήριον. In essence, the justification and redemption outlined in 3:21-26 and continued in 6:1-11 is predicated upon the reality of Christ as a ἰλαστήριον. Consequently, the following discussion will outline the meaning of ἰλαστήριον and its usage in developing the ritualistic approach to Romans 6:1-11.

While several views abound in the debate regarding the meaning of ἰλαστήριον in 3:25,⁵⁹ the current scope of this paper does not allow for an in-depth review of each perspective.⁶⁰ Thus, the common position of interpreting ἰλαστήριον as the mercy seat will be argued for in this paper.⁶¹ Looking at the LXX, 21 of the 27 uses of ἰλαστήριον are found in the Pentateuch and all such uses translate the Hebrew, תְּרֻפָּה, understood as the mercy seat.⁶² The mercy seat was the place of expiation, whereby blood from a purification offering would be sprinkled to purge impurity and bring forgiveness of sin (Lev 16), but it was also the place of divine revelation (Exod 25:22).⁶³ Based on this understanding, Bailey takes a literal approach to understanding Christ as the mercy seat, rejecting the idea of Christ as a purification sacrifice in favour of the place of divine revelation. Understanding διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως as connected to ἰλαστήριον and ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι as connected to the verb προέθετο, Bailey rejects any interpretation that understands the reference of blood as denoting Christ as a sacrificial offering.⁶⁴ Rather, by taking ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι with προέθετο, Bailey understands Christ's death and shedding of blood as God setting forth Jesus as the mercy seat where humanity may come to experience the presence and revelation of God.⁶⁵

Finlan disagrees with Bailey's interpretation and takes ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι with ἰλαστήριον, translating 3:25a, "whom God put forward in a bloody death as a mercy seat of faith."⁶⁶ Finlan rejects Bailey's strict interpretation and takes ἰλαστήριον as a synecdoche that refers to the entire

⁵⁹ See Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission*, 47–72, for a history of interpretation.

⁶⁰ See McMurray, *Sacrifice, Brotherhood, and the Body*, 58–74 for an in-depth and recent argument in favour of interpreting ἰλαστήριον as a votive offering instead of the common interpretation of ἰλαστήριον as the mercy-seat. Interestingly, the votive gift interpretation finds its roots as far back as Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (1901).

⁶¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 193; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 251–56; Finlan, "The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors," 140; Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat," 170; See Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 429 who rather translates ἰλαστήριον as "sacrifice of atonement."

⁶² Shauf, *Jesus the Sacrifice*, 238; See Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat," 170, who argues that while ἰλαστήριον does not bear the definite article in Romans 3:25 (as it does in the LXX), it should still be understood as the mercy seat rather than a general place of atonement.

⁶³ Finlan, "The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors," 141.

⁶⁴ Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat," 209.

⁶⁵ Bailey, 210.

⁶⁶ Finlan, "The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors," 165.

Levitical sacrificial system as the mercy seat plays a central role in Israelite atonement rituals.⁶⁷ Finlan furthers this point by detailing the verb προτιθμι (“put forward”) as referring to the LXX cultic image of publicly presenting a covenant-making sacrifice (Exod 24:7-8, cf. Gal 3:1).⁶⁸ Thus, Paul understands Christ to be the new purification offering made on the Day of Atonement that reveals the saving righteousness of God apart from the law (3:21) through faith.⁶⁹

Having displayed the presence of sacrificial imagery in 3:25 through Paul’s use of ἱλαστήριον, it is now important to outline a brief overview of the Levitical purity system. Priestly theology emphasized a distinctiveness between the realm of God and the realm of humanity, with dangerous consequences should the two realms interact.⁷⁰ The foundational problem which Priestly theology, and subsequently, the Levitical purity system, solves, is Yahweh’s desire to dwell among his people.⁷¹ Using the Levitical purity system, specifically, systems of mediation (e.g., sacrifices) and proper behaviour (e.g., ritual purity), Yahweh and humanity may dwell together without fear.⁷² It is this system that will be detailed below.

Firstly, impurity in the ancient Israel was understood as a dynamic and malevolent force that manifested itself as a physical substance attracted to areas of sacredness (e.g., the temple and its sancta).⁷³ Sin, as a kind of impurity, was generated through the breaking of divine prohibitions (Lev 4) and the neglect of cultic and judicial orders (Lev 5), defiling both the individual with guilt as well as the sacred areas with impurity.⁷⁴ These particles of impurity and the sin of the individual would need to be expunged through the purification offering which acted as a detergent and means of forgiveness (Lev 4:1-5:13).⁷⁵ Regular purification offerings throughout the year would forgive the individual of their sins.⁷⁶ However, it is only on the Day of Atonement that the purification offering would purge the impurity found in sacred areas, and in doing do, also purge the sinner of impurity and sins that they had previously been forgiven of but not cleansed (Lev 4:20, 26, 31; 5:2-3; Num 6:9ff; 8:7-12).⁷⁷ Gane, thus, draws a distinction between moral fault and ritual impurity. Moral fault is a load in which the sinner bears at a particular historic time and which the sinner can find forgiveness through the offering or a regular purification sacrifice. Comparatively, ritual purity is a bodily state of contamination that needs to be cleansed and can only be achieved on the Day of

⁶⁷ Finlan, 176.

⁶⁸ Finlan, 158; Hultgren, *Paul’s Gospel and Mission*, 56.

⁶⁹ Finlan, 165.

⁷⁰ Kessler, *Old Testament Theology*, 332.

⁷¹ Kessler, 332; Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, 43.

⁷² Kessler, 334.

⁷³ Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary,” 392.

⁷⁴ Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, 65.

⁷⁵ Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary,” 397.

⁷⁶ Gane, *Cult and Character*, 127.

⁷⁷ Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, 65; Gane, 128.

Atonement.⁷⁸ This rite was executed through the slaughtering of an animal and the daubing of its blood upon the sacred objects and spaces by a priest on behalf of the sinful and impure individual (Lev 9:9).⁷⁹

Thus, it is important to outline the pinnacle of the Israelite purification system, the Day of Atonement. As mentioned previously, regular purification offerings throughout the year lead to divine forgiveness but leave the individual and the sacred areas in a state of impurity (Lev 16:30).⁸⁰ Thus, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies with blood from the purification offering and sprinkles it upon the sacred areas to cleanse it from all impurities, and consequently, secure communal purification for Israel.⁸¹ Having effected atonement for sins and purgation of impurity from both the sacred areas and the people, a second purification offering is given through the Azazel goat.⁸² Taking the Azazel goat, the High Priest transfers the sins of the people, already atoned for, into the animal and sends it into the wilderness, the domain of evil, where its power can no longer affect the community (Lev 16:21).⁸³ In essence, by sending their atoned sins back to its place of origin, Israel recognizes the ultimate cause of their sin to be found in an outside force. Consequently, Israel assumes their role as a forgiven people, freed from the power of sin, who now testify against the power which led them towards sinful actions to begin with.⁸⁴

Foundationally, the purging of impurity in the Day of Atonement is important as God will not abide within a polluted sanctuary and among a sinful people. While God may tolerate impurity in his dwelling place for a time, if impurity is not cleansed promptly (on the Day of Atonement), God may leave his dwelling place and depart from his people.⁸⁵ Consequently, as Paul describes the justifying and redemptive work of Christ as a *ἱλαστήριον*, he understands Christ as the one who ultimately forgives the sin of the believer while also bringing deliverance from the power of sin. In this way, the people are purged of their impurity, enabling God to dwell permanently with his people. Thus, I will now argue that how the believer experiences the purifying work of God is

⁷⁸ Gane, 128.

⁷⁹ Milgrom, "Israel's Sanctuary," 392.

⁸⁰ Milgrom, 394. Milgrom, contra Gane, states that while inadvertent misdemeanours were cleansed instantly through regular purification offerings, since their impurities only reached the outer layers of the Temple, wanton and unrepentant sins could only be purified on the Day of Atonement, since the impurities of heinous sins reached deep into the Holy of Holies. For Milgrom, forgiveness of sin is not a category affected by the purification offering. The purification offering was meant simply for the purging of impurity from the sacred spaces.

⁸¹ Gane, *Cult and Character*, 232.

⁸² Gane, 258; Compare Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, 149, who understands both purification animals to comprise one purification offering.

⁸³ Milgrom, "Israel's Sanctuary," 396.

⁸⁴ Gane, *Cult and Character*, 264.

⁸⁵ Milgrom, "Israel's Sanctuary," 396; Gane, 230.

through their baptism (βαπτίζω, 6:3) into Christ Jesus. To support this conclusion, I will explore the presence of baptism in relation to ritual purity in early Judaism and early Christianity.

The Presence of Ritual Purity in Early Judaism and Early Christianity

As mentioned above, most commentators understand βαπτίζω as merely a burial symbol for the believer's union with the death and resurrection of Christ. Through one's baptism, the individual publicly declares their participation in the death of Christ and pledges allegiance to the dominion of God by continuing to walk in newness of life founded upon Christ's resurrection.⁸⁶ In addition to the historic interpretation, I will argue that βαπτίζω also bears the notion of ritual sacrifice and purification as the means by which the believer attains freedom from the dominion of sin and death as their sin and impurity is purged away.

Firstly, one must investigate the presence of baptism in relation to ritual purity in early Judaism and early Christianity. By studying the Qumran communities,⁸⁷ a society vital for understanding the beliefs and practices of Second Temple Judaism, it is evident that the group consisted of priestly individuals who rejected the institutional Temple due to its corruption.⁸⁸ However, this group seemingly cared deeply for purity laws but could not offer sacrifices at the temple for purification. Consequently, the group elevated other purity laws, namely, the maintenance of ritual purity through washing.⁸⁹ Through the discovery of ritual baths at Qumran, it is possible to understand some ablutions to be an adaptation of the purification offering sacrificed at the Temple (4Q277 I 1-13).⁹⁰ Just as the average Jew may have brought a regular purification offering for sins committed and impurity generated, so also members of the Qumran communities may have conducted ablutions to cleanse themselves of ritual impurity resulting from sin. While the ablutions conducted at Qumran were administered regularly, and thus, dramatically unlike Christian baptism, the first ablution completed by a member could have signified an initiatory rite.⁹¹ For example, Josephus, depicting the initiation of individuals into the Essene community, describes the process of bathing with a "purer kind of holy water" (B.J. 2.137–142). While it is unclear whether the act of ritual

⁸⁶ See Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 36. Other scholars have attempted to understand βαπτίζω through a sacramental lens, perceiving the rite of baptism as the instrument by which an individual is joined to Christ's death, enabling them to walk in newness of life. This paper will not address this current debate.

⁸⁷ Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 65–69.

⁸⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 11; Church, *Temple Rejected*, 79; Schiffman, "Community without Temple," 267.

⁸⁹ Lawrence, *Washing in Water*, 86–97.

⁹⁰ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 105.

⁹¹ Beasley-Murray, 16; Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery In Early Christianity*, 58; Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 76.

bathing was formally part of the initiation process or whether initiation allowed for one to now partake in ritual bathing, it is likely that the first bath of purification symbolized entry into the community.⁹²

As an initiate submitted oneself to their first ablution, they also surrendered oneself to the commandments of God and repented of their former life so that they may be made spiritually clean (4Q512 XI 1-3).⁹³ Only through internal repentance can the rite of ablution cleanse the man of his sins, purifying him of his impurity and allowing him to enter the presence of the holy community (1QS III 4-9).⁹⁴ Evidently, the goal of the initiate was to enter a state of outward ritual cleanliness while pursuing a heart of obedience to gain the desired state of physical and spiritual purity. This act of initiation was considered the start of a new life separate from the power of sin.

Regarding the presence of baptism as a process of ritual purification in early Christianity, ample evidence is attested in the Didache. While the Didache was written in the second century, decades after Paul's epistle to the Romans, it provides revealing evidence of the early Christian understanding of baptism. While the Didache focuses little on the theory of baptism, instructions are given to the practice of baptism.⁹⁵ Notably, baptism is to be preceded by the recitation and study of the Two Ways text, a document outlining the moral code of the Christian faith within an eschatological view of the world divided between good and evil (Did. 1-6).⁹⁶ By submitting to baptism, the Christian pledges their allegiance to the way of good in their moral conduct within the world. Secondly, baptism encouraged the use of "living water" (ὕδατι ζῶντι) subject to availability (Did. 7.2). Appropriated from contemporary literature, living water pertains to a certain classification of running water used for purification rites for severe levels of impurity (e.g., leprosy, contact with a corpse, etc., cf. 11Q19 XLV 15-17).⁹⁷ In this way, living water was understood to impart life and regeneration to the baptizand.⁹⁸ As a result, it is evident that the early Christian understanding of baptism displayed a sense of regeneration through the cleansing of one's impurity, followed by an expectation to live in accordance with the way of righteousness.

This is further emphasized in the works of Tertullian who associated baptism with the forgiveness and cleansing of sins.⁹⁹ In his work, *On Baptism*, Tertullian begins by outlining the reality of baptism as one that washes away the sins of one's former blindness (1.1). He supports this statement by

⁹² Lawrence, *Washing in Water*, 74.

⁹³ Lawrence, 114; Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery In Early Christianity*, 58.

⁹⁴ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 17; Lawrence, 139.

⁹⁵ Blidstein, *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature*, 113; Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 201; Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery In Early Christianity*, 59.

⁹⁶ Blidstein, 114; Ferguson, 202.

⁹⁷ Lawrence, *Washing in Water*, 133.

⁹⁸ Blidstein, *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature*, 115–16; Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 204.

⁹⁹ Ferguson, 346.

later detailing the fact that baptism makes the believer holy as one's spirit is washed and one's body is cleansed (4.1-4.5).¹⁰⁰ Specifically, what is cleansed in the believer is the guilt of sin, and consequently, the resulting penalty of death (5.6, cf. 2.2).¹⁰¹ Once the impurity of sin has been removed by the cleansing of baptism, the Holy Spirit, God's own presence, begins to dwell in the believer (6.1), freeing the believer from the powers of sin (7.2).¹⁰²

Thus, it is evident that in both early Judaism and early Christianity, bathing (whether it be Jewish ablutions or Christian baptism) was understood to bear a purificatory component. Specifically, in both cases, bathing was understood to purge the individual of their sins and thus, initiate them into the community. Moreover, Christian baptism expands upon this idea by explicitly mentioning the dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer through their baptism. In this way, baptism bears similarities to the dwelling presence of God in the temple after purification. Consequently, this provides a foundation by which to analyse the presence of a ritualistic approach in Romans 6:1-11.

The Ritualistic Approach as Outlined in Romans 6:1-11

As stated above, the ritualistic approach builds upon the framework and conclusions of the harmonized approach, bearing insights from both forensic and participatory approaches, and adds greater nuance to the argument through an exploration of Paul's use of βαπτίζω. As a result, the following exegesis will describe the nuances of the ritualistic perspective in relation to this harmonized approach.

After the charge of 6:1, verses 2-4 speak of the believer's participation in the death of Christ. Whereas earlier in the epistle Christ became the purification offering offered on the Day of Atonement on behalf of humanity to be accepted by faith (3:25), now Paul speaks of the believer as one who participates in the historical purifying work of Christ. In line with the participatory perspective, Christ, who identifies fully with humanity under the force of impurity, dies as a purification offering to cleanse sacred space so that God may dwell perfectly with humanity. In his identification with humanity, Christ becomes the representation of all those who have been baptized into his purifying death so that no longer must humanity dwell under the force of impurity apart from the presence of God, but can now enter the sacred space where God may fully dwell with humanity.

Continuing into verse 4, Paul introduces the reality of Christ's resurrection, enabling the believer to walk in newness of life. Through the resurrection, Christ proves himself to be the final

¹⁰⁰ Ferguson, 346; Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery In Early Christianity*, 46.

¹⁰¹ Ferguson, 346.

¹⁰² See Ferguson, 347, for a comprehensive account of Tertullian's work that goes beyond *On Baptism*.

purification offering on behalf of his people, enabling the creation of a new relationship between the purified people and the God who will never depart from his habitation among them. Consequently, this new creation, displayed through Christ as the renewed humanity dwelling in the renewed dwelling place, allows the believer to walk in the newness of life as they act as members of this new creation. While believers have not yet fully experienced the finality of their purified state in the renewed dwelling place under the rule of God, the surety of the renewed future, displayed in Christ, enables the believer to act in accordance with the rule of God apart from adherence to the law.

Consecutively, just as the participatory approach understood τῷ ὁμοιώματι τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ in verses 5-6 as denoting the believer's conformity to Christ's death through daily ethical living, so also the ritualistic approach understands τῷ ὁμοιώματι τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ similarly. The ritualistic approach understands the believer's conformity to Christ as conformity to the purifying work of Christ. Just as Christ purged the impurity produced by humanity's sinfulness through his sacrificial death and resurrection, and thus brought forgiveness of sin through his justifying work (6:7), so also believers conform to the purifying work of Christ through the death of the old self (the producer of impurity) and the habitation of a new life. In walking in the newness of life, the believer engages with the future reality of their final dwelling with God through moral acts of purification in the present life.

Finally, verses 9-11 describe the defeat of death's reign and impurity within the old age. Due to Christ's resurrection and consequential act of purification, death and impurity no longer have dominion over Christ. As the blood of the purification offering cleansed the sanctuary and the offerer from impurity's rule, so also the blood of Christ permanently cleanses the renewed dwelling place of God and the believers of faith (3:25) so that God's rule and dwelling may be perfectly established among his people. Having experienced the purifying work of Christ, the people of God must consider themselves cleansed of sin and liberated from the force of impurity and, thus, work as purifying agents of God in the world.

Conclusion

As the Roman Christ-followers struggled to understand how to ethically respond to God's grace without the law, Paul introduces a fundamental paradigm shift by describing union with Christ as the foundation behind ethical living. As understood through this harmonized approach, one's union and conformity to the death and resurrection of Christ leads to the justification and liberation of the believer from the rule and penalty of sin, enabling ethical living. Building upon this harmonized perspective, the ritualistic approach nuances the ideas of justification and liberation by examining Paul's use of βαπτίζω. Evidently, Paul understands one's union with the death and resurrection of

Christ as one's participation in Christ as a purification offering (3:25). Through participating in Christ's purifying work, the believer is cleansed from a state of sinful impurity and freed from the reign of impurity, enabling the presence of God to dwell in their midst, presently through ethical living, and in the future in totality. Further work needs to be done to understand Paul's ritualistic framework throughout the entire epistle, particularly, in Paul's use of sacrificial language in Romans 12:1-2 (especially Paul's use of *παρίστημι* in 6:13 and 12:1) as an exhortation towards ethical living.

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