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Women Baptizers: Restoring Baptismal Typology to the Birth of Moses from a Painting at Dura Europos (c. 240 CE)

Mujeres bautizadoras: restauración de la tipología bautismal en el nacimiento de Moisés a partir de una pintura de Dura Europos (c. 240 d.C.)

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Abstract: A painted panel with the scene of the rescue of Moses from the Nile in the Dura Europos synagogue is here discussed in relation to the question of women baptizers in the *Didascalia apostolorum*. The panel and the document are roughly contemporary and from the same region, Syria. A performative reading of the panel where women enact Moses' safe delivery from the threat of exposure, and name and wash him with ritual vessels, reveals the baptismal typology of the scene. However, patristic tradition almost entirely neglects the rescue of Moses among the many baptismal typologies of episodes from his life. This observation leads to an understanding of women's marginalization from baptismal celebration as a theological choice that removed ritual significance from the acts of birth and naming that were the prerogative of womenfolk, especially mothers.

Keywords: Dura Europos, Moses, Nile, baptism, typology, women.

Resumen: Un panel pintado con la escena del rescate de Moisés del Nilo en la sinagoga de Dura Europos se analiza aquí en relación con la cuestión de las mujeres bautizadoras en la *Didascalia apostolorum*. El panel y el documento son aproximadamente contemporáneos y proceden de la misma región, Siria. Una lectura performativa del panel, en el que las mujeres representan la liberación segura de Moisés de la amenaza de ser expuesto, y lo nombran y lavan con vasos rituales, revela la tipología bautismal de la escena. Sin embargo, la tradición patrística olvida casi por completo el rescate de Moisés entre las numerosas tipologías bautismales de episodios de su vida. Esta observación lleva a entender la marginación de las mujeres de la celebración bautismal como una opción teológica que quitaba significado ritual a los actos de nacimiento y nombramiento que eran prerrogativa de las mujeres, especialmente de las madres.

Palabras clave: Dura Europos, Moisés, Nilo, bautismo, tipología, mujeres.

1. Introduction

A well-known and often quoted passage of a collection of early rules known as the *Didascalia apostolorum*, extant in Syriac translation from a Greek original, prohibits women from administering baptism:

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> As to whether a woman should baptize, or whether one should be baptized by a woman, we do not counsel this, since it is a transgression of the commandment and a great danger to her who baptizes as to the one baptized. For were it lawful for a woman to be baptized our lord and teacher would himself have been baptized by Mary his mother; he was, however, baptized by John just as others of the people. Brothers and sisters, do not endanger yourselves by acting outside the law of the Gospel[1].

Roughly contemporary with this document and in the same geographical area of Syro-Mesopotamia, a monumental fresco of the rescue of Moses from the Nile was depicted c. 240 CE in a Jewish synagogue in the Hellenistic multi-cultural town of Dura Europos on the Euphrates[2]. The colourful image features an array of women, showing nine females out of twelve adults, plus baby Moses[3]. In this paper, I suggest that this image displays baptismal valence that can help illuminate the meaning of the *Didascalia* passage.

In a short article, it is impossible to tackle all the problems in this text[4], or to fully explain the complex historical development of early Christian baptism[5]. It is also beyond the scope of this essay to explain how the unique paintings in the Dura synagogue work to characterize that space for a specific community, or how the community interpreted the image[6]. I am interested only in pointing out the existence of a baptismal typology in the iconography of the rescue of Moses that provided precedent for the practice of infant baptism by women. The theological elaboration of baptism, however, soon progressed in other, more spiritualizing, directions. This precedent was forgotten, or perhaps deliberately eliminated as an embarrassing paradigm. In this theologically and politically driven process of divorcing religious initiation from naming and rite-of-passage ceremonies, the role of women (and more specifically of mothers) was also sidelined. This happened, I suggest, not only for practical reasons[7], nor because of external social pressures[8], but as a by-product of specific theological choices that, while perhaps directed at balancing extremes, connived with views on women's subordinate status as the inevitable and even appropriate ticket to the success of a worldly-wise ecclesial institution. This choice granted integration into society and supported Roman policies of maintaining a unified multinational empire.

2. The baptismal valence of the rescue of Moses as depicted at Dura Europos

The long panel painting on the first register of the West wall, to the right of the central niche, represents a river scene (Fig. 1). The waters of the Nile occupy the foreground of

1. *Did. App*. 3.9, transl. Stewart-Sykes (2009: 189). On this passage see Lindemann (2011: 797-807), Eisen (2000: 150-151), Cardaman (1999: 311); see also Fonrobert (2001).

2. Kraeling (1956: 169-178), Weitzmann - Kessler (2009: 26-34).

3. Steinberg (2006), Hazan (2020: 197-198, fig. 4), Crostini (2023: 210-211 and fig. 8.1).

4. The question of how it relates to the positive role it attributes to deaconesses is particularly acute: *Did. App*. 3.12, transl. Stewart-Sykes (2019: 192-195); cf. Bradshaw (2012: 641-642).

5. Ferguson (2009) is the ultimate reference work on this topic.

6. I will tackle questions related to Jewish exegesis in my forthcoming book (Crostini forthcoming b).

7. Either because «[w]hen the church began baptizing infants there was no longer any need for women in the ministry to baptize women, and the female ministers were abolished» (Christiansen, 1981: 6) or because it was inappropriate for the sexes to be exposed naked during the ceremony to members of the other sex: Bradshaw (2019), Lindemann (2011).

8. As argued in general by Zamfir (2013: 386-388) about the subordination of women.

the painting lengthwise[9]. On the left, a naked woman bathes in the river, holding a naked baby on her hip. Behind her, on the riverbank, a line of women stands: starting from the left, the first two can be identified as Jochebed and Miriam, who receive the rescued baby Moses, while the other three women, who bear objects, may be two or three different individuals[10]. On the right, the court scene with Pharaoh, enthroned in the centre and flanked by two younger men, has been commonly identified as the audience with the midwives. I have argued, however, that a more plausible interpretation of this part of the image is the presentation of Moses at Pharaoh's court by his mother and sister (depicted here with identical clothes as on the left side), with Pharaoh's daughter kneeling down before Pharaoh to obtain his assent at receiving this child as her own[11]. These women's active agency in the salvation of Moses corresponds to the description of Moses' infancy in the play by Ezekiel the Tragedian, the *Exagoge*, where emphasis on foreign surrogate motherhood and the Egyptian court education of Moses denotes international openness. This attitude is consonant with the Hellenistic multicultural city where these paintings were commissioned and exhibited[12].

Figure 1

Thus, the pictorial rendition is not just a transposition into images of the biblical text but reflects an oral-performative stage of the story, about which it has left for us invaluable traces[13]. A series of details in the painting can be interpreted as allusions to baptism. The naked figure of Pharaoh's daughter and the ritual objects carried by her handmaids, coupled with the naming of Moses, celebrate the regenerative power of the Nile water as a new birth. Moses' precarious floating basket is represented as a water-borne casket, like Noah's ark in miniature, in which death and rebirth simultaneously take place: Moses' birth story dramatizes both the salvific and the destructive powers of the river, with eschatological implications. Were these images (or similar painted or enacted scenes after Ezekiel's play) triggers to the polemic reflected in the fifteenth chapter of the *Didascalia apostolorum* against women baptizers?

9. Kraeling (1956: 169).

10. Kraeling (1956: 174) and Weitzmann - Kessler (1990: 30) count three, but one is shown twice wearing the same dress and carrying the same fluted bowl (but not the pitcher), so she could be the same person repeated.

11. Crostini (2023: 213, 217-218).

12. Crostini (2023: 214-217, 223).

13. Crostini (forthcoming a); Crostini (forthcoming b).

3. Ritual washing in the Nile

The stark-naked body of the daughter of Pharaoh has generated much comment[14]. Some have decried the image as out of character with the moral standards expected of a holy place[15]. Goodenough famously identified the goddess-like features of this attractive womanly silhouette with oriental divinities such as Anahita[16], or indeed with Aphrodite rising from the waters, a widespread iconography in Dura[17]. The miraculous rescue raises expectations of the presence of a supernatural power. The materialization of a (nameless) princess as deliverer is a twist to this classical plot[18].

Not many commentators, however, have paid attention to the river in which the woman is bathing. Yet the mythical status of the Nile made it a primary location for ritual washings and myths of rebirth. The monumental collection of essays on Christian, Jewish, and pagan water rituals edited by David Hellholm often references the Nile. The rebirth rituals of Isis and Osiris are connected to this river and these practices spread to Italy together with associated festivals, as demonstrated by the famous Nilotic landscape mosaic in Palestrina near Rome[19]. At the Pelusia, «an Egyptian style festival in the city of Rome introduced presumably under Marcus Aurelius», a ritual sprinkling took place in memory of the ebbs and flows of the Nile[20]. Indeed, the river's rhythms marked the life –or the death– of the land of Egypt.

Nile water was a sought-after commodity. It was both required for sacred rituals and desirable for its healing properties. Juvenal, in a merciless satire, stigmatizes the superstitious behaviour of a Roman noblewoman who performs penitential immersions in the Tiber even in the depths of winter and then journeys to Egypt to procure Nile water with which to sprinkle the Temple of Isis in the Campus Martius in Rome[21]. Polybius recounts that the daughter of King Antiochus, Berenike, only drank water from the Nile and therefore had to travel with an adequate supply from that source. He does not specify whether this was for health reasons or just for taste[22]. The Egyptian background to these beliefs lies in the myth of Osiris:

> In the ritual myth of Osiris dying and later being resuscitated was closely related to the seasonal changes of the Nile. The living Osiris was identified with the life-giving water of the Nile that dwindles away as Osiris is dying, and yet comes back as flood with the resus-

14. Xeravits (2017).

15. Moon (1992: 595): «she must have seemed a shameless image even to a hellenized (*sic*) Jew living in this garrison town in eastern Syria»; more objectively evidenced in Smith (1966: 219 n. 7).

16. Goodenough (1964: 200-203). On this divinity identified with water as representing fertility, support for warriors and healing, see now Saadi-Nejad (2021), with critical review Skupniewicz (2021).

17. Baird (2018: 141, 146-147). Weitzmann - Kessler (1990: 30) discern «an ultimately Hellenistic ancestry» for this figure.

18. Van Seters (1994).

19. The index only lists «*Nillandschaft*» as a term and does not bring together references to the Nile. On the installation of this mosaic, covered with water and filled with living fish, see Assmann and Kucharek (2011: 47-48).

20. Graf (2011: 109).

21. Graf (2011: 108), Merkelbach (2001: 104), Iuv., *carm*. 6, vv. 526-529.

22. Dölger (1936: 167).

> citated Osiris during the summer (*sic*) season. Similarly, the initiates had, in principle, to bathe themselves in water that had been brought specially from the Nile[23].

Like the waters of baptism, washing in the Nile had healing and regenerative powers; its waters were «living waters», both «refreshing» and «fiery»[24].

The naked figure of Pharaoh's daughter standing in the flowing waters of the Nile recalls the powers of the river together with those of the mother-goddesses associated with it. Her nude bathing, however, also evokes depictions of ceremonies of initiation. Jensen points out that «[n]ude bathing was a part of initiation into Greco-Roman mystery cults» at Eleusis and for Isis[25]. A stucco relief now in the Farnesina palace shows a young man standing naked before an older person dressed in flowing robes at a ceremony of Bacchic initiation as indicated by the *thyrsoi*[26]. This compositional scheme is also used for Christ's baptism in the Jordan, in which he is often depicted of smaller size than the Baptist, unclothed and as a youth[27]. Nakedness was acceptable in Christian art within certain contexts such as bathing and childhood[28]. The iconographical similarity between images of Eleusinian initiation and Christ's baptism would support theories of cross-contamination between these practices[29].

The ritual connotations of the princess's bathing are further underscored by the line of women who stand on the riverbank holding precious vessels. Their carrying these objects by holding them with both hands at chest height is reminiscent of processional poses, such as the procession to Isis described by Clement of Alexandria and illustrated in an exquisite relief now in the Vatican Museums[30]. The objects they carry are a gold pitcher, a gold fluted bowl and an ivory casket.

The ivory casket presents a side view of the object floating on the Nile next to Pharaoh's daughter: it is the basket that carried Moses to safety. The basket, unlike that described at Ex. 2:3 as made of reeds, is a rigid construction shaped like a pedimented sarcophagus, similar to first- or second-century house-shaped ossuaries[31]. These objects are usually extant in stone, but could also be made of wood, ivory, or ceramic[32]. The Mishna refers to Moses' gathering of Joseph's bones (Ex. 13:19) to validate the practice of ossile-

23. Klostergaard-Petersen (2011: 6 n. 10), with reference to Merkelbach (2001: 152), Assmann and Kucharek (2011: 50-53).

24. Dölger (1936: 153-156, 165-177).

25. Jensen (2011: 164). Like Juvenal, so did Aristophanes and Apuleius make fun of these practices in Eleusinian and Isis cults respectively: see Merkelbach (2001: 102-110, esp. 104) on Nile's holy water.

26. Bragantini and de Vos (1982: tav. 79); Leipoldt (1925: fig. 2); see also fig. 1 for a relief from Eleusis.

27. Jensen (2010a).

28. Jensen (2010a: 162-163); Jensen (2012: 318): «[i]t was apt... for a figure who, by virtue of his (nude) baptismal bath, enjoyed a peaceful rest while awaiting the general resurrection». Smith (1966: 220) observes that, despite protestations of prudishness by rabbis, nakedness was carried over from Jewish to Christian baptismal practice as a requirement.

29. *Pace* Ferguson (2009: 378).

30. προφανὲς τὸ ὑδρεῖον ἐγκεκολπισμένος: Dölger (1936: 156 and pl. XI), Clem., *str*. 6, 4, 37, 1. The image is available as a 17th-cent. etching at the Philadelphia Museum at: https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/280524 (consulted 7 July 2024). The Vatican relief shows a profile view, whereas the handmaids of the painting are presented frontally.

31. Rahmani (1994).

32. Figueras (1983: 25) rejects cedar-wood as a reading of a Talmudic passage, because it had to be imported from Lebanon.

gium: «Moses was reckoned worthy to take the bones of Joseph»[33]. The presence of this object may therefore be due to traditions specifically concerning Moses.

The pedimented floating house also recalls depictions of Noah's ark, a pre-eminent symbol of salvation used in baptismal contexts, both figural and textual[34]. The disputed object depicted on a mosaic at Clupea (Kélibia) on a baptismal font is very similar[35]. The regenerative powers of Noah's story are described in 1 Clement as a re-birth (*palingenesis*), while Justin Martyr likens the waters of the flood to those of baptism[36]. Lanfranchi notes that the word used in Ezekiel's metrical text, however, is not the expected *kibotos*, but the more unusual *kosmos*[37].

Attention is drawn to this casket by its being depicted twice, once floating on the water, and a second time held by the handmaid on the shore. In this second depiction, its display surely involves keeping a memory and a record of the rescue event at the river. While it seals the pact between Pharaoh's daughter and Jochebed, by looking back to the story of exposure and threat, at the same time it looks forward to eternal salvation after death[38].

The pitcher and bowl are large and eye-catching[39]. Kraeling finds a match to the «small gold jug» among the temple furnishings scattered on the floor from the Temple of Dagon panel (WB 4)[40]. This observation supports Kessler and Weitzmann's understanding of the cultic nature of the display, as already recognized by Goodenough[41]. The formal, procession-like array and the way that the objects are carried contributes to the sacrality of the moment shown[42]; such fine metalwork belonged to cultic objects made «for the gods»[43].

Although the royal status of Pharaoh's daughter justifies her ownership of precious vessels, the use of these objects for her bathing must be discounted by her full immersion in the river water[44]. Rather, the juxtaposition of the fluted bowl with the ivory casket dis-

33. Figueras (1983: 22). M. Sotah 1,9.

34. Jensen (2010a: 267-269); Lundberg (1942: 73-116).

35. Jensen (2010a: 268 and fig. 6.7).

36. Jensen (2010a: 269), 1 *Clem*. 9.4; Just., *dial*. 138.2-3.

37. Lanfranchi (2006: 136-137); Crostini (2023: 215); Cohen (1993: 34-35) does not see this word as a reference to a container, but to a special dress or adornment of the baby. The images do not support this reading of the text.

38. Meyers (1971: 91) reads the panel of Ezekiel's resurrection of the dry bones at Dura as witness to similar beliefs. On the association of water with funerary rites, see Figueras (1983: 101-102). Figueras also considers other metaphors, such as the open gates – one wonders whether the prominent city gate at the far right of the image could be also understood in an eschatological vein.

39. Kraeling (1956: 175) considers three objects: a jug (fig. 47), a bowl (fig. 48), and a «fluted gold dish» (fig. 50). I believe the latter two to be the same object repeated twice.

40. Kraeling (1956: 175).

41. Weitzmann - Kessler (1990: 30) agree with Goodenough here, who «demonstrated that such objects are commonly held by nymphs, but then went a step too far by suggesting that these maidens were actually meant to represent nymphs».

42. Frank (2023: 40-50). An intriguing fragment related to baptismal polemic also focuses on the contemplation of ritual vessels in a temple context: Bovon (2000: 720-721). See further below on this text.

43. Horster (2023: 55-58).

44. Kraeling (1956: 175), «the princess' toilet accessories». The painter is hardly concerned with the realism of the scene: for example, the princess' clothes are neither depicted on the riverbank nor held by her attendants.

played by the handmaids standing side by side strongly encourages taking them together as all objects pertaining to baby Moses[45].

4. Naming Moses at the riverbank

According to Ezekiel the Tragedian's version of Moses' story, the naming of the child takes place by the riverbank. The distich about the naming concludes the birth of Moses fragment: «She then named me Moses, because / she had taken me from the watery river-bank» [46]. In this way, Ezekiel's poetic version remains close to the etymology of the name (presumed or real) that explains the Egyptian name «Moses» as «rescued from the waters».[47] This important baby is therefore named by his foreign surrogate mother, and reflects her experience of having rescued him from the Nile. This procedure has biblical parallels. According to Susan Ackerman,

> a child's mother or her female surrogate or surrogates name the child in about 63% of naming episodes in the Hebrew Bible where a name-giver is identified. More specifically still, there are, by my count, forty-six instances in the biblical text where a child's name-giver is explicitly identified, and in twenty-nine of these episodes, the child's mother or her female surrogate or surrogates bestow the baby's name[48].

Thus, in the majority of cases, women are responsible for naming contextually with the birth. Children's names often reflect mothers' experience as articulated in the naming speeches by the same mothers[49]. Moving the timing of the naming to a later occasion, such as circumcision, guarantees fathers' involvement in this process, a shift that appears to increase in the Roman period[50].

While depictions of famous births, including Jesus's, were accompanied by images of the babies' first washing, represented in large, cup-like vessels, Moses' rescue shifted this watery moment of ablution to his exposure in the river. The drama between life and death condensed in the act of human birth was therefore consumed in a natural landscape that already contained that mythical potential. Traces of these parallel worlds remain in Ephrem's poetry that compares the Virgin Mary and the river Jordan as fruitful wombs[51].

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45. In describing the ark in the river, Kraeling does not notice the similarity with the casket held by the handmaid: see Kraeling (1956: 176). That the pitcher cannot be seen could be explained by its being held inside the bowl against the chest of the woman.

46. Engl. transl. Jacobson (1983: 51); Lanfranchi (2006: 111, ll. 30-31): ὄνομα δὲ Μωσῆν ὠνόμαζε, τοῦ χάριν | ὑγρᾶς ἀνεῖλε ποταμίας ἀπ᾽ἠόνος. This word for «riverbank», ἠιών, is found in Her., *Hist*. 2.13.7, 7.44.5 and 8.96.6 and Aesch., *Ag*. 1158.

47. Lanfranchi (2006: 138); Cohen (1993: 36). On the Egyptian origin of the name and some of the problems involved, see Towers (1935).

48. Ackerman (unpublished); Ackerman (forthcoming). See also other counts in Albertz (2012a: 247 and n. 9), Bridge (2014: 391-392), Ljung (1989: 15-20). References from Ackerman (unpublished): «Mothers or their female surrogates name children in Gn 4:1, 25; 19:37-38; 29:32-35; 30:6, 8, 11, 13, 18, 20, 21, 24; 35:18; 38:4-5, 29; Ex 2:10; Idc 13:24; ISm1:20; 4:21; IISm 12:24; Is 7:14; Rt 4:17; IPar 4:9; 7:16. See also Gn 16:11, where Hagar is told by God's divine messenger that she will name her son Ishmael, but cf. Gn 16:15, where Abram (Abraham) actually bestows the name».

49. Ackerman (unpublished).

50. Lc 1:59 and 2:21 attest to the practice of naming at circumcision; Ackerman (unpublished), Albertz (2012b: 392).

51. Seppälä (2011: 1147, 1160).

The exposed breasts of the bather characterize her womanhood as potentially fertile and attuned to the experience of motherhood. Although the story presents her only as a surrogate mother, her female body is another version of the water's life-giving potential. Viewers in the synagogue would have been aware that bathing in rivers was prescribed to Jewish women as post-partum purification[52]. Could they have wondered whether Pharaoh's daughter had recently experienced childbirth? Might her child have died, and the finding of Moses come as a substitute for loss? By contrast, Jochebed is presented fully clothed[53] and therefore well beyond need of being purified after childbirth. For this reason, perhaps, both biblical and haggadic traditions speak of Moses' concealment for three months before he was exposed (Ex. 2:2)[54]. Perhaps such timing also marked the appropriate moment for giving a child to a wet-nurse. By specifying such details, the narrative shows knowledge of the rhythms of women's and children's bodies. It uses real-life expectations to increase the dramatic irony of the episode.

To be sure, the scene concludes with a normal contract through which Pharaoh's daughter hands over the baby to Jochebed as a paid wet-nurse. Jewish women were often implicated in such services, as in midwifery[55]. Moreover, the terms of such contracts for the return of children to their rightful owners were strictly drawn to avoid controversies over ownership of the older child. The implications are therefore that the child is considered to be the princess. Her naked bathing therefore ostensibly marked her coming out to society after a period of confinement.

Van Seters criticizes the view of Ina Willi-Plain who sees in the story of the river rescue an aetiological tale devised to justify Moses' name, but his argument that not all Egyptian names in the Bible deserve such an explanation (he gives the example of Phineas) is weak considering the special importance of Moses[56]. What seems more likely is that the biblical redactor had reasons to divorce the naming occasion from the river scene, all the while keeping the etymological meaning that depended on it intact. Ezekiel's version reflects oral traditions pre-existent to the text. It is necessary to invert the direction of dependence on such grounds, rather than consider his play derivative from the biblical narrative[57].

The painting at Dura, inspired by Ezekiel's scene, presents the naming event as a washing ceremony, a kind of baptism. The action of pouring from a vessel is attested for some baptismal ceremonies, even though pictorial and material evidence is scant. A few images have a hand-held convex dish from which the water flows over the head of the baptismal candidate[58]. On an etched glass fragment, «[a] jug or vase seems to be a source of water (or oil)» [59]. In the *Didache*, water is poured on the baptizand's head three times

52. Blidstein (2017: 115). Jewish sources provide a special angle on this question, in contrast to views expressed by other scholars: for details, see Blidstein (2017: 134 n. 31).

53. Kraeling (1956: 172) for description of dress.

54. Cohen (1993: 121).

55. Childs (1965: 112-113).

56. Van Seters (1994: 28 and n. 40); Willi-Plein (1991).

57. This is the common assumption: Cohen (1993); Lanfranchi (2006); Jacobson (1983).

58. There are three examples where John is shown holding such a vessel: a reconstructed sarcophagus in the Museo Pio Cristiano, the dome mosaic in the Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna, and a decorated silver spoon from Aquileia: Jensen (2010a: 56, 137 and 142, figs. 2.5, 3.8, 3.10). See Jensen (2010a: 56 n. 95) for the spoon.

59. Jensen (2010a: 142, fig. 3.9).

and Gregory of Nyssa compares this pouring to the coming of the Holy Spirit[60]. Among the baptisms described in the *Acts of Thomas*, one includes mention of a basin or vessel for water[61].

More secure are the attestations of precious vessels used for baptism in later contexts. These objects, rather than the river-setting, came to mark continuity in the practice. The Latin term *pelvis* designating a silver baptismal vessel that Constantine gave to the church at Ostia, weighing about forty pounds, corresponds to Greek *pelike*, which designates a large-necked amphora with handles. In that case, it can be envisaged as a vessel for pouring rather than for containing or immersing[62]. Donations of precious vessels to church treasures included a «service for baptism or penance, of silver, weighing five Roman pounds for use in either baptism or rites associated with penance». This equipment was given by Pope Sixtus to the church of S. Lorenzo, while a more inventive silver stag with a spout from its mouth belonged to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore[63]. Such sophisticated ritual furnishings emerged from finds in Syria, likely products of silver-working ateliers located at Antioch[64]. A silver vase and dish were found at Dura Europos[65].

The jug and fluted dish displayed by the handmaid in the panel painting of Moses' birth is a prop that visually signals an action performed and spoken. It gestures by its presence towards the naming of the child at the time of his finding by the river, while the casket is the material memento of his having been saved *from* but also *by* the water – not drowned. The nomen-omen belief is mirrored in Moses' many escapes from dangerous waters, not least in his miraculous passage of the Red Sea, where Pharaoh was drowned.

5. The baptismal significance of Moses

Many of the episodes from the life of Moses were attributed baptismal significance, especially those to do with water. The Targums develop the eschatological and salvific power of each of Moses' water miracles: the waters of Marah, the twelve sources at the oasis of Elim, Rephidim, the wells of Miriam, of Be'er, and of Jacob at Harran, and other water episodes.[66] Moses' striking water from the rock is typically associated with baptismal scenes in Roman catacombs[67]. Widespread in both treatises and liturgy is the paradigm of the passage of the Red Sea as a figure of baptism, as the waters opened to offer Israelites their longed-for salvation[68]. Cyril of Jerusalem's *Baptismal Catecheses* compare Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites to the devil's pursuit of those to be baptized «to the very streams of salvation»: just as «the tyrant of old was drowned into the sea», so,

60. Jensen (2010a: 138): *Did.* 7, Gr. Nyss. *or*. 35 on the Holy Spirit; Ferguson (2009: 607).

61. Jensen (2010a: 131): *A. Thom.* 132.

62. The translation «basin» is ambiguous, but the cognate with the body part around the waist may indicate something more similar to the fluted bowl in Dura's depiction. Jensen (2010a: 142-143); *Lib. pontif*. 34 (Sylvester).

63. Jensen (2010a: 143).

64. Kondoleon (2000), Mango (1986).

65. Visible at https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/5180, Fowlkes-Childs and Seymour (2019:1 86, item 130); Crostini (forthcoming b).

66. Bienaimé (1984: 1-75, 88-199); additional episodes, analyzed by Bienaimé (1984: 76-87), are: Nm 20:11, Dt 8:15 and Ps 74, 78, 105 and 114.

67. Jensen (2010a: 76-79); Apostolos-Cappadona (2011: 1728).

68. Daniélou (1956: 86-98); Lundberg (1942: 16-17, 116-135) from liturgical sources.

in Christ, the devil «disappears in the saving water»[69]. Finn notes that, «[i]n the allusive way of the East Syrians, Jacob of Serugh links the Exodus through the Red Sea, John the Baptist at the Jordan, and Christ's gift of baptism» [70].

Parallels with Moses are found especially in Syriac authors writing metaphorically and poetically about baptism. Ephrem develops a sustained comparison between Jesus and Moses. Not only are single actions placed next to one another, but the whole significance of Moses is captured in the salvific project of his life. In Ephrem's *Hymns on the Epiphany*,

> Moses is a mortal person on whom the majesty of God dwells, and this mystical dwelling is a «figure of Baptism»: «On Moses dwelt the Breath, and on you the perfecting of Christ...». Moreover, the imagery of water is connected with the cloud that overshadowed Israel in the desert, a symbol of the Holy Spirit that overshadows one in baptism[71].

For Ephrem, Moses and Jesus were both «leader and Saviour; … for them (the Israelites) he caused water to gush from a rock; for us the Savior made living water flow from his side [Ex. 17:6 and Jn 19:33]»[72]. Elsewhere the theme of baptism as illumination prompts Ephrem to compare light at Moses' Sinai revelation to light at the revelation of Jesus during his baptism in the Jordan: «Just as Moses gleamed with the divine glory because he saw the splendor briefly, how much more should the body wherein Christ resided gleam, and the river where he was baptized?»[73].

The figure of Moses is, therefore, paradigmatically a «baptismal» figure. In this light, it is all the more troubling that the moment of his birth, dramatized as a coming out of the waters making him the figure of a «saved saviour»[74] and sealing the most shared human experience of all – the perilous coming into the world –, should not figure at all in this list of typological events. The only remnant of it appears in Origen, which was picked up by Isidore of Seville and survives in medieval catenae[75]. This astonishing absence goes hand in hand with the total omission of comment on the act of naming that happened to Moses through his adoptive foreign mother, and that kept being part of the understanding of the ceremony as a rite-of-passage for most of the faithful. What happened to the baptismal

69. Hall (2013: 92-93); text in Cross (1995: 54).

70. Finn (1992: 25): «Moses in the wilderness depicted the image of baptism/...The great Moses with his baptism marked out the baptism/ wherein the whole world is to receive forgiveness». On Red Sea as typology of baptism, see Daniélou (1956:86-98). Although this typology is mentioned as belonging also to John Chrysostom's *Baptismal Instructions* in Harkins' translation (Harkins 1963: 6), the text does not develop this or other Moses-related baptismal typologies, even though it mentions Moses as a type of Christ several times.

71. Seppälä (2011: 1171-1172).

72. Finn (1992: 146).

73. Finn (1992: 159); Seppälä (2011: 1148).

74. Miller (2013: 27), referring to Gerhards (2006: 137, 146-147).

75. Isid., *sent*. 58, PL 83: 109A: Filia Pharaonis, quae Moysen expositum ad ripam fluminis collegit. Ecclesia gentium est, quae Christum ad flumen salutaris lavacri reperit. (Pharaoh's daughter, who gathered Moses exposed at the riverside, is the church of the Gentiles, which found Christ at the river of the salvific washing. My transl.); Or. apud *Gloss.* Ex 2:2, also allegorically reads the daughter of Pharaoh as «Ecclesia de gentibus congregata». This passage is too long to quote but deserves further attention. https://glosse.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?id=liber&numLivre=04&chapitre=04_2 (consulted 12 July 2024). I am gratful to Anders Ekenberg for drawing my attention to these passages.

significance of Moses' rescue from the Nile, which, as I hope to have demonstrated, so eloquently imaged at Dura in the early third century?

6. The rejection of Moses' Nilotic typology in baptismal theology

Stephen Patterson describes three models available for patterning baptism in the early church: a spiritual enlightenment model, a community reception model, and a death model. Of these, the first one prevailed. Patterson defines the spiritual model as a «baptism [that] conveyed the Holy Spirit to the baptized and transformed them into enlightened, immortal, children («sons») of God, like Adam, their primordial kin»[76]. Preference for this model preserved the central role of the Holy Spirit, about whose importance everyone agreed, but was effectively a concession to the gnostic component of the communities and their Neoplatonic philosophical background. Jesus's Jordan baptism by John fitted into this mold. The occasion produced an epiphany where God the Father recognizes Him as His Son. In baptism, we become «children to the father»[77].

All the episodes of the life of Moses that correspond to baptismal typology involve men only. On the West wall of the synagogue the contrast between the women-led rescue of Moses from the Nile and these all-men models of baptism and salvation is visualized. Both the Passage of the Red Sea, replete with armed troops[78], and the twelve sources at the oasis of Elim[79] are represented in the upper registers. The sacrifice of Elijah on Mount Carmel, depicted immediately to the left on the South wall, includes water-bearing people that could be associated with the baptismal valence that this episode of idol-destruction acquired[80]. The work of the church was identified as a fight against pagan idolatry, with baptism as the weapon[81]. These paradigms were more consonant to the all-men comfort zone that became the church hierarchy.

The women's panel that worked as baptismal typology for Moses' birth story was the odd one out. It claimed viewer's attention on the lowest, most visible row of images, and, being the birth of the hero, carried strong foundational implications that made it even more dangerous. It lent itself to accusations of idolatry created by the ambiguities of the river Nile and the nude female bathing in it, which was evidently at odds with the role of idol-slayer that the institutional church increasingly carved for itself. By recognizing the role of naming Moses through an ablution ceremony with sacred vessels by a foreign, Egyptian foster-mother, the image counteracted claims about the exclusivity of baptism and its clericalized enactment, and showed it undesirably implicated in human birth and women's purification rituals. Finally, this paradigm demanded a non-sectarian understanding of the church, about which not everyone agreed.

With the notable exception of Origen[82], rebirth in baptism is delineated in opposition to carnal birth. Rather than «a new birth» apprehended through bodily experience, mediated by the washing ritual, baptism is understood as leading to a nearly unenfleshed kind of existence, a form of angelic perfection manifesting in ascetic lifestyle and infallible

76. Patterson (2018: 69-70, 63 and n. 47).

77. Blidstein (2017: 129): Clem., *paed*. 1.6.32.

78. Kraeling (1956: 74-85), Weitzmann - Kessler (2009: 38-51).

79. Kraeling (1956: 118-124), Weitzmann - Kessler (2009: 63-67).

80. Lundberg (1942: 29-30).

81. Lundberg (1942: 30): «le baptisme a justement signifié la rupture definitive avec le paganisme».

82. Hall (2013: 95-98).

morality. Justin Martyr contrasts with contempt the «first birth» that comes from physical intercourse and is «a matter of ignorance and necessity» to the spiritual birth of baptism that produces «children of choice and of knowledge (*proaireseos kai epistemes*).» He therefore calls baptism «illumination (*photismos*), because they who learn these things are illuminated in their minds (*dianoian*)»[83]. For Clement too, washing and enlightenment went hand in hand[84].

Overwhelmingly, baptismal theology, according to Patterson's first model, dealt with enlightenment and spiritual matters, looked forward to eschatological promises, described and inscribed communal and social belonging as an identity marker – but had little or nothing to do with mothers, birth, names, or individual destiny. Even its connection to death needed special pleading[85]. Unsurprisingly, infant baptism soon became a matter for controversy[86]. From this spiritual perspective, though, it was also harder to explain the necessity for a bodily sign and for water itself[87]. In the stark opposition between spiritual purification in a dirty body and morally unsatisfactory ablutions in unholy water that *P. Oxy.* 840 sets up as a vignette of a dialogue between «the Saviour» and a Levite high priest, Bovon recognizes signs of this encompassing debate[88]. The fragment demonstrates how baptismal understandings were a point of contention between «Jewish» and «Christian» factions: where they agreed was in the elimination of women from the equation.

7. The marginalization of mothers and naming from baptismal practices

From the perspective of adult baptism, belonging to a community became a matter of personal, rational choice (*proairesis*). This optional condition had the advantage of loosening ethnic ties and remixing social composition within the religious community, thus potentially advancing two of the components in the pre-Pauline baptismal formula in Gal. 3:26-28, namely, the division Jew/Gentile and slave/free (Gal. 3:28a-b). It is these two components only that survive in the reprise of the formula found in 1 Cor. 12:13[89]. The third component of Galatians' utopian vision, the erasure of difference between male and female (Gal. 3:28c), gets lost in the process. Thus, baptism is no longer seen primarily «as initiation into an egalitarian community in which ethnic, class, and gender differences were to be overcome», which was Patterson's second model. Together with mothers, this model was rejected. This shift is crucial for understanding what happened to the role of women in baptism.

Spiritualizing baptism entailed dematerializing mothers and their roles in the real birth. In the nearly 2000 pages of Hellholm's volume not once is baptism coupled with the act

83. Blidstein (2017: 122): Just., 1 *apol*. 61.

84. Blidstein (2017: 118), Ferguson (2009: 309-313).

85. O'Reilly (2017), Ferguson (2009: 155-158). See below for how even this aspect is connected to birth and mothers.

86. Ferguson (2009: 375-377) reviews scholarly positions on the origins of infant baptism. If the idea of this paper is correct in grasping a connection with the typology of Moses' birth, then the closest plausible explanation remains Johannes Leipoldt's association with mystery religions and initiation ceremonies (cf. Leipoldt 1925; other works by this author were not available to me).

87. Chevallier (1986).

88. Bovon (2000: 705).

89. Patterson (2018: 65-66).

of naming, whether an infant or an adult[90]. Rather, baptism becomes the celebration of a belonging «in the name of Christ», and its Mosaic paradigm is shifted to a baptism «in the name of Moses» which is strictly understood as Moses' own saving action to the Israelites. One could understand the reference in 1 Cor. 10 on two components of Moses' story alone, the cloud and the water, as counteracting claims that Jewish baptism entailed naming and washing by mothers at the Nile. Baptism was no longer considered a rite of passage: Moses' adult deeds alone serve as fitting preparation to baptism in Christ[91].

Only Origen dared to keep a carnal aspect to the mechanism of spiritual rebirth. Hall notes this positive apprehension and its reprise in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*[92]. For Origen,

> if the human soul «had intercourse with the Word of God», then «a truly blessed offspring» would be birthed. «From there will be born a noble lineage, from there will arise chastity; from there will issue justice, patience, gentleness and love and the venerable offspring of all the virtues». Gregory sees Moses' birth as demonstrating the same dynamic: virtue is birthed as a human being exercises his free will, purposely chooses a life of virtue, and strategically conquers the debilitating effect of the passions... The passions can be overcome through the exercise of the will, a dynamic Gregory sees operative in the narrative of Moses' birth[93].

Gregory continues: «It is the function of free will both to beget this virtuous male offspring and to nourish it with proper food and to plan ahead to save it unharmed from the water» [94]. The water or «stream» on which the baby Moses floats –protected by a basket– is made «turbulent by the successive waves of passion», aspects of sinful human character which cripple our ability to respond to the spirit's power and guidance[95]. Origen's and Gregory's understanding does not reject physical birth as disgusting but emphasizes experience and education as conducive to change and virtue, necessary preparations for the real difficulties of life. Although naming is not mentioned, and real mothers are absent, these authors do not share Tertullian's detachment nor participate in the general silence about the baptismal valence of Moses' birth.

The third model for baptism described by Patterson, which «imagined baptism as vicarious participation in Jesus's death and resurrection such that the baptized would someday rise with Christ and die no more»[96], also underwent a setback despite apostolic support. Indirectly, one could argue that even this aspect was linked to the active agency of mothers and dwindled in proportion to these. Evidence comes from stories of mothers who accompanied their children to be baptized, where their concern for the eschatological fate of the child is emphasized. At the church of Saint Stephen at Uzalis in Roman North

90. Hartman's article (2011) on baptismal name-formulae refers to the invocation of the name of the divinity (Christ); see also Ferguson (2009: 182-183). In fact, recalling the need for a pastoral theology of baptism that includes the ceremony of naming an infant is a necessity even today: see Pence (1998).

91. Swain (2013) has a sustained interpretation of the passage. His supersessionist reading, however, overlooks the possibility of an intentional rewriting of the Jewish past.

92. Hall (2013: 99-100), Ferguson (2009: 614).

93. Hall (2013: 100).

94. Hall (2013: 100-101).

95. Blidstein (2017: 100-101), citing Gr. Nyss., *v. Macr*. II.6, 56.

96. Patterson (2018: 69-70).

Africa, a mother hurried with her sick child to seek baptism (and a cure?) for him, but he died in her arms before she could reach the church. Her prayer to the saint was so fervent, that the child was resuscitated long enough to receive baptism by the presbyters, only to die again immediately afterwards. However, the child gained the privilege of being buried at the shrine[97].

While preserving the bond mother-child as an effective means to ensure the salvific rites of baptism, this anecdote reads as a warning to mothers not to resort to home-spun ceremonies even in cases of extreme danger. Inscriptions attest that these emergencies were frequent[98]. Confiding in the saint, this mother could obtain the legitimate safe passage for her child, which was to be had only at the church and by the clergy in charge of the correct ritual. It included washing, anointing, and the laying of hands. The mother's willingness to make the journey to the church had also earned for him a special final resting place next to the saint's relics. The official message conveyed by the story did not enter discussions about the legitimacy of the celebrants[99], but aimed to exclude mothers' agency beyond their role as mediators between children, saints, and ecclesiastical hierarchy. The story is a far cry from Jesus' compassion on a grieving mother requiring the physical resurrection of her child (Lc 7:11-17).

Along with the birth paradigm, the death paradigm also weakened. Only mothers were passionately involved in the fate of their offspring. Extreme emergency such as extermination, offering a parallel to Moses' birth predicament, inspired a metaphor that recalls mothers' baptismal roles. Mothers' tears at the death of the Holy Innocents – a killing of babies parallel to Pharaoh's genocidal orders – were compared to baptismal washing[100]. Through this figurative and poetic use, the practice of baptizing the dead was also adumbrated, another grey area not disapproved by Paul[101]. Despite Pauline elaboration in Rom. 6:3-11 and application of baptism to the death of Christ, the alienation of baptismal practice from the initial rite of passage at life's beginning also contributed to weaken its eschatological meaning which was its natural completion: the salvific ark was at the same time a heavenly tabernacle preserving the body for resurrection, as the casket for Moses' basket in the Dura panel reminds us[102].

It was therefore the complex beginnings of Christian baptismal theory and practice, in constant dialogue with Jewish practices, that marginalized the significance of Moses' rescue and alienated Galatians' plea for gender equality. The *Didascalia* reflected this overall shift but was still aware of alternative traditions tied to Moses' baptismal washing at birth and naming ceremony. By subscribing to and prescribing the prevalent John the Baptist tradition, the *Didascalia* warned women of the dangers of continuing such practices.

97. The story is found in Aug., *serm*. 323-324; see Burns (2011: 1300); Jensen (2010b: 1680, 1689).

98. Ferguson (1979: 41-45), Ferguson (2009: 627-629).

99. Burns (2011: 1295-1298) discusses this problem at the centre of the Donatist controversy.

100. Jensen (2010b: 1686), Petr. Chrys., *serm*. 152 and Zeno, *tract*. 1, 2.

101. Tabbernee (2011: 941), Patterson (2018: 49, 61-62).

102. An ancient casket with reliquary function contains a baptismal scene with women and a child: Jensen (2010a: 97); see also the women represented in the birth of Moses scene of the eleventh-century Hexateuch: Broderick (2017: 45-46 and fig. 8). The ark here is shaped as an Egyptian boat for the dead, as seen in the Noah panel at El Bagawat: Broderick (2017: fig. 3), Zibawi (2004: fig. 33; see also fig. 18 and tav. XIX,1-3). The first bath of Moses as depicted in the all-women scene of the Hexateuch follows the pattern of mythical first baths (Dionysus, Achilles, Alexander) which also employs chalice-like containers typical of medieval images of baptism.

These traditions were in turn connected to the special, public and iconic environment which the paintings at Dura witness to for the years 230-256 CE. With this background in mind, can one pinpoint more precisely what the dangers indicated in the *Didascalia apostolorum* for both baptizer and baptizand were? What was the commandment that women baptizers were breaking when taking over washing rituals for themselves?

8. The dangers of public performance

A viewer who, after watching a performance of Ezekiel the Tragedian's Nile rescue scene, read the prohibition against women baptizers in the *Didascalia apostolorum* would be able to understand the prohibition's target more clearly. The painting gives us a taste of this experience by representing the actresses, costumes and props for such a performance.

The above-mentioned Oxyrhynchos fragment, *P. Oxy*. 840, contemporary with the Dura evidence[103], couples public female performers and baptismal practice[104]. «The Savior» accuses a pharisaic priest of washing in impure pools, where pigs wallow, and of performing bodily anointments that resemble beauty treatments more than spiritual practices: «you have cleansed and wiped the outside skin which the prostitutes and flute-girls anoint, which they wash, and wipe, and make beautiful for human desires» [105]. The passage strengthens the sense that rites that included immersion and anointing could easily slip into and be confused with analogous mundane activities. Moreover, the duality between show and reality, form and substance extends to the women who provide these anointings, who are «inwardly … full of scorpions and every wickedness»[106]. Scorpions are poisonous beasts associated with snakes and symbolizing deceit[107]. Slandering women in this way panders to Roman prejudice that all public women (and thus unveiled ones) are effectively prostitutes[108].

It becomes clearer, then, what dangers *Didascalia* warns against, namely, loss of reputation. Women seen performing ablutions and anointings on others could well resemble the «prostitutes and flute-girls» that this polemical fragment accuses of duplicity and deceit. On the other hand, people who receive their services are also accused of superficiality and outward show of cleanliness, while Jesus's disciples boast of the spiritual quality of their women-less washings «in waters of eternal life». As the danger implied is pinpointed, so is the commandment clarified. It is the Pauline dictum that «a woman should be subjected to her husband, since the head of a woman is a man» (1 Cor. 11:3;

103. Bovon (2000: 705) dated it to the second or third century in the context of «ancient Christian controversies about the validity of water baptism».

104. *P. Oxy*. 840: Bovon (2000: 714-715), Blidstein (2017: 119-120).

105. *P. Oxy.* 840: Blidstein (2017: 119).

106. The text here is corrupt but Bovon (2000: 715 n. 39) does not discuss it with the other emendations. The logic of the passage would require continuation of a second-person address: you wash outside, but you are filthy inside. Here I must follow the published restoration of pronoun and verb in the feminine plural until a new emendation is proposed.

107. Ael., *NA* X, 29: Dölger (1936: 184). A different twist is found in Aratos' version of the myth of Artemis and Orion which has the goddess kill him with a scorpion in punishment for his raping her (Arat. 634-646). It is also possible that scorpions had a geo-political significance. They appear next to the cross on Sasanian seals as a Christian or Mithraic symbol: Maksymiuk, Skupniewicz and Smyk (2021) argue for a Mithraic interpretation; Tertullian's *Scorpiace* was written against the poison of 'Gnostics' from Egypt such as Valentinians: Dunn (2004: 105-134, 107).

108. Edwards (1993: 98-136); Strong (2016: 56).

Eph. 5:22), which opens Chapter 3 in the *Didascalia*[109]. Recommendations on appearance complete the picture of the acceptable woman: she should not arrange her hair «in the hairstyle of a harlot», nor dress herself «in the clothing of a harlot», nor wear «shoes so that you resemble those of this kind, so that you do not bring upon yourself those who are attracted by such things»[110]. Finally the question of veils is tackled: «And when you walk in the street cover your head with your robe so that your great beauty is concealed by your veiling. And do not paint the natural face which God has made for you, but complete your journey looking downwards so that your robe can fall over you»[111].

Scholars have compared this passage with how women are depicted at Dura. Stewart-Sykes positively comments that «[t]he women depicted in the Dura Europos mural of the finding of Moses all wear veils over their heads», as if their apparel complied with the strict regulations about veiling in *Didascalia*, Chapter 3[112]. However, the painting hardly satisfies the requirements of self-obliteration suggested by this text in extent and manner of bodily covering. Starting from the exegesis of the Pauline command (1 Cor. 11:2-16) in a comprehensive discussion on veils, MacDonald observes that in the images from Dura women are veiled but without face covering, whereas veils that included face coverings must be implied by Paul. These complete coverings were common practice for married women in the East[113].

It is possible then to draw a parallel between the demands of the Corinthian women and the reality of Dura. MacDonald rightly sets the requirement that interpretation of the disputed Pauline injunction to wear veils should apply specifically to women in this Corinthian assembly during their activity of prayer and prophecy in the congregation[114]. It was at that time only that the wearing of veils seemed to those women a nuisance and an odd demand. If the activities of women performing synagogue rituals at Corinth can be understood as emulating the ritual scenes from Dura, including scenes such as the washing and baptism of Moses[115], then we could better understand why their public appearances would have caused scandal. As we have seen in the birth of Moses scene, Durene performative practices were soon considered morally and theologically inadequate of representing the standing of the community. These practices, together with the baptismal typology of Moses' birth, were being sidelined and effectively silenced.

But while reputation of adult women could be managed through such prescriptions, rewriting the theology of birth and the once associated moment of baptism required a more strenuous effort. At 1 Cor. 11:11-12, a strange phrase used by Paul is a symptom of discomfort at the neglect of Galatian's appeal to gender equality. Significantly, such equality may be restored through birth: «Only in the Lord there is no woman without a man nor man without a woman. For as the woman came from the man, so also the man

109. Stewart-Sykes (2019: 112); MacDonald (1987: 80).

110. Stewart-Sykes (2019: 113).

111. Stewart-Sykes (2019: 115).

112. Stewart-Sykes (2019: 115, n. 22).

113. MacDonald (1987: 82-90, 82).

114. MacDonald (1987: 72-75).

115. The mimetic quality of baptism is described in Bas., *Spir*. 15.35: πῶς οὖν κατορθοῦμεν τὴν εἰς ᾅδου κάθοδον, μιμούμενοι τὴν ταφὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος; Lundberg (1942:63): «Dans la consécration des eaux, les puissances démoniaques soient expulsées, afin que le baptisé, sauvé, puisse remonter hors de la mer de la Mort.» This is a key performative text speaking about Moses that reasons of space prevent me from analyzing further here. See also Ferguson (2009: 583, 589).

by means of a woman, and all things come from God.» The reading of v. 11 as «there is no distinction between man and woman» as suggested by Kürzinger would increase the sense of contamination between the veiling prescriptions and a worldview that does not substantially change from Galatians even when the female-male phrasing is dropped[116]. Here, it is birth that is the pivot of equality rather than a marker of difference. The power of motherhood is tamed in this discourse, and both the first Adam and the Theotokos are reconducted to the origin of everything in God.

9. Conclusions: Baptismal practices at Dura Europos

Reading the painted panel in the synagogue at Dura Europos as carrying the baptismal significance of Moses' birth and rescue story provides a new context for the prohibition of women's baptismal performance articulated in Ch. 15 of the *Didascalia apostolorum*. The panel stands as a lone witness to a tradition of women naming and ritually washing their children in what was the basic rite-of-passage at birth, which concerned mothers, foster carers and midwives before anyone else. Infant baptism carries this residual practice, but the overwhelming thrust of baptismal theology, set paradigmatically through John the Baptist's modelling of Christ's baptism as an epiphany of the spirit and a male filiation to God the Father, worked to erase the link with mothers and female kin as baptismal practitioners. In order to do so, the role of women in administering the naming and washing of the child Moses and in granting, concretely and metaphorically, his salvation, was obliterated in favor of a spiritualized reading of the initiation procedure. Why did this happen?

Part of the reason for marginalizing the baptismal significance of Moses' birth, while keeping the general baptismal meaning of Moses as saviour of his people in all the other episodes of his life, was to differentiate the new baptismal practice from previous and contemporary ablution rituals that entailed either a «primitive» cult of mothers, a «pagan» resonance in river cults – particularly associated with Egypt and the Nile – or mysteric connotations. Confinement of women's roles could be understood as a by-product of these overarching theological concerns in the self-definition of the church. However, the pro-active exclusion of women from public roles is also motivated by the need to preserve the community's reputation. Allowing women to assume active roles came with risks which the nascent community was not prepared to undertake.

The question of baptism by women was not predicated on the problem of women's teaching roles, but only on the problem of women's public performance. The following chapter of the *Didascalia* allows and encourages a more private woman-to-woman catechetical instruction in a baptismal context[117]. In the ancient world, rules of seclusion applied even to cases where the status of women was not ontologically or socially subordinate to that of men, as in Pythagorean circles[118]. The boundary between respectable women and prostitutes, where both categories of women exercised independent agency, resided precisely in the latter's exposure to public view, whether directly in presence or indirectly through images. Thus, in Christian tradition, even painting the Virgin Mary needed legitimization by being attributed to saint Luke[119].

116. Kürzinger (1978), MacDonald (1987: 81, n. 48).

117. *Did. App*. 16, transl. Stewart-Sykes (2009: 192-195). Bradshaw (2012) notes the incongruity.

118. Taylor (2003: 178-182).

119. Bacci (2004).

Lindemann considers the counterfactual statement of the *Didascalia* that, had it been legitimate for women to baptize, then Jesus would have been baptized by his mother, an «überraschendes Argument» [120]. On the contrary, this argument is perfectly logical in light of Moses' birth as a typology for baptism, which was (untypically) not followed in the Christian story. Moreover, Lindemann's conclusion, that the *Didascalia*'s «prohibition of baptism by women either confirms the usual practice [without women] or at most rejects an occasionally occurring deviating practice»[121], is undermined by Dura's baptismal image of the birth of Moses. While its lone survival could present it as an exception, there are traces that the phenomenon was widespread in the attitude of women at Corinth and in the baptismal valence still attributed to the birth of Moses by Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Elvira (c. 375)[122], and Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636). Further, although women's role in the sacrament is officially forbidden, the role of women in taking their children to baptism is preserved by stories like Augustine's tale from Uzalis. Still today, from a family point of view, baptism is primarily the act of naming and since birth is the prerogative of mothers, the act of naming would seem to belong together with the awesome moment when a new life comes into the world. Thus, speaking out the name, sanctioning it for the wider community, attributing the new-born a destiny wrapped up with that name, are ominous performances[123] whose importance is neglected when the focus is placed on acts of washing, immersion, or anointing, and only the moral implications of the sacramental sign are emphasized.

Theological speculation appears in denial of this reality. Avoiding a theology of naming problematically overlooks the deeper implications of personal names, which were often theophoric, designating religious belonging through divine invocation, or denoted specific virtues[124]. In Jewish culture, as with Moses, the etymology of the name was considered so important as to generate a reference literature in the form of *onomastica*[125]; the glosses of Hesychius of Jerusalem on Psalms, for example, always start from the etymology of names[126]. In fact, looking at names may provide a more encompassing reason for the divorce of baptismal initiation from naming rites.

Modern sociological studies of names reflect how the vicissitudes of multicultural identities in mixed societies are shown in naming choices[127]. After 212 CE, with the Edict of Caracalla, provincial Roman citizens acquired new Latin names. These standardized Roman names characterized their new status in the empire and opened possibilities of social mobility that went with that belonging[128]. The Durene environment, newly participating in a Roman identity, was a perfect example of cultural stratifications and ethnic mixtures[129]. While holding on to a mother-given name may well have been a sensible strategy not to lose a sense of ethnic belonging, targeting that belonging may have served the political needs of the Roman Empire while fitting into an apparently positive interna-

120. Lindemann (2011: 799).
121. Lindemann (2011: 802).
122. Ferguson (2009: 665); on Gregory see Brumback (2023).
123. Doja (2006); Ohaja and Anyim (2021).
124. Solin (2017: 250-253), Kajanto (1989).
125. One tradition is gathered in Hier., *nom. hebr.*
126. Crostini with Fincati (2016).
127. Cila *et al*. (2021).
128. Potter (2014^2: 139).
129. Sommer (2016).

tional ideal of a nascent and fast expanding Jesus movement. The contradictory message of Christianity concerning the family also entailed a removal of mother-centred ceremonies that would strengthen both the individual families and specific ethnic identities. Such political choices ended up strengthening opposition to women's roles, despite women's fundamental contribution, both historical and contemporary, to the community's path to success and salvation.

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