The “Rebaptism” of the Ephesian Twelve: Exegetical Study on Acts 19:1-7

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Acts 19:5: “Upon hearing this they (the twelve disciples Paul found in Ephesus) were baptized in the name of Jesus.”

On the surface there is nothing unusual or problematic about this text. There are no variant readings to plague us. There are no difficult or obscure words to translate (the Greek preposition eis may be translated either “in” or “into”). There is nothing unusual about the immediate scene depicted; the twelve Ephesians are “baptized in the name of Jesus” as were the Pentecost converts, the Samaritans, Cornelius and his friends, and even Paul himself (Acts 2:38, 8:12, 16, 10:48, 22:16, cf. 2:21). Nor is there anything problematic about what happens in the following verse: “When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.” There is nothing unusual about the laying on of hands or the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, at least not in the book of the Acts (Acts 6:3-6, 8:17f., 39, 9:17f., 10:44ff., 13:2f.).

The significance of our text, and the baptism it describes, can only be seen in relation to its background: the immediate background of verses 1 to 4, and the larger background of the book of Acts and the New Testament as a whole. And, when viewed against this background, as I hope to show, our text has a great deal to say to us.

Of course, our interest is immediately sparked when we learn from verse 3 that these Ephesians had already been baptized. In response to Paul’s query, “Into what (or in what name) were you baptized?”, the twelve answered, “Into John’s (that is, John the Baptist’s) baptism.” Here we have the reason for the great interest in this passage; when Paul baptized the Ephesian twelve in verse 5, he was, in effect, re-baptizing them, with the implication that their earlier baptism (“of John”) was invalid or inadequate in some way. What we have here is the one, and only, instance of “rebaptism” in the New Testament.

Before we inquire into the reasons for this unprecedented step, however, we should look more closely at the situation as it unfolded. In particular, let us examine Paul’s approach to the twelve and see what can be learned from it. To begin with, we may ask what made Paul think that the Ephesian “disciples” had been baptized in the first place (for he clearly assumed this in verse 3a when he asked, “Into what were you baptized?”). There are only two possible explanations, for we can be sure that neither Paul nor his deputies, Priscilla and Aquila, had baptized these “disciples” themselves.

One very interesting possibility is that Paul and his associates already knew the Ephesian twelve to be disciples of John and, hence, recipients of John’s baptism. But, if this was the case, why did Paul ask about their baptism in verse 3a as if he didn’t already know? This could only mean that he was asking the question (“Into what were
you baptized?” rhetorically to set up the point he wanted to make next (i.e., that John’s baptism was only provisionally). The same would then apply to the question he asked in the previous verse (“Did you receive Holy Spirit when you believed?”). On this reading, the Ephesian twelve would have been self-confessed, perhaps even outspoken, proponents of John’s cause (their case, then being very different from that of Apollos who “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus” although he knew only the baptism of John; Acts 18.25). The dialogue in verses 2 to 4, then, might well represent a formal disputation between the spokesmen of the two factions, Paul championing the Christian cause and arguing very deftly.

This interpretation of verses 2 to 4 as a debate is possible but not convincing in my view because of verse 2b: “We have not even heard that there is Holy Spirit.” Undoubtedly this is an allusion to John the Baptist’s well-known teaching that “the one who was to come after him,” i.e., the messiah, would baptize with the Holy Spirit instead of (just) water (Mk. 1:8ff., John 1:33, cf. Acts 1:5). As far as these “disciples” were concerned, in other words, the messiah had not yet come and the Spirit had not yet been given. Or, at least, they had not heard of it (cf. the Western reading of 2b: “We have not even heard that anyone is receiving the Holy Spirit”). This ignorance of the Christian gospel seems to me to be inconsistent with the notion that the Ephesian twelve were self-confessed critics or opponents of the Christian way, although it will be difficult to explain this ignorance on any reading, as we shall see.

The other possibility is that Paul did not know at the outset that the Ephesians were originally John’s disciples. In that case he merely assumed that they had been baptized, presumably because he took them to be Christian believers (v. 2a: “Did you receive Holy Spirit when you believed?”). This is entirely consistent with the New Testament pattern; belief in Christ (and/or repentance) is normally followed by baptism (Acts 2:38, 8:12, 37ff., 16:31ff., Mark 16:16). But why did he take them to be believers at all? The context of Paul’s recent return to Ephesus after a lengthy absence suggests the possibility that the twelve had begun attending some Christian meetings during that absence (cf. Romans 16:3, 5), had shown a definite interest, while not requesting (or responding to a call for) Christian baptism, had been unquestioningly accepted as “believers” by the Ephesian church, and had subsequently been introduced to Paul as such upon his return. They had simply drifted into the church, as it were, and it was assumed that they were bona fide Christians (a phenomenon not unfamiliar to us today, I might add!).

Now, if this was indeed the case, why did Paul ask whether they had received the Holy Spirit when (as presumed) they first believed, as he did in verse 2a? The normal pattern in New Testament times was clearly that the gift of the Spirit would follow upon or, at least, closely be associated with, faith and baptism in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38, 8:14-17, 36-39, 9:17ff., 10:44-48). So why didn’t Paul assume that the twelve had received the Spirit just as he assumed that they had received (Christian) baptism?

It might be suggested that Paul was making a distinction here between the normal gift or bestowal of the Spirit, associated with baptism, and the extraordinary charismatic “gifts of the Spirit” that all believers were enjoined to seek even after their baptism (1 Cor. 12:31, 14:1). In other words, Paul was assuming that the Ephesian twelve had
received the Spirit but, with commendable pastoral concern, was checking on their spiritual growth and asking whether they had received the “gifts of the Spirit” since they first believed (the aorist participle of pisteúō can be translated either “when you believed,” or “since you believed,” though the former is more natural).

However, Paul’s question is ostensibly about receiving the person of the Spirit, the Spirit himself, not just his gifts, and this suggests something far more penetrating. We are reminded that “anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Romans 8:9). In questioning whether the Ephesian “disciples” had received the Spirit, Paul was really questioning the presumption that they were Christians. On this reading, Paul was not assuming that the twelve were believers but merely addressing them as such out of courtesy and in an attempt to get to the truth of the matter.

So these twelve Ephesians were introduced to Paul as believers on the basis of their church attendance, but Paul somehow sensed the absence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The reason may have been the absence of the charismata or “spiritual gifts.” To take a counter-example: there is no indication that the true Christianity of Apollos was ever questioned by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26), or by Paul himself (! Cor. 3:5f., 4:6, 16:12), in spite of his unorthodox background (more on this later). The reason, apparently, was that Apollos was “verent in the Spirit” (zéōn tō pnéuma; Acts 18.25) whereas the Ephesian twelve, by implication, were not. Hence Paul’s pointed query: “Have you received Holy Spirit?”

Then it all comes out! “We have not even heard that there is Holy Spirit,” the twelve reply (v. 2b). So, Paul’s suspicion was confirmed! These “disciples” were not true believers, believers in Jesus as messiah, that is. But had they not been baptized in Jesus’ name? If not, into what had they been baptized? “Into John’s baptism” (eis tō Ioánou báptisma, v. 3b). It is at this point in the discussion, then, that Paul first realizes who these twelve Ephesians really were: they were “disciples” of John the Baptist. Hence the absence of the Holy Spirit in their lives! From here on Paul’s task was relatively simple. He had only to point out what the twelve already knew, namely, that John’s baptism was only “for repentance” (báptisma metanoías, v. 4a, cf., Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3) and that John himself had instructed the people “to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus,” in order to receive the baptism of the Spirit which they were so obviously lacking (v. 4b, cf. Mark 1:7f.). And it was “upon hearing this” that the twelve were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, as our text relates (v. 5).

But there is still one difficulty! How was it that these twelve Ephesians could have been attending Christian meetings, perhaps even have met with the Christian leaders, Priscilla and Aquila, without having heard about the coming of the messianic Spirit or even having discerned his presence in the church? How was it possible, in other words, for the Ephesian twelve to have had enough contact with the church to be accepted as baptized believers without being convinced, in return, that the Holy Spirit had come and was present in the church? Is it possible that this young church was not the ideal, spiritual church we like to imagine and that it was not manifesting the gifts of the Spirit? If so, this might help to explain Paul’s original interrogation in verse 2a: “Did you receive Holy Spirit when you believed?” Perhaps the “spiritual deadness” of the
church had come to his attention, and he was interviewing all of the members, asking
them whether they had received the Spirit and, if so, why they were not manifesting it
(the subsequent apostasy of the Ephesian church, mentioned in Acts 20:29f, II Tim.
1:15, lends further support to this hypothesis). The case of the twelve disciples of John
was an unexpected surprise and is the only case recorded because of its peculiar
interest and dramatic results.

At last, we are in a position to ask the key question: why were the Ephesian twelve
actually rebaptized? Why didn’t Paul simply pray for the twelve and lay his hands on
them, as Peter and John had done with the new Samaritan converts so that they might
receive the Spirit (Acts 8:14-17)? Evidently because the twelve Ephesians had not been
baptized “in the name of Jesus” as the Samaritan Christians had. They had only
received John’s “baptism of repentance.” But what was wrong with that? Apollos had
only known the baptism of John (Acts 18:25), yet there is no suggestion that he was
ever rebaptized, or that such a step was even considered! For that matter, some of the
original twelve apostles had undoubtedly received John’s baptism (John 1:35-40), and
there certainly is no indication that they were ever rebaptized! But the common feature
between the case of Apollos and that of the twelve apostles was the free, unsolicited
outpouring of God’s Spirit and the subsequent manifestation of that Spirit in their lives
and ministries. The twelve Ephesians, on the other hand, had been baptized by John,
but they had not received God’s Spirit in “confirmation” of that baptism as the twelve
apostles and Apollos had. So it was the absence of Jesus’ name in their baptism, on one
hand, and the absence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, on the other, that implied the
non-validity of their original baptism and the necessity, or at least the permissibility, of
their rebaptism.

The conclusion we have reached here is this: the sine qua non of valid water
baptism in the New Testament is not the invocation of Jesus’ name as often supposed
(this was absent in the cases of Apollos and those apostles who had been baptized by
John), but the bestowal of God’s Spirit whether before, during, or after baptism with
water. Normally, the two would go together in what we call “Christian” baptism, but it
is the absence of God’s Spirit, not the absence of Jesus’ name, that invalidates John’s
baptism in the case of the Ephesian twelve.

This conclusion forces us to reconsider the function of invoking Jesus’ name in
normal Christian baptism. If it were primarily a form of dedication to Jesus3 or a
covenant oath formula,4 then it would be difficult to explain how it could ever be
omitted as it was in the case of Apollos. Of course, the bestowal of the Spirit could be
taken as a sign or seal of ownership by Jesus, thus making any subsequent words of
dedication (and hence rebaptism in the name of Jesus) superfluous (cf. II Cor. 1:22,
Eph. 1:13, 4:30 which refer to the “sealing” of the Spirit).

But it seems more natural to suppose that the primary function of Jesus’ name here
is that of entreaty for the Spirit (in confidence that the Spirit will be given), Jesus, after
all, was the promised messiah, the one to whom John directed his own disciples for
During his own ministry, Jesus instructed his disciples to ask the heavenly Father for

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the gift of the Spirit (Luke 11:13). He also promised them the Spirit and, in conjunction with that promise, he instructed them specifically to ask in his name (en tò onómati mou) for the power to do great works (John 14:12-14). Hence the baptismal formula, “in the name of Jesus,” may be interpreted primarily as a formula of entreaty for the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing of the coming of the messiah and, by implication, of the gift of the Spirit, the Ephesian twelve were baptized “in the name of Jesus,” that is, entreating him for this gift, and upon so being baptized, they received the laying on of Paul’s hands (another sign of entreaty?) and the outpouring of the long-awaited Spirit. Then they spoke in tongues and prophesied. In the counter-example of Apollos, the gift of the Spirit had already been received, so further entreaty through the invocation of Jesus’ name in baptism would have been superfluous and wasn’t even to be considered. Conversely, in the counter-example of the Samaritan converts, the gift of the Spirit was not received until Peter and John “prayed for them (in Jesus’ name?) that they might receive the Holy Spirit” and “laid their hands on them” (Acts 8:15, 17). They had already been baptized in Jesus’ name so re-baptism would have been superfluous and wasn’t to be considered.

Our final conclusions then is this: there are no grounds in the text we have considered for justifying the practice of re-baptism when the previous baptism was accompanied by the invocation of Jesus’ name by way of entreaty for the gift of the Spirit. Even in cases where that name was not explicitly invoked, rebaptism should not be regarded as a general rule, for God may already have “confirmed” that baptism through the free, unsolicited gift of his Spirit as he did in the cases of Apollos and some of the apostles, themselves.

FOOTNOTES
1 Compare Jesus’ earlier use of rhetorical questions in his confrontations with the chief priests and the Pharisees (Mt. 21:24f., 31, 40, 22:20, 41f.).
2 Compare Jesus’ earlier disputations with disciples of John (Mt. 9:14-17, 11:2-6).
4 M. G. Kline, By Oath Consigned, Eerdmans, 1968, p. 80.
5 Cf. verse 26 and the baptismal formula in Acts 10:48 where the preposition en = “in” is also used. Elsewhere, the baptismal preposition is epi = “on/upon” in Acts 2:38 or eis = “in/into” in Matt. 28:19, Acts 8:16, and our text, Acts 19:5; cf. Matt. 18:20. Hence the “good news” preached “concerning the name of Jesus Christ” in Acts 8:12.