Did Augustine change or broaden his perspective on baptism?

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In the Museum of Classical Art in Arles, one of the Christian sarcophagi depicts the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea.\(^1\) This biblical narrative is identified in the Early Church as the model for baptism. The passing through the water is understood to be necessary for obtaining salvation.\(^2\) This paper enforces the necessity of baptism for people of all ages. The key question is: Does Augustine, who had been baptized as an adult, change his perspective on baptism? In his writings, Augustine emphasizes the necessity of baptism for all people, including the old and the very young. Added to this is the unrestricted opportunity of receiving baptism according the opinion of Augustine; it has to be an open opportunity during the whole year.\(^3\) For what reason, did he emphasize the necessity of infant baptism (after his own baptism as an adult), and did he change or broaden his perspective?

**The early Christian connotation of the flight of the Israelites through the Red Sea**

It is essential to realize, before going more deeply into the key question, that “The flight of the Israelites at the Red Sea” sarcophagus has been interpreted as a necessary flight of a complete nation. The Israelites consisted of all kinds of people: aged men and women, adults, young people, young children and babies. Before they crossed the Red Sea, they were damned to death. The pharaoh pursued them and was in their immediate vicinity. They could not return. Their escape from Egypt, a symbolic account of the flight of Christian believers from the world, seemed to end in disaster. At this moment, when the Israelites were threatened to die, God opened a new way through the water. All passed through the water and safely reached the other side of the Red Sea. All were saved definitively. None were excluded from salvation. Every person who passed through the water was saved. These crucial moments in the history of the Jewish nation are symbolically depicted and fulfilled in Christian Baptism.

In the fourth century, the narrative of the transition through the Red Sea is applied to Christians who, in their passage of the baptism-rite, die symbolically but live simultaneously forever with Christ on earth, and after their death, in heaven.\(^4\) Augustine also gives a symbolic explication of this narrative. In his exegesis he propounds that the Jews are pursued unto the Red Sea by the Egyptians, who have been interpreted as our own sins. He twice underscores that this persecution by our own sins lasts until

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\(^{1}\) The Israelite parents with their children have just crossed the Red Sea and are shown in one of the sarcophagi, looking at the pharaoh and his servants who die in the Red Sea. These parents hold the hands of their children.

\(^{2}\) In the early Church of the fourth century the physical experience of the Baptism-rite was necessary for individual salvation. A crucial passage is Mark. 16:16, ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.’ Ambrose said that unless a person was baptized he could not receive remission of sins nor imbibe the gift of spiritual grace. Cf. Ambr. Myst. 20.

\(^{3}\) *Aug. Sermo* 210, 1.2: At cum per totum annum, sicut unicumque vel necessitas fuerit vel voluntas, non prohibeatur a Baptismo, id donante illo qui dedit eis potestatem filios Dei fieri; anniversariam vero Domini passionem, non nisi certo anni die, quod Pascha dicitur, liceat celebrari:

\(^{4}\) Cyprian said that as the Red Sea drowned Pharaoh, so baptism drowns the devil out of a man. Cf. Cypr. Ep. 70.
the Red Sea. The Red Sea is identified by Augustine with the Christian Baptismal font. Augustine compares baptism with the passing through the Red Sea. This soteriological significance of the Red Sea narrative is essential for a full understanding of the theology of Augustine, including his view on infant baptism.

The baptism of Augustine as an adult and his recommendation of infant baptism

Augustine had been baptized as an adult. He appreciated this as a rich experience, as we can read in his Confessiones. He speaks about his own baptism in a thankful way and is astonished at God’s plan of salvation of human mankind. Regarding this astonishment of Augustine, one could ask oneself: Why did Augustine emphasize the relevance of infant baptism later in his life? Augustine even recommends this infant baptism as necessary for salvation, although children neither could believe nor could confess their being a Christian. Augustine emphasizes that, in the case baptized children would die, the Grace of the Almighty would supply the lack of an active confession of these children. Did Augustine change his perspective on baptism? Before we can draw a conclusion, it is crucial to mention different reasons which influenced Augustine’s theological vision and convinced him of the necessity of infant baptism.

Different reasons which possibly have changed the perspective of Augustine on infant baptism

In the sources one can read that Augustine himself originally did not have the intention to be baptized as an adult. As a young child he fell ill, and at that very moment, he wanted to be baptized. However, his mother Monica saw her child was recovering from his illness, and she decided to delay his baptism. She did not see the necessity of infant baptism, because Augustine recovered his health; the urgency of infant baptism disappeared in this manner. The effect of this for Augustine was that he did not see it as a requirement to be baptized when he fell ill again as an adult in Ostia, after his journey from Africa. The source which tells us the story (Augustine’s Confessiones) even reveals a secret: Augustine regrets, after his conversion, his own lack of interest in baptism. He was not really interested in baptism as an adult, whereas his motivation as a child was really positive and pure, not influenced by the thoughts and objections of an adult. The result of this self-evaluation is a more positive attitude toward infant baptism. This might be the first reason for Augustine to change his perspective and to recommend infant baptism.

A second reason which might have influenced Augustine’s vision on baptism is the practice of infant baptism in North-Africa in the third century. Cyprian is for Augustine a theological model and standard, including his practice of infant baptism. In the discussions, Cyprian did not want to delay the day for baptism until the eighth day after the birth of the child. As soon as the child had been born, the new-born baby could be baptized. For Augustine this radical theological conviction was fully acceptable.

A third reason which possibly influenced Augustine’s perspective on baptism is the general tendency in the fourth century to delay baptism until death. This appeared a worrisome development for the churches and for sacramental practice. After all, the close connection between Early-Christian adult baptism and Early-Christian Eucharist further implied that baptism was necessary for Eucharistic practice. The development, in the fourth century, of the delay of baptism until death, was a threat to

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5 Aug. Serm. 213,9 and Serm. 4,9 (Ps. 80,8).
6 Aug. Confess. IX,6,14, ‘Nor was I sated in those days with the wondrous sweetness of considering the depth of Your counsels concerning the salvation of mankind.’
7 Aug. De Baptismo contra Donatistas IV,24: Sicut…, sic in infantibus qui baptizatus moriuntur, eadem gratia Omnipotentis implere credenda est, quod non ex impia voluntate, sed ex actatis indigentia, nec corde credere ad justitiam possunt, nec ore confiteri ad salutem.
8 Everett Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church (Cambridge, 2009), 776-78.
9 Aug. Confess. 5,9,16: ‘I did better as a boy when I begged for it from my devout mother.’
10 In De Dono Perseverantiae Augustine praises Cyprian as a beatified saint and martyr.
11 E. Ferguson, Baptism (2009), 617-33.
the common practice of the Eucharist. This development created a serious problem for the fourth-century church. In the East, Chrysostom stumbled on the same problem.\textsuperscript{12}

A fourth reason is every new-born baby’s need for forgiveness of sins, especially by reason of the sin of Adam, original sin. Every new-born baby is guilty, according to Augustine, Origen and Ambrose, and needs to be baptized for the forgiveness of original sin. Origen and Ambrose emphasized the presence of this original sin in the same manner as Augustine did. Nevertheless, to them this did not mean a new-born baby had to be baptized immediately, a logic which was for Cyprian not disputable.\textsuperscript{13}

The fifth reason which illustrates Augustine’s tendency to recommend infant baptism is the connection Augustine made between circumcision and baptism. Circumcision was necessary for Jewish boys, so baptism was, in the same manner, required for the children of Christian believers. Just as the son of Moses had to be circumcised and negligence of circumcision almost led to his death, so similarly the children of Christian believers had to be baptized as well. In this way Augustine illustrates the invaluable worth of the holy sacrament of baptism, a sacrament which brings life, not death. He simultaneously stresses the obligation of Christian believers to baptize their infant children.\textsuperscript{14}

In spite of all this, we do not discover in the theology of Augustine a forced endeavour to realize only infant baptism. Adult baptism is, for Augustine, not less important. In the \textit{Enchiridion}, Augustine gives very clear guidelines for infant baptism and adult baptism. It is a rich source, with a clear scope:

‘...And that symbol, which is celebrated in the midst of us, that is exactly the great sacrament of baptism. The intention of this sacrament is that the people which will come to this grace, will die to sin. After all, Christ is called also ‘died to sin’, because He died in his flesh, that means, in the external resemblance of sin. And [the baptized] are enabled to live by means of their resurrection from the grave; it does not matter which age of the body they have.

After all, from the age of a new born baby until the age of an old infirm man, nobody may be prohibited from baptism. This is not different from what the baptized go through their selves: they all die of the sin. Although, there is a difference: The babies only die to their original sin, the elder people also die to the sins they added by their sinful life to the sin they took with them, when they have been born.'\textsuperscript{15}

**Conclusion**

Did Augustine change or broaden his perspective on baptism? I think he did not really change his perspective, because he wanted to be baptized himself as a child. It was through circumstances that he was not baptized as a child, although it was his eager desire. I think he broadened his perspective. He saw the necessity of baptism, also of infant baptism increasingly. Augustine did not develop a specific dogma for infant baptism, but he promoted baptism as a sacrament necessary for the salvation of Christian believers of all ages. This salvation was not only restricted to adult persons but was also intended for children. The narrative of the passing through the Red Sea depicted in the Sarcophagus

\textsuperscript{12} E. Ferguson, \textit{Baptism} (2009), 622-23.

\textsuperscript{13} A. Gilmore, \textit{Christian Baptism} (London, 1960), 189: ‘The doctrine of original sin, while it does not appear to have been a cause of the introduction of infant baptism, nevertheless helped to establish it. Those who defended the baptism of infants could appeal to this doctrine in support of it, claiming that, although the new-born infant had no sins of its own to be remitted, yet it needed the forgiveness of sin biologically inherited from Adam and the human race through its parents...It was held by Ambrose and Augustine, for instance, that the baptism even of infants secured the cancelling of this guilt.’

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Aug. De Baptismo contra Donatistas, IV, xxiv:} Cur ergo ei praeceptum est ut omnem deinceps infamem masculum octavo die circumcideret (Gen. xvi,14), qui nondum poterat corde credere, ut ei deputaretur ad justitiam; nisi quia et ipsum per se sacramentum multum valebat? Quod in filio Moysi per angelum manifestatum est, qui cum adhuc incircumcisus a materre ferretur, praesenti et evidentii periculo ut circumcideretur exactum est (Exod,iv,24); et cum factum esset, depulsa est pernicias.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Aug. Enchiridion, I,41-43} Ipsum est quod in nobis celebratur, magnum Baptismatis sacramentum, ut quicumque ad istam pertinent gratiam, moriantur peccato, sicut ipse peccato mortuus dicitur, quia mortuus est carni, hoc est, peccati similitudini: et vivant a lavacro renascendo, sicut ipse a sepulcro resurgendo, quamlibet corporis aetatem gerant. [cap. XLIII] A parvulo enim recens nato usque ad decrepitum senem, sicut nullus est prohibendus a Baptismo, ita nullus est qui non peccato moriatur in Baptismo: sed parvuli tantum originali, maiores autem etiamuis omnibus moriuntur peccatis, quae cumque male vivendo addiderunt ad illud quod nascendo traxerunt.
demonstrates this necessity of baptism of all ages. Augustine was conscious of the necessity of baptism and aware of the rescuing value of both sacraments, of Baptism and Eucharist. Everyone had to be baptized, just as every young boy of eight days old in the Jewish culture was obliged to be circumcised. Every soul, parents and children alike, had to cross the Red Sea for salvation. This Jewish transition-narrative developed into a Christian transition-rite, necessitating baptism for the salvation of all Christian believers, young and old.

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