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### Holy Baptism's Liturgy : What Is Extolled in Ones and Threes?

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**Holy Baptism's Liturgy  
What is Extolled  
In Ones  
and Threes?**

**Tuesday in Holy Week 1999**

**Jonathan Bontke**

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## **Introduction**

**The following is a study of the historical usage of single and triple immersion / sprinkling practices through the first twelve centuries A.D. The questions at hand are: 1) Has either practice historically been predominant 2) What doctrine is informing each practice? 3) Is there a specific text of Scripture informing each practice? 4) How does this study resource us in our current practice?**

**The Latin expression, “Lex orandi, lex credendi” has for centuries encapsulated the truth that liturgical practice serves a looking glass into the worshiper’s theology. It is the purpose of this study to use baptismal liturgies as such a looking glass, so that the doctrines informing these two practices may be extolled rather than overlooked. There is a constant danger among liturgical churches to overlook what doctrine a practice is extolling and to miss the vitality and dynamic nature of the liturgy. The purpose of this study is to bring into clarity the tradition, theology, and vitality of what is extolled in ones and threes in Holy Baptism’s liturgy.**

**The liturgies included in this study are for the most part those compiled in E.C. Whitaker’s, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy. This work includes a comprehensive collection of liturgical documents on baptism through the first nine centuries A.D. The compilation covers both the Eastern and Western Church. In addition to Whitaker’s collection of liturgies several conciliar documents from the Eastern and Western Church are included in the study.**

## Why Triple Immersion / Sprinkling?

### Doctrine: Unknown

The Didache is the earliest evidence available for the practice of triple sprinkling. There is, however, no scriptural, historical, or theological doctrine given in the Didache for such practice. “But if thou hast not running water, baptize in other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. And if thou hast not either pour forth water thrice upon the head, in the Name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> This was written in Syria around 100 A.D.

The Acts of Judas Thomas written in Edessa at the beginning of the third century A.D. do not specifically say that a triple form was being used. There are six separate accounts of baptisms in the document but none of them describe the form used. They simply state, “And he baptized them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit of holiness.”<sup>2</sup> There are numerous manuscripts from that city and that area dating about two hundred years later that do specify a triple formula. The indication is that a triple form was being used during the time that the Acts of Judas Thomas was written.

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<sup>1</sup> E.C. Whitaker, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy, p: 1.

“Ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἔχῃς ὕδωρ ζῶν, εἰς ἄλλο ὕδωρ βάπτισον εἰς τὸ οὐ δύνασαι ἐν θερμῷ. Ἐὰν δὲ ἀμφοτέρω μὴ ἔχῃς, ἔκχεον εἰς τὴν κεφαλὴν τρεῖς ὕδωρ εἰς ὄνομα πατρὸς καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἁγίου πνεύματος.”  
Didache 7.2 - 7.3 TLG.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p: 14-19.

**There are, however, no indications of any historical or theological doctrines behind their practice.**

**The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena is one of the earliest manuscripts dating 250 A.D., but it is perhaps the most ambiguous. There is no indication of what city it was written in, or what baptismal form they used. The names in the document seem to be Greek which would place them in the center of a circle of areas that clearly practiced a triple form (See Map A1). There is a brief reference to location in the document.**

**“Straightway then Paul took her by the hand, led her into the house of Philotheus, and baptized her in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>3</sup> Who Philotheus is and where his house is located is still in question, but it was apparently during Paul’s journeys and may be in or around Athens. There is no discussion in the document about doctrines behind their baptismal practice.**

**James of Edessa is the final document in which there is no indication of the doctrine behind the baptismal practice implemented. It is another ambiguous document because it has no certain date. It is thought to have been written in the sixth century. Here again the baptismal practice is uncertain but like the Acts of Judas Thomas it is from Edessa which clearly practiced a triple form. The document states, “After that he pours the chrism thrice in the form of a cross while he says a prayer. Then he baptizes them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>4</sup> The chrismation practice helps to support a triple form of baptism, but gives no doctrine behind the triple formula.**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p: 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p: 59.

**All of the above manuscripts clearly or strongly suggest that a triple form of baptism was being used. None of them, however, give the doctrines for the form they use. This is not the case with co-temporal and co-spatial documents. What I mean is that there are documents written in the same time period, but in different cities, which give the theological doctrines informing their practice. There are also documents written in the same cities but at different times which give theological doctrines behind their baptismal practice.**

**This leaves several possible conclusions about the above documents which do not give the doctrine behind their practice. 1) They perhaps were facing no controversy and therefore saw no need to mention it. With the earliest document this may have been especially true. This would indicate that even in the Didache the practice was going on before a clear doctrine had been expressed. 2) The form may have been so well known through the Apostolic Tradition that the practice was always implemented and doctrines were only later an issue of discussion. 3) With later documents stating the doctrine behind the practice may have been taken for granted because it was so well known, therefore the author saw no need to include it in his account of the baptism.**

**There is strong evidence for this last hypothesis in the document, The History of John the Son of Zebedee. This document was written in the mid fourth century A.D. and includes two baptismal accounts. The first is the baptism of Tyrannus the Procurator of Ephesus. The second is the baptism of the Priest of Artemis. Artemis is a small island just off the coast of Ephesus (See Map A1). In the Ephesus account we are told:**

**“The procurator says: “What must I say, and then descend?” John says to him: “According as thou hast seen and found true and**

believed.” And the crowd was silent, as if there was not a man there, that they might see what the procurator and John would say. And the procurator stretched out his hands to heaven, and cried out, weeping and saying: “I believe in the Father and in the Son, and in the Spirit of holiness”; and he leaped down into the font. Then the holy man drew near, and placed his hand on the head of the procurator, and dipped him once, crying out, “In the Name of the Father”; and the second time, “In the Name of the Son”; and the third time, “In the Name of the Spirit of holiness”.<sup>5</sup>

Here there is a clear indication that a triple form is used after a trinitarian interrogation, and after each name is spoken. Thus John is basing his triple form on the name of the Trinity. Such a clear statement of what doctrine is informing the practice is not indicated in the above documents. Likewise, in the Artemis account there is no mention of the form used or any indication of the doctrine behind their baptismal practice. Thus the Artemis document is identical to the above documents that did not state the doctrine behind their practice. The document reads:

“And St. John drew nigh and raised them up, and they said: “We believe in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit of holiness, and we will never know aught else.” And John drew near, and washed them clean of the soot [which they wore in token of grief], and anointed them with oil, and baptized them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit of holiness, for the forgiveness of debts and the pardon of sins.”<sup>6</sup>

Here is a case where John’s practice was clearly stated in Ephesus, but is not mentioned in Artemis. It is highly unlikely that a baptism performed in a city a few miles away by the same man is going to take a completely different form. It is simply taken for granted that the reader would understand that the same practice was being used. This may be what was

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p: 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p: 23



**going on in the Edessa documents in which some would clearly state the practice used and others would not.**

**Thus the evidence suggests that what is going on is not that early documents did not state their practice or the doctrine behind their practice because they had none. Rather, the evidence suggests that the practice and the doctrine behind the practice was simply not mentioned because it was taken for granted that the reader already understood.**

**There is one further document from Constantinople that should be placed with the documents that gave no doctrine behind their practice, but unlike those documents there is no co-spatial document to confirm the baptismal practice of Constantinople as triple form. The document is the Barberini Euchologion of the Byzantine Rite. This manuscript was written in Constantinople around 790 A.D. The document does not state whether single or triple form is being used, and there are no other liturgies from that city. There were, however, liturgies such as the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, which clearly states a triple form practice, discovered in the library at Constantinople. The fact that such liturgies are found there strongly suggests that triple form was being used, for it was typically their practice to burn any heretical liturgies or writings. Since the triple form liturgies found in the library at Constantinople were obviously not destroyed they were also obviously not considered heretical, but appropriate for use in the Divine Service.**

**For further support of Constantinople's practice there is, also, a statement from the Council of Constantinople 381 A.D. which would indicate that triple form baptism was being used.**

**Canon Seven states,**

**“But Eunomians, who are baptized with only one immersion, and Montanists, who are here called Phrygians, and Sabellians, who teach the identity of Father and Son, and do sundry other mischievous things, . . . we receive as heathen. On the first day we make them Christians; on the second, catechumens; on the third, we exorcise them . . . and then we baptize them.”<sup>7</sup>**

**Clearly those receiving single immersion baptisms were not received as Christians but as heathens and without baptism. This is not a liturgy, but is a clear historical document which would indicate that Constantinople also practiced triple form baptisms. In fact, they did not accept single form baptism as a baptism at all, “and then we baptize them.”**

**To simply know that there is a doctrine informing the baptismal practice of triple or single form is not our goal. Our goal is to discover what that doctrine is. We now, therefore, turn our attention to those documents which do deliver the specific doctrine behind triple form practice.**

### **Doctrine: Trinitarian Interrogation**

**There are numerous manuscripts which indicate that a triple form of baptism was used because it flowed from the form of the Trinitarian Interrogations. The three questions, from which developed the three articles of the Apostle’s Creed, would be separated by the answer of the baptizand and their immersion or sprinkling. The earliest account of this is found in Tertullian’s De Corona written in North Africa around 213 A.D. “After this we are thrice immersed, while we answer interrogations rather more extensive**

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<sup>7</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 14. p: 185.

than our Lord has prescribed in the gospel.”<sup>8</sup> The interrogations developed out of the Trinitarian formula of Matthew 28. The baptizand would be questioned, “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?”, and they would respond, “I believe.” Then they would be baptized once, and the Bishop would then question them about the second Name, and so on.

The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus written in Rome around 215 A.D. is another early account of Trinitarian Interrogations being the driving force behind the triple form of baptizing.

**“And when he goes down to the water, let him who baptizes lay hands on him saying thus:**

**Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty?**

**And he who is being baptized shall say:**

**I believe.**

**Let him forthwith baptize him once, having his hand laid upon his head. And after let him say:**

**Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, Who was born of Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose the third day living from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?**

**And when he says: I believe, let him baptize him the second time.**

**And again let him say:**

**Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?**

**And he who is being baptized shall say: I believe. And so let him baptize him the third time.”<sup>9</sup>**

The reference given earlier to the History of John the Son of Zebedee seems to fall under the category of Trinitarian Interrogations.

**“The procurator says: “What must I say, and then descend?” John says to him: “According as thou hast seen and found true and believed.” And the procurator stretched out his hands to heaven, and**

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<sup>8</sup> E.C. Whitaker, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy, p: 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p: 5-6.

**cried out, weeping and saying: “I believe in the Father and in the Son, and in the Spirit of holiness”;**<sup>10</sup>

**There was clearly some sort of teaching that went on before the baptism, and here the procurator is called to confess what he has “found true and believed.” His confession is a trinitarian confession, and then follows a single immersion after each name that the procurator had confessed. It is certainly a less formal interrogation but does have its roots in the confession of the three persons of the Trinity.**

**In a latter manuscript attributed to Hippolytus we again see the interrogations taking a major position in the rite. In The Canons of Hippolytus from Egypt around 500 A.D. we see the same form used as in the Apostolic Tradition. The only further clarification comes in a statement at the end of the rite. “He replies: I believe, and the third time he is immersed in the water. Each time [singulis vicibus], he says, I baptize thee in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [who is equal].”<sup>11</sup> It is here clarified that the entire trinitarian formula would be spoken at each immersion after the confession of faith in each Name.**

**Ambrose of Milan writing around 380 A.D. gives us even clearer reasoning behind the interrogations and triple form.**

**“Thou didst descend, then; remember what thou didst answer, that thou believest in the Father, thou believest in the Son, thou believest in the Holy Spirit. It is not a case of, I believe in a greater and a less and a least; but thou art bound by the same pledge of thine own voice to believe in the Son exactly as thou believest in the Father, to believe in the Holy Spirit exactly as thou believest in the Son; with this one exception, that thou confessest the necessity of belief in the cross of the Lord Jesus alone.”<sup>12</sup>**

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p: 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p: 90.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p: 132.

**Ambrose connects the confession of each Name to a confession of the equality of the three persons. The triple form is a way of pointing to the equality of the three persons of the Trinity.**

**Later manuscripts also indicate that the Trinitarian Interrogations were and continued to be central in the practice of triple form baptism. The Gelasian Sacramentary written in Rome in the eighth century displays the interrogations as the doctrine behind triple form. “And while you ask the questions, you dip him three separate times in the water.”<sup>13</sup> The Bobbio Missal of Rome 700 A.D. also alludes to the interrogations but adds an interesting insight. After asking the three trinitarian interrogation questions the document states, “You baptize him and say, “I baptize thee in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, that have one substance, that thou mayest have a part with the saints in everlasting life.””<sup>14</sup> Here the equality of person is not being emphasized, but the unity of substance. This clarifying statement about the “one substance” indicates that the Trinitarian Interrogations and triple form baptism are intended to emphasize the equality of the persons. The author is perhaps afraid of tritheistic accusations and so he adds the disclaimer “one substance.”**

**The Stowe Missal from Ireland in 800 A.D. still uses the interrogations, but does not baptize until all the questions have been answered. “He goes down into the font and is dipped or sprinkled thrice:”<sup>15</sup> Beroldus of Milan wrote in the 12th century also giving the Trinitarian Interrogations as the driving force of the practice of triple form. Following the**

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p: 195.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p: 212.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p: 220.

interrogations he would baptize them once after each name of the Trinity.<sup>16</sup> The latest document is a little beyond the time scope of this study but is helpful in seeing the development of triple form. The Sarum Rite from Rouen printed in 1543 A.D. Following the three interrogations the document states:

**“Then let the priest ask the name of the infant saying: What seekest thou? Let them reply: Baptism. Again the priest: Dost thou wish to be baptized? Let them reply: I wish. Then let the priest receive the infant sideways in his hands: and having asked his name let him baptize him with a threefold dipping invoking the Holy Trinity once saying thus: N. I also baptize thee in the name of the Father (and let him dip him once with his face turned towards the north and his head towards the east) and of the Son (and again let him dip him once with his face turned towards the south) and of the Holy Ghost. Amen (and let him dip him the third time with his face towards the water).”<sup>17</sup>**

Here we see a very developed triple immersion form with very symbolic practices connected to each immersion, but at the heart of the practice is the Trinitarian Interrogations and the confession of faith in each Person.

There is also a letter from Pope Vigilius written in Rome in 538 A.D. that helps to clarify the reason for the Trinitarian Interrogations and the triple form of baptism. The Letter of Pope Vigilius to Profuturus 538 A.D.:

**“Now concerning the performance of baptism in the accustomed way, which apostolic authority has likewise sanctioned and observes, your charity will without difficulty acknowledge those things which are set out below.**

**However, in our judgment this is a novel error, that whereas at the end of the psalms the custom of all Catholics is to say: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, some as you judge take away one conjunctive syllable, endeavor to diminish the perfect name of the Trinity, and say: Glory be to the Father and to the Son, to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, although reason itself teaches us clearly that by the removal of one syllable they declare in a manner of speaking that**

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p: 152.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p: 246-247.

**the person of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one; yet the words of the Lord Jesus Christ are sufficient to convince them of their error, when he declared that the baptism of believers should be performed with the invocation of the Trinity: Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore since he did not say: In the name of the Father and of the Son, of the Holy Spirit, but commanded that the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit should be named with equal distinction, it follows that people who seek to remove anything from this confession deviate completely from the teaching of the Lord. And if they continue in this error, they can have no association with us. . .**

**If any bishop or priest has not baptized as the Lord commanded, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, but in one person of the Trinity, or in two, or three, Fathers, or in three Sons, or three Paracletes, let him be cast out of the Church of God.”<sup>18</sup>**

**It is clear that the equality of each person of the Trinity was to be confessed in the baptismal rite. To do otherwise would be to depart from the baptismal mandate of Matthew 28. There is no confusion or inequality of persons to be allowed. The three names are to be confessed equally as the three persons are equal. So also the baptismal form follows three equal sprinklings or immersions to confess the equality of the three persons.**

### **Doctrine: The Name**

**Very similar to the documents informed by the Trinitarian Interrogations are the documents informed simply by the Name. Theodore of Mopsuestia writing in Antioch before 428 A.D. in a document titled Instructions to Candidates for Baptism: Sermon 4, uses a triple form based not on interrogations but only on the name.**

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p: 226.

**“The priest stands up and approaches his hand, which he places on your head and says: “So-and-so is baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” . . .**

**The priest places his hand on your head and says, “Of the Father’, and with these words he causes you to immerse yourself in water, while you obediently follow the sign of the hand of the priest and immediately, at his words and at the sign of his hand, immerse yourself in water. By the downward inclination of your head you show as by a hint your agreement and your belief that it is from the Father that you will receive the benefits of baptism, according to the words of the priest . . . You therefore immerse and bow your head while the priest says, “And the Son”, and causes you with his hand to immerse again in the same way . . . Then the priest says, “And of the Holy Spirit”, and likewise presses you down into the water . . . After this you go out of the water.”<sup>19</sup>**

**There are two interesting things to note about this document. The first is that there are two accounts of the same event given. The first is very short and unclear, but the second is expanded and very descriptive. The first account simply says, “The priest stands up and approaches his hand, which he places on your head and says: “So-and-so is baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” In the second version the author makes it clear that the immersing comes once after each name is spoken. This is another case where it is evident that authors often used a short and less descriptive form when speaking of triple immersion or sprinkling. This adds even more weight to the conjecture that some documents actually describing a triple form baptism do not clearly state what form is being used or the doctrine behind such practice.**

**The second important insight that this document gives us is that bowing or immersing oneself before the Name is a hint of agreement and belief that you receive the benefits of baptism from that Person of the Trinity. Thus a bowing before each name**

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p: 49.



**extols the belief that you are receiving the benefits of each person of the Trinity. Here is the confession that it is not simply one God we bow before with all his gifts muddled together, but to each unique person of the one Godhead receiving the gifts of each.**

**Another document which is informed by the Name is the Coptic Rite from Egypt which is still in use today. There is no certain date for the document and unlike the Antioch document there is no direct reason for the Name running the form (i.e. to receive the gifts of each Person).**

**“At the first immersion he shall say: I baptize thee, son of N. in the Name of the Father. The second time: And of the Son. The third time: And of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”<sup>20</sup>**

**Later we will see some conflation of reasoning, and the Name will again appear as a major factor in determining the practice of triple form.**

### **Doctrine: Three Days / Dying and Rising**

**In the Apostolic Constitutions of 375 A.D. from Syria we get the clear statement that the descent into and the ascent from the water represents a dying and rising with Christ. We will see in a quote from book VIII of the Constitutions that a triple form of Baptism was being used. This is perhaps the setting into which flowed a later developed reasoning for triple immersion or sprinkling. The teaching often given for triple form baptism is that it shows forth the three days in the tomb, and thus the dying and rising with Christ. We don't see it here in the Constitutions and we never see it outside of a conflation with Trinitarian Interrogations or emphasis of the Name. The evidence indicates that the three**

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p: 95.

**days in the tomb reasoning was perhaps later and was simply added to the already grounded practice of the interrogations and name. The close link of baptism to the Paschal Feast may be another reason why the three day in the tomb teaching became popular. Each immersion signifying the alternation of day and night from Good Friday to Easter.**

### **Doctrine: Conflations of the above Doctrines**

**In 350 A.D. in the Mystagogical Catechesis 2 of St. Cyril of Jerusalem we see the first conflation of doctrines behind triple form baptism.**

**“After these things ye were led to the holy pool of divine baptism, as Christ was carried from the Cross to the Sepulcher which is before our eyes. And each of you was asked, whether he believed in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and ye made that saving confession, and descended three times [Greek: trition] into the water, and ascended again, here also covertly pointing by a figure at the three days burial of Christ . . .”<sup>21</sup>**

**Here it is clear that a form of interrogation preceded the baptism and that the name was governing the number of immersions. The three days burial is spoken of as an aside, “here also covertly.” There is a hidden symbolism that flows out of the practice, but not that drives the practice.**

**The Apostolic Constitutions written, or compiled, at the same time as St. Cyril’s document and also in Syria makes a very revealing statement.**

**“If a bishop or presbyter does not perform the single initiation by means of three immersions, but with one immersion only, a baptism ‘into the Lord’s death’, let him be deposed; for the Lord did not say, ‘Baptize into my death’, but ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all**

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p: 29. “και κατεδύετε τρίτον εις τὸ ὕδωρ και ἀνεδύετε μάλιν” II. 4.

**nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup>**

**Single immersion baptism was clearly condemned on the basis that it had departed from the baptismal mandate of Matthew 28. The attack seems to be focused on Romans 6**

**Rom 6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?**

**Rom 6:3**

**ἢ ἀγνοεῖτε ὅτι, ὅσοι ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθημεν;**

**This passage was apparently being used to support single immersion. The Apostolic Constitutions would not suffer any text to take over the mandate. Thus a very apparent tension developed and single immersion was condemned. This passage and others had to be dealt with and the oneness of dying and rising in baptism had to be addressed. A tension here developed between upholding the triple practice used for at least 250 years, and the single action of dying and rising with Christ. The result was the development of the three days in the tomb reasoning.**

**St. Cyril of Jerusalem is the first to espouse such an explanation of the triple form. Thus we see him remaining faithful to the long tradition of the Name of Matthew 28 being the driving force behind the triple form, but appending an explanation of the three days in the tomb to allude to a dying and rising with Christ. In this way Cyril extols the Name and the dying and rising with Christ, two doctrines clearly stated in the Apostolic Constitutions, while guarding against baptizing “into the Lord’s death.” St. Cyril is**

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<sup>22</sup> Apostolic Constitutions 47,50.

“Ἐἴ τις ἐπίσκοπος ἢ πρεσβύτερος μὴ τρία βαπτίσματα μιᾶς μύσεως ἐπιτελέσῃ ἀλλὰ ἓν βάπτισμα τὸ εἰς τὸν θάνατον τοῦ Κυρίου διδόμενον καθαιρείσθω οὐ γὰρ εἶπεν ὁ Κύριος ἡμῖν ,Εἰς τὸν θάνατόν μου βαπτίσατε. ἀλλὰ ,Πορευθέντες μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος).”

**following the direction of the Apostolic Constitutions and does not suffer Romans 6 to take over Matthew 28, but understands Romans 6 in a way that presents no contradiction.**

**Narsai of Edessa around 437 A.D. gives us the first clear evidence that triple form was being used in Edessa. He also gives us another reference to the three days reasoning.**

**“Of the Name of the Divinity he makes mention, and he says three times: “Father and Son and Holy Spirit, one equality.” The Names he repeats with the voice openly, and thus he says: “Such a one is baptized in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit.” And he does not say, “I baptize”, but “is baptized”; for it is not he that baptizes but the power that is set in the Names. The Names give forgiveness of iniquity, not a man; and they sow new life in mortality. In their Name he that is baptized is baptized as in a tomb; and they call and raise him up from his death.**

**Three times he bows his head at their Names, that he may learn the relation--that while They are One They are Three. With a mystery of our Redeemer he goes into the bosom of the font after the manner of those three days in the midst of the tomb. Three days was our Redeemer with the dead: so also he that is baptized--the three times are three days. He verily dies by a symbol of that death which the Quickener of all died; and he surely lives with a type of the life without end. Sin and death he puts off and casts away in baptism, after the manner of those garments which our Lord departing left in the tomb.”<sup>23</sup>**

**Again the Name is front runner for the baptismal practice. Here also it is expressed that the “one equality” is best confessed by speaking the Names three times. Narsai also states that it is the Names that have the power to baptize and which give forgiveness and sow new life. The Names are what call and raise a person out of the death of the tomb. Then Narsai makes a clear ontological statement which is connected directly with the three immersions of baptism. “Three times he bows his head at their Names, that he may learn**

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<sup>23</sup> E.C. Whitaker, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy, p: 55.

**the relation--that while They are One They are Three.” The connection is that triple immersion confesses the equality of the three Persons and the One Godhead.**

**Following this clear statement come the typological statements, “Three days was our Redeemer with the dead: so also he that is baptized--the three times are three days. He verily dies by a symbol of that death which the Quickener of all died; and surely lives with a type of the life without end.” Here again Romans 6 rings in, but as secondary to the Names and what they are doing. If it weren’t for what was with the Names then there would be no weight to the symbolism of the three days in the tomb, rather we would be stuck there in the tomb. It is the Names that, “call and raise him up from his death.” Whether the three days in the tomb reasoning for triple form could stand on its own is irrelevant. The fact is it is not confessed here or anywhere as prior to or apart from the Name of Matthew 28. No attempt is ever made to base the practice of triple immersion solely on the doctrine or text of dying and rising with Christ.**

**The final conflation occurs in a manuscript dated around 1300 A.D. in the Armenian Rite The Canon of Baptism.**

**“Then he shall turn him towards the east, confessing the one Godhead of the holy Trinity, thrice as follows: Dost thou believe in the all-holy Trinity, in Father and Son and Holy Spirit?**

**The priest shall ask thus: Dost thou believe in the Father? Dost thou believe in the Son? Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit?**

**And at each several question the catechumen shall say: I believe, I believe, I believe.**

**And once more he asks him thrice: Dost thou believe, believe, believe?**

**And at each several question the catechumen shall say: I believe. . . .**

**And he maketh the novice to go down into the font. And the priest shall ask his name, and pouring some of the holy water over his head thrice, he shall say as follows: N. or M. is baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, redeemed by the blood of Christ from the**

**slavery of sin, receiving the freedom of adoption as son of the heavenly Father, having become a co-heir with Christ, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. Now and ever and for eternity.**

**This he shall three times repeat, and three times plunge the novice in the water, thereby signifying the three days burial of Christ and his fellowship with him. And he shall wash his whole body and say: Ye that have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ [Gal. 3:27]”<sup>24</sup>**

**Here again the interrogations are running the practice, but the indication is that there is no contradiction between the Name and baptism into Christ. You can't be doing one without the other. Nevertheless the three days in the tomb reasoning is secondary and seeks to extol those baptismal passages which speak of being baptized into Christ and his death. The passage which continues to make its way to center stage is the mandate of Matthew 28. As mentioned above there are no documents which express three days in the tomb as sole doctrine behind triple form baptism. In all the documents that express three days in the tomb reasoning the mandate is always spoken of as primary and as that which is running the triple practice. Even more dubious about three day reasoning is that it only appears in one Western liturgy in Toledo and three from the East (See Map A2). Unlike the Interrogations and Names, tomb talk is limited mostly to the East and is at least 150 years later than the Trinitarian Interrogations.**

### **Doctrine: The Substance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is One**

**John Chrysostom gives us the final formulation of a doctrine behind triple form baptism in Stavronikita 2 written during Lent 390 A.D. in Antioch.**

**“That you may also learn from this that the substance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, baptism is conferred in the following**

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p: 62, 64.

manner. When the priest says: “So-and-so is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, he puts your head down into the water three times and three times he lifts it up again, preparing you by this mystic rite to receive the descent of the Spirit. . . . The one fulfilling all things is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the undivided Trinity. It is faith in this Trinity which gives the grace of remission from sin; it is this confession which gives us the gift of filial adoption.”<sup>25</sup>

Here Chrysostom clearly states that triple form is used to extol the substance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one. The clearest way of confessing one substance is by confessing three Persons. Here again it is the three Names or Persons that are doing all the action and they are one. “The one fulfilling all things is.” We are most confessing our “faith in this Trinity which gives the grace of remission from sin” when we are confessing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three Persons, triple form “this confession gives us the gift of filial adoption.”

### **Conclusion of Triple Immersion / Sprinkling**

What is evident here is that the mandate of Matthew 28 has prompted its hearers to almost universally adopt a triple form of baptizing. Where such a form is not adopted we hear only condemnation spoken. Such a practice is not simply a human idea but the creation and urging of the Triune Name, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. What is behind the triple form is the Lord’s Words and Name. Time and time again what is primary in Holy Baptism’s liturgy is the Name, a Name that is confessed in threes.

Those documents which sought to extol passages other than Matthew 28 always did so in a secondary or subordinate way. The Name and mandate always appeared as

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p: 41.

**primary. Those documents also extolled baptism in a way that lacked a universal practice, and were closely related to a reaction against Romans 6 becoming the front runner Baptismal text.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is evident from the liturgy that it is Matthew 28 that fills and produces the practice of triple immersion / sprinkling baptisms. The doctrine of the three Persons and the one Godhead is the central teaching that is extolled in this practice, as well as Christ's death and resurrection. "The Names give forgiveness of iniquity, not a man; and they sow new life in mortality. In their Name he that is baptized is baptized as in a tomb; and they call and raise him up from his death."<sup>27</sup> It is the Name that gives gifts in threes. It is the Name that informs and urges triple form baptism.**

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<sup>26</sup> **Apostolic Constitutions 47,50.**

**"Εἴ τις ἐπίσκοπος ἢ πρεσβύτερος μὴ τρία βαπτίσματα μιᾶς μύσεως ἐπιτελέσῃ ἀλλὰ ἐν βάπτισμα τὸ εἰς τὸν θάνατον τοῦ Κυρίου διδόμενον καθαιρείσθω οὐ γὰρ εἶπεν ὁ Κύριος ἡμῖν ,Εἰς τὸν θάνατόν μου βαπτίσατε. ἀλλὰ ,Πορευθέντες μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος)."**

<sup>27</sup> **E.C. Whitaker, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy, p: 55.**



## **Why Single Immersion / Sprinkling?**

### **Doctrine: To Extol the One Godhead**

**There are no Eastern liturgies which practice single form baptism. There is only one Western liturgy that has such a practice, and it had been using a triple form until a Trinitarian heresy forced them to change their practice. The document by St. Hildephonsus of Toledo written before 669 A.D. states:**

**“Two covenants are made: the first, in which the devil is renounced, when it is said; I renounce thee, devil, and thy angels and thy works and thy commands: the second, in which belief is declared in God in the name of the Trinity.**

**Then according to the commandment of the Lord, who said: Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost [Matt. 28.19], the priest adding: that thou mayest have life eternal, the person is sprinkled with water.**

**That he is once immersed, he is sprinkled in the name of the one Deity. But if he were thrice immersed, the number of the three days of the Lord’s burial is shown forth. And therefore within the limits of our faith differing customs are not opposed to one another. But because the heretics by this number of immersions are accustomed to rend the unity of the Godhead, it is by God’s guidance that the Church of God observes the practice of one sprinkling only.”<sup>28</sup>**

**There are several important facts to glean from this document. First of all St. Hildephonsus is still appealing to Matthew 28 and a Trinitarian Interrogation. This perhaps betrays the familiar triple form that he was practicing up to this time. The second important fact is that what is filling the content of single immersion is the statement, “That he is once immersed, he is sprinkled in the name of the one Deity.” It is the one Godhead that is extolled in single immersion. This is in no conflict with Matthew 28 or with what is**

**extolled in triple immersion. The Eunomians were condemned for single form baptism because they were Arian and were confessing that only the Father was God, and therefore there should be only one immersion. That is not what is being confessed in Toledo.**

**The third important fact is that the three days in the tomb reasoning for triple immersion here appears for the first time in all the Western liturgies at which we have looked. As was seen above in the condemnation of the Apostolic Constitution the baptism into the Lord's death was indicative of a single action and a single immersion. Thus in Syria the single action of dying with Christ was associated with the tomb so that the three days in the tomb would bring the single action of Romans 6 into conformity with the triple form of Matthew 28. This is perhaps an appeal to a traditionally Syrian doctrine. So he states, "And therefore within the limits of our faith differing customs are not opposed to one another."**

**He is certainly not referring to the heretics when he speaks of differing customs. He has already appealed to the name of the Deity as the doctrine behind single immersion. It would be confusing to then appeal to the name of the Deity as the doctrine behind triple immersion. Thus he appeals to the three days. The ground for the practice they are about to implement is the Name. The ground for the practice they are about to abandon is the three days. The only reason for abandoning triple form is to refute the heretics. By arguing this way all St. Hildephonsus is leaving behind is Romans 6. He is still standing on the mandate and the Name. It is doubtful that leaving behind the three day in the tomb reasoning was a big deal in the West.**

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p: 115.

**Closely connected with this liturgy is the Fourth Council of Toledo 633 A.D.**

**Although this is not a liturgy it does give us further insight into the practice of single form baptism.**

**“Regarding triple immersion in baptism, as you perceive yourself (and I can add no more), differing customs within the one faith of the Church can do no harm. We ourselves immerse thrice and signify thereby the three days in the tomb, so that when the child is taken from the water for the third time the resurrection after three days is expressed. Yet though it might be supposed that our practice tended towards reverence for the Trinity on high, yet no difficulty can be raised if a candidate were immersed in the water but once, since in the three persons there is but one substance; no objection can be raised, whether a child is immersed three times or once, since in three immersions the Trinity of persons is indicated and in one immersion the Unity of the Godhead. But if hitherto the heretics have been baptizing by triple immersion, I do not think that you should do the same, lest in counting the immersions they divide the Godhead, lest while they continue to do what they were doing, they may boast that they have overcome your own practice. . .”. And therefore let us observe single immersion . . .”<sup>29</sup>**

**Here it is clearly expressed that what is behind triple form is the “Trinity of persons”, and what is behind single immersion is the one substance. It is clear that the triple form was the norm and was only being abandoned to combat the heretics. There would be no change from triple form to single form if it were not for the Trinitarian heresies. What is brought to the foreground is that the baptismal practice is not doctrine or dogma. There is no mention of it being contrary to the Word of God to practice single immersion instead of triple immersion.**

## **Conclusion of Single Immersion / Sprinkling**

**That is all of the liturgical information about single form baptism. There are, however, as mentioned above, several fourth century condemnations of single form baptism. There is the Apostolic Constitutions of around 375 A.D.**

**“If a bishop or presbyter does not perform the single initiation by means of three immersions, but with one immersion only, a baptism ‘into the Lord’s death’, let him be deposed; for the Lord did not say, ‘Baptize into my death’, but ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’”<sup>30</sup>**

**Then there is the Council of Constantinople of 381.**

**“But Eunomians, who are baptized with only one immersion, and Montanists, who are here called Phrygians, and Sabellians, who teach the identity of Father and Son, and do sundry other mischievous things, . . . we receive as heathen. On the first day we make them Christians; on the second, catechumens; on the third, we exorcise them . . . and then we baptize them.”<sup>31</sup>**

**This Syrian phenomenon in the mid to late fourth century was associated with Arianism.**

**As this quote indicates more specifically Eunomianism. Here rather than appealing to single form to guard against the heretics it was the heretics who were espousing a single form. Even though this is earlier than the Toledo practice it is still 250 years after the first account of triple form being used.**

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p: 224.

<sup>30</sup> Apostolic Constitutions 47,50.

**“Εἴ τις ἐπίσκοπος ἢ πρεσβύτερος μὴ τρία βαπτίσματα μιᾶς μυστηρίου ἐπιτελέσῃ ἀλλὰ ἐν βάπτισμα τὸ εἰς τὸν θάνατον τοῦ Κυρίου διδόμενον καθαιρείσθω οὐ γὰρ εἶπεν ὁ Κύριος ἡμῖν ,Εἰς τὸν θάνατόν μου βαπτίσατε. ἀλλὰ ,Πορευθέντες μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος).”**

<sup>31</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 14. p: 185.

**The documents thus deliver to us that single form baptism did not appear until after triple form had already developed a tradition of 250 years or more. When it did appear it was based on heretical teachings and texts other than Matthew 28, and was confined to Syria. Then on the one occasion that it did make it into a liturgy it was standing against a 533 year tradition of triple immersion in a city that had clearly been practicing triple immersion and was only appealing to single immersion to combat a Tritheistic heresy. That is putting single form in the worst light.**

**To speak positively of single immersion one might appeal to the fact that there are numerous documents presented here that did not specifically mention using triple form. It could be argued that they were using single form. One might especially appeal to the Bobbio Missal of Rome 700 A.D. which states after the interrogations, “I baptize thee in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, that have one substance, . . .” Here it could be argued that the one substance is being emphasized and therefore only one immersion was used. At best we are left with an argument from silence, and at worst we have to face the fact that there are two earlier liturgies from Rome which clearly state that triple form was being used. The same is true of all the other unclear documents. There are co-spatial documents that state triple form was used (See the Time Line). The documents leave only one conclusion. Triple form baptism was manifestly the common practice throughout the first twelve centuries A.D.**

## **Deciphering the Data**

**In deciphering the liturgical data, what has come most abundantly clear is that triple form baptism is without question the common and accepted practice through the first twelve centuries A.D. I now direct the reader to map 1A in the appendix of this paper. There the data takes on a geographical perspective. Each city or area in which one of the above baptismal liturgies was in use is included on the map. Below the name of the city or area the baptismal practice of that location is given. Note that the entire area around the Mediterranean Sea from Toledo to Jerusalem is represented by a specific baptismal practice. There are, first of all, no unknowns about the practice of each location. Secondly, every city or area, according to their liturgical data, practiced triple form baptism. The only slight exception is Toledo which began using single form to combat a Tritheistic heresy. From East to West triple form was not only the practice used, but in Constantinople and Syria single form was condemned.**

**Turning now to map 2A the data again comes clear. The goal of this study was not simply to discover whether there was a predominant practice, but also the doctrine behind that practice. On this second map, with the same cities and areas represented, the data about the dating of the liturgies and the doctrine behind their practice is included below the name of the location. Of the four possible doctrines behind triple form practice, there is only one doctrine informing triple form that is common to every location. The universal doctrine behind triple form is the Trinitarian Interrogations.**

**In the West the Trinitarian Interrogations are the only doctrine behind triple form, except for Toledo. In the East we also find the Triune Name and the Three Days in the**

**Tomb given as secondary to the Trinitarian Interrogations. Syria is the only instance of the Single Substance or unity of the Godhead being used to support triple form baptism. In Toledo Single Substance is used, but as the doctrine for single form baptism.**

**Finally, note the dates of the liturgies both on map 2A and on the Time Line. The earliest triple form is in Syria around 100A.D. The earliest single form is in Toledo between 633A.D. and 669A.D. Thus, a single form liturgy does not appear until 530 years after the earliest triple form liturgy. Note, however, that the condemnation of single form in Syria came in 375A.D. This demonstrates that single form was practiced well before 633A.D., but even that date is 275 years later than the first triple form liturgy.**

## **Final Conclusion**

**The historical data not only shows triple form to be the common practice through the first twelve centuries A.D., but to have been virtually unopposed and unhindered. It is evident from the data that triple form baptism flowed from the baptismal mandate of Matthew 28 and that it is the Triune Name, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost that is informing the practice. Such practice extols the equality of the three persons and the one substance. “Three times he bows his head at their Names, that he may learn the relation--that while They are One They are Three.” The Trinitarian Interrogations flow from the Triune Name of Matthew 28 and are with that text the only two elements that appear at every location where triple form baptisms were practiced. “After this we are thrice immersed, while we answer interrogations rather more extensive than our Lord has prescribed in the gospel.”**

**The clear references to single form baptism indicate that the one substance is filling its content, and that it has historically been a heretical practice or an emergency practice against heresy. It has never been the norm. Single form has historically displayed that the form is not mandated and that in the limit of our faith we can have different customs.**

**Here we may appeal to the Formula of Concord:**

**“We further believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church.”<sup>32</sup>**

**We have a long sure and certain tradition flowing from the Apostles with no major disruptions, and only two minor ripples. What was given to do by our Lord in the words of the baptismal mandate have had their way with the liturgy for the first twelve centuries as is evident by way of triple form baptism. To practice any form of baptism other than triple form is to depart from a very old and well founded tradition. To practice any form of baptism other than triple form is to depart from the way the Lord’s Words have informed our practice for hundreds of years. As we continue in this ancient and rich tradition we stand in solidarity with the Christians from every location from whence our earliest baptismal liturgies have been handed down, and we rejoice that the Church’s current situation warrants no departure from such a firm foundation.**

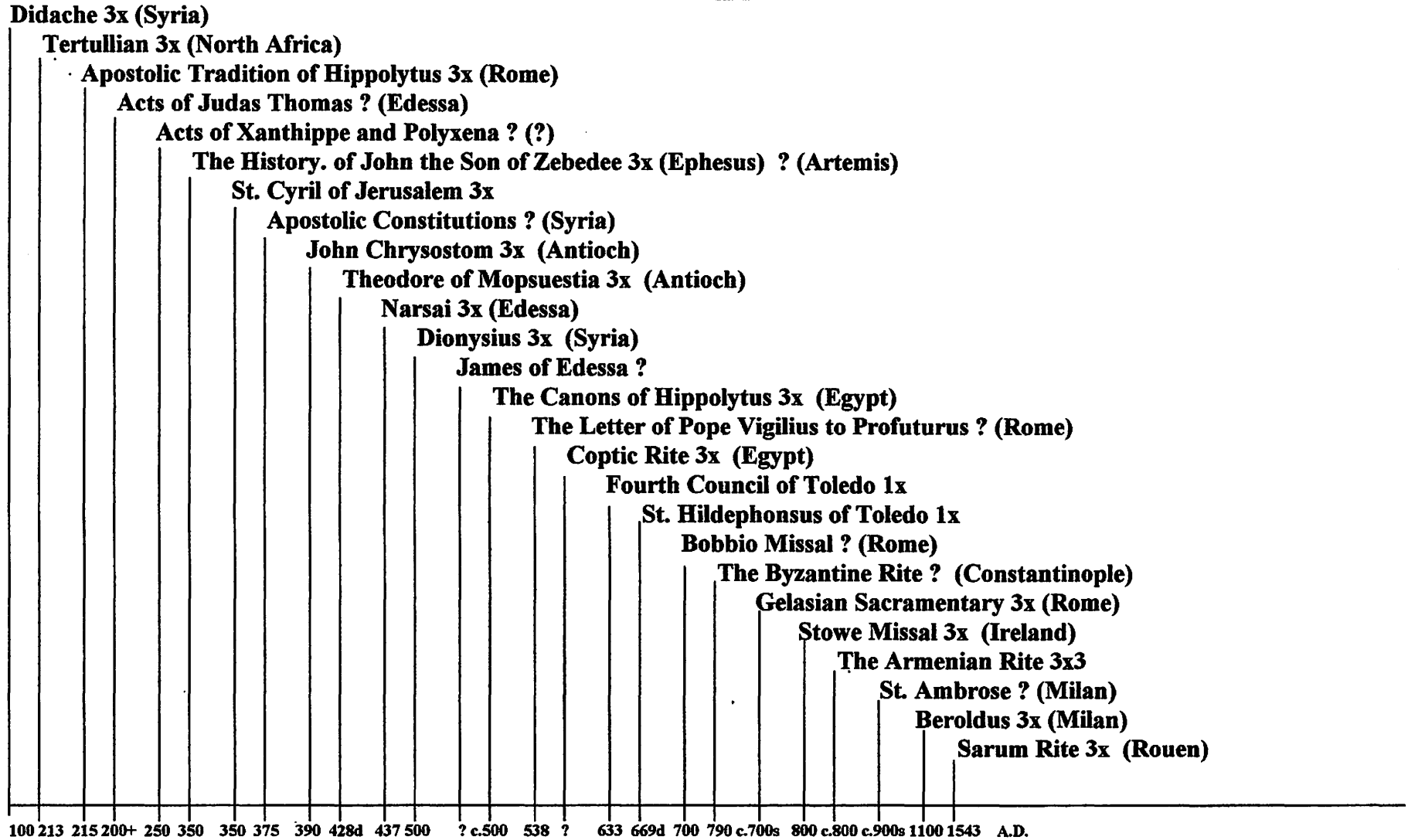
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<sup>32</sup> Tappert p: 612.9.



**Appendix  
of  
Time Line  
and  
Maps**

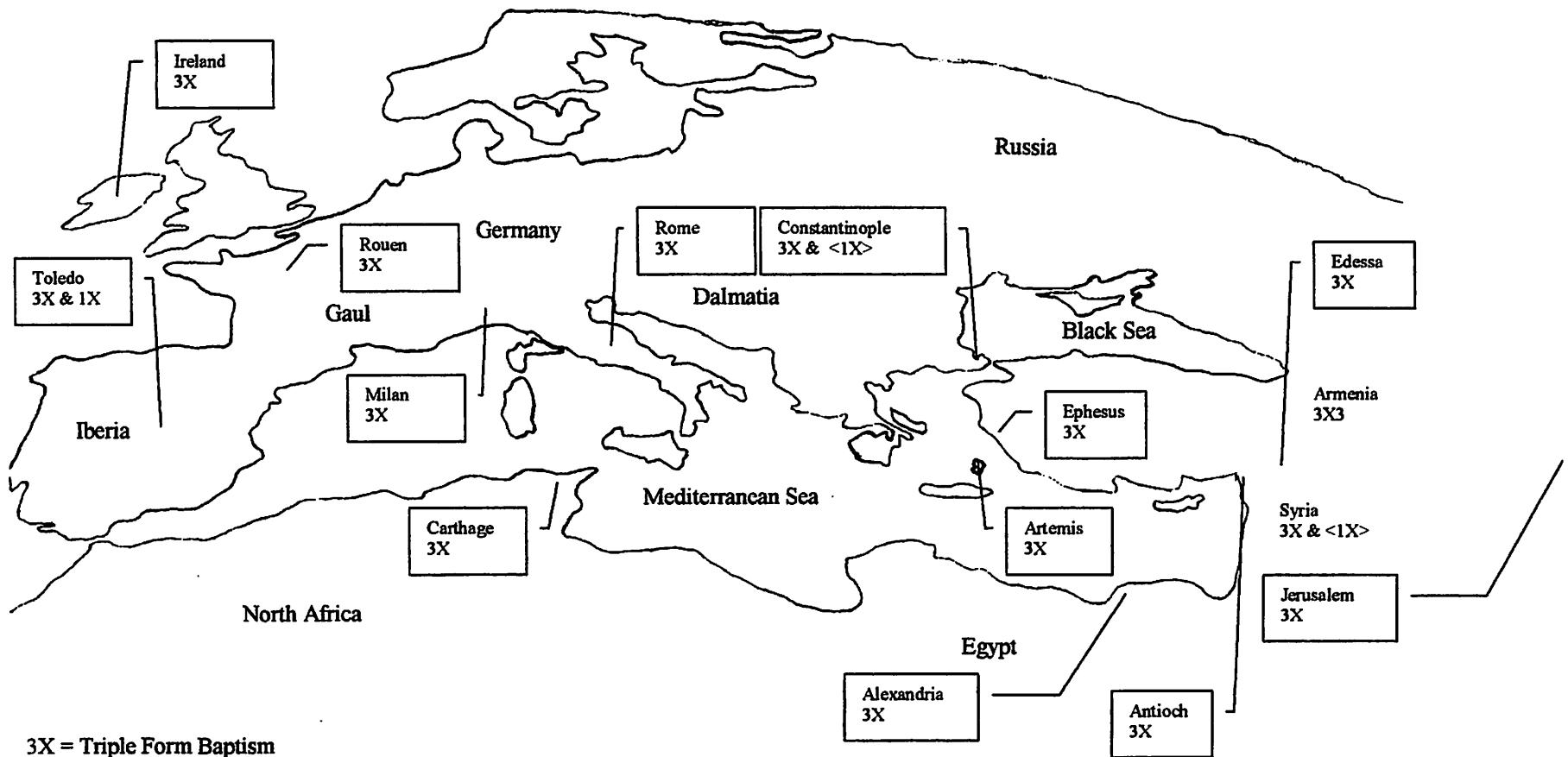
## Time Line



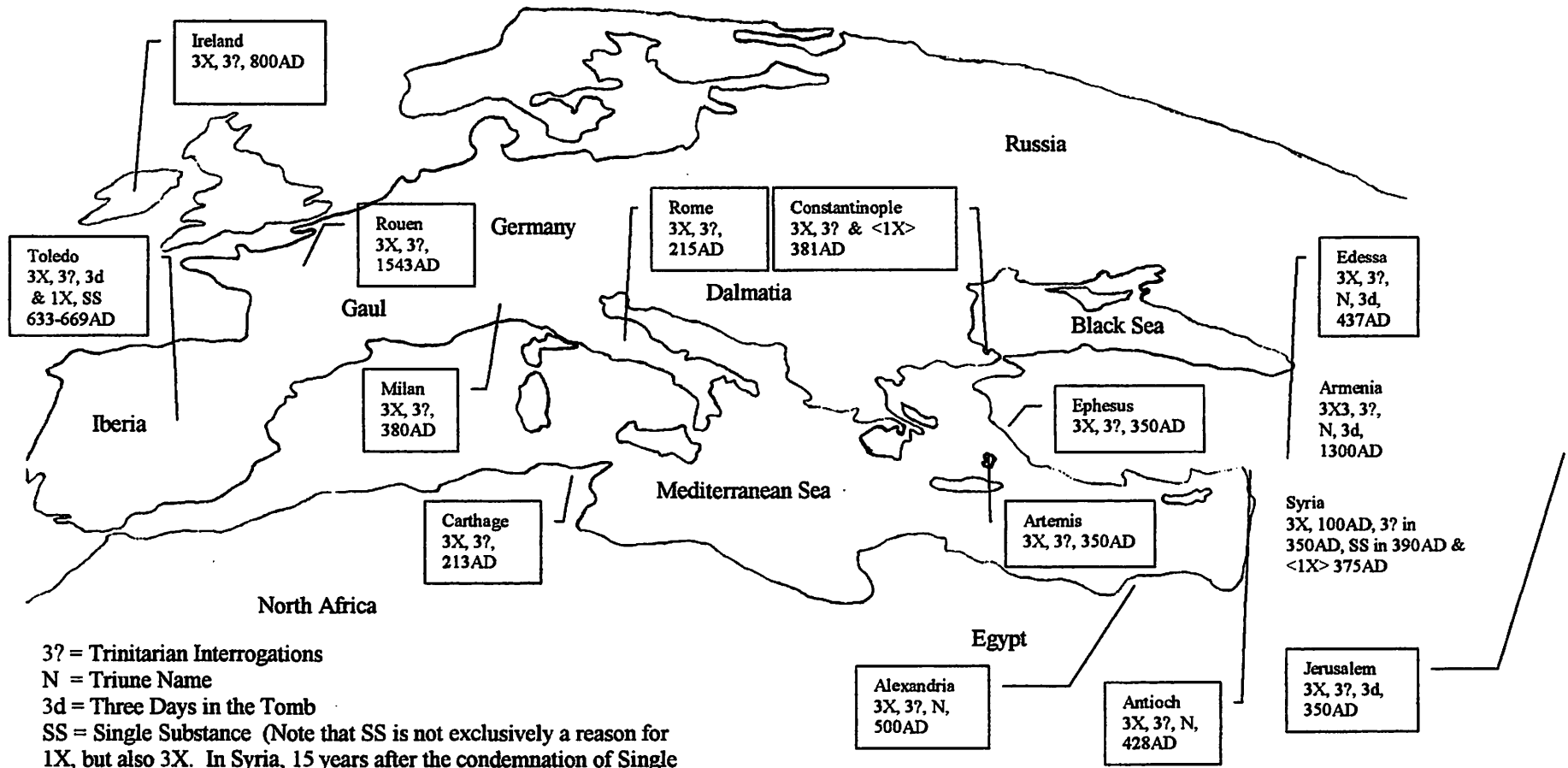
3x = Triple Immersion/ Sprinkling

1x = Single Immersion/Sprinkling

? = No Specific Mention of Triple or Single Practice



3X = Triple Form Baptism  
 3X3 = Three Sprinklings Administered for each Name of the Trinity  
 1X = Single Form Baptism  
 <1X> = Single Form Baptism is Condemned Here



3? = Trinitarian Interrogations  
 N = Triune Name  
 3d = Three Days in the Tomb  
 SS = Single Substance (Note that SS is not exclusively a reason for 1X, but also 3X. In Syria, 15 years after the condemnation of Single Form Baptism, we find the single substance of the Trinity given as a reason for Triple Form Baptism.)

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