THE IMPACT OF THE SITUATIONAL CONTEXTS
FOR PAUL’S USE OF BAPTISMAL TRADITIONS
IN HIS LETTERS

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As the title indicates there are three problems to be dealt with in this essay: firstly, the pre-Pauline baptismal traditions, secondly, the situational contexts, and thirdly, Paul’s own use of these traditions in various situations. Decisive for a correct understanding of the texts ad rem, however, is the inter-connectedness of these three aspects.

Accordingly the following issues have contributed to the problems facing the interpreters in regard to the Pauline texts dealing with baptism:

1. The appraisement of the importance of the inter-textual co-texts, particularly but not exclusively of the Pauline homologoumena;
2. The assessment of the situational contexts as part of the underlying argumentation in the letters;
3. The amount of emphasis laid on the importance of the intra-textual co-text-analysis, especially in the form of each letters’ argumentative function.

When listing these problems I have chosen first to deal with the inter-textual co-texts in a diachronic analysis, then to address the situational contexts as part of the overall pragmatic aspect, and finally to carry out a synchronic analysis on the basis of the intra-textual co-texts in each of the pericopes under investigation.

1. Pre-Pauline Baptismal Traditions: The Inter-Textual Co-Texts

It is certainly correct when Hans Dieter Betz states:¹

Paul’s doctrine of baptism as set forth in Romans 6 is characteristically different from what he says about baptism in his other letters.

He thereby refers above all to 1 Cor 1:13–17 and Gal 3:26–28 and the fact that baptism is not even mentioned—at least not directly—in 1 Thessalonians being the oldest preserved letter by Paul. Among other texts, Betz in particular makes use of 1 Cor 1:13ff. as a witness to the development in Paul’s own understanding of baptism. There we read:

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in[to] my name. I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else. For Christ has not sent me to baptize but to preach the gospel...

There seems, no doubt, to be a long way from this seemingly negative statement in 1 Corinthians to the positive, almost mystical, understanding of baptism in Romans 6. The intertextual analysis need not—as often assumed—establish similarities only, but can—on the contrary—often also establish differences. The validity of this kind of analysis remains the same, however!

Lars Hartman has pointed to the many baptismal formulas used in Early Christianity already at the time of the New Testament. I will here deal with some of the most important formulas as part of the intertextual co-text analysis.

The Name-Formula

We encounter the formula “Into the Name of the Lord Jesus” or similar formulas above all in Acts (8:16; 19:5: εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ; 10:48: ἐν τῷ ὄνομα τῆς Χριστοῦ; 2:38: ἐπὶ τῷ ὄνομα τῆς Χριστοῦ). According to Hartman these formulas had primarily two functions: firstly, to delimit the Christian baptism from that of John the Baptist; secondly, to designate the baptized Christian as