

Infant Baptism In The First-Century Presupposition Pool¹

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Summary

The debate over infant baptism in the apostolic church was classically captured in the exchanges between Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland. Most debates have focussed on 'reading between the lines' of first-century Christian texts, and have yielded little resolution of the New Testament's silence. Such studies often fail to address the significance of the silence itself, within its original context. In this paper I examine the practices of first-century Judaism and Graeco-Roman religions regarding infant initiation and participation in their parents' religion, including the Graeco-Roman practice of the dies lustricus and the involvement of children in Graeco-Roman worship. Using Theo Vennemann's concept of presupposition pools, I will ask how the early church's silence should be interpreted in light of the original audiences' presuppositions. I will argue that since the New Testament and other surviving works of the early church do not address their audiences' presupposition that their infants would be initiated into their religion, it indicates that they shared rather than challenged this widely held assumption. The New Testament's silence is therefore best interpreted as indicating the practice of infant baptism.

1. Introduction

Cambridge professor C. F. D. Moule said of Joachim Jeremias's 1958 book *Infant Baptism* that it contained 'at least' all the evidence in favor

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of the apostolic origin of infant baptism.² And indeed, in the last fifty years we have not stumbled upon any new direct evidence of the apostolic practice in this period. However, in his 2004 paper 'Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies?: A Seismological Approach', Anthony N. S. Lane proposed an alternative to what he called the tendency 'to torture the early evidence in order to make it say more than the authors intended, to read between the lines of first-century documents'. Instead of examining the data (or lack thereof) from the church in the first century, he examined the data from the church in the early patristic period, and its relationship to the apostolic church. From this examination he drew his conclusions on what 'must have happened in apostolic times' to explain the later practices.³

Rather than look at the direct data, which is scant, Lane looked at data from a related time and place, and drew con...

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