



BY BENNIE R. CROCKETT, JR.

A New Way of Life

THOUGH PAUL HAD NOT BEEN TO ROME (Rom. 1:10; 15:22-24), he named at least 26 Christians in Rome in his letter (Rom. 16:1-15). These names reveal people's origins from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds; some may have become Christians on the day of Pentecost about 25 years earlier (Acts 2:10,41).

If Paul wrote to the Romans during his stay in Corinth, his relation to Gaius may be significant. Gaius—Paul's host in Corinth—sent his greetings to the Romans (Rom. 16:23), and he may have been the Gaius whom Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14). Paul's argument about baptism in Romans 6 could reflect Paul's memory about those he baptized in Corinth (vv. 14-17). But of particular interest for Paul was the significance and meaning of baptism (Rom. 6:1-14) in relation to the Romans' new way of life in Christ (v. 4).

New Life According to Paul

Because of Christ's resurrection, believers "walk in newness of life"¹ (Rom. 6:4), one of the most repeated phrases from Paul's letter to the Romans. Although the phrase appears in many of the prominent English translations, the Greek phrase (*en kainototi zoes*) reveals the larger moral context of Romans 6 and 7 when translated as "in a new way of life" (HCSB). The HCSB faithfully recaptures and enhances William Tyndale's original 1526 English translation, "in a new life."²

Only one generation after Paul wrote Romans, the Greek word *kainotes* appeared in Plutarch's *The Life of Pericles*. Describing the beauty and brilliance of Greek culture, construction, and democracy under Pericles (495-429 B.C.), Plutarch (A.D. 46-119) wrote, "Such perpetual newness [*kainotes*] blooms as though untouched by time."³ While Pericles's Parthenon remains standing in Athens as the greatest monument of classical Greek culture, the material structure has suffered irreparable damage by time, the elements, war, and looting. The perpetual newness of the Parthenon is its survivability and iconic reminder of Greek culture's origins. But, as with all of material reality, all "things that are seen are temporary" (2 Cor. 4:18).

Appearing twice in the New Testament (Rom. 6:4; 7:6), the word *kainotes* conveys the new kind of moral life that Christ's resurrection brought to believers. According to Romans 6:1-14, believers should not abuse God's abundant grace by maintaining a sinful life; rather, in Christ, believers died to sin, were buried in baptism, and have been raised to a new [moral] way of life (vv. 1-4).

Baptism for Jewish Roman Christians

For Jewish Christians (2:17-3:31), their memory and familiarity with various washings would have provided immediate comparison and contrast to Christian baptism. Various kinds of non-baptismal washings appear frequently in the Old Testament (Lev. 15:4-27; Num. 8:5-7; 2 Kings 5:9-14; Ps. 51:7; Ezek. 36:24-27) and probably served as background references for baptism.

According to Acts 2:10, some Christians in Rome were proselytes to Judaism. According to the Jewish Talmud, composed after A.D. 70 but likely referring to practices before that date, proselytes to Judaism underwent baptism, circumcision, and sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. During a proselyte's baptism, "Two men learned in the Law shall stand near him and instruct him as to some of the lighter and some of the weightier commandments. He immerses himself and when he comes up he is in all respects an Israelite."⁴

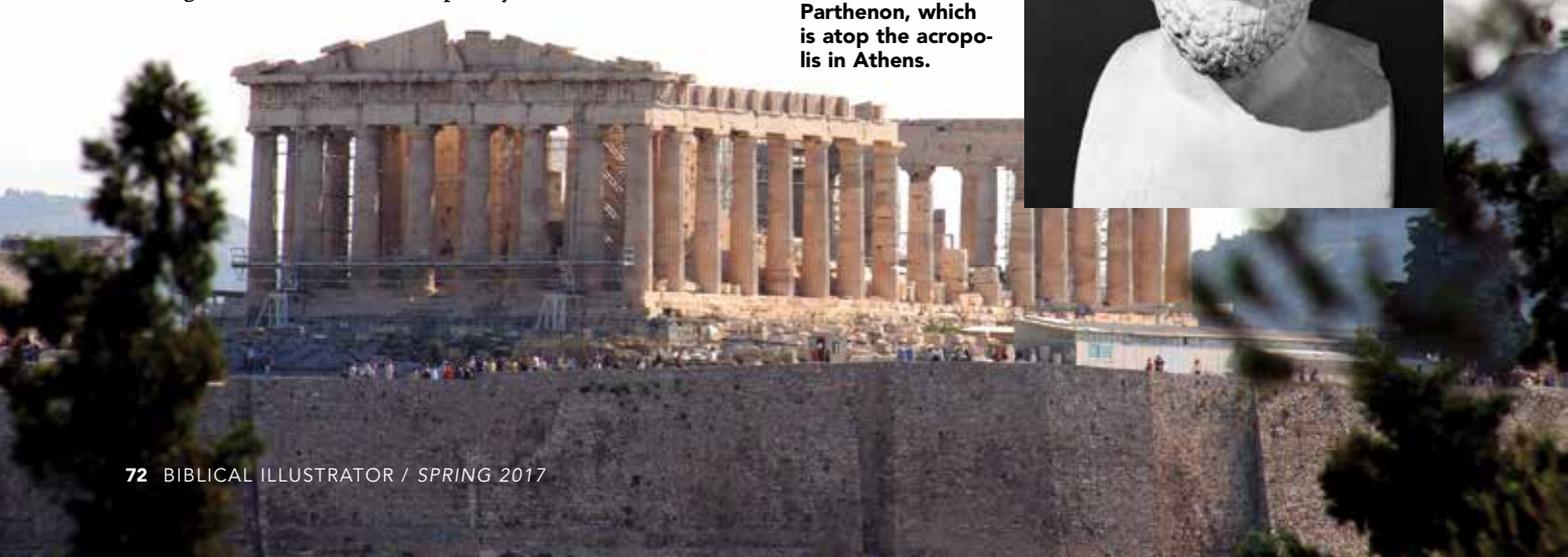
Right: Bust of Pericles, who led Athens in the mid-5th cent. B.C. One of his major accomplishments was to lead the city to develop an impressive upper city. The result was the Athens acropolis with its most prominent structure, the Parthenon.

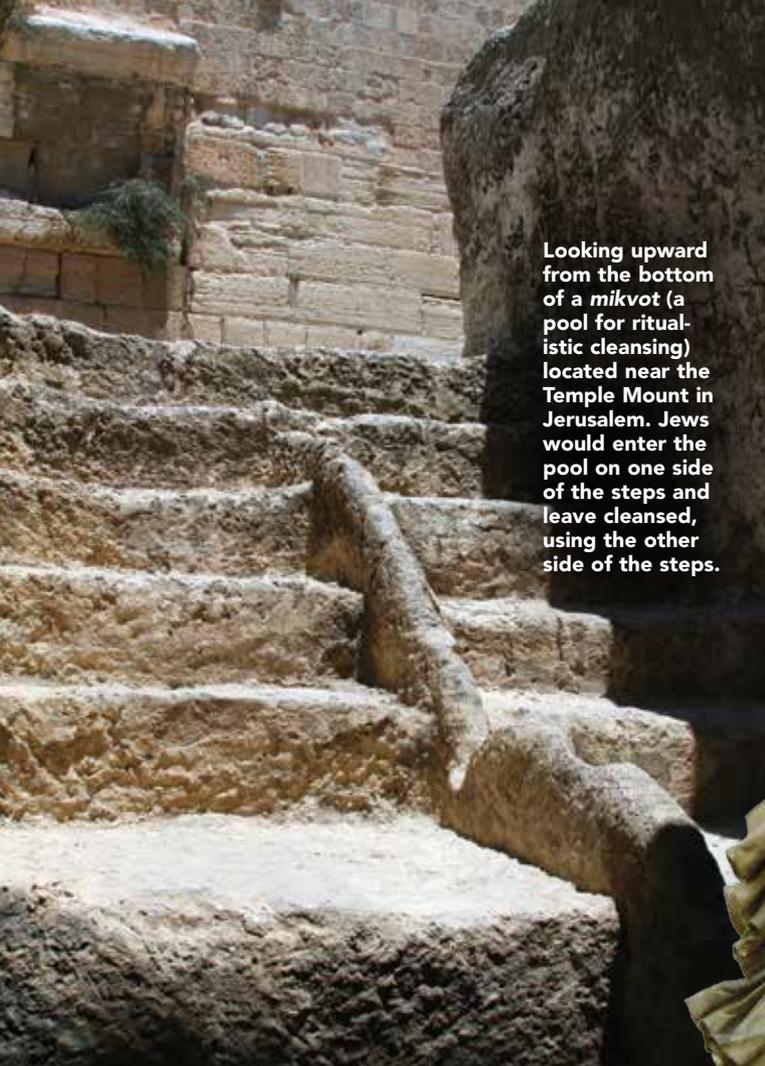
Below: The Parthenon, which is atop the acropolis in Athens.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: DAVID ROGERS/ MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY/ UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI/ COLUMBIA (395/5A)



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Looking upward from the bottom of a *mikvot* (a pool for ritualistic cleansing) located near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Jews would enter the pool on one side of the steps and leave cleansed, using the other side of the steps.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (10/7/10)

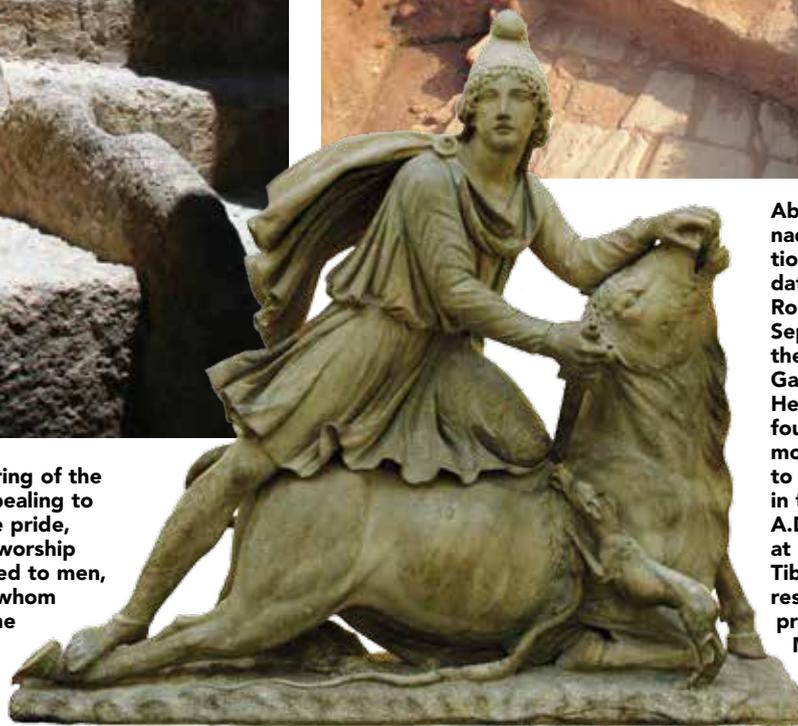


Above: A colonnaded street junction in Sepphoris dating from the Roman period. Sepphoris was the capital of Galilee until Herod Antipas founded and moved the capital to Tiberias early in the 1st cent. A.D. The schools at Sepphoris and Tiberias were responsible for producing the Mishnah and the Palestinian Talmud (A.D. 200–450).



Right: Marble statue depicting Mithras slaying the bull; Roman, 2nd cent. A.D. The Mithraic religion focused on the end of the constellation of the Bull, that is, the end of the Age of Taurus and the introduction of Aries

in the spring of the year. Appealing to masculine pride, Mithraic worship was limited to men, many of whom passed the tradition on to their sons.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/27/84)

Also, the Beth Shammai rabbis “allow a proselyte, who underwent circumcision on the eve of Passover, to immerse himself and then partake in the Passover-offering.”⁵

Though originally a slave, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (A.D. 55–135) gained his freedom after Emperor Nero’s death in A.D. 68. Epictetus taught in Rome until Emperor Domitian banished all philosophers around A.D. 90. In one of his late writings, Epictetus observed that proselytes to Judaism experienced baptism.⁶

Roman Religions and Baptism

Anyone living in Rome would have had some knowledge of the ancient Greek mystery religions and the Roman ritualistic forms of those religions that may have included initiatory baptism. Many cults to polytheistic gods existed in the first century as evident in the New Testament’s use of Greek and Latin names for them (Zeus/Jupiter and Hermes/Mercury,

Acts 14:12–13; Artemis/Diana, Acts 19:24,27–28,34–35; The Twin Brothers/Castor and Pollux, Acts 28:11).

During the Romans’ war with Carthage in the third century B.C., the Romans enthroned the Asia Minor Greek goddess Cybele (the Great Mother) as a state goddess. Cybele’s consort Attis likewise received Roman recognition when Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54) promoted him to the Roman pantheon by allowing Attis’s priests to deliver traditional pine trees to Rome’s Palatine Hill.⁷ Since Attis functioned as a fertility god for crops, the cult featured an annual dying and rising of the god related to nature’s winter and spring.

The Great Mother cult had a washing ritual, and later a sect of heretical gnostics associated with the cult practiced ritualistic washing as an initiation rite. The second-century defender of the Christian faith Hippolytus of Rome wrote about the gnostic heretics that “the promise of washing is nothing else for them than for the one being washed

in living water and anointed with an unutterable anointing to enter into unfading pleasure.”⁸

Another popular Roman cult was Mithraism, which featured the hero Mithra slaying a bull in an underground cave and thereby controlling the heavens.⁹ Some link Mithraism to light and fire with an initiation process that included ritualistic washings.¹⁰

During Nero’s reign (A.D. 54-68), a prince, Tiridates of Armenia, visited Nero. Tiridates practiced the eastern Mithraism cult in Rome, but also worshiped the Roman emperor as a deity.¹¹ Although Mithraism may have included initiatory washing and a sacred meal, Tertullian (A.D. 155-240), the North African Christian writer, later argued that such cultic practices were deviations mimicking true Christian devotion.¹²

Christian Moral Purity in the Imperial City

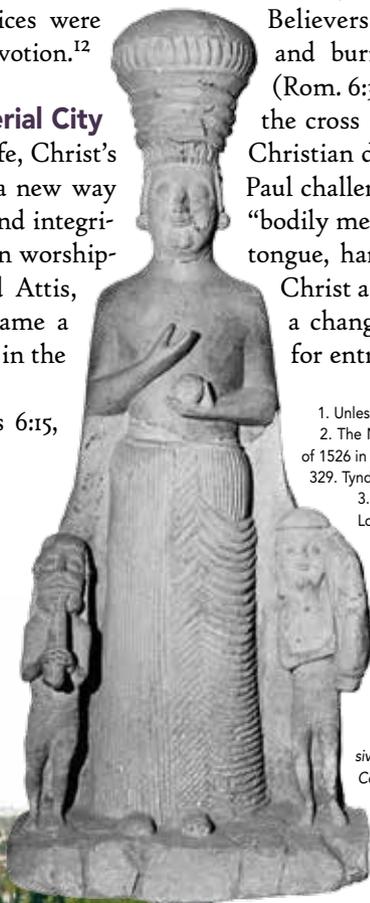
As sin corresponds to the old way of life, Christ’s resurrection propels the believer into a new way of life corresponding to moral purity and integrity. Unlike the Roman patriotic duties in worshipping pagan nature’s Great Mother and Attis, early Christians’ baptism instead became a sign for a new kind of moral life based in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15,

Below: The ruins on Byrsa Hill in Carthage, in northern Africa. The sacred precinct at Carthage, the Tofet, covered about 1.5 acres. Rome and

Carthage opposed each other in a series of three wars between 264–146 B.C. These were known as the Punic Wars.

Right: Figurine of Cybele, whom the Romans considered to be the great mother of the gods.



Paul refers to a believer’s life as being a “new creation,” for the “old ways of life have passed away” (2 Cor. 5:17). Since the old ways of life (Rom. 1:18-32) have passed away through Christ’s reconciliation of believers to God (2 Cor. 5:18-20), believers continually must choose to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24, esv). Whether Paul used the term “justification” (Rom. 4:25), “reconciliation” (Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:18-19), “redemption” (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14), or “salvation” (Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 5:9) for persons’ new relation to God through Christ, the evidence of believers’ change is their sanctification (Greek, *hagiasmos*, Rom. 6:19,22; 1 Thess. 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:13) in holy living.

Believers in Christ “were baptized into his death and buried with Christ through baptism to death” (Rom. 6:3-4). Jesus’ baptism into self-sacrificial death on the cross (Mark 10:39) portrays the definitive act for all Christian discipleship (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Paul challenged the early Roman Christians to yield their “bodily members” (Greek, *melos*, Rom. 6:13,19—head, eyes, tongue, hands, stomach, genitals, feet) in the service of Christ as Lord of all.¹³ Christian baptism signified such a change in moral lifestyle, not a ritualistic washing for entrance into a particular religion.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are the writer’s translation.

2. The New Testament, Translated by William Tyndale, The Text of the Worms edition of 1526 in original spelling, ed. W.R. Cooper (London, England: The British Library, 2000), 329. Tyndale’s original spellings appear modified above for contemporary usage.

3. Plutarch, *The Life of Pericles* 13.3, in Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives*, vol. 65 in The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press 1916), author’s translation.

4. “Yebamoth 47b” in C.K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 210.

5. “Eduyoth 5.2” in *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Michael L. Rodkinson, vol. 9 (Boston: New Talmud Publishing Co., 1903), 18.

6. Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.9.21, vol. 131 in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. W.A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1925), 266.

7. Johannes Lydus, *De Mensibus* 4.59, in *Liber De Mensibus*, ed. Ricardus Wuensch (Leipzig, Germany: B.G. Teubner, 1898), 113.

8. Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, vol. 2 in Origen, *Philosophumena, sive Omnium haeresion refutatio*, ed. Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, (Paris: 1860), § 3131, author’s translation.

9. David Ulansey, “Solving the Mithraic Mysteries,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20, no. 5 (September/October 1994): 40-53.

10. Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1903), 6, 157, 173, 190.

11. Dio Cassius *Roman History* 63.5.2, vol. 176 in The Loeb Classical Library, trans. Earnest Carey (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1925), 142-43.

12. Tertullian, *On Baptism* 5 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ANF], ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3. (1885; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012). 671; Tertullian, *On Prescription Against Heretics* 40 in ANF, 262-63.

13. On the central issue of the body’s sanctity, see Matthew 5:29,30; 18:8; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 6:41-42; Romans 3:13; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:13,15-16,18-19; 10:8; 12:12-25; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Ephesians 4:28; 6:6; Philippians 3:19; Colossians 3:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; James 3:5-6; 4:8; 1 Peter 3:10; 2 Peter 2:14; 1 John 2:16; Revelation 2:14,20-21; 9:21.

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