Below is my translation of Anne-Françoise Jaccottet's article, Du baptême de Dionysos à l'initiation du Christ : langage iconographique et identité religieuse – available on A.-F. Jaccottet's academia.edu page.

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FROM THE BAPTISM OF DIONYSUS TO THE INITIATION OF CHRIST: ICONOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY[1]

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In the beginning was the Baptism. The event at the Jordan constitutes the first act of Jesus' public life, his coming as the Messiah. [...] Like the Jordan to which it is linked, Jesus' Baptism indeed appears as a point of passage: from the desert to the Promised Land, from the Old to the New Testament[2].

The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John the Baptist, universally recognized as a historical fact, holds a prominent place in the four canonical Gospels, serving as an inaugural moment[3]. Several Judeo-Christian texts, called apocryphal, reflecting the various interpretations that this episode has undergone as well as the intense interpretative controversies it has generated, confirm the "crucial" importance of baptism in the early centuries of Christianity[4].

1 The reflections presented here originated during a study day dedicated to baptism and baptisteries held at the University of Lausanne in December 2006. I would like to thank the organizers of this meeting, Serena Romano, Professor of Art History, and Ivan Foletti, Assistant, for fostering such fruitful debate. I also thank Professor Jean-Michel Spieser from Fribourg, who introduced me to the richness of the iconography of the Baptism of Christ on that occasion, and with whom we exchanged our partly divergent views on the mechanisms of the formation of this imagery. *Fons vitae. Baptêmes, baptistères et rites d'initiation (II^e^-VI^e^ siècle). Actes de la journée d'études, université de Lausanne, 1^er^ décembre, 2006*, eds. Ivan Foletti & Serena Romano, Roma, Viella, 2009. Lastly, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Nicole Belayche, Jean-Daniel Dubois, and John Scheid, organizers of this conference, for providing us, through

the chosen theme and its open possibilities, with the opportunity to venture into parallels and hypotheses that break down some commonly accepted barriers.

2 Daniel Vigne, *Christ au Jourdain. Le Baptême de Jésus dans la trodition judéo-chrétienne.* Paris, Gabalda, 1992, p. 77.

3 Mt 3, 1-12; Mk 1, 2-8; Lk 3, 15-17; Jn 1, 19-34. Although the account of the baptism does not technically open the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, it clearly inaugurates the ministry, the public life of Jesus (cf. infra, n.9).

4 Daniel Vigne's comprehensive study (*Christ au Jourdain*, op. cit.) is illustrative in this regard.

It is not surprising to find this key episode represented very early on, especially in the oldest parts of the Catacomb of Callixtus[5], from which the scene illustrated in Figure 1 originates[6]. Representations of the Baptism of Christ did not remain confined to catacombs and multiplied across various media. Sarcophagi played a significant role in depicting this episode, as evidenced by the two selected examples here, both from Rome, the first dating from around 270 AD (Figure 2)[7], and the second from the early 4th century (Figure 3)[8]. Alongside painted scenes that continued to adorn the catacombs until at least the 5th century[9], we can mention a likely Egyptian gem from the 5th century[10], an ivory plaque from the 6th century (Figure 4)[11], and a gold medallion from Constantinople from the late 6th century[12].

Fig. 1. Catacombe de Callixte, Cubiculum A3, 2e quart du IIIe siècle apr. J.-C.
D'après A. Nestori, *Repertorio topografico delle pitture delle catacombe romane*, Vatican, coll. « Roma sotteranea cristiana », 5, 1993 (1975), n° 21

Fig. 2. Sarcophage, Rome, Santa Maria Antiqua, vers 270 apr. J.-C. D'après *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1967, I, n° 747, 1

Fig. 3. Sarcophage, Rome, Vatican, Museo Pio Cristiano 183, début du IV^e^ siècle apr. J.-C.
D'après *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1967, I, n° 13, 1

Fig. 4. Plaque d'ivoire, Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, D 313, vᵉ siècle apr. J.-C. © Lyon MBA/Photographie Alain Basset

5 The oldest known representation of the Baptism of Christ is found in the Catacomb of Callixtus, Level 2, Hypogeum Alpha (Reekman), Cubiculum X, North wall (opposite the entrance, where the main themes are consistently located, cf. Paul C. Finney, The Invisible God. The Earliest Christians on Art, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 198). Only the presence of a bird flying toward the group formed by a man assisting with his right hand another man placed below him in the field, shifts the interpretation of the scene towards the baptismal theme (Aldo Nestori, Repertorio topografico delle pitture delle catacombe romane, Roma, PIAC, coll. "Roma sotterranea cristiana," 5, 1993 [1st ed. 1975], p.103, no 1; Paul C. Finney, The Invisible God, op. cit., p. 198-199).

6 In addition to the scene represented here (Figure 1 - Cubiculum A3), a very similar scene (except for the attire of the baptizer) is found in a neighboring cubiculum (A2): Aldo Nestori, Repertorio, op. cit., p. 106, nos. 27 and 22; both ensembles are contemporary (2nd quarter of the 3rd century). On the genesis and paintings of this part of the Catacomb of Callixtus, cf. Paul C. Finney, The Invisible God, op. cit., p. 154-230.

7 Giuseppe Bovini & Hugo Brandenburg, Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, Vol. 1. Rom und Ostia, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1967, no 747.

8 Giuseppe Bovini & Hugo Brandenburg, Repertorium, op. cit., p. 12-13, no 13.

9 For example, in the Catacomb of Callixtus, the so-called "Cubiculum of the Sheep": Aldo Nestori, Repertorio, op. cit., p. 109, no 45, recently reproduced in Jean-Michel Spieser, "Les représentations du Baptême du Christ à l'époque paléochrétienne," in Fons vitae, op. cit., p.65-88, Fig. 10.

10 Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century. Catalogue of the Exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977, through February 12, 1978, ed. Kurt Weitzmann, New York, MMA, 1979, p.437-438, no 395 (Liselotte Kôtsche).

11 Note the presence of three personifications, namely the moon, the sun, and the Jordan. The representation of the Jordan in personified form became the norm from the 6th century onwards (cf. Jean-Michel Spieser, "Représentations," op. cit., p. 79-80). This ivory plaque from the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon is not unique. Other ivory plaques can be mentioned here, such as those preserved in Berlin and Paris dating from around 410-420 (baptism is depicted on the first plaque, no 406), cf. Age of Spirituality, op. cit., p. 446-448, nos. 406-407 (Liselotte Kôtsche). In the latter representation, one should note the simultaneous presence of the Jordan water descending in a vertical flow behind Jesus and the Holy Spirit represented in the form of another vertical flow emerging from the mouth of the tomb to touch the head of Christ, clearly depicted as a child.

12 Age of Spirituality, op. Cit., p. 312-313, no 287. Recto: Virgin enthroned and miniature Nativity scene with adoration of the Magi; the Baptism scene on the reverse is accompanied by the quotation of the heavenly voice from Matthew 3:17: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (TOB translation).

Note the open hands that seem to send the Spirit in the form of a dove. Below the scene, three personifications: gold, Dan, and the sea, in reference to Psalm 114 [113 A].3. The proposed date (584) refers to the baptism of Theodosius, the porphyrogenitus son of Maurice Tiberius, for whom this object is believed to be a commemoration.

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From the 3rd to the 6th century, the scene evolves relatively schematically and revolves around the four essential elements: the figure of the one baptized, that of the baptizer extending his right hand over the head of the one baptized, the presence of water, and the dove; these four elements form the framework of the narrative of the baptism of Christ, especially in Matthew and Luke. Does this mean that the pictorial representations of the baptism of Christ are faithful illustrations of the Gospel text? Several signs divert us from such an interpretation. It has long been noticed that Christ was systematically depicted as a young man or even a small child in all representations of his baptism, up to the 6th century. This schematic choice, of course, has nothing to do with the canonical texts since it is as an adult that Jesus presents himself to John at the Jordan[13]. Another difference between the image and the texts is that the baptismal water, far from always being represented as that of a river on a horizontal plane, often comes "from above" in a vertical flow towards the head of Christ. These two particularities have not failed to pique the interest of researchers. In a recent article, Jean-Marie Spieser[14] provides an overview of this dual peculiarity in the representations of the baptism of Christ. Why then revisit a dossier that has been carefully and recently examined here? It should be noted that different exegeses have attempted to explain the originality of the images through texts, other texts than those of the Gospels. Thus, J.-M. Spieser highlights the indications of a textual tradition of a child Christ at the time of his baptism and concludes:

The images in which Christ is represented as a young boy, at least the oldest among them, would thus be linked to a tradition, attested by these texts, which is not troubled by the contradiction with the Gospel text. These images appear as the conservatory of a tradition systematically obliterated in textual witnesses[15].

The explanation for these "deviant" representations is thus sought internally, within the closed world of the early Christian authors and in a close relationship with the text. Without questioning the existence, highlighted by J.-M. Spieser, of texts presenting a child Christ, I would like to revisit the question of the representations of the baptism of Christ from a strictly iconographic perspective here. Do Christian images only take

shape in isolation and with exclusive reference to the written word, even if it is heterodox?

13 The only age-related precision is provided by the Gospel of Luke (Lk 3:23): "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age" (TOB translation). Note the phrase "when he began" (arkhomenos), which emphasizes a before and after, with the baptism as the turning point.

14 Jean-Michel Spieser, "Représentations," op. cit.

15 Ibid., p. 69.

Does the textual tradition of the child Christ, early on overshadowed by texts recognized as canonical, suffice to explain the permanence and stability of this representative schema until the 6th century? The theme of this conference encourages me to venture into the realm of openness, that of iconographic cohabitation between the Christian world and the Greco-Roman world, provided that the notion of "worlds," separated, has any congruence at all. Looking at representations of the Baptism of Christ from an iconographic perspective will also lead us to reflect on the genesis of an image and the referent that underlies it, a crucial question for Christians who must constantly invent new patterns to express their new faith and religious identity.

Let us therefore look at the scenes of the Baptism of Christ not as illustrations or as the visualization of a text but as an iconographic schema. The scheme at the base of all representations can be summarized in a very simple composition with two main figures: one adult who extends his right hand above the head of the second, a young man or young boy. The bird and the water are the two elements that turn this scheme into a theme and give it its precise meaning of the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. We will return to these two elements later. If we focus on the two human figures, their staging, and the evident and significant age difference between them, an iconographic parallel inevitably comes to mind. This scheme very concretely evokes scenes of the initiation of young Dionysus, widely disseminated from the end of the Hellenistic period[16]. The examples provided here (Figures 5 and 6) clearly highlight the schematic parallelism that links the two series of representations (see montage in Figure 7); the young initiated god, like the baptized Christ, is depicted as a child or young man with an adult figure standing beside them, extending their hand above their head in a gesture that other elements of the scene illuminate as evidently ritual. The striking schematic resemblance between these two series naturally raises a fundamental question: could

the iconographic scheme of the Baptism of Christ be a reiteration of the initiation scheme of Dionysus, whose popularity is well attested in the early centuries of the Roman Empire? Could it be the iconographic influence of an initiatory pattern, with Dionysus always represented as a child, that explains the presence of the child Christ in baptism scenes?

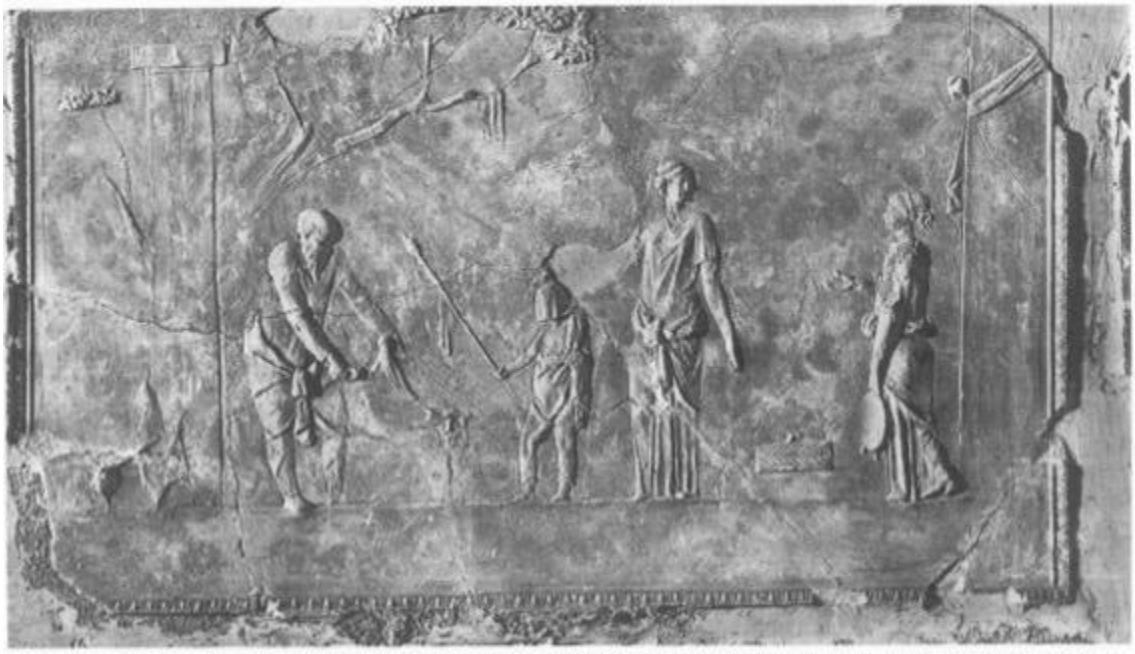

Fig. 5. Stuc de la maison sous la Farnésine, cubiculum 46, Rome, Musée des Thermes, époque augustéenne. D'après R. Turcan, *Liturgies de l'initiation bacchique à l'époque romaine (Liber). Documentation littéraire, inscrite et figurée*, Paris, Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, coll. « Mémoires », 27, 2003, pl. 41

Fig. 6. Stuc, Ostie, Isola sacra, tombe de P. Aelius Maximus, 120-130 apr. J.-C. D'après dessin du *LIMC*, I, s.v. Antiope n° 7

Fig. 7. Montage comparatif (fig. 1 et 2 // fig. 5 et 6)

16 The work of Robert Turcan, Liturgies de l'initiation bacchique à l'époque romaine (Liber). Documentation littéraire, inscrite et figurée, Paris, Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, coll. "Mémoires," 27, 2003, provides practical access to the corpus of figurative documents. Reference can also be made to Friedrich Matz, DIONYSIAKETELETE. Archäologische Untersuchungen zum Dionysoskult in hellenistischer und römischer Zeit, Mainz, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, coll. "Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse. Jahrg. 1963," 15, 1964; and Giulio Emmanuele Rizzo, Dionysos mystês. Contributi esegetici alle rappresentazioni di misteri orfici, Napoli, Accademia di archeologia, lettere e belle arti, coll. "Memorie" 3, 1915. However, it should be noted that scenes at the liknon, recognized as representations of the Bacchic initiation, should not be considered the sole way to depict the Dionysian initiatory ritual in images; they are at most an iconographic convention, widely used to evoke initiation. A critical distance is therefore necessary in the face of iconographic repertoires elaborated solely on this schema. On this question, as well as on the multiplicity of Bacchic initiatory forms that the focus on the liknon scene can obscure, see Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, Choisir Dionysos. Les associations dionysiaques ou la face cachée du dionysisme, Kilchberg (Zurich),

Akanthus, 2003, 1, p. 123-146, particularly p. 142-143; ead., "Un dieu, plusieurs mystères," in Religions orientales - Cultes mysterieux, ed. Corinne Bonnet, Jörg Rüpke & Paolo Scarpi, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, coll. "Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge," 16, 2006, p. 219-230; ead., "Le cratère de Derveni recontextualisé ou comment héroïser une femme," in Égypte - Grèce - Rome. Les différents visages des femmes grecques. Travaux et colloques du séminaire d'épigraphie grecque et latine de l'IASA 2002-2006, ed. Florence Bertholet, Anne Bielmann Sánchez & Regula Frei-Stolba, Bern, Peter Lang, 2008, p. 41-62, particularly p. 52-56.

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Positing the hypothesis of an iconographic lineage between a "pagan" initiation scene and the representation of the Baptism of Christ, which is the cornerstone, along with the Crucifixion, of Christian faith, is far from self-evident. But invoking chance alone to explain the parallelism of the scenes, accentuated by the presence of a child Christ who is foreign to the majority textual tradition, can only be conceived after exploring the range of possible cohabitations and adaptations. It is this path that must be explored. Assuming a reiteration of the Dionysian initiatory scheme immediately raises the question of why. Why use this Dionysian schema, clearly ritually connoted? Could the Baptism of Christ have been understood, in certain Christian circles, as the equivalent of an initiation? Some indicators lead us to believe so. First, it is the divergent version of the Baptism narrative in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 3:21-22, TOB translation):

Now, as all the people were baptized, Jesus, also baptized, prayed: then, heaven opened; the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily appearance, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven. “You are my son. I, today, have begotten you”[17].

The heavenly declaration, inspired by Psalm 2:7, which concludes the episode while simultaneously opening up its profound theological significance, was initially suspected to be a late modification, in the light of the unity of Matthew's and Mark's versions[18]; these heavenly words are now recognized as the original version of the Lucan text, referred to as the Western version in reference to the origin of the manuscripts that attest to it[19]. The uniqueness of Luke's Gospel lies in the "Today I have begotten you," a public proclamation not only that Jesus is the Son of God but a proclamation of his begetting (gegennèka se) as the Son of God at the moment of his baptism. It is this notion of begetting at the moment of the rite that forms the point of articulation between the Baptism of Christ and initiation into "pagan" mysteries. Indeed, we know how much the mystery initiation was considered a passage, a second birth. Does the Lucan text, in

its "Western" version, still bear the trace of a reading of the Baptism of Christ in initiatory terms?

17 Huios mou ei su, egô sèmeron gegennèko se (Cod. Bezae = Codex D); Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te (Vetus Latina).

18 "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," Mt 3:17; "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased," Mk 1:11. See previous note.

19 Daniel Vigne (Christ au Jourdain, op. cit., p. 21-24 and 107-132) definitively settled the debate by demonstrating the antiquity of the formula, as attested by the commentaries of the early Church Fathers on it, and the process that led to the purification of the Lucan text and the homogenization of the Gospels based on the formula present in Matthew and Mark, between the 4th and 5th centuries. See also Bart D. Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture. The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 62-72.

The proclamation of Jesus' begetting as the Son of God at the moment of baptism poses and has posed thorny theological problems, especially in relation to the Incarnation at the Nativity. This difficulty in reconciling the Incarnation with the Lucan formula explains why it was "erased for doctrinal reasons" between the 4th and 5th centuries[20]. But it is this very difficulty that prompted the comments of the Church Fathers, whose exegesis deserves to be recalled here. A text by Origen seems particularly illuminating in terms of how this formula was read and understood in an attempt to reconcile the Incarnation with the begetting at baptism:

He received Baptism and took on the mystery of the second birth (mysterium secundae generationis assumpsit) so that you too may destroy your first birth and be born again[21].

This "mystery of the second birth" is an exegesis in almost initiatory terms. This "regeneration" of Christ uses language and concepts that would not have been rejected by initiates, whether Bacchic or otherwise. We know that Luke wrote his Gospel for Christians of Greco-Roman culture, for whom initiatory symbolism was known and customary. For people raised in a polytheistic culture, was it so inconceivable, as it is for us, that the same symbolism could be applied to Jesus and Dionysus? Is it not significant that in the chapter preceding the account of the Baptism of Christ, Matthew

puts into the mouth of John the Baptist an indirect allusion to another motif of Bacchic initiation, the winnowing fan or liknon?

20 Cf. Daniel Vigne, Christ au Jourdain, op. cit., p. 107-132. A literal interpretation of the formula is the basis, for example, of the so-called Ebionite heresy, whose partially preserved Gospel allows us to reconstruct the belief: Jesus, a man from birth, is begotten as the Son of God at the moment of his baptism (ibid., p. 32-36 and 108-115; quoted on p. 42).

21 Origen, Homilies on Luke 28,4 (Paris, Cerf, coll. "Sources chrétiennes," 87, p. 354-356), quoted by Daniel Vigne (Christ au Jourdain, op. cit., p. 124). The author's thorough study shows the exegetical stages that, from an initial rejection of the formula, led to the idea of a triple birth of Christ: at the Incarnation, at baptism, and at the Resurrection (especially John of Nicaea, cited ibid., p. 127), three events in the life of Christ to which the prophecy of Psalm 2, from which the Lucan formula is derived, can be applied. A reading of the "Western" text and of the begetting at baptism that is in line with dogma can thus be summarized as follows, following D. Vigne (ibid., p. 130): "These three mysteries represent, as it were, three successive stages of the Revelation of the Son. Eternally begotten by the Father, the Son is 'multiply' begotten as a man. These three 'births' precisely open the three phases of his human life: hidden life, public life, glorified life."

I indeed baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire[22].

Certainly, the evangelist does not use the term "consecrated" like liknon, but ptuon, a winnowing fan. Furthermore, the symbolic purification of grain is by no means exclusively Bacchic or even "pagan". However, the chosen place for this formula, on the threshold of the baptismal scene, cannot fail to intrigue the exegete who seeks to place the text and, above all, its reception in the ritual context, and more specifically, the initiatory context of contemporary Greco-Roman society. Could the narrative of baptism not be written on the basis of cultic and cultural references other than purely Christian ones? Could it be formulated in such a way as to evoke and reinterpret an initiatory reality well-known to the readers?

These allusions to an initiatory reading of baptism[23], which, according to the analysis proposed here, are present in the background of the Gospel texts, must still be justified from a theological perspective, following proper methodology. Having had the opportunity to present the theological argumentation in detail in a recent article[24], I will limit myself here to presenting only the most relevant results for our discussion. If this key to an initiatory reading is indeed well-founded, we must inquire into the reasons for such an assimilation, in terms of substance rather than form, of Christ's baptism to Dionysus' initiation. Did the early Christians, especially those raised in Greco-Roman culture, feel an analogy, in terms of the rite performed, between the initiated Dionysus and the baptized Christ? Thus formulated, this question contains the premises of a possible answer. Christ, just like Dionysus, submits to a ritual that will become the obligatory passage for faithful or devout men who wish to be integrated into the religious community, whether Bacchic or Christian. Christ, submitting to John's water baptism and then receiving the baptism of the Spirit, and subsequently instituting baptism as a sacrament of integration into the Christian community[25], "is he not very close to Dionysus, who initiates himself into the mysteries he himself institutes?

22 Mt 3:11-12, TOB translation.

23 Concerning an initiatory reading of the baptismal rite and the difficulties it poses, see Richard E. DeMaris, "The New Testament in its Ritual World," London/New York, Routledge, 2008, Chapter 1, "Perilous Passage."

24 Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, "Les rituels bachiques et le baptême du Christ," in Fons vitae, op. cit., p. 27-38.

25 The baptism of Christ, in its double meaning (water baptism by John, followed by baptism of the Spirit), does it truly represent the prototype of Christian baptism? The controversy extends far beyond the scope of these few pages. Here, I will cite the remarks of Jacques Mercier ("Baptême," in Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la Bible, Turnhout, Brepols, 2002 [1st ed. 1960], p. 189-192 (quoted on p. 190): "The scene takes on the appearance of a theophany to declare the prophetic (rather than messianic) identity of Jesus through the agency of a dove, a symbol of the presence of a prophet [...]: the new times are inaugurated ('the heavens are torn open'); God, His prophetic son, and the Spirit are now here. The baptism of Jesus is the prototype of the sacrament, in the sense that through baptism, the believer becomes a child of God and also receives the Spirit." For a synthesis of the issue, I refer to Simon Légasse, "Le baptême de Jésus et le baptême chrétien," Studii Biblici Franciscani Liber

Annuus, 27 (1977), p. 51-68, and "La transcendance du baptême," Paris, Cerf, 1993, p. 57-69.

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First of all, let us note that the foundation of the integration rite, instituted by the god or the Son of God, is based on a reversal of roles twice over: divinity, recognized as such or to be recognized as such, goes through a ritual intended for humans. Concerning Christ, this inversion of roles is underscored by Matthew through John's surprise and opposition: 'But John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" (Mt 3:14)[26]. As for Dionysus, modern criticism, due to excessive rationalism, has had difficulty in accepting this submission of a god to the ritual of his own mysteries[27], but this inversion, carrying profound religious significance, is now recognized and can be expressed no better than in the words of Marcel Detienne: 'By initiating himself into his own mysteries, after undergoing the ordeal of mania, Dionysus thus becomes what he is'[28]. In this context, the heavenly voice that proclaims the generation of Jesus or His election as the Son of God[29] at the moment of the baptism of the Spirit takes on an even more pronounced initiatory meaning. It is the ritual practiced by the god or the Son of God that reveals, in the eyes of humans, the divine identity - of Dionysus as well as of Christ.

26 The question of the impeccability of Jesus, who nonetheless submits to the baptism of repentance and remission of sins, is treated illuminatingly by Daniel Vigne (Christ au Jourdain, op. cit., p. 133-164 (quoted on p. 162): 'The reservations of John the Baptist in Matthew, the designation of Jesus as the Lamb in John, Jesus' immediate emergence from the water in Mark and Matthew, and Christ's prayer after baptism in Luke, all show in the baptized Jesus an innocent, indeed the Innocent. Not only does He have no sins, but He carries and removes (according to the double sense of the verb airô) the sin of the world. This conviction was accepted by the entire early Church.'

27 Affirmed as early as 1915, thanks to Giulio Emmanuele Rizzo (Dionysos mystès, op. cit.), this reflexive concept of initiation faced rational opposition from many exegetes. Anthropologists of Greek religion, notably Marcel Detienne (cf. next note), greatly contributed to gaining acceptance for this thesis and emphasizing its religious importance. Cf. Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, 'Rituels bachiques,' art. cit., p. 30-31.

28 Marcel Detienne, 'Dionysos en ses parousies: un dieu épidémique,' in L'association dionysiaque dans les sociétés anciennes. Actes de la table ronde

organisée par l'École française de Rome (Roma, 24-25 mai 1984), Rome, École française de Rome, coll. 'EFR,' 89, 1986, p. 53-83 (quoted on p. 71).

29 Cf. supra and footnotes 17-20.

What initially appeared as a reversal of expected roles between divinity and humans in the ritual turns out to be an essential theological key whose meaning lies in a ritual communion, and even a community of nature and experience, between the divinity and its faithful or devotees. As we know, Dionysus maintains relationships with humans, with whom he partly shares mortal nature, and the ambiguity of these relationships reveals a profound religious significance. The dual nature of Dionysus, both human and divine[30], is notably revealed in his epithet Bacchos or Baccheus. He is the quintessential Bacchant among human Bacchants who celebrate him with their frenzied dances that turn into trance. He is the one who answers the call of the Bacchants, the one who comes in the midst of the celebrants, the one whom the Bacchants see eye to eye with when they are truly 'enthused.' The epiphany of the god in the midst of those who celebrate him, this ritual convergence of the Bacchant and the Bacchants, annihilates all distance between the human and the divine: the god is the prototype of the human Bacchant, in essence and in ritual practice. When, over time, the Bacchic ritual vocabulary evolves into the semantic sphere of the mysteries, this same communion in the ritual between the god and his devotees is found again, in a different form. Dionysus, as we have seen, submits to the initiatory rites of his own mysteries. He thus becomes an initiate, a mystes, like all Bacchic initiates. Moreover, he becomes a co-initiate of humans, a sunmystes, whose title proclaims the communion of ritual and initiatory experience[31].

The importance of this initiatory community between the god and humans is particularly revealed by a Roman document. The tomb of Isola Sacra in Ostia, which provides us with the stucco of the Bacchic initiation illustrated in Figure 6, has also transmitted another stucco, adjacent to the first, depicting the result of the previously illustrated ritual scene[32]. Despite the poor state of preservation of the document, one can make out the young god, riding a panther, following the classical pattern to evoke the completion of the received initiation. A satyr and a Silenus complete the scene without surprise. A carefully inscribed Latin inscription confirms the initiatory interpretation of the scene: 'Liber Pater Sanatus,' which translates to 'Initiated Father Liber Pater (Latin transcription of Dionysus)'; we are indeed dealing with the initiation of the young god into his own mysteries, or rather the result of this initiation and the affirmation of the status of an initiate - a mystes in Greek - of the god. But the most important part lies in a graffito.

Another hand has added three letters to the left of 'sanatus' in this neatly aligned inscription, breaking this fine arrangement: *CON*. These three letters significantly amplify the meaning of the inscription: by making the god not only an initiate (sacratus) but also a co-initiate, a companion in initiation (con-sacratus), the anonymous author wanted to emphasize precisely the community of ritual and initiatory experience that binds the god to human initiates. Dionysus is not only initiated into his own mysteries, but he shares with humans the same status of an initiate, the same initiatory experience that marks the entry of human candidates into the community of initiates.

30 Dionysus has the privilege of being born twice, first prematurely from his mortal mother Semele, who was accidentally struck by lightning by her lover Zeus, and second, at full term, after a few months of gestation in his divine father's thigh. He is born first as mortal (as the son of a god and a mortal, like Heracles or Theseus), and second as immortal (cf. for example, Henri Jeanmaire, Dionysos. Histoire de Bacchus, Paris, Payot, 1951, p. 333-336). Dionysus is diphus, of double nature, both human and divine! Tradition knows other genealogies for Dionysus, or rather for the various Dionysuses. The god of interest here, Bacchos, the god of orgia, is indeed the son of Zeus and Semele.

31 For more details on this evolution, cf. Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, 'Un dieu, plusieurs mystères,' art. cit.

32 For an illustration of this stucco, cf. LIMC, IV, 1, s.v. Dionysos/Bacchus, no 171, or Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, 'Rituels bachiques,' art. cit., fig. 2, p. 38.

Can we say that Christ maintains the same relationship with Christians as Dionysus Bacchus does with the Bacchants or Dionysus the companion of initiation does with human initiates? The mere proximity of the terms "Christians" and "Christ" today, in modern languages as well as in Latin or ancient Greek, encourages us to follow this path. But the real question is whether certain groups of Christians in the early centuries of our era felt a very close relationship with Christ, both in terms of nature and the ritual of baptism to which he submitted. Was Christ understood by Christians steeped in Greco-Roman culture as a prototype of the baptized, as a "baptismal companion" of humans? At the very beginning of his treatise on baptism, Tertullian, while railing against the sect of the Cainites, specifies in these metaphorical terms the essence and significance of baptism:

But we, little fishes (pisciculi) like our ICHTHUS Jesus Christ, are born in water, and it is only by remaining in it that we are saved (salvi sumus) [33].

The faithful, the baptized, are little fish in comparison to the Ichthus, the Fish par excellence, the Son of God and Savior, who is Jesus Christ. They share with Christ the same fundamental nature and differ from him only in magnitude and scope. Water, a source of life for a little fish as well as for the Fish par excellence, symbolizes the second birth obtained through baptism and ensures salvation. If Tertullian dares to use this metaphor, it is because he knows he is understood; he knows he can rely on a conception of baptism as a shared rite that seals the communion of nature and experience between the believer and Christ, the baptized and the prototype of the Baptized, this baptismal companion[34]. It is interesting to note in this regard that the compound sumbaptizesthai, literally "to be co-baptized," does indeed appear in Christian hymns or a homily, albeit later, but with an unmistakable meaning (literal translations):

> 33 Tertullian, De Baptismo, 1, 3, translated by R. F. Refoulé & M. Drouzy, Paris, Cerf, "Sources chrétiennes" series, 1952.
>
> 34 It should be noted that in the case of Paul, the relationship between the community of the baptized and Christ is more complex: Romans 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:12-13 both heavily emphasize the communion between Christ and the faithful, especially regarding baptism, using many compounds with the prefix "sun-". However, for Paul, it is about establishing the essential link between the baptism of the Christian and the death and resurrection of Christ. Through baptism, the Christian enters into communion with the death of Christ and can thus hope to be resurrected, just like Him (cf. Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, "Rituels bachiques," art. cit., p. 34-35). Is the difference in perception of this communion between Paul and Tertullian, asserted by both, due to the different cultural context in which each of them was educated? In other words, is the community of nature and ritual experience that emerges in Tertullian the result of his knowledge, even indirect or diffuse, of pagan and Dionysian rites and their religious and initiatory significance?

Analecta Hymnica Graeca. Canones Januarii, 8th day, canon 18, Ode 9:

[...] we were previously delivered, naked and helpless, to death and destruction, we the children of the earth. But by sharing now in the baptism with Christ (sumbaptisthentes

Christô de nuni), we are made immortal through faith (aphthartisthèmen pistei) in rebirth through the bath (i.e., the baptismal water: tô loutrô), through which we receive the Holy Spirit.

Analecta Hymnica Graeca. Canones Januarii, 2nd day, canon 4, Ode 1:

O Jordan, receive Christ with joy and gladness, He who is baptized in you and sanctifies you, you and all of humanity. Brothers, let us share the baptism with the Savior and with God (sumbaptisthômen tô sôtèri hai Theô), practicing abstinence from sins in His presence, so that we may become children of the accomplished light.

Théodore Stoudites, Grande Catéchèse, no 32 (literal translation):

Let us give glory because of these things, let us be enlightened (phôtisthômen) because of these things, and ourselves, having become the light (phôs) of knowledge, and as if by deputation towards the Jordan, let us behold the great light (phôs), our baptized Christ (ton Christon hèmôn bebaptismenon), and let us embrace His footprints left in the water, elusive. And let us no longer abandon ourselves to the darkness of error but let us unite with Him (suniômen) and be baptized with Him (sumbaptisthômen autô).

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It is indeed the shared baptism with Christ[35] that grants access to salvation and eternal life, making the believer a light, similar to the Light, Christ. As with Tertullian, the communion between Christ and the faithful is emphasized by the symbolic terminology applied to both: little fish in the presence of the Supreme Fish, lights in the presence of the Light. Christians find themselves in the same relationship with Christ as the Bacchants do with the Supreme Bacchant or the initiates with the co-initiate. As the carefully constructed lexical symmetries highlighted in these texts indicate, Christ and Christians are in communion through their nature and the ritual experience they share in baptism, much like the Bacchants are in relation to Dionysos.

35 It should be noted that the relationship established by the prefix "sun-" goes from the baptized to Christ; it is humans who are the co-baptized of Christ and not the other way around. Dionysos appears in the reverse relationship on the stucco in Ostia, as he is himself the companion of initiation for humans (consocratus). This reversed relationship of precedence is not of paramount importance here. Furthermore, there are Bacchants who are co-initiated by Dionysos (for example, Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, "Choisir Dionysos," op. cit., II, p. 202-203, no. 112, epitaph of a young man of 19 years, Ayazviran (Lydia),

> 240-241 AD: "[...] Thus Bromios, with the Fates, chose me, his comrade (etairon), in order to have me as a companion-mystes (sunmustèn) for his own dances [...]."

The correspondences highlighted here, far from being trivial, suggest, I believe, that the baptism of Christ could have been understood, at least in Hellenochristian circles, in terms of initiation and that Christ could have been seen as a god who, like Dionysos, shares the nature and experience of humans. Therefore, if we return to our starting point, namely the representations of Christ in the form of a child at the moment of his baptism, the hypothesis that this iconographic pattern originated from the Dionysian initiatory tradition to express this crucial and highly theological episode in the life of Christ seems to be grounded in a religious foundation detectable in early Christian authors. From the Bacchic initiation to the baptism of Christ, the common denominator is provided by the relationship of the god to humans: the shared ritual that makes the deity a companion in the religious experience of humans.

To understand the mechanisms of the formation of the Christian image of baptism, its references, and the particular meaning that the iconographic tradition gives to these representations, it is finally necessary to briefly examine the other elements of the baptismal scene. Firstly, the bird-dove. It should be noted that the definition given depends on the perspective one adopts when looking at the image: it will be referred to as a bird if one takes a schematic approach, while the thematic appreciation of the representation will use the term dove. The transition from bird to dove is from the scheme to the theme, a transition that occurs here through direct reference to the narrative, to the text. It is not in reference to an iconographic tradition but rather to the text that the bird-dove appears. It is the text, subtly present behind the representation, that transforms this bird schema into a dove, allows the interpretation of this dove as the materialization of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately provides access to the theme of the image: the baptism of Christ.

It is quite different when it comes to the representation of the Jordan River, the last fundamental element of these baptismal scenes. Jean-Marie Spieser[36] has rightly emphasized the particular form that many images of the baptism of Christ reserve for the waters of the Jordan. I will briefly summarize his relevant conclusions here and refer the reader seeking more details to the author's work. The water of the Jordan is most often not represented as a horizontal expanse, bathing the one being baptized, but rather as a vertical flow coming from an upper region. This peculiarity, already foreshadowed in one of the earliest representations of the scene (fig. 1), is clearly

visible on the Vatican sarcophagus depicted here (fig. 3)[37]. Obviously, it is not the narrative of the baptism that explains or justifies this variation. This vertical flow is part of a rich and multifaceted symbolism that J.-M. Spieser painstakingly reconstructs. Water can indeed symbolize the Spirit, much like the rays of the sun can; however, if this interpretation applies well to a flow descending from heaven onto the head of the baptized, it seems inadequate to account for a flow coming from above, certainly, but alongside Christ and gathering around him to form the waters of the Jordan (for example, fig. 3). In this form, this gushing water closely resembles the miracle of the spring attributed to Peter, who is notably featured in some documents in significant symmetry with the baptismal scene[38]. The water from the rock that Peter makes gush forth is directly related in meaning to baptismal water and comes "from above" as a metaphor for the Spirit. Yet, these upper waters still fit into a cosmological perspective. And it is precisely the Jordan that is supposed to bridge the gap between the upper waters and the terrestrial world, the Jordan, "the one that descends," becoming a source of life by being assimilated to the common source of the four rivers of Paradise. The Jordan, the original and cosmological river, establishes the connection between the high and the low, materializing the Spirit and alluding, through the maternal metaphor of the waters, to the second birth experienced by the Baptized: it is an understatement to say that the "vertical" image of the waters of the Jordan in representations of the baptism of Christ is significant. The waters of baptism are far from being just the liquid element necessary to the economy of the baptismal narrative. The representational pattern created for the occasion goes beyond the strict limit of the textual narrative and opens the door to a profound and multifaceted symbolism, to a deep interpretation of the baptismal gesture.

36 Jean-Michel Spieser, "Représentations," art. cit., p. 77 sq.

37 See also the ivory plaque preserved in Berlin, dating from around 410-420, supra, n.11.

38 On a sarcophagus from Arles, the baptism scene is depicted on one small side of the sarcophagus, in exact parallel to the miracle of the spring depicted on the other small side; cf. Brigitte Christern-Briesenick, Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sorkophage, III. Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien, Mainz, von Zabern, 2003, p. 35-36, no. 49 (pl. 17, 2-3), and Jean-Michel Spieser, "Représentations," art. cit., p. 72-73 and fig. 5-6. On these scenes from Arles and on water miracles in general, see Luc Renaut, "Moise, Pierre et Mithra, dispensateurs d'eau: figures et contre-figures du baptême dans l'art et la littérature des quatre premiers siècles," in Fons vitae, op. cit., p. 39-64

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It is therefore appropriate to revisit the images of the baptism of Christ while questioning the mechanisms that guided the development of the overall iconographic scheme. Christians of the 3rd century found themselves in the need to create a new image, an image capable of expressing not only the eventful but also the theological and metaphorical meaning of Christ's baptism, an image capable of making full sense, and in turn conveying it, within the funerary context in which it began to flourish from its earliest appearances. The image is composite and reveals the use of different references. The bird-dove, as we have seen, is an almost textual element that allows the scene to shift into the theme of baptism and does not strictly fit into an iconographic tradition that would give it its meaning. The representation of the waters, on the other hand, reflects a rich and complex exegetical tradition. Its crystallization in the form of a vertical flow is an iconographic invention intended to evoke the metaphorical meaning of the Jordan. The image goes beyond the text by giving, through a new schematic approach, both a cosmological and maternal dimension to baptism. The representation of the baptismal waters is both a summary and a source of a broad and profound interpretation of the baptismal scene.

This work on the scheme to add meaning to the represented scene seems to me to align with our initial hypothesis. The schematic parallelism between the Dionysian initiating-initiated couples on one side and the Baptist-Baptized on the other (fig. 7) is not coincidental. The representation of the child Christ at the moment of his baptism is not merely a reflection of a biographical and chronological view of the key events in Christ's life, placing his baptism in adolescence, nor is it a metaphorical expression of his humility. The young age of Christ, I believe, can be explained by the adoption of an existing iconographic scheme, that of the initiation of young Dionysus into his own mysteries. It is a reappropriation of the initiatory scheme, but not a mere copy or servitude. The early Christian artists did not draw from the Greco-Roman iconographic repertoire out of a lack of imagination but rather to introduce an additional layer of meaning to the depicted scene, a layer of meaning precisely carried by the "pagan" tradition to which the borrowed scheme is connected.

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It is easy to provide examples of this process. On the sarcophagus of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, for instance (fig. 2), many elements can be readily identified as directly drawn from the Greco-Roman iconographic tradition: the main scene, which occupies a significant third of the basin, can be easily deciphered as the episode of Jonah. Jonah is depicted in a highly classical pose that exactly mirrors the posture of

Endymion, the mortal who sleeps eternally to preserve his life and youth, as can be seen, for instance, on a sarcophagus held in New York[39]. This schematic reuse allows the sculptor to evoke the liminal state of Jonah, sleeping in a disturbing sleep[40], and, above all, prefiguring the death and resurrection of Christ and the Christian. It is not solely for aesthetic reasons that, overlooking the languid body of Jonah, one finds a bucolic scene directly derived from the Greco-Roman iconographic tradition. This pastoral ambiance indeed connects with the figure of the Good Shepherd depicted two scenes to the right, but it also adds the notions of peace and abundance, which were directly associated with the bucolic environment in antiquity. The episode of Jonah, through this double iconographic borrowing from the Greco-Roman tradition, thus gains depth and meaning and becomes a prefiguration of the peaceful death and resurrection of the Christian, in an environment characterized by peace, abundance, and gentleness.
39 Sarcophagus from the early 3rd century, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund 1947 (47.100.4). All representations of Endymion follow the same pattern, with the hero reclined in a languid pose, arm folded over his head. This gesture, as is customary in iconography, directly alludes to the liminal state induced by sleep, akin to death; it can also evoke supreme well-being and the luxury expressed by the Greek notion of "truphè." This same gesture can be found on the figure of Dionysus on the Derveni Krater, alluding to a sleep-death, simultaneously evoking initiation and expressing the "truphè" often associated with the Dionysian world (cf. following note).
40 The twinning of Death and Sleep (Thanatos and Hypnos) in Greek tradition, laden with its inherent significance, has not failed to be exploited in the initiatory theme where the initiate is supposed to die symbolically to be reborn as an initiate. This play on sleep-death to evoke the initiatory experience has, for example, been highlighted concerning the Derveni Krater, whose initiatory message is, I believe, undeniable, and which features Dionysian figures asleep or awakening on its shoulder: cf. Gian Luca Grassigli, "La fede di Astion: per un'interpretazione del cratere di Derveni," Ostroka, 8 (1999), p. 99-143), and Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, "Le cratère de Derveni," above-cited article.

The reuse of the motif of the initiation of young Dionysus to represent the baptism of Christ is indeed, I believe, a conscious act; its adaptation to the baptismal scene aims to convey something more, to go beyond the eventful narrative, to go further than the text. The choice of the initiatory scheme, in its Christian resemanticization, is a discourse on the nature of Christ, both human and divine, an emphasis on the inaugural character of the baptismal act, on its generative dimension, and finally, an imaginative exegesis of the proximity of Christ and Christians through the ritual.

This guided journey through the representations of the baptism of Christ has allowed us to shed light on a fundamental iconographic dialogue between the Greco-Roman and Christian traditions. Rather than surprising us, this observation reminds us, if needed, that Christians raised in the Greco-Roman culture certainly mastered the language of images and its immense potential, just as they read and recited literary classics, practiced rhetoric, and understood the workings and meanings of "pagan" rituals. To express their newfound faith, they naturally drew from the surrounding cultural language. Iconographic patterns, inclined to travel and undergo reinterpretations, asserted themselves based on their potential to add an extra layer of meaning, to offer multi-layered interpretations that, in turn, prompted reflection and exegesis. Christianity did not solely build itself in reference to the text, even if it was written with a capital "T."