

Water and Blood

John claims that Jesus, the Son of God, came δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος ... οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον, ἀλλ' ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι (through water and blood... not by this water only, but by this water and by this blood, 1 John 5:6). According to John, this is the very testimony of God (5:9), and thus believers ought to believe the *combined* testimony of the water and the blood. Yet, how do water and blood speak? What is their message, and why is it so important that Christ by both the water and the blood? These questions have been variously answered by commentators. The blood is the less contentious and is said to represent either (1) the sacrament of communion or (2) His crucifixion. The water is less clear and is said to represent one of the following: (1) the sacrament of baptism, (2) the physical substance that flowed from His side (John 19:34) thus representing His death, (3) His birth, (4) His baptism, (5) His baptismal ministry, or (6) the giving of the Holy Spirit.¹

This paper will attempt to show that the best way to understand ὕδατι and αἵματι is that the ὕδατι represents the Son of God's life, and the αἵματι represents the Son of God's death; thus, taken together, they represent the entire incarnational ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. This will be demonstrated through a lexical study of the Johannine usages of ὕδωρ and αἷμα and then by an appeal to both the greater literary context and historical context of 1 John 5:6.

A Lexical Analysis of the Johannine Usages of ὕδωρ and αἷμα²

These two words used consistently throughout Johannine literature. Three particularly relevant uses refer to both ὕδωρ and αἷμα (1 John 5:6, 5:8, and John 19:34), but because they are disputed they will be excluded from this lexical study.

The ὕδωρ of Life

John uses ὕδωρ 29 times in 26 verses in all his writings. While many instances refer to merely physical water,³ the dominant metaphorical usage of ὕδωρ refers to *life*.

Most often, ὕδωρ refers to living water or the water of life. With the woman at the well, Jesus calls the water He offers “living water” (John 4:10, 11), indeed water that satisfies thirst eternally and that springs up to eternal life (4:14, c.f. 4:15). The one who believes in Him will have flowing from “his innermost being... rivers of living water” (John 7:38, c.f. Isa 44:3). The Lamb of God Himself will guide His sheep to the “springs of the water of life” (Rev 7:17). The Alpha and Omega will give to the thirsty from “the spring of the water of life without cost” (21:6). John sees the “river of the water of life... coming from the throne” (22:1). The ending plea of the canon is “let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (22:17). Thus, in John's mind, water is used as a metaphor for life; not only does physical water nourish and sustain physical life, but living water nourishes and sustains spiritual life.

The second most common usage of ὕδωρ is in reference to baptism (John 1:26, 31, 33; 3:23), particularly to John's baptism.⁴ But baptism is itself a sign that points to new *life* (c.f.

¹ Gary W. Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, ed. H. Wayne House, W. Hall Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012), 506.

² John uses two different prepositions in 1 John 5:6 with ὕδατι and αἵματι: διὰ and ἐν. This signifies that it is not the prepositional phrase “διὰ...” or “ἐν...” that John is focusing on, but the nouns themselves.

³ The woman at the well: John 4:7, 13. The water into wine: John 2:7, 9, 4:46. The water at Bethesda: John 5:7. The water to wash the disciples' feet: John 13:5. The river waters: Rev 8:10, 11; 11:6; 12:15; 14:7; 16:4, 5, 12; 17:1, 15. The sound of waters: Rev 1:15, 14:2, 19:6.

⁴ See footnote 2 above.

Romans 6:1-11). This is not merely a physical coincidence, but a symbolic reality. Because water nourishes spiritual life, water itself becomes the symbol of new life.

In addition, ὕδωρ often parallels God's πνεῦμα. John 3:5 says, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Whether “water” here means baptism or something else is not the point; again, “water” is associated with new birth, and thus new life and the Spirit Himself is also the means of the new birth. Also, John's baptism ἐν ὕδατι is contrasted with Jesus' baptism ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. The Spirit of life and the water of life aim to accomplish the same thing: new life.

This clear water-life motif should be upheld when examining the more difficult usages of ὕδωρ. Although John is free to deviate from his established pattern, such an abnormal usage will need extraordinary evidence.

The αἷμα of Death

John also uses αἷμα 29 times in 26 verses. Almost all the usages have clear overtones of death,⁵ and most usages are a metonym for death itself.

Most commonly, the αἷμα is in reference to Christ. Jesus offends the Jews by saying they must eat His flesh and “drink His blood” (John 6:53, 54, 55, 56) to have eternal life. His blood cleanses believers from all sin (1 John 1:7). His blood “released us from our sins” (Rev 1:5). He “purchased for God with [His] blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (5:9). The saints' robes are washed “white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). The saints overcame the great dragon “because of the blood of the Lamb” (12:11). And Christ Himself is clothed in “a robe dipped in blood” (Rev 19:13). It is not the physical liquid in his cardiovascular system that is in view here; physical blood can never physically wash away spiritual sin. But it is also not merely Christ's cessation of life that is in view; rather it is His penal substitutionary death that merits forgiveness for God's people.

The other usages of αἷμα are various but also share a blood-death motif. The judgement of the first trumpet brings “hail and fire, mixed with blood” (Rev 8:7). The blood of the haters of God flows out of the city (Rev 14:20). The saints' blood is a reference to their death (Rev 6:10, 16:6, 17:6, 18:24, 19:2).

This clear blood-death motif was not created by John, but instead finds its origins in the Genesis account, particularly through the first sacrifices (c.f. Gen 3:21, 4:4). With such a consistent blood-death motif in the Bible, it is virtually certain that this is the same lens John uses when writing 1 John 5:6.⁶

The ὕδωρ and the αἷμα

With the water-motif and the blood-death motif established, how then should 1 John 5:6 be understood? It could be paraphrased as “This is the One who came through both living and dying—Jesus Christ; He did not come to live alone, but to live and to die.” This interpretation will be defended against other various proposals in the next section.

⁵ Arguably, **all** the usages of αἷμα have overtones of death. However, the following usages may not: the moon's *color* turned to blood/red (Rev 6:12), human lineage (John 1:13, αἱμάτων is plural), and water turned to physical blood (Rev 8:8; 11:6; 16:3, 4).

⁶ Some have argued that the blood is a reference to communion. However, this is quite unlikely, as John doesn't even mention the Lord's supper, and specifically never uses αἷμα in connection with the new covenant. The connection between blood and the covenant in the Last Supper is contained only in the Synoptics (Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20).

A Contextual Analysis of 1 John 5:6-8

Taking ὕδωρ to refer to Christ's life *en toto*⁷ and αἷμα to refer to His penal substitutionary death accords with both the literary and historical context of 1 John 5:6.

Just before 5:6, John says that the one who overcomes the world is “he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” He then spends the next 3 verses explain what “Son of God” means. The phrase “Son of God” is used 14 times in John's writings, and comes to take on a technical meaning, akin to ‘He who was begotten from the Father.’⁸ This Son of God is He who came δι’ ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος (“through water and blood”). First, John uses only one preposition, διά, to tie both ὕδατος and αἷματος together as a unit.⁹ He then emphasizes the necessity of both of these individual means by saying that the Son of God οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον (“did not *come* by water only”), ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι (“but by the water and by the blood.”). The necessity of both water and blood is critical to the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

A few exegetical notes are in order. First, the word ὕδωρ cannot refer to *any* baptism or any baptismal ministry¹⁰ because John says that Jesus *came* “δι’ ὕδατος.” The “language of “coming” associated with Jesus (ὁ ἐλθὼν) refers to his incarnation.”¹¹ Although in the synoptics Christ's public ministry is inaugurated by His baptism by John the Baptist, this is not how the apostle John presents it in His gospel. Indeed, the apostle doesn't even mention that Christ was baptized by John the Baptist, only that He was recognized by him (John 1:29-34).

In addition, it would not be theologically accurate to say that the Son of God *came* through baptism. Indeed, this would seem to allow for a Gnostic heresy that taught that “Jesus was born an ordinary human being but became God's special agent when the heavenly Christ [the Son of God] descended upon him at his baptism.”¹² Indeed, to say that the Son of God came through baptism could allow the heretics to reject the incarnation (Word-made-flesh-ment), the very truth that John has been fighting to establish: “every spirit that confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus [as coming in the flesh] is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3). Such a careful writer as John would not allow for such an error to hide within his doctrine.

So, what does it mean that the Son of God came through water and by water? Culy claims that it ὕδωρ should be viewed as a “metonymy not for Jesus' baptism but for his birth”

⁷ Marshall agrees and says, “John is not, of course, thinking narrowly of the mere moment when the incarnation became a reality at the birth of Jesus; he is thinking of the total act of his coming into the world.” But then, inexplicably, he argues that it means “the water of Jesus' baptism.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 231.

⁸ A study of how this and related phrases are used by John would be relevant here, but such a study regrettably exceeds the scope of this paper.

⁹ διά is best taken as instrumental, giving the means of Christ' coming. Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, 509.

¹⁰ Some argue that αἷματι is a reference to John the Baptist's baptism by appealing to the phrase “ἐν ὕδατι.” John uses this phrase three times (John 1:26, 31, 33), which all refer to John the Baptist's ministry of baptism ἐν ὕδατι. However, these same commentators fail to mention John only uses the phrase “ἐν αἵματι” once (Rev 8:7), which is a reference to “hail and fire, mixed ἐν αἵματι,” a clear reference to eschatological judgment. (The only other usages of “ἐν αἵματι” are Hebrews 9:22, 9:25, 13:20.) The rarity of the phrase “ἐν αἵματι” indicates that the logic does not hold.

¹¹ Martin M. Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2004), 125.

¹² Daniel Akin L., *I, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 197. But Akin argues for the ὕδατι to refer to Christ's baptism.

particularly “natural birth built on the breaking of the water that precedes childbirth.”¹³ However, it is doubtful whether John understood ‘the breaking of water’ to refer to childbirth.¹⁴ Indeed, if we were to be biologically precise, the Word became flesh not at His birth, but at His miraculous conception in Mary’s womb. For these reasons, it is better to understand ὕδωρ in 1 John 5:6 to refer to Christ’s entire life. The Son of God came into the world through and by *life*; His conception, birth, childhood, pre-public ministry, and public ministry are all in view.

Second, John’s insistence that the Son of God is the One who came through *both* water *and* blood is best explained by examining John’s purpose in writing the letter: to encourage the saints in light of a heresy that had ravaged the church. It seems that the heretics who had left the church taught that the “heavenly Christ [the Son of God] abandoned [Jesus] before his death and, consequently, it was only the earthly Jesus who died on the cross.”¹⁵

The heretics would hardly object to the fact that the Son of God truly lived on the earth; Him coming “by water” was not the issue. But John deals the death blow when he says that the *Son of God* came through both water (life) *and* blood (death); *the Son of God*, the Divine Son, truly died a penal, substitutionary death. This is of supreme importance in the mind of John, for if Christ was not the Son of God even in His death, then he would not be able to say that “the blood of Jesus *His Son* cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7, emphasis added). Indeed, the forgiveness of sin hinges on this truth. If “we reduce the death of Jesus to that of a mere man, . . . we lose the cardinal point of the New Testament doctrine of the atonement, that *God* was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”¹⁶ Thus, the Son of God came into the world not only to live, but also to die a penal substitutionary death.¹⁷

Conclusion

The water and the blood testify that Christ is the Son of God, both in His life *and* in His death. This understanding respects the water-life and the blood-death motifs that John utilizes throughout His writings and concords with the historical heresies he is addressing. Such a definition upholds both the incarnational life and the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, the historical and theological realities that form the bedrock of Christian faith. Such a ground is fertile soil, the soil that John’s readers need, for their assurance of faith to flourish.

¹³ Culy, *I, II, III John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, 125–126.

¹⁴ Witherington lists Song of Songs 4:12-15 as an OT text where water relates to natural birth (amniotic fluid). Ben Witherington III, “The Waters of Birth: John 3:5 and 1 John 5:6-8,” *NTS* 35 (1989): 155–158. However, the context of Songs 4:12-15 is not pregnancy. Solomon’s lover is described as a “garden spring / a well of fresh water” metaphorically, not physically.

¹⁵ Akin, *I, 2, 3 John*, 38:197.

¹⁶ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 233.

¹⁷ It is appropriate to pause here to ask, “How can Christ *come* by death?” It would seem more appropriate to say that He *left* by death. This deserves more investigation, but perhaps this paraphrase illuminates John’s meaning: the Son of God came *to us* in His life *in the incarnation* and came *to us* by His death *in the atonement*.

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