

# A liturgical comparative study of Sotho initiation and Christian baptism



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At first glance, there appears to be similarities between traditional Sotho initiation and Christian baptism, as both give the individual entrance into a new stage of life. This study compares African initiation in the Sotho context with initiation and baptism in the Christian context. The following aspects served as comparison: concepts of initiation, admission requirements, separation and new naming, the process of initiation through circumcision and baptism, community and the initiation, teaching in the initiation, and controversies in the initiation process. The correct biblical teaching and the right approach will overcome wrong teachings that emanate from African concepts about ancestral spirits and witchcraft, and the initiation school. This comparison opens the eyes for the Sotho initiation to discover and rethink the importance of the concept of baptism, the requirement of faith in baptism, the radical separation of the baptised person from the unbaptised, the importance of new naming, the Name of the triune God, the beauty of the process of baptism, the importance for the baptised to live, to experience and contribute to the community life of the church, the necessary teaching before and after baptism and to deal with controversies on the basis of Scripture.

**Keywords:** Liturgical comparison; Baptism; Circumcision; Sotho initiation; Biblical principles.

## Introduction: Assumptions and methodology

What will be the outcome when African initiation (in the South-African and Sotho<sup>1</sup> context) is compared with initiation and baptism in the Christian context? At first glance, there appears to be similarities between traditional Sotho initiation and Christian baptism as both give entrance into a new stage of life: the former admits into manhood; and the latter, as a sign of the covenant that engrafts the new Christian into the body of Christ, the church. This liturgical comparative study is undertaken to identify the similarities and differences between the two and to consider whether the meaning of Christian initiation through baptism can be deepened in the specific context of African culture by this comparison. The focus is principally Sotho initiation, but also referenced with Xhosa practices because of the close relation between the two cultural groups.

Initiation in the traditional Sotho context has a long history in South Africa. It is among the cultural practices that have been perceived as heathen and barbaric since Christianity came into Africa. Many African traditions and culture had to be forgotten, eliminated, or otherwise discarded for one to be accepted as a Christian (Letšosa 2010:25). However, those cultural traits and patterns could never be wiped out. Traditional initiation is not something of the past (Twala 2007:24). There are still many people, even in Christian churches in Africa, who still uphold their cultural customs.

For many South Africans, the establishment of democracy in the nation called for an African renaissance, meaning a turn back to original cultures instead of totally westernising and doing away with what seems to be unacceptable to modern Western culture. The multi-religious status of South Africa also turned some people back towards a stronger appropriation of their different cultural beliefs which they now practice more openly than they did before the country became a democracy in 1994. Therefore, for Christians, the present challenge that the churches face is (1) to synchronise Christian positions and biblical truths with African beliefs to retain members; (2) to risk losing some members by adhering to biblical teaching; or (3) to find another way of dealing with this issue.

The methodology followed in this article is that of Richard R. Osmer who proposes a fourfold task for research in the field of Practical Theology, namely the descriptive task ('What is going on?'), the interpretative task ('Why is it going on?'), the normative task ('What ought to be going

1.The Sotho nation emerged from the accomplished diplomacy of Moshoeshe I who gathered together disparate clans of Sotho-Tswana origin that had dispersed across Southern Africa in the early 19th century. The language of the Sotho may be referred to as *SeSotho* or less commonly *SeSothosaBorwa* (Southern Sotho). *SeSotho* is the first language of 1.5 million people in Lesotho or 85% of the population. A person who speaks *SeSotho* is referred to as *Mosotheo*; the plural form is *Basotheo*.

on?'), and a pragmatic or strategic task ('How might we respond?') (Osmer 2008:4). The theological premise is that Scripture is the primary source of knowledge for the interpretation of reality, and therefore for the comparison of Sotho initiation and initiation into the body of Christ through baptism specifically, reflection upon the biblical text and current church practices in the reformed tradition are compared alongside an investigation of Sotho practices. The authors follow the same theocentric and Trinitarian viewpoint on reality. We acknowledge that there is always an element of the Godly presence and that this will also play a part in the presentation of the results of this research.

The article is structured as a series of paired comparisons on the concepts of initiation, admission requirements, separation and new naming, the process of initiation, community and initiation, teaching and initiation, and controversies in initiation. Following the comparisons, an analysis, evaluation and a few recommendations are made.

## Comparisons of Sotho initiation and Christian baptism

### Concepts of initiation, circumcision and baptism

#### Sotho initiation

Initiation as a rite of passage and a cultural act is one of the most celebrated stages of human development among most of the South-African (and African) communities. In some communities, it is not advisable for a male to stay uninitiated – in other words, uncircumcised – especially in rural areas or where tradition is still highly upheld. An uninitiated male will not be taken seriously in discussion groups or where important decisions need to be made. According to Guma (2001:274), prior to initiation and circumcision, boys are not yet regarded as accomplished 'persons', but are rather perceived as 'sub-human beings'. They are always addressed in derogatory terms and called *bashemane* [boys] or *dintja* [dogs]. One only suffices for manhood and acceptance as a human being in society after attending an initiation school and undergoing circumcision.

#### Christian initiation

For a time, the first Christians continued to participate in the Jewish rites and customs, even attending the services of the temple (Ac 3:1; 5:21, 42). As Gentiles came to Christ, controversy arose between those who said that participation in the covenant community required circumcision and those who believed the rite was unnecessary. It was argued that since the covenant promise of the Messiah was given to the Jews, Gentiles must first be circumcised and become Jews before they could receive salvation in Christ since the physical act was necessary for and a guarantee of salvation (Ac 15:1, 2). For many Jews, the observance of circumcision became not only a symbol of religious privilege, but also a sense of racial pride (Phlp 3:4–6), for they associated the ceremony with Moses' law rather than the promise to Abraham (Jn 7:22; Ac 15:1). Because Greeks and Romans did not practice

circumcision, Jews were called 'the circumcised' (Ac 10:45; 11:2; Rm 15:8; Gl 2:7, 9; Eph 2:11; Tt 1:10) and Gentiles 'the uncircumcised' (Gl 2:7; Eph 2:11).

God ordained sacraments to seal his promises to believers, to pledge his good will and grace toward them, and to nourish and sustain their faith. The sacrament of baptism added to the Word of the gospel, represents to the external senses what God enables people to understand through his Word and does inwardly in their hearts, confirming in them the salvation he imparts to them. Baptism is a visible sign and seal of something internal and invisible by means of which God works in believers through the power of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not an empty and hollow sign to fool and deceive. Without Jesus Christ, baptism would be nothing. Christ instituted this outward cleansing and promised with it that as surely as water wash away the dirt from the body, as certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away a soul's impurity, in other words, sin.

### Admission requirements

#### Sotho initiation

Twala (2007:26) holds that it was the chief who periodically called upon all boys of a certain age group (usually those between the ages of 16 and 20) to undergo the ritual of initiation. However, the age of admission differs from province to province in South Africa, because eligibility is governed by different circumcision acts according to the province (Semenya 2010:68). The *Limpopo Circumcision Act* of 1996 allowed for boys as young as 12 to be circumcised with parental consent (Rampedi 2009:10). In the Eastern Cape, boys should at least be 16, but for those younger than 21, parental consent is necessary. In the province of the Free State, initiates aged 18 or under need written parental consent, while those 18 and older must give prior written consent themselves. In many places, an initiation school is open to young males who have reached puberty, but in some cases, adults, married or unmarried, with or without children, can also attend such a school. This is done in instances where certain individuals could not attend such a school when they were young. Sometimes older initiates who have already experienced fatherhood and matrimony, go there on the advice of *dingaka* [traditional doctors] in consultation with the ancestral spirits who are believed to be angered by the negligence of an important custom by their surviving relatives.

On justifying the importance of initiation and circumcision and explaining why the tradition should be continued, Zulu historian Professor J.S. Maphalala (2007) comments:

Why should we even question this noble act of passage to manhood? It is as African as our black faces. We even have names to characterize those who have been there. It was the highest honour that young men could aspire to. Strict protocol was followed, and deaths were a rarity. First, they camped far from human settlements and went to the river at dawn to find a sharp smooth stone that was used to cut the foreskin. After that 'operation', they would go to the nearest homestead and urinate

at the same spot where women urinated because they believed they would heal faster. If someone died it was one of those things and the family found out much later. (p. 27)

### Christian initiation

The circumcision of the new covenant believer is accomplished 'in the circumcision of Christ' – a circumcision 'made without hands' as that person is 'buried with Him in baptism' and 'raised with Him through faith' (Col 2:11, 12). According to Paul, circumcision and baptism symbolise the same inner reality, so Christian baptism may be called the New Testament counterpart of circumcision (Freedman, Myers & Beck 2000:256). The 'circumcision of Christ' fulfils God's promise to perform an inward work by circumcising the hearts of his people (Dt 30:6), making a new covenant in which sin would be forgiven and his law written upon their hearts (Jr 31:31–34) and placing his spirit within them (Ezk 36:25–27). In other words, to be 'in Christ' (Col 2:11) is to have a circumcised heart (Col 2:12; Rm 2:29). The presence of the Spirit in the lives of believers is the sign that God has performed in Christ this inward work promised to believers (Ac 11:15–17).

By the shedding of his blood, Jesus Christ completed all other bloodshed that could or would be made as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin. He, having abolished circumcision that was done with blood, instituted the sacrament of baptism in its place. As a result, all who earnestly desire to obtain eternal life ought to be baptised. The only admission requirement is faith in Jesus Christ.

### Separation and new naming during circumcision

#### Sotho initiation

Initiates have clan names and surnames in addition to their personal names within the South Sotho culture (Guma 2001:274). The clan name is most important during initiation rites, for it clarifies the status hierarchy of the individual and determines the position of the person among other initiates. They may enter the initiation lodge without hindrance with these names, while the uninitiated are not allowed to visit. The names given at initiation schools 'remain behind' and are used by those who are involved in the initiation rites.

Among the Northern Sotho (the Pedi), certain rules and regulations apply when the initiates return from *mophato* [circumcision school] (Semenya 2010:71). Uninitiated boys and girls are, for example not allowed to call the initiates by their personal names but must use their clan names. When an initiate is called by their personal name, they say, *o wabileletša* [you have used a name that you were not supposed to use], and as a result, one may be summoned to *Kgorong* [traditional court] to account for the wrong. Normally people who have committed that wrong are warned or fined.

#### Christian initiation

John the Baptist was circumcised, as were Jesus and Paul (Lk 1:59; 2:21; Phlp 3:5). They all received their names on the eighth day as was the tradition. Through the sacrament of

baptism, Christians are received into the church of God and receive a new 'clan' name – that of 'Christian' and it seemed to relate with the Sotho process. They are separated from other people and religions because they wholly belong to Christ whose mark and ensign they bear. Baptism serves as a testimony that Christ will forever be their gracious God and Saviour and in Christ God will be their Father.

Being washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven the sins of believers because of Christ's blood poured out in his sacrifice on the cross. To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed believers and set them apart to be members of Christ so that they become more and more dead to sin and live increasingly holy and blameless lives. By baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers.

### The process of initiation through circumcision and baptism

#### Sotho initiation

Among the Amaxhosa, the night before the initiation, the initiates are led to a river to bathe in its cold water and thereby signifying the purification of the initiates before the ceremony (Mandela 1994:25). Among the Basotho, the initiation starts with 3 days of rites and a feast at which the boys' parents and relatives gather. On the third day, a black bull is slaughtered and the boys eat chunks of meat cut from its right foreleg and shoulder. This meat is coated with medicine. After the feasting, the boys are led to the area where the lodge is to be built (Roediger 2011). During the initiation process, a respected man and woman who have been initiated and are well mannered are called to come and perform some rituals in the *mophato*. These men and women are mostly experts on certain acts performed in *mophato*. In the case of male initiates, the *thipane* [experts with the knife] are those who operate when *mophato* training reaches the point of circumcision which may be either at the beginning of the course or at the end according to the usage of the specific *Morafe* [tribe]. No other person may perform this kind of operation, except a well-trained and respected *thipane* (Twala 2007:24). Circumcision is a trial of bravery and stoicism, as no anaesthetic is used; the initiate must suffer in silence (Mandela 1994:25). No question is asked in the process, but every Xhosa boy screams afterwards, *Ndiyindoda* [I am a man].

After an 'operation', the boys' wounds are dressed and wrapped in leaves of a special plant and led into the lodge (Twala 2007:27). A traditional nurse dresses the wounds and takes care of the young men, especially during the first eight days following the circumcision. This is the most critical period of the initiation exercise which requires proper care by keeping the wounds clean. Traditional bandages are typically used for dressing the wounds of the initiates. Among the Bapedi, the newly circumcised are told to go and sit on a cold stone at the

river so that the pain should be less severe (Semenya 2010:72). A Xhosa man must sleep in a hut with burning wet wood in an attempt to promote healing, with one leg up and another down while lying on his back (Mandela 1994:26).

There is a difference in opinion regarding the purpose of circumcision. Vorster (2005:899) claims that the male initiation rite (circumcision) symbolises the man's control over the female sex, while the initiation rite for women (clitoridectomy) symbolises the removal of sexual aggression and enables submission to men. This specific process of female circumcision practice is not common among the Basotho of South Africa. In a sense, men are taught that circumcision during initiation is for the purpose of teaching them to be sexually dominant over females. In his interview with M.A. Mohlakoana, a traditional healer, Twala (2007:31) concluded that the reason for circumcision was that the penile bloodletting represents the excretion of bad blood from the body of a person who is ready to enter manhood which is not necessarily in line with the aspect of domination over the woman.

### Christian initiation

During this process followed by the reformed tradition, the minister reads the formula and asks questions. In the case of children, parents respond; adult candidates make their own responses. God makes a covenantal promise and believers respond to embrace what God promises. The minister of the Word, as the authorised representative of Christ, administers the visible aspect of the sacrament by pouring or sprinkling water in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). The dipping in, or sprinkling with water teaches that because of the impurity of our souls, believers are to humble themselves before God and seek purification and salvation outside themselves. The triune God gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely gifts and invisible grace: washing and cleansing of sin, purging of all filth and unrighteousness, renewing of the heart and filling it with all comfort, giving a true assurance of divine goodness and replacing the old with the new.

## Community and the initiation

### Sotho initiation

The concept of *botho/ubuntu* that underpins the staying together of family groups is reinforced during the time of initiation. During the initiation, all the candidates are grouped together: children of chiefs and commoners, rich and poor (Setiloane 1976:37). There is no differentiation. Their faces are covered with masks of grass and reeds, and their bodies all daubed with white ochre. It is difficult then to distinguish them as they are mostly of the same age and body posture. They are all covered with a shroud of sameness and will continue thereafter to share, each and all, in the blame and the shame, the joy and the glory of any of their group. The aim is that of a common adulthood. A good human being is one who promotes the wellbeing of their own society. The *mophato* [initiation] does not only teach the initiates the joys

of close fellowship in hardships, but also responsibility towards others without which the community is unsustainable. A man and woman should learn that freedom is impossible outside the close necessity of the group. During the initiation, the initiates must also observe the numerous taboos that are taught prior to and during the process.

After completion of the training period, the initiates leave all their clothing behind in the lodge which is then set alight by the instructors (Twala 2007:28). The young men run ahead without looking back at their childhood. It has symbolically ended with the burning of the lodge. Smearred with red ochre, they march to the village, covered in blankets and surrounded by men and elders where they are given a new set of clothes. A large feast is then held where each newly initiated man is given an opportunity to verbalise his own self-composed praise poem in which he defines his new adult identity and takes a new name. After initiation, the boy acquires the status of a man and he is 'ripe' for marriage (Du Plooy 2007:28). Through initiation and circumcision, he attains added rights and privileges, for example he may take part in his family court and sometimes may act on behalf of his father. Circumcision entitles a young man to acquire heritage rights and permits him to establish his own homestead.

### Christian initiation

Believers experience fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers in Christ with initiation by baptism into the Christian life. As a result of Christ's finished work on the cross, God now makes his permanent abode in the believer's heart (Jn 14:23). Therefore, the fellowship that now prevails under the new covenant is nothing less than the vital, spiritual union of the believer with Christ (Jn 14:20, 21). Jesus' last supper with his disciples illustrates the relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of this fellowship (Mk 14:22–25). Fellowship with God is the goal of the Christian life (1 Jn 1:3) and this relationship will be perfected when the Saviour is seen 'face to face' (1 Cor 13:12) and when God dwells with his people in the heavenly kingdom (Rv 21:3).

Scripture uses several images to describe the spirit of togetherness that characterised the Early Church. The first is 'the household of God' (Eph 2:19; 1 Tm 3:15), or 'the household of faith' (Gl 6:10). It is through the gifts symbolised through baptism that one becomes part of God's household. In God's household, love and hospitality are to be the norm (Heb 13:1, 2). Further, the church is depicted as the family of God on earth (Eph 3:15). God is the Father and believers are his faithful sons and daughters. The life of God's family is to be governed by love, tenderness, compassion and humility (Phlp 2:1–4). Finally, the Christian fellowship is represented as the 'one body' (Eph 2:15, 16). Notwithstanding great natural diversity, the Holy Spirit binds believers together into a single organism (Eph 4:4–6). In this fellowship of love, no believer is insignificant. Each member has been endowed in the promise of baptism with gifts for the spiritual edification of the entire body.

## Teaching in the initiation

### Sotho initiation

While the initiates are housed in the lodge (*mophato*), they rise early, perform a variety of tasks and undergo a harsh physical regimen. Skills, such as the art of warfare and cattle raiding, are taught and improved. An older brother or cousin deals extensively with knowledge of family life, including sexuality (Setiloane 1976:38). Typically, those who have already been initiated are regarded as counsellors. Initiates are also tutored in the arts of singing and composing praises to their chiefs and to themselves (*hoithoka*) whose proper expression or articulation constitutes the important adult (male) quality of eloquence (*bokheleke*) (Twala 2007:27).

Praise poems (*lithoko*), as a way of teaching, refer to various phenomena, including historical occurrences in which former chiefs are featured and significant experiences in the life of the initiates. A male adult is recognised socially by his ability to praise himself and his chief articulately. Each initiate (*lekolwane*) begins his praises with his new name (Guma 2001:276). In his composition, the initiate may claim admirable qualities by identifying himself with ferocious animals or describing imaginary physical and facial features, thereby putting himself in the best possible light. Individual life histories are also recited by means of praise poems. These praises are important to master, and adults are to become experts in their practice and interpretation. Should an initiate fail to comprehend them easily, he would receive a harsh beating.

In addition to the praises, knowledge of *koma* is extremely important. *Koma* is a highly guarded secret teaching of the institution and as such is perceived as the 'soul' of the institution; it is not disclosed to outsiders. The outsider will have to go in to know what *koma* is about. Revelation of *koma* to anyone who has never been to an initiation school is regarded as a serious and punishable offence. Therefore, to preserve its mysticism, *koma* is concealed in a secret language that tends to be obscure and unintelligible to the uninitiated. Should an initiate disclose the secret of what is taking place there, such a person is excommunicated from manhood (Tšiu 2001:275). In addition, to emphasise the secrecy of the rites, the *mophato* is built far away from the village, and women are threatened with death if found to witness the rites or see sacred flutes (Twala 2007:24).

The system of teaching in the Sotho initiation process is that of repetition in the form of stories. Song and dance are also a means of instruction with musical satire to draw attention to anti-social behavioural tendencies (Setiloane 1976:40–41), for example the words of one song say, *Ntho ena ke masawana, tsa ba bang di a patwa, tsa rona di a pepeswa. Ke masawana ntho ena ke masawana* [literally: This thing is unfair, our secrets are exposed but that of others are hidden, this is totally unfair]. It is often sung with two groups, one mentioning an issue and the other one responding. The format of teaching is mostly in the negative 'do not'. Initiation is an opportunity

for the elders to transmit the teaching of the fathers and ancestors so that the new generation knows their roots.

A suitable traditional doctor or healer (*ngaka*) is also required to teach the initiates (Du Plooy 2007:28). A traditional healer should be a person who has clearer than normal vision of natural forces and their interaction as well as the power to select these forces and to direct them for specific purposes. Delays may occur if a traditional healer is not appointed. Local traditional doctors (*lingaka*) are sometimes asked to oversee the initiation, but such specialists are often invited from elsewhere. In many instances, a primary doctor is assisted by two to six other traditional doctors and apprentices (Du Plooy 2007:29). Boys will only be regarded as men after the *mophato* and girls as women after their *bohwerwa*. This will grant them dignity in society.

### Christian initiation

Paul taught that circumcision was indeed of value to Jews, for it was the sign that to them had been committed the 'oracles of God', that is, God's word concerning the promise of salvation (Rm 3:1–3). He reminded the Ephesians that as Gentiles they had once been 'strangers to the covenants of promise', not bearing the covenant sign in their flesh (Eph 2:11, 12; cf. Col 2:13). Likewise, Jews had no cause for pride, for disobedience could cause outward circumcision to be counted as uncircumcision (Rm 2:25). Paul and the other apostles followed Moses and the prophets in teaching that true circumcision was a matter of the heart. The teaching of the New Testament goes further to affirm that a faithful believer, although physically uncircumcised, is regarded by God as circumcised, 'for he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical' (Rm 2:26–29). Both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace (Ac 15:11) and circumcised and uncircumcised alike are justified on the ground of their faith, apart from works of the law (Rm 3:28–30; Elwell & Beitzel 1988:462–465):

Just as faith asks for baptism, baptism asks for faith and a deepening of life in the new creation. Baptism is a momentary experience but is also a vocation, a lifelong growth into Christ and his paschal mystery that ends with the final profession which is the testimony of a Christian death. (Westerfield Tucker 2012:10)

Therefore, Jesus added to the command to give disciples the instruction to baptise and to teach them.

## Controversies in the initiation process

### Sotho initiation

Circumcision at initiation schools has caused controversy in South Africa because of the death rate following circumcision at these schools. This led to the establishment of the Traditional Circumcision Act (2001), according to which doctors, inspectors and police are allowed in the vicinity of the initiates. The Act also states that the *mophato* must be registered. Predictably, the Act was not well accepted among traditional leaders who claimed that it interferes with the

administration of the custom since only the initiated should be in proximity to the initiates. Traditional circumcision is constitutionally recognised in South Africa which means that everyone, including the state, is prohibited from interfering with the custom (Maseko 2008:192). However, the government was forced to intervene because of numerous complaints, deadly infections and the loss of reproductive organs. The South-African Government intervened by limiting some rights to traditional circumcision, because the rights of the communities' associates on language, culture and religion cannot shield practices that offend the Bill of Rights. The government is not anti-circumcision and in fact wants to promote male circumcision given the reports from international health organisations that indicate a reduction in the spread of HIV and/or AIDS.

### Christian initiation

When Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile Christians ought to be circumcised to demonstrate their submissiveness to Moses' law (Ac 15:2), the matter was referred to the Apostolic Council (v. 5) that determined Gentiles did not need circumcision (vv.28–29). Paul permitted the circumcision of Timothy, whose father was not Jewish, out of respect for the Jews among whom Timothy would work (Ac 16:3), but he remained adamantly opposed to the circumcision of Titus, a converted Gentile (Gl 2:1ff.). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul states that his ministry, unlike Peter's, was to the uncircumcised (2:7–8). Accordingly, his advice to the Galatians was to disregard circumcision (5:2; cf. 6:15). Viewing circumcision as a sign of the old covenant, Paul stressed baptism as the new ritual sign, a 'circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ' (Col 2:11–12).

One of the most discussed issues in our context is that of the so-called second baptism, when a person previously baptised (as an infant or adult) experiences a deepening in faith and requests to be baptised again to confess explicitly and openly this renewed spiritual life:

Baptism is the first decisive moment, the first significant stage, the first of the sacraments/ordinances for a believer and for an infant or child who is then expected to profess belief when of age. Baptism is the 'gateway into Christian life, directed towards the fullness of faith and discipleship in Christ'. It is the first means of ritual incorporation into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and indeed the ritual itself in some sense recapitulates and emulates the paschal mystery. Death – death to sin and to the bondage of an old way of life – is necessary for the process of incorporation to continue: 'new life can only begin and grow when the old life that impedes the grace of God is ended'. (Westerfield Tucker 2012:8)

It is evident that in this view of baptism a seeming second baptism is not acceptable.

## Analysis, evaluation, responses

### What is going on?

Initiation is an essential process for the African. They learn about the self and the roles and behaviours related to gender,

family, clan and society. The newly initiated individual is allowed new opportunities and roles, including the possibility of marriage and in some traditions also gets a new name. Baptism is also an essential process for the believer in the triune God, who after baptism is a carrier of the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism creates and shapes a new identity, bringing the new Christian into a new way of life and thinking. After baptism and teaching (infant) or teaching and baptism (adult), the baptised person is accepted in the reformed tradition as a full confessed member of the community of the church.

Throughout the process of observing and describing what is going on in the Sotho and Christian contexts, we listen priestly with a spirituality of presence (Osmer 2008:33).

### Why is it going on?

In the discussion of 'What is going on?', we already addressed the question 'Why is it going on?' to a great extent. We tried to do this 'interpretative task in a spirituality of sagely wisdom' (Osmer 2008:81).

We established that the Sotho initiation is mainly a true cultural custom and that it is not related to baptism as an act of God executed by his representative with the authority of his or her Sender. The fact that there is circumcision involved in the Sotho initiation can lead to the question whether there is any relation with the Old Testament's circumcision.

On the contrary, initiation in the Old Testament covenant through circumcision operates on the principle of the spiritual union of the household and their Head, God. The covenant is 'between me and you and your descendants after you' (Gn 17:7). From its inception, infant circumcision was the distinctive Israelite custom, not derived from Egyptian or other practice, and is in great contrast with the puberty rites of other nations. It is evident that the African initiation points to social acknowledgement of adult status, while the Old Testament's initiation to a status before God and a provenience of divine grace (Wood & Marshall 1996:204). Therefore, it is not true that African circumcision derives from the rite of circumcision in the Old Testament. Initiation in the covenant of the New Testament and the church of Christ is built on the Old Covenant with radical changes. The baptism points also to the intimate relationship between the baptised person and the triune God unto whose Name the baptised person is united, also with all the others who were previously baptised. The promises of the Old Covenant are fulfilled in Christ by the shedding of his blood and the baptised person inherits these promises.

### What ought to be going on?

By asking the question, 'What ought to be going on?', it expects from the researcher to do a 'normative task in a spirituality of prophetic discernment' (Osmer 2008:135).

Concerning the Sotho initiation, it is true that there is more than one possibility to fall in the trap of the so-called African

independent tradition, a mixture of Christian and heathen religions. Therefore, it is necessary to discern carefully. As mentioned, the Sotho initiation is a cultural event and it may be honoured as such. But the principle of Christ in culture must come into play. Therefore, the leader of the initiation school ought to be handpicked and the elders of the young person who attend the school must insist that the leader must be a devoted Christian. The young men and women will in most cases be baptised members of the church and they must bring in a Christian atmosphere of honouring Christ in every task they are asked to do. The emphasis in this kind of church initiation should differ from the cultural activity of initiation schools. It should be based on the fact that humans love each other because God loves them first. This love should be shown irrespective of one's own clan or tribe. It should accommodate people of different ethnicity, tribes, clans and nationalities without any reservations.

If African people grow up in the true biblical initiation and are taught in this truth, they will die for their Christian faith since they do indeed die with and for their African faith. There will then be no reason to go for sacrifices knowing that there was one sacrifice done once and for all for all our misery and woes. The advantage is that African people are religious people and it is easy for them to be guided to grow in biblical truth. Concerning baptism, it is necessary to state the biblical principles in baptism clearly.

### **Baptism is the heart of the entry into the new life**

The Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches formulated it in these words:

When the gospel is preached and the call to conversion is heard, a process of incorporation into life in Christ is set in motion in the one who is called to salvation (Acts 2:37–42). While the process continues throughout life until the Christian is definitely incorporated into Christ at the parousia, its earthly course is marked by certain decisive moments, in which significant stages of life in Christ are first realized and manifested. These moments taken together can be called Christian initiation. They are moments of faith and conversion, of ritual celebration and of entry into the life of the Church. Baptism is at the heart of the process, both as decisive moment and as model of the entire process. (JWG study 2005, par. 34)

'The gifts of forgiveness, salvation and the Spirit are bestowed whereby the newly baptized are joined to Christ, begin to live a new life and entrusted with Christ's mission' (Westerfield Tucker 2012:9). Baptism is not efficacious simply by being administered. Only the blood of Christ can wash the soul. In order that it may do this by way of baptism, a first prerequisite is faith (Breed & De Wet 2012:7). Baptism is the sacrament of faith (Gallican Confession XXXV; Geneva Catechism [1545] 2.87; Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles XXV). The right use of baptism requires faith and repentance.

### **Baptism, like circumcision, is a covenant sign**

It is a 'sign and seal of the covenant of grace' (Westminster Confession XXVIII, 1). It operates in the action field of God's

effective grace through the forgiving and cleansing work of the blood of Christ ministered by the Holy Spirit and God's faithful promise to fulfil what he has started in us (Breed & De Wet 2012:5). The Son seals through baptism that he has washed the member and that they are sinless before the Father. The Holy Spirit says in the Word that he sanctifies God's children and he will dwell in them to guide, comfort and lead them in all truth. For this reason, it remains essential that the Word should always precede the sacraments. Sacraments should thus never stand independently of the Word. What is evident in the act of baptism is the notion that God's acts in Christ are very real. These acts from God are radical and total and call for a radical and total commitment (Versteeg 1983:11).

### **By baptism the baptised person is received into the church of Christ**

Being marked as a Christian comprises embracing the new Christian identity and acting out the Christian ministry of prophet, priest and king that we are consecrated unto. Baptism is a sign of our profession (Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles XXVII). Baptism once received does continue throughout a man's life and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption (Second Helvetic Confession, XX). The person who asks for baptism asks also to walk with the church on a lifelong journey, trusting Christ in all things. Baptism intimately connects the baptised with Christ's whole church and its manifestation in a local congregation. In baptism believers are baptised into the one body and become members of one another (One Baptism par. 57; see 1 Cor 12:12–13a, 27; Eph 4:12). 'The body of Christ, the church, is thus uniquely constituted by baptism' (Westerfield Tucker 2012:9). There is a distinctive bond of unity among those who are baptised: they share in Christ's suffering, adopted as coheirs of the Father and filled with the Holy Spirit.

### **The baptismal vocation of reconciliation**

Baptism is the joyful act of welcome into a new and caring community of the faithful bound together in Jesus Christ. During suffering and trials, faith is tested. Baptism simultaneously sets a person apart and invites them into a community, the new community of the church, united in Christ. The communal baptismal life aims towards the liberation of mankind united under one Head, Christ (cf. Lukken 2005:386; Spierling 2005:4). Christians constantly need to renew their participation in the *koinonia*:

Christian ministries of reconciliation and justice are defined by baptism and belong to the baptismal vocation; the eschatological vision that compels these ministries is rooted in the paschal mystery into which the baptized have been incorporated and continue to participate. (Westerfield Tucker 2012:11)

### **How may we respond?**

#### **The Sotho context**

The correct biblical teaching and the right approach will overcome wrong teachings that emanate from African

concepts about ancestral spirits and witchcraft and the initiation school (also referred to as mountain school). However, it would not be advisable to throw out the baby with the bath water. The Sotho concept of sharing that is taught in the initiation school, may encourage Christians to rethink the value of sharing in a biblical sense. Sharing is a biblical teaching. The Old Testament prophets taught it. Jesus gave his life to save a new community of believers. It is the task of the church to revive the concept of sharing and respecting one another as brother and sister (Ac 4:32). There need not be suffering people among fellow believers. In Sotho they say, *bana ba motto ba arolelana hlooho yea tsie* [the children of a man share the head of a locust]. The implication is that if there is not enough food in a house, whatever is available for the children to eat should be shared, even if it is as small as the head of a locust.

This is an example of how culture may help to see the full revelation, not to imitate Sotho sharing, for instance but to investigate the wonderful meaning of *koinonia*. The *mophato* is a group of youth of approximately the same age taught to live together, survive together, share together and even fight together at the circumcision school. In a similar vein, the church may make use of cell groups with baptised people of the same age. They should be given certain projects to run in the church, under supervision. Such projects should be perceived as part of their initiation. It should teach them cooperation and working together.

### The biblical context of baptism

In this comparison between the Sotho initiation and the biblical baptism, the conclusion can be made that the Sotho context can only acknowledge problems in view of the real and biblical experience of baptism. The principles of the biblical baptism will only be found in the Bible and not by comparing it with the Sotho culture.

## Conclusion

This comparison opened the eyes for the Sotho initiation to discover and rethink the importance of the concept of baptism, the requirement of faith in baptism, the radical separation of the baptised person from the unbaptised, the importance of new naming, not with the name that parents decide on for their children, but the Name of the triune God, the beauty of the process of baptism, the importance of the baptised to live and experience and contribute to the community life of the church, the necessary teaching before and after baptism and to deal with controversies from the basis of Scripture. In this sense the comparison was not in vain.

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### Authors' contributions

R.L. and B.d.K. equally contributed to the writing and research of this article.

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