

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

with the terrible powers which Science is placing at his disposal unless his moral and spiritual advance proceeds *pari passu* with his advance in scientific knowledge. That means that the world's need of Religion is deeper and more urgent than its need of Science, and the Religion that it needs is the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

L. H. MARSHALL.

## The Baptistery of St. John at Poitiers.

“THE Church of St. John Lateran is a Baptist Church, and I hope to preach there before I die.” So said the late Dr. Fasulo of Rome about the famous basilica known to Roman Catholics as the “Mother and head of all Churches in the World”. The ancient baptistry at the Lateran, possibly the oldest ecclesiastical building still in use by any Christian communion, is well known as a monument of the primitive mode of baptism. The splendid baptistries at Florence, where it is said that Dante once saved a child from drowning, at Pisa, and elsewhere in Italy, are even more famous, but it may not be so well known that the earliest Christian monument in France is also a “Baptist Church”.

The Baptistery of St. John at Poitiers as an architectural monument cannot be compared with the great baptistries of Italy but in historical interest and significance it is their fellow. The building has an appearance of great antiquity. The central part, which is the original baptismal chamber, is a rectangular building of flat Roman bricks with low-pitched gables and roof covered with semi-cylindrical tiles. This building now forms the transept of a cruciform church, the chancel and nave being of later date. In the centre of the floor is the deep stepped octagonal basin of the baptistry, which is about eight feet wide at floor level. Typewritten notes for the use of visitors explain that this basin was used for baptism by immersion, as Christ was baptised in Jordan, and that this mode obtained till about 680 A.D.

About fifty years ago this whole site was excavated with a view to discovering the plan of the original buildings. The

excavations shewed that there had been a large porch to the west of the baptismal chamber, opening into it by two doors, and on the north, south and east sides, a series of six rooms. Of these it is thought that three were changing rooms for the candidates, one a vestry for the Bishop who administered the ordinance and the other two vestries for the elders and deacons and for the deaconesses attendant on the candidates.

The building of the baptistry is assigned to the fourth century and local tradition associates it with St. Hilary, who was Bishop of Poitiers from 353 till 368. Hilary was a convert from paganism and, at the time of his ordination to this important bishopric, he was a married man and a layman. He soon became renowned as a preacher and under his leadership Poitiers became a centre of orthodoxy. In 356 he was banished at the instance of the Arians but he was allowed to return four years later. During his exile he had written "On the Trinity" and "Against the Arians".

The first important alterations to Hilary's baptistry were made about the end of the seventh century, at the time when affusion took the place of immersion as the recognised mode of baptism. The reasons put forward for this change are that new converts were now rare and infant baptism was becoming general, and that bodily nudity was increasingly repugnant to new generations of Christians. At this time Bishop Ansoald built the pentagonal chancel on the east side of the baptismal chamber, and had the ancient baptistry filled in and an up-to-date font erected on its site. All the baptisms of the district were performed at this font by the Bishops of Poitiers down to the eleventh century. Then it became customary for priests to baptise in their own churches. The nave of the present church was built to replace the porch of the baptistry which was damaged by a fire in the year 1018. The structure is practically unaltered since that date.

The building has gone through many vicissitudes. For centuries it served as parish church for a very small parish, and was little used and on the verge of ruin. After the French Revolution it was put to secular uses and for a time was turned into a bell foundry. About one hundred years ago it was bought by the state, put in order, and placed in the hands of the Société des Antiquaires de l'Ouest as a museum to house their collection of ancient stone monuments. This Society still cares for the Baptistry of St. John, and has issued an admirable booklet about it, to which the writer is indebted for much of this information.

C. B. JEWSON.