

The Baptismal Formula of Matthew 28:19

A Textual and Historical Investigation — revised June 2026

I. The Biblical Standard of Evidence

Scripture establishes a minimum evidentiary standard: “**At the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established**” ([Deuteronomy 19:15](#); [2 Corinthians 13:1](#); cf. [John 8:17](#)). Jesus himself invoked this principle. We apply it here to examine whether the Trinitarian baptismal formula of [Matthew 28:19](#) — “*baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*” — meets the biblical burden of proof.

II. The Witness Test Applied to [Matthew 28:19](#)

[Matthew 28:18-20](#) contains five distinct teachings of the Great Commission. Four of them receive multiple biblical witnesses:

1. All authority given to Jesus — [Matt. 11:27](#); [John 3:35](#); [Eph. 1:22](#); [Heb. 1:2](#)
2. Teach all nations — [Mark 16:15](#); [Acts 1:8](#)
3. Baptize believers — [Mark 16:16](#); [1 Peter 3:21](#); [Acts 2:38](#)
4. Jesus always with his followers — [John 14:18](#); [Heb. 2:18](#)
5. **Baptize in the 3-fold name** — None

The Trinitarian baptismal formula appears nowhere else in Scripture. It has not one corroborating witness in the entire New Testament — and therefore fails the very standard Jesus and Paul affirmed.

III. The New Testament’s Actual Baptismal Formula

Far from corroborating the Trinitarian formula, the rest of the New Testament consistently contradicts it. Every baptism recorded in Acts uses the name of Jesus alone:

- [Acts 2:38](#) — “*be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ*” (Peter at Pentecost)
- [Acts 8:16](#) — “*they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Philip in Samaria)
- [Acts 10:48](#) — “*he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*” (Cornelius’s household)
- [Acts 19:5](#) — “*they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Ephesus)
- [Romans 6:3](#) — “*as many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death*”
- [Galatians 3:27](#) — “*as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*”
- [Colossians 3:17](#) — “*whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus*”

Paul’s rhetorical question in [1 Corinthians 1:13](#) — “*Were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” — only makes sense if baptism is administered into a single person’s name. [Acts 4:12](#) declares: “*There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.*”

The disciples never once baptized in the 3-fold name. They always baptized in the name of Jesus.

IV. The Parallel Commission Accounts

Two other Gospel passages record Jesus’ final commission, and neither contains the Trinitarian formula:

- [Luke 24:47](#) — “*repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations*”
- [Mark 16:17](#) — “*in my name they will cast out demons*” (the commission’s authority formula is “in my name”)

The most natural reconstruction of what Jesus actually commanded is therefore: “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in my name.*” This is precisely what the parallel texts reflect — and, as we will see, what the earliest manuscripts and **patristic** witnesses confirm.

- The word “**patristic**” (ˈpuh-TRIS-tik) is an adjective meaning “of or pertaining to the Church Fathers (early Christian writers) or their writings, doctrines, and the historical period in which they lived.”

V. The Hebrew Shem Tob Text

The Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, preserved in Shem Tob ibn Shaprut’s 14th-century polemical work *Even Bohan* and critically edited by George Howard (*Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, Mercer University Press, 1995), renders [Matthew 28:18-20](#) as follows:

“Jesus drew near to them and said to them: To me has been given all power in heaven and earth. Go and teach them to carry out all the things which I have commanded you forever.”

The baptismal clause — including the Trinitarian formula — is entirely absent. The Institute for Scripture Research’s *The Scriptures* notes this in its footnote “d” on [Matthew 28:19](#): “Not found in the Hebrew Shem Tob text.” While the Shem Tob text has its own textual complexities, its omission of the formula is consistent with all the other lines of evidence below.

VI. The Eusebian Evidence — The Most Decisive Witness

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340 AD) is perhaps the most important single witness in this debate. Described by Westcott as the scholar “to whose zeal we owe most of what is known of the history of the New Testament,” Eusebius inherited the library of Pamphilus at Caesarea — containing manuscripts estimated to be 50–150 years older than any we now possess.

In his pre-Nicene writings (written *before* the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD), Eusebius cites [Matthew 28:19](#) **nearly twenty times** — consistently with the shorter reading:

“Go, and make disciples of all the nations **in My Name**, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”

F.C. Conybeare, Cambridge textual scholar, documented this exhaustively in *The Hibbert Journal* (1902) and concluded:

“It is clear that of the MSS which Eusebius inherited from Pamphilus at Caesarea, some at least preserved the original reading, in which there was no mention either of Baptism or of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

The *International Critical Commentary on St. Matthew* (Driver, Plummer, Briggs, 3rd ed., 1912, pp. 307–308) states:

“Eusebius cites in this short form so often that it is easier to suppose that he is definitely quoting the words of the Gospel... And if we once suppose his short form to have been current in MSS of the Gospel, there is much probability in the conjecture that it is the original text, and that in the later centuries the clause ‘baptizing...Spirit’ supplanted the shorter ‘**in my name.**’”

Significantly, Aphraates, the 4th-century Syrian church father, cites the same verse as “**they shall believe in Me**” — a paraphrase of “in My Name.”

The **Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Edition** (art. “Baptism,” p. 369) draws the conclusion:

“The circumstance, unknown to these critics when they made their conjectures, that Eusebius Pamphili, in nearly a score of citations, substitutes the words ‘**in My Name**’ for the words ‘baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,’ renders their conjectures superfluous... The first gospel thus falls into line with the rest of the New Testament.”

VII. Justin Martyr and the Window of Interpolation

The Britannica (p. 364) identifies that “our earliest detailed accounts of baptism are in the Teaching of the Apostles (c. 90–120) and in Justin Martyr.” This observation is pivotal for dating the interpolation.

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 AD), in his *First Apology*, Chapter 61, describes baptism “in the name of God the Father and Master of all, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit” — but **critically, he does not cite [Matthew 28:19](#) as his authority**. He appeals instead to Isaiah and apostolic tradition. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* observes:

“Justin quotes a saying of Christ as a proof of the necessity of regeneration, but falls back upon the use of Isaiah and apostolic tradition to justify the practice of baptism and the use of the triune formula. **This certainly suggests that Justin did not know the traditional text of [Matthew 28:19](#).**”

Furthermore, when Justin echoes the commission itself in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (ch. 39), he uses the phrasing “being made disciples in the name of his Christ” — matching the shorter Eusebian reading, not the Trinitarian formula.

Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 180 AD) is the first writer to quote [Matthew 28:19](#) with the full Trinitarian formula as authoritative Scripture. This places the **window of interpolation between approximately AD 140 and 180** — after Justin (who does not cite [Matt. 28:19](#) as the source) and before Irenaeus (who does). The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge (p. 435) confirms: “The Trinitarian formula occurs only in [Matt. 28:19](#), and then only again in the [Didache 7:1](#) and Justin, [Apol. 1:61](#).” All three reflect the same liturgical tradition — and the external witnesses precede or are contemporary with the interpolated Gospel text.

Williston Walker (*A History of the Christian Church*, Scribner’s, 1953, p. 95) further notes that the Trinitarian formula reflects the practice “recorded (**or interpolated**) in the Teaching...and by Justin.”

The most coherent reconstruction is: **a Trinitarian baptismal formula existed in Syrian and Roman liturgical practice independently of [Matthew 28:19](#); sometime between AD 140–180, a scribe inserted that formula into the text of the Great Commission, replacing the original “in my name”; Irenaeus then quotes the resulting text as Scripture, completing the cycle.**

VIII. The Scholarly Consensus

The evidence above is not fringe opinion. It represents the considered judgment of mainstream critical scholarship across more than a century:

Britannica, 11th Ed. (1910), p. 365 —

“The trinitarian formula and trine immersion were not uniformly used from the beginning... In the 3rd century baptism in the name of Christ was still so widespread that Pope Stephen declared it to be valid.”

Jerusalem Bible (1966), footnote on [Matt. 28:19](#) —

“It may be that this formula, so far as the fulness of its expression is concerned, is a reflection of the Liturgical usage established later in the primitive community.”

Bible Catechism, Vatican II Edition, p. 64 —

“Only in the 4th Century did the formula ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ become customary... the Church of the Apostolic era did not know the trinitarian baptismal ‘word’... but only the Christological one (into the name of Jesus Christ).”

Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1 (1992), p. 585 —

“According to a wide scholarly consensus, [[Matt. 28:19](#)] is not an authentic saying of Jesus, not even an elaboration of a Jesus-saying on baptism.”

James Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion* (1905), p. 568 —

“No historical trace appears of this baptismal formula earlier than the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles and the first Apology of Justin about the middle of the second century.”

“We cannot make out when the Trinitarian formula emerged.”

Peake’s Commentary (1929), p. 723 —

The passage is “a late doctrinal expansion.”

IX. For My SDA Friends

Early in her marriage, Ellen White was baptized in the 3-fold name by her husband, James White. You may be aware that she made several strong statements in favor of the validity of 3-fold name. You may not be aware that, during her lifetime, much of the information presented in this article was unavailable. You may also not be aware of Ellen’s generalized disclaimer:

*“New light will ever be revealed on the word of God to him who is in living connection with the Sun of Righteousness. **Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed.** The diligent, prayerful seeker for truth will find precious rays of light yet to shine forth from the word of God. Many gems are yet scattered that are to be gathered together to become the property of the remnant people of God. **There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error.** The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. **No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.**”* [CW 35.1-2](#)

X. Conclusion

The totality of the evidence — biblical, textual, **patristic**, and historical — converges on a single conclusion: **the Trinitarian baptismal formula of [Matthew 28:19](#) was not original to the text of that Gospel.** The most probable original reading was “baptizing them in my name,” consistent with:

1. The two-or-three-witnesses test — the formula has **no** corroborating NT witness
 2. Every baptism recorded in Acts — always “**in the name of Jesus**”
 3. The parallel commission accounts in Luke 24 and Mark 16
 4. The Hebrew Shem Tob text — which **omits the clause entirely**
 5. Eusebius’s **nearly twenty** pre-Nicene citations of the shorter reading
 6. Justin Martyr, who **does not cite** [Matt. 28:19](#) as the source of the Trinitarian formula he knows
 7. The **140–180 AD interpolation window**, defined by Justin and Irenaeus
 8. The unanimous judgment of the Jerusalem Bible, the Anchor Bible Dictionary, the Encyclopaedia Britannica 11th Edition, Peake’s Commentary, and the Vatican II Catechism
 9. The disciples obeyed the commission as they understood it. They baptized, without exception, **in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ** — and in so doing, they were faithful to what Jesus most likely actually commanded.
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Author’s Note: [The original version of this study](#) was published July, 2024, at [sidnash.org](#). This revised edition (June 2026) was produced with the research assistance of **Claude 4.6 Sonnet**, an AI language model, which contributed additional documentation from **patristic** sources, critical scholarship, and encyclopedic reference works. The two-or-three-witnesses analytical framework, the core biblical argument, and all verified primary source quotations from the original study are the author’s own work. As always, the reader is encouraged to verify every citation independently.

Link to my original study: “[Gospel Commission Verification](#)”.
