

Baptism

Word Study & Historical Background

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*An Independent Minister of Christ Jesus
Of the church at Wilmore, Kentucky*

There are many early examples of sacral water ceremonies in Babylon, Persia and India. The Ganges and Euphrates rivers came to have a religious significance comparable with that of the Jordan among Jews and Christians. In Egypt there was an older form of the baptism of kings and the dead with a view to renewal of life, and sacral baths were used in the worship of Isis.

The common theme seems to be that of bathing, washing or cleansing. What is unclean before God, whether physical or moral without a clear distinction, can be washed away like dirt. There also appears to be the thought of the enhancement of life or immortality attached with the practice of these early forms of baptism.

In common with other nations, the Hebrews were accustomed to using water for the purpose of religious purification. In the Septuagint, "*baptizein*" is used for the dipping of a morsel into wine, of feet into a river, of the finger into the blood of the sacrifices, or of unsanctified vessels into water in the laws of purification. The sevenfold dipping of Naaman (2 Kings 5:14) may suggest sacramental ideas and illustrates the importance of the Jordan.

A specialized use of baptism is found in the practice of proselyte baptism, one of the ceremonies by which new converts were admitted to Judaism. There is no reference to proselyte baptism in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, Josephus or Philo; but it is generally agreed that the references in Epictetus, the Sibylline Oracles, and the Mishnah enable us to date the beginnings of the practice not later than the first century A.D. Proselyte baptism was not viewed as an act of ritual purification alone, but an act of self-dedication to the God of Israel, involving spiritual factors as well as physical.

In the Mandaeen ritual the thought of purification is secondary and the strongest emphasis rests on the sacramental or magical power of vivification. The Mandaeans probably had little dealings with the disciples of John, and arose only centuries later as a Gnostic sect.

For John the Baptist, the basic idea seems to be that of a cleansing bath. Baptism is an expression of repentance and the confession of sins (i.e. sorrow for sin and the desire to be free from it). But the thought of a sacramental purification for the coming eon is at least hinted, as John links the rite with his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. So John's baptism is a rite of moral purification designed to prepare those submitting for the approaching kingdom of God.

John contrasts his own water baptism with a future baptism to be administered by the mightier one (Luke 3:16). The continuation of water baptism is interesting since both in the gospels and in the first chapter of Acts there is a contrast between John's baptism with water and the future baptism of the mightier one with holy spirit and with fire. This would seem to suggest that in the new dispensation water baptism would have been superseded.

From the day of Pentecost onward, the rite of baptism with water was the symbol of entry into the Christian community. It was closely linked with repentance and with the reception of the holy spirit.

In the early church, baptism linked the baptised with the organized Church and it thus became a requirement of the Church. Ignatius prohibited baptism without the bishop's presence, and Tertullian would not allow women to baptise. So already we begin to see the "systematizing" of baptism by the organized Church, accompanied by requirements imposed by the Church.

Sources:

- *Theological Dictionary of the NT* (Kittel)
- *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon Press)

Baptism in the Scriptures

We see early on that the physical act of water baptism by John is tied to an inner **repentance** which is evidenced by an outward fruit consistent with that repentance. (Matthew 3:6). John's "baptism of repentance" was proclaimed "*for the pardon of sins.*" (Mark 1:4)

John goes on to point out that while he is baptizing in water for repentance, there is One coming who is superior to him, and who will be baptizing **in holy spirit and fire**. (Matthew 3:11). Unless there will be two different baptisms at some point, John seems to be saying that his water baptism, for repentance, serves a temporary purpose and will one day yield to a more important kind of baptism.

In Luke 7:29 we see John's baptism noted as "the baptism of John." In John 1:33, we learn that John has been **sent to baptize in water**, and he has been told by the One Who sent him that when he sees the spirit descending and remaining on one whom is being baptized, that one will be He Who will baptize in holy spirit. And we see in Acts 13:24 that John's baptism was **for "the entire people of Israel."** It did not extend to the nations outside of Israel.

In John 3:22 we see that water baptism was also a part of Jesus' ministry, although it was Jesus' disciples that did the baptizing and not Jesus Himself (John 4:2).

In what is commonly called the "Great Commission," Jesus instructs His disciples to go and disciple the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the holy spirit. (Matthew 28:19). We must remember that at this time the sheep of Israel are still awaiting the restoration of the kingdom upon the earth. The evangel (gospel/good news) is still the same at this point ... *Repent, for the kingdom is near ... make yourselves ready.* So this instruction to baptize would refer to the "baptism of John," it being a water baptism for repentance.

Mark 7:4 is a most enlightening passage. Here we note that the Authorized Version does not use the word baptism, but substitutes "*washing*" because of the context, despite the fact that in the original Greek we are seeing precisely the same word; *baptizo*. The Concordant Version is consistent in its translation of this word, and so we read, "*the baptizing of cups and ewers and copper vessels and of couches...*" Because the passage speaks of things, instead of people, being baptized, the Authorized Version uses another word. But are we not

enlightened concerning the idea of baptism if the translation is consistent. Baptism is tied to the notion of washing. We see this same substitution of “*washing*” for the Greek *baptizo* in Luke 11:38, where the context clearly speaks of a washing before dinner. And in the case of the related form *baptismos*, the Authorized Version uses “*washing*” in three of its four occurrences, with only Hebrews 6:2 being rendered “baptism.” All this to say that the act of water baptism is closely related to the act of a physical washing; a symbol of the more important spiritual washing as one readies himself for the coming kingdom.

In Mark 10:38 Jesus uses the word baptism in a figurative sense. When He asks, “*Are you able to drink the cup which I am drinking, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am being baptized?*” He is clearly not speaking of His water baptism, or even of a baptism of repentance. He seems to be using the word relative to His forthcoming **suffering and death**. We see this again in Luke 12:50 when Jesus notes “*a baptism have I to be baptized with, and how I am being pressed till it should be accomplished!*” And in Colossians 2:12 Paul tells the believers they are “*entombed together with Him in baptism.*”

In Mark 16:16 baptism appears to be **a requirement for being saved**. “*He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.*” Keeping in mind that the audience at this time is the Jewish ecclesia (church), whose expectation is the restored kingdom upon the earth, being saved speaks of faith, obedience and endurance under the guidelines Jesus has introduced. One must believe Jesus and His teachings, must be repentant and readied for the coming kingdom, and must persevere until that kingdom should come on earth as it is in heaven. For this group (Israel) in that era, believing and baptism are requirements.

In John 1:25 the Pharisees challenge John relative to His baptizing, suggesting that to baptize one must be the Christ (the Messiah, or Anointed One) or the Prophet. It would seem, then, that baptism was linked in their expectations with the restoration of the kingdom unto Israel, as proclaimed by the prophets.

Acts 1:5 seems to signal a imminent change from water baptism to spirit baptism. “*John, indeed, baptizes in water, yet you shall be baptized in holy spirit after not many of these days.*” The apparent fulfillment of these words seems to come on the day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2. To the amazed crowd of Israelites who ask how they should respond, Peter replies, “*Repent and be baptized each of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the pardon of your sins, and you shall be obtaining the gratuity of the holy spirit.*” (Acts 2:38). In this era, then, it appears that there are **two baptisms** running in parallel. Peter’s instruction to repent and be baptized would seem to be speaking of water baptism, and the gratuity of the holy spirit that is anticipated would seem to speak of the spirit baptism that had been promised.

When some are baptized in water but have not yet received the holy spirit, there is concern among the apostles who send Peter and John to pray concerning them (Acts 8:14). Clearly the apostles saw a need for both baptisms.

Of even greater concern to the apostles is when the holy spirit is poured out upon Cornelius and other **God-fearing gentiles** who are with him, when they had not even been water baptized. In response, Peter rushes to water baptize them (Acts 10:47). Again we see there is an expectation among the apostles that both water and spirit baptism was necessary for those who believe, although there appears to be a bit of **confusion at this point as to how God is operating**. Is not water baptism to precede spirit baptism? And is baptism to extend to God-fearing gentiles, and not remain just unto the believers of Israel?

Peter sees water baptism as a representation of the salvation God provided to Noah and his family, who were “*brought safely through water, the representation of which, baptism, is now saving you also; not the putting off of the filth of the flesh but the inquiry of a good conscience to God...*” (1 Peter 3:21). So by the time Peter writes this epistle, physical water baptism is minimized (“*not the putting off of the filth of the flesh*”) in favor of the spiritual element which is of far greater importance.

Even with water baptism there was a progression. In Acts 19:3 Paul asked some believers if they had received the holy spirit. When they reported that they had not, Paul asked “*Into what, then, are you baptized?*” Their response? “*Into John’s baptism.*” Paul proceeds to tell them that John baptized with “*the baptism of repentance*” telling of One who was to come that they should be believing. Upon hearing this, the believers were baptized “*in the name of the Lord Jesus.*” When Paul subsequently placed his hands on them, they received the holy spirit. So this group was baptized three times ... one in water into John’s baptism, one in water in the name of the Lord Jesus, and one by the holy spirit. And so there appears to be a change in the purpose of baptism. In John’s day it was a baptism/washing of repentance in preparation of the coming One, and the coming kingdom. Now it appears to be a ***baptism into Christ***; a washing, if you will, that accompanies a belief in Christ Jesus.

Clearly ***washing*** is the idea related to baptism for Paul as he speaks of his own baptism in Acts 22:16. Here Paul reports that he was instructed to, “*Rise, be baptized, and bathe off your sins, invoking His name.*” And Paul’s notion of baptism relates to the death of Christ. “*Are you ignorant that whoever are baptized into Christ Jesus, are baptized into His death? We, then, were entombed together with Him through baptism into death, that, even as Christ was roused from among the dead through the glory of the Father, thus we also should be walking in the newness of life.*” Here we see that Paul views baptism in a figurative way, with ***a spiritual (not a physical) emphasis***. Baptism into Christ becomes ***dying with Him, and subsequently living a new life in Him***.

The ***lessening importance of water baptism*** for Paul can be seen in 1 Corinthians 1:13 where he baptized only a few, and is thankful that he did not baptize more; as it appears that the physical act of water baptizing was creating divisions with an emphasis upon the person that had done the baptizing. How similar this is to the taking of the Old Testament Law and with the growing emphasis by the Pharisees upon the outward fulfillment, with a neglect of the more important inward element. Paul goes on to say that “*Christ does not commission me to be baptizing, but to be bringing the evangel...*” (1 Corinthians 1:17) Compare John the Baptist, who was sent to baptize, with Paul who was not sent to be baptizing!

Paul further emphasizes the spiritual perspective of baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13 where he says, “*For in one spirit also we all are baptized into one body ...*” Absent here is any reference to the physical water aspect of baptism. Still, water baptism continued to be in practice in 1 Corinthians 15:29.

Paul uses baptism in a figurative way in 1 Corinthians 10:2 when he speaks of the Israelites being “*baptized into Moses*” in the cloud and in the sea.

Perhaps the climax of Paul’s comments relating to baptism are found in Ephesians 4:5, where he instructs that the one body of Christ has “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism ...*” Clearly he is not speaking here of a physical water baptism, but instead of the spiritual baptism that is common to all within the body. Furthermore, by this point in Paul’s ministry there was ***no emphasis upon the outward gifts*** once thought to be the

necessary evidence for spirit baptism; most notably tongues. We recall Paul's words concerning tongues in 1 Corinthians 13, where he reports that "*prophecies will be discarded, or languages they will cease ...*" Could that day of **maturity** (1 Corinthians 13:10) have come, as Paul speaks in Ephesians of the one baptism that all in the body have in common?

To summarize, the concept behind water baptism is that of washing, but its intent is to lead us to the more important inner, spiritual baptism by the holy spirit. At one time this spirit baptism was always manifested by outward signs; most often tongues. But as time went on it appears that even these outward signs were not always present. Paul tells us that when maturity comes, languages will cease. The physical act of water baptism also seems to lessen in importance as time goes on. And while we can identify no definitive point in Scripture where we see the need for water baptism finally being eliminated in favor of the more important spirit baptism, seeing the progression within the Scriptures it appears that this is the case. When Paul shares with us that which was revealed to him not thru any man but by Jesus Christ Himself (Galatians 1:12), and as God begins doing a new thing in establishing the body of Christ with no preference to Israel, water baptism is no longer mentioned as a requirement. Just as the Old Testament Law was fulfilled in Christ, and as Paul admonishes the Galatians to cease trying to place themselves back under the Law, so also it appears that water baptism has fully led us to the spiritual truth of spirit baptism. With that in mind, should we continue to return to the old, making water baptism a requirement for believers?

For those desiring, nonetheless, to experience water baptism as a sign of their gratitude for what God has done, there would be nothing wrong in their doing so; as long as no dependence is placed upon that outward act in terms of their standing with God. But to **require** that believers be water baptized would be placing ourselves back into a previous "administration" that is no longer pertinent in this present day, and it would be to place human requirements upon what God has graciously granted.

From "Englishman's Greek Concordance" (Wigram)

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βαπτίζω, baptizo.

- Mat. 3: 6. were baptized of him in Jordan,
 11. I indeed baptize you with water
 — he shall baptize you with the
 13. unto John, to be baptized of him.
 14. I have need to be baptized of thee,
 16. Jesus, when he was baptized,
 20:22. to be baptized, with the baptism that I am
 baptized with?
 23. and be baptized with the baptism that I am
 baptized with:
 28:19. baptizing them in the name
 Mar. 1: 4. John did baptize in the wilderness,
 5. were all baptized of him in the
 8. I indeed have baptized you with water: but
 he shall baptize you with the
 9. was baptized of John in Jordan.
 6:14. That John the Baptist was risen
 7: 4. except they wash, they eat not.
 10:38. and be baptized with the baptism that I
 am baptized with?
 39. and with the baptism that I am baptized
 withal shall ye be baptized:
 16:16. He that believeth and is baptized shall
 Lu. 3: 7. came forth to be baptized of him,
 12. came also publicans to be baptized,
 16. I indeed baptize you with water;
 — he shall baptize you with the
 21. when all the people were baptized, it came
 to pass, that Jesus also being baptized,
 7:29. being baptized with the baptism
 30. themselves, being not baptized of him.
 11:38. had not first washed before dinner.
 12:50. I have a baptism to be baptized with;
 Joh. 1:25. said unto him, Why baptizest thou then,
 26. saying, I baptize with water:
 28. Jordan, where John was baptizing.
 31. therefore am I come baptizing with
 33. sent me to baptize with water,
 — which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.
 3:22. there he tarried with them, and baptized
 23. John also was baptizing in Ænon
 — they came, and were baptized.
 26. behold, the same baptizeth, and all

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ΒΑΠ

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ΒΑΡ

- Joh. 4: 1. that Jesus made and baptized more dis-
 ciples
 2. Though Jesus himself baptized not,
 10:40. place where John at first baptized;
 Acts 1: 5. John truly baptized with water:
 — ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost
 2:38. Repent, and be baptized every one of you
 41. received his word were baptized:
 8:12. were baptized, both men and women.
 13. when he was baptized, he continued
 16. only they were baptized in the name
 36. what doth hinder me to be baptized?
 38. Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized
 him.
 9:18. forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.
 10:47. that these should not be baptized,
 48. commanded them to be baptized
 11:16. John indeed baptized with water;
 — ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.
 16:15. when she was baptized, and her
 33. was baptized, he and all his,
 18: 8. hearing believed, and were baptized.
 19: 3. Unto what then were ye baptized?
 4. John verily baptized with the
 5. they were baptized in the name
 22:16. arise, and be baptized, and wash away
 Ro. 6: 3. so many of us as were baptized into Jesus
 Christ were baptized into his death?
 1Co. 1:13. were ye baptized in the name
 14. that I baptized none of you,
 15. that I had baptized in mine own name.
 16. I baptized also the household of Stephanas:
 besides, I know not whether I baptized
 any other.
 17. Christ sent me not to baptize,
 10: 2. were all baptized unto Moses
 12:13. by one Spirit are we all baptized
 15:29. which are baptized for the dead,
 — why are they then baptized for
 Gal. 3:27. have been baptized into Christ

- Mar. 7: 8. (as) the washing of pots and cups:
 Heb. 6: 2. Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of
 9:10. meats and drinks, and divers washings,

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βαπτιστής, baptistees.

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- Mat. 3: 1. In those days came John the Baptist,
 11:11. a greater than John the Baptist:
 12. from the days of John the Baptist
 14: 2. This is John the Baptist;
 8. Give me here John Baptist's head
 16:14. (that thou art) John the Baptist:
 17:13. spake unto them of John the Baptist.
 Mar. 6:24. The head of John the Baptist.
 25. the head of John the Baptist.
 8:28. they answered, John the Baptist:
 Lu. 7:20. John Baptist hath sent us
 28. a greater prophet than John the Baptist:
 33. John the Baptist came neither
 9:19. answering said, John the Baptist;

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βάπτω, bapto.

- Lu. 16:24. that he may dip the tip of his finger
 Joh.13:26. shall give a sop when I have dipped (it).
 Rev.19:13. clothed with a vesture dipped in blood:

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βάπτισμα, baptisma.

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- Mat. 3: 7. Pharisees and Sadducees come to his
 baptism,
 20:22. the baptism that I am baptized with?
 23. with the baptism that I am
 21:25. The baptism of John, whence was it?
 Mar. 1: 4. preach the baptism of repentance
 10:38. the baptism that I am baptized with?
 39. with the baptism that I am
 11:30. The baptism of John, was (it) from
 Lu. 3: 3. preaching the baptism of repentance
 7:29. baptized with the baptism of John.
 12:50. I have a baptism to be baptized
 20: 4. The baptism of John, was it from
 Acts 1:22. Beginning from the baptism of John,
 10:37. the baptism which John preached;
 13:24. the baptism of repentance to all
 18:25. knowing only the baptism of John.
 19: 3. they said, Unto John's baptism.
 4. with the baptism of repentance,
 Ro. 6: 4. with him by baptism into death:
 Eph. 4: 5. One Lord, one faith, one baptism,
 Col. 2:12. Buried with him in baptism,
 1Pet.3:21. (even) baptism, doth also now save us

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βαπτισμός, baptismos.

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- Mar. 7: 4. (as) the washing of cups, and pots,