Origins & History of Baptism

Summary

14. "Origins & History of Baptism"

15. "Myth of Baptism"

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Baptism didn't begin with John the Baptist, and it didn't end with a water ritual either. This article traces the practice to its Hebrew roots and asks what Yah'shua's own baptism was really for.

- Water baptism's roots in the pre-Christian Hebrew mikvah.
- John's "baptism of repentance" distinguished from the promised baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire."
- Yah'shua's own abstention from performing water baptisms (John 4:2).
- His baptism as a purely inward, spiritual fulfillment of the water ritual, undergone Himself only so as "not to offend."

The full article begins on the next page.

Origins & History of Baptism

Baptism is generally a religious ritualistic water purification, practiced in many of various religions including *Christianity*, Mandaeanism, and Sikhism. The *Christian* form of the ritual specifically has its origins with the Hebrew *pre-Christian* ritual of *mikvah*.

The word *baptize* derives from the Greek word βάπτειν *(the infinitive; also listed as the 1st person singular present active indicative* βαπτίζω), which loosely means "to dip, bathe, or wash". To some groups it is a matter of religious conviction to assert that *baptism* is literally equivalent to, *to plunge something entirely into the water, so that the water closes over it.* To other groups, *baptism* is a symbolic term meaning "identification with" *(e.g. the Christian Church)* having no connection with earthly ritual.

Baptism, e.g., *mikvah,* was familiar as an entrance ritual into the Hebrew faith and Temple long before the *Messiah's* era. It remained familiar to the Hebrews and to the Gentiles of Yah'shua's day and also to non-practicing Hebrews.

The many mystery religions of the day also used *baptism* in this way, and some scholars believe that Gentile proselytes to Judaism were *baptized* into the faith as well. Hebrews of first century Palestine, on the other hand, would not have considered *baptism* an appropriate ritual for themselves, for they had already "crossed through" the waters of the Red Sea via their ethnic heritage and had no need to cross over again.

Thus, John's call for fellow Hebrews to be *baptized* was provocative and unexpected. That so many responded to this call signalled a great desire in many for a new way of life.

The synoptic Gospels differentiate between John's *baptism* and *baptism* in the name of Yah'shua. John's is emphasized as a *baptism* of repentance and preparation for the complete, or Spiritual *baptism* done by the Messiah. Whereas John *baptized* with water, Yah'shua would come *baptizing* with His Holy Spirit and fire *(Matt. 3:11)*.

Yah'shua Himself did not *baptize* with water *(John 4:2).* Rather His *baptism* denoted an inner experience, a coming of His Holy Spirit and fire, an experience that happened prior to the water ritual. The book of Acts contains the most clearly defined *Christian baptism* rituals. The Ethiopian eunuch *(Acts 8:26-40)*, the jailer from Philippi *(Acts 16:16-34)*, and the Roman centurion Cornelius *(Acts 10:1-48)* are examples of persons who expressed repentance and/or acted upon belief in Yah'shua, received His Holy Spirit and then later experienced *baptism*.

Today, water *baptism* is most readily identified with *Christianity*, where it superstitiously symbolizes the cleansing *(remission)* of sins, and the union of the believer with the Messiah in His death, burial and resurrection so that he becomes one of the Messiah's Faithful. Most *Christian* groups practice some form of literal water-based *baptism* and agree that it is important, yet strongly disagree with other groups regarding any or all of several aspects of *baptism*, such as: · form of the *baptism*

· recipients of *baptism*

· meaning of the act of *baptism*

However, a few *Christian* groups acknowledge that water-based *baptism* has been erroneously retained in favour of the promised baptism by His Holy Spirit, and that water *baptism* was unnecessarily carried over from the early Jewish *pre-Christian* practice of *mikvah*. This assertion holds the only provable basis for the continuance of the *pre-Christian* ritual.

The term *baptism* is not used to describe the Hebrew or modern Jewish rituals, the purification rites, or *Mikvah* – the ritual bath in Hebrew laws and tradition where the ritual of *baptism* can find its true origins. In the Tanakh, and other Hebrew texts, bathing for ritual purification was established for specified circumstances – in order to be restored to a condition of 'ritual purity'. For example, Hebrews who become ritually 'defiled' by contact with a corpse *(according to the Law of Moses)*, had to use the *mikvah* before being allowed to participate in the Holy Temple. Immersion was required for converts to the Hebrew faith, and is still a requirement for converts to modern Judaism as part of their conversion. Through practices such as these, immersion in the *mikvah* symbolically represents purification and restoration, and qualification for full religious participation in the life of the Hebrew or Jewish community.

In modern times, the adherence and observance of the laws, rituals, and customs regarding the *mikvah* differ greatly among the Jewish denominations. Due to the destruction of the Holy Temple, immersion in a m*ikvah* has no practical purpose these days, but many Orthodox and Haredi Jews do so anyway, in order to 'increase purity'. The only modern exception is that after menses, women need to immerse in a *mikvah* in order to be permitted to her husband.

The *Christian* explanation of *baptism* as the definitive rite, by which the *baptized* person is indicated to be fully-qualified for participation in the life of the *Church*, begins with a misunderstanding of the career of John the Baptist, who was the cousin of Yah'shua. John rightly declared that repentance was necessary, prior to forgiveness. There must be a return to Yahweh. This implies that the stain of sin is not ineradicable, but can be removed or "washed away" by putting off polluting acts and returning to "the way of Yahweh", all of which was **symbolized** in his *baptism*.

John also taught that his *baptism* was not finally sufficient, and that repentance would not attain to its goal of separation from sin, apart from a greater *baptism* which was not in his power to give. According to the

Gospel of Luke, John taught, "I *baptize* you with water; but One comes who is stronger than I, of Whom I am not worthy to untie the strap of His sandals; He will *baptize* you with His Holy Spirit and fire; His winnowing fork is in His hand to clean out His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His storehouse, but the chaff He will burn with inextinguishable fire." *(Luke 3:16-17)* John's *baptism* shows that the effort to make oneself acceptable to Yahweh by repentance, would be superseded, or made complete by the coming of the Lamb of Yahweh that 'takes away', not 'covers over' sins.

According to the Gospel of John, after John *baptized* Yah'shua, he testified concerning Him: "I have seen the Spirit coming down as a dove from heaven, and it remained upon Him. And I had not known Him, but the One who sent me to *baptize* with water, that One said to me, On whomever you see the Spirit coming down and remaining upon Him, this is the One *baptizing* with His Holy Spirit. And I have seen, and I have testified that this is the Son of Yahweh." *(John 1:32-34)*

"Behold the Lamb of Yahweh, that takes away the sins of the world." This "taking away" of the sins of the world, means what it says. Thus, our faith in our Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection as the Firstborn Son of Yahweh is paramount. The Messiah has the authority to take away our sins and our sins no longer need to be symbolically rinsed away or covered over with water. If this ritualistic "work" of the former "works of the law" were still necessary, then our Messiah would not have the authority of Yahweh to "take away" our sins, and our faith in Him as our Saviour would be futile.

The ritual of *baptism* may be summed up in this: Inasmuch as the Messiah became the final wave sheaf offering, and inasmuch as the Messiah became the final and perfect sacrifice, His *baptism* by John finalized, or completed the ritual of the *mikvah*.

He participated in this rite of *baptism*, or more aptly, this final *mikvah*, not because it was necessary, but rather that He should not be seen to offend anyone.

At the time of His own baptism, the Messiah had not yet finalized the rite of *mikvah*, by replacing the ritualistic water bath, with the *baptism*, or bathing of, with and by His Holy Spirit, hence it might have been seen as an offence to the Hebrews or even to the gentile converts of the day, had He not willingly gone through with the then traditional process.

← Return to the Articles Index