

What Did This Baptism Mean to the Jewish People?

“Why then are you baptizing?”

This is the question the Pharisees asked John at the Jordan River.

John was a study in contrast: the temple priest and the desert prophet. John did not come in priestly robes that he by birth was eligible to wear but rather in the attire of a prophet. “John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist” (Matt. 3: 4). The camel’s hair garment was the equivalent of the sackcloth that Old Testament prophets wore when they appeared in mourning with a message of judgment. John did not come with the splendid waistband of a priest, but rather with a simple leather belt around his waist. John’s food was not that of a priest. The priests ate the flesh of the sacrifices. John lived by what the desert provided — locusts and wild honey.

The Greek word *baptizō* comes from the root *baptō*, which literally means to dip or to dye. It was a common word among those in the fuller’s trade. Undressed cloth was prepared for use by first dipping it into bleach and then into dye. The emphasis, however, in the word is not on the procedure of dipping but rather on the result of the procedure. The cloth woven of unprocessed sheep’s wool was dull and it needed to be cleansed. The appearance of the cloth was changed by putting the cloth into bleach and then into dye. When it emerged from the bleach, it was clean and white; and when it emerged from the dye, its appearance was further altered. Such was the literal concept in the word.

The word metaphorically meant to change identity, to change appearance, or even to change relationships. To the Jewish mind, *baptizō* had in it both the idea of cleansing and consecration to a new identity or a new relationship.

Thus the ritualistic use of water signified both cleansing and consecration.

Edersheim says: “. . . *the Law had it, that those who had contracted Levitical defilement were to immerse before offering sacrifice. Again, it was prescribed that such Gentiles as became “proselytes of righteousness,” or “proselytes of the Covenant”, were to be admitted to full participation in the privileges of Israel by the threefold rites of circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice—the immersion being, as it were, the acknowledgment and symbolic removal of moral defilement...*”

A proselyte by his baptism signified that he was terminating his relationship in his old society, including his allegiance to his old gods. He was joining himself with the community of Israel and submitting himself to Israel’s God.

Although the Jews were familiar with the concept of baptism and John did baptize, there are several important reasons for concluding that he was not merely performing the Old

Testament ritual of cleansing. He was not functioning as a priest, using water for cleansing as provided by the law. Rather, John preached “a baptism of repentance” (Luke 3: 3). Thus Scripture distinguishes his baptism from a baptism for ceremonial cleansing. Four facts about John’s baptism are recorded:

- (1) John’s baptism was in view of the coming of Messiah (Matt. 3: 2)
- (2) It was in view of the people’s uncleanness (Mark 1: 5)
- (3) It was based on confession and repentance (Mark 1: 4)
- (4) It was with a view to receiving forgiveness of sins (Mark 1: 4)

John, in calling the nation to repentance, was functioning as an Old Testament prophet, not a priest. His ministry was in keeping with the principle of Deuteronomy 28 and 30. Before Messiah’s blessings could come, the people must turn from their sin to God. They must seek His forgiveness.

Thus we see that John was not the one who would forgive sin. He was identifying them with the One who would forgive sin. It was a public confession of sin and of the need of a Saviour-Messiah. It was a declaration of allegiance to the coming Messiah. And His coming was near! John’s new rite was not a means to secure the remission of sins. For the Jew, it was a humiliating public confession of his sins, but also an expectant hope of the coming Kingdom.

Taken from J.Dwight Pentecost “The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ”
Zondervan 1981 Kindle ed.