

## John's Baptism of Repentance

During this season of the Jewish calendar, each person is expected to reflect upon his or her actions during the past year. Beginning with the Jewish New Year, there are ten days in which one is to reconcile personal relationships in anticipation of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. This season of repentance and reconciliation echoes the voice of one whose prophetic message was permeated with a call to repentance. All of the Gospels open with a description of John the Baptist's proclamation of a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4). In this brief study, we want to consider both the form of John's baptism and his distinctive call to accompanying repentance.

Many Christians are surprised to discover that John's invitation to ritual immersion was nothing new for his Jewish hearers. Although scant mention is made of the practice in the Old Testament, by John's day the custom was already well developed. According to Jewish faith, one undergoes immersion if there is any question of ritual impurity. This can result from a number of causes, some a requirement of the natural course of life, e.g., after giving birth.

Luke's Gospel speaks concerning the period of Mary's 'purification' (Luke 2:22). This was the forty days following the birth of Jesus (cf. Lev. 12:2-4). It is only after this period that she was permitted to enter the Temple. Before entering the Temple precincts Mary would have been required to submit to ritual immersion, perhaps even in one of the ritual baths (mikveh) archaeologists have uncovered along the southern wall of the Temple Mount.

Dr. Chana Safrai has noted that Mary went to the Temple to give her offering on the first day she was permitted. Since she was not obligated to go that very first day, this may be another indication of the deep religious piety of Mary and Joseph, hinting at the type of home in which Jesus was raised.

Unlike the various styles of Christian baptism, according to Jewish practice the candidate immerses him/herself. Of course, this formal difference raises the question about John's physical role in the baptism of Jesus. In one fascinating piece of evidence, we have an ancient drawing from a Roman catacomb which depicts John and Jesus at Jesus' baptism. John is standing on the bank of the Jordan River extending a hand to Jesus assisting him from the water.

Not all of the Gospels are identical in their description of John's activity at Jesus' baptism. Luke's account omits specific reference to John in the verse which describes Jesus' baptism, 'Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened' (Luke 3:21). R.L. Lindsey has suggested that at the root of our misunderstanding concerning John's role is confusion underlying the passive Greek verbs 'they were baptized/he had been baptized'. There is ambiguity in the equivalent Hebrew verb whose sense may lie behind the Greek text. In Hebrew, the verb 'to baptize' can be transitive or intransitive (i.e. reflexive). Once again, we may be seeing Greek words conveying Hebrew meanings directly translated from earlier Hebrew texts.

An even more compelling argument is to remember that these were all first century Jews for whom the practice of being plunged under the water by someone else was unknown. Indeed, the passive form of the Hebrew verb 'to be immersed'. in a ritual sense never occurs. In all probability, the ancient drawing has accurately depicted John's location-on the bank not in the water. He did not physically assist in the immersion of those who came to him, as we usually imagine it. Instead he functioned as a witness to those who responded to his call.

One final comment on the form of Jewish ritual immersion - it is not commonly noted that the Jewish practice is a thrice immersion. This may have also been early Christian practice as indicated in a first century Christian document, The Didache (The Teaching of the Apostles). David Flusser has suggested that the practice of thrice immersion may have been what gave rise to the Trinitarian formula heard in Matthew 28:19, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

More important than clear understanding of the form of John's actions along the Jordan River are the innovative ideas which he attached to the rite. As we mentioned, usually the practice of ritual immersion was purification for physical/ritual impurity. The need for ritual immersion did not necessarily suggest 'sinfulness' on the part of the baptismal candidate. Nevertheless, John combined the rite with an accompanying need for repentance from sin. He proclaimed a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' The relationship between ritual immersion and spiritual purification in John's ministry is spelled out more fully by the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius.

'(John) had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellow and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a purification of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior'. (Antiquities 18:117).

John's conditions for baptism are very similar to that heard in the Dead Sea Scrolls. 'No one may enter the water . . . unless he has repented of his evil, because uncleanness clings to all transgressors of His word' (Community Rule (1QS) 5:13-14). It appears that both John and the Essene sectarians from Qumran believed that sin itself could render an individual defiled. Thus, one who underwent ritual immersion without accompanying repentance would come up from the waters as defiled as he went in. 'He shall not be reckoned among the perfect; he

shall neither be purified by atonement, nor cleansed by purifying waters, nor sanctified by seas and rivers, nor washed clean with any ablution. Unclean, unclean shall he be' (Community Rule 3:5-6).

This notion held by John the Baptist and the Essenes was a departure from that held widely by others in first century Judaism. The Essenes believed that as the waters of ritual immersion cleansed the outward person, God was also at work cleansing the inward person. The instrument for that inner purification is described in the sectarian Community Rule, 'He shall be cleansed from all his sins by the spirit of holiness' (Community Rule 3:7).

Members of the Qumran community anticipated the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in their ritual immersion. We have no record whether this hope was experienced by those who submitted to immersion under John's ministry along the River Jordan. Yet, the linking of water and spirit by both John and the Qumran sectarians provides the background to the events at Jesus'; baptism. "The Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art My beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:22).

On the occasion with Jesus, the divine voice signals that the coming of the Holy Spirit was not for purposes of purification but anointing for prophetic ministry. Nevertheless, for our study what is important is to note that the Holy Spirit's active presence during the custom of ritual immersion is a notion which was commonly held by the Qumran sectarians and John the Baptist and may have influenced others in the early community. Indeed, the connection between water and spirit played a central role in early Christian thinking.

Once again we find that characters in the New Testament story belong to emerging Jewish ideas in the first century and were inseparably connected to that vital spiritual community. The message of the New Testament takes on new depth and meaning when read in light of that historical and spiritual milieu.

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