

The Meaning of Baptism in the Jewish Culture

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. . . . At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (Mark 1:4-5; 9)

John the Baptist was a Jew doing something that was very common, and still is, in Judaism. He would have been called "John the Immerser," not "John the Baptist." Ritual immersion has been an important part of Judaism for thousands of years.

The term used in the Hebrew Bible for **baptism** is usually translated as **washing** and the purpose is for **purification**. The person or article to be purified must undergo **total immersion** in either *mayim hayyim* ("live water"), i.e., a spring, river, or sea, or a *mikveh*, which is a body of water of at least 40 *se'ahs* (approximately 120 gallons) brought together by natural means, not drawn. The person or article must be clean and have nothing adhering to him or it, including clothing. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

The word *mikveh* literally means "collection" and is used in Leviticus 11:36.

"Nevertheless, a spring or a cistern where there is a collection [*mikvah*] of water shall be pure."

Ritual immersion changes the status of a person or object from *tumah* (ritual impurity) to *taharah* (ritual purity).

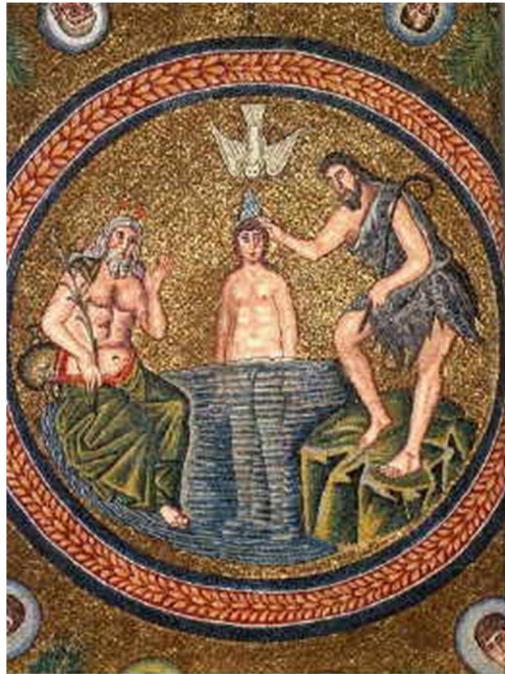
Let's turn to the Encyclopedia Judaica again for additional information about ritual impurity:

- (1) A person or object can be in a state which, by religious law, prevents the person or object from having any contact with the temple or its cult (members, objects and rituals).
- (2) The state is transferable from object to another in a variety of ways, such as touching the object or being under one roof with it, and is independent of the actual physical condition.
- (3) The state of impurity can be corrected by the performance of specified rituals, mainly including ablution (ritual immersion), after which the person or object becomes pure once more until impurity is again contracted.

(4) The state of impurity is considered hateful to God, and man is to take care in order not to find himself thus excluded from His divine presence.

(5) Three main causes of impurity are apparent: leprosy, issue from human sexual organs, and the dead bodies of certain animals. **Later the concept was extended to the unrepentant sinner.**

In the oldest pictures of Jesus' baptism, estimated to be from the second century, John is standing on the river bank and Jesus is standing in the water naked.



In Jewish ritual immersion the person immerses himself and is not dunked under the water by someone else. John's role, as "the Immerser" was to make sure that every part of Jesus' body went completely below the surface of the water.

Ritual immersion was also required before anyone could enter the Temple's ritual areas. It would have also had people like John watching those immersing themselves to make sure they did it correctly.

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