



The Biblical Heritage Center's **THE TEACHINGS OF THE JEWISH JESUS SERIES**

*Rediscovering the original teachings of
the Jesus that lived and taught in ancient Israel.*

BAPTISM • NUMBER 1

The Jewish Jesus & Baptism

By Jim Myers

Baptism is a very important Christian ritual today and has been from the very beginning. One of the famous New Testament characters is even named after it ó *John the Baptist*. Since I was raised as a member of a Baptist church, for many years I thought that John the Baptist created our church and that we were the original Christian church because our name appeared in the New Testament. I could picture John preaching down by the Jordan River, holding an altar call, leading the people that came down to him in a salvation prayer, and then dunking them ó *one by one*.

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.¹

I thought that what John the Baptist was doing something new ó *preaching a "Christian" message about baptism, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins*. But years later, when I went back and looked at the quote above from Mark, I realized that **John the Baptist was doing his thing before Jesus ever showed up**. It was before Jesus became the Christ, before Jesus taught, and before Jesus was crucified. **The people that were coming down to him to be baptized were NOT being baptized to become Christians. Jesus did NOT play a role the message of repentance or forgiveness of sins in John's message. Think about that for a moment or two.**

John the Baptist was preaching and doing things his non-Christian Jewish audience understood, and one member of that audience was Jesus. *Every person listening to John the Baptist that day had probably been baptized many times before and would be baptized many times after that day, including Jesus*. In this article we will discuss baptism. Our goal is to answer these questions.

Why was it done?

Where was it done?

How was it done?

Who did it?

By whom was it done?

Let's start with the question of **where baptism was done**. One place was obviously the Jordan River. Baptism was also done within water installations known as **MIKVA'OT** (plural) or **MIKVEH** (singular) -- *stepped-and-plastered facilities used exclusively for baptism*. Many mikva'ot have been found in excavations in Jerusalem, as well as in outlying villages and at various rural locations. A few slightly larger mikva'ot are known in the immediate area of the Temple Mount, as well as a complex at the Temple.

There were many mikvaot on the Temple Mount including one in the Chamber of Lepers situated in the northwest corner of the Court of Women (Mid. 2:5). The Temple itself contained immersion baths in various places for the priests to use, even in the vaults beneath the court (Commentary to Tam. 26b; Tam. 1:1). The High Priest had special immersion pools in the Temple, two of which are mentioned in the Mishnah.² Josephus tells us that even during the years of war (66-73 CE) the laws of baptism were strictly adhered to (Jos. Wars, 4:205). Did you get that? There were laws of baptism in Israel.

According to the classical regulations, a mikveh must contain enough water to cover the entire body of an average-sized man (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 4b). The rabbis calculate the necessary volume of water as being 40 *seah* (most contemporary authorities believe this is about 150 gallons). The rabbis also specified that a mikveh must be connected to a natural spring, or to a well of naturally occurring water--like rainwater. A river or sea would meet the requirements.³ Below is a picture of an ancient mikveh discovered in Jerusalem.⁴



Now let's turn to the question of **why baptism was done**. Something that most people do not know today, outside of the Jewish community, is that ritual purity was one of the highest priorities of the Jewish people as long as the Temple stood. A person who was ritually impure could not enter the Temple or participate in religious rituals. A person that was not ritually pure could make another person impure just by touching him or her. Make sure you understand that ritually impure isn't always a bad or evil thing. Many things could be the source of impurity, including things that were a natural part of life, for example, a woman's monthly period, touching something dead, including the preparation of a deceased person for burial. *The latter is an interesting situation because it is also a commandment. It is a case where keeping one commandment causes a person to break another.*

How did baptism become a way to restore one to ritual purity? In the Torah we find references to washing of clothes and bathing as means of restoring purity.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes."⁵

Anyone who touches them will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening."⁶

Later, Jewish rabbis and teachers interpreted the requirements of washing clothes and bathing, that are found in the Torah, to mean baptism. This leads us to the answer of **how baptism was done**. In Judaism, baptism requires the complete immersion of the body (" ebilah," Yeb. 46b; Mek., Ba odesh, iii.). This was a well-established practice by the time of Jesus, but it wasn't the same kind of immersion practiced in Christianity today.

Tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem to attend each major festival at the Temple. **Baptism was required to enter the Temple's courts. If they were baptized like we baptized people at the Baptist church, there would not have been enough time to individually dunk tens of thousands of people.** *The baptizers would need a break after 100 or so baptisms.* It appears that the Bethesda and Siloam Pools by the Temple Mount were designed for this purpose. They could accommodate almost all of the pilgrims **because they baptized themselves by self-immersing themselves** without any problem. Below is a picture of the Siloam Pool.⁷



"The Pool of Siloam In Jerusalem"
By James Tissot (1836-1902)

<http://www.keyway.ca/jpg/pool.jpg>

Jews aren't dunked by someone else. They self-immers themselves. Jewish self-immersion has never been taken lightly. It was performed in the presence of witnesses (Yebam. 47b). The person self-immersing himself or herself made special preparations before. Then, the person would completely undress and enter the water. This leads us to the answer of **by whom was baptism done**. Before the person went beneath the water, a profession of faith was made before the designated "fathers of the baptism" (Kethub. 11a; Erub 15a).⁸

The person in the water would squat down until he was completely beneath the water and made sure water touched every part of his body. The baptizer stood outside of the water and acted as a witness that the person made the profession and that he was completely immersed. Not even one hair of the head could remain out of the water. **John the Baptist would have been acting as a "father of the baptism."** He would have witnessed Jesus's profession of faith and made sure he was completely immersed. *We should more accurately call him John the "Immerser," instead of the "Baptist."*

The earliest pictures of the baptism of Jesus reveal that he practiced this established self-immersion ritual himself. In the picture below, make sure to notice that Jesus is standing nude in the water and John the Immerser is standing on the river bank.



Source⁹

It should be pointed out that there are strict requirements about who is involved in the baptism ritual concerning gender. Only women baptize females and only men baptize males. Strict privacy requirements are kept to maintain the sacredness of those involved.

Self-immersion and repentance were both required in offering burnt sacrifices, which were made for the forgiveness of sins. But, some Jewish sects proclaimed there were ways to receive forgiveness of sin outside the Temple, such as the Essenes. John the Immerser's message fits well in the culture and time period, therefore. The relationship between ritual immersion and spiritual purification 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 self-immersion. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if self-immersion 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."¹⁰

What did Josephus mean by "right behavior" and how is that related to the pardon of sins? I have little doubt that Josephus and Jesus were familiar with teachings that had been in circulation in Judaism for over a century when Jesus was born. It explains what "right behavior" means here. One source that records the idea is the *Book of Tobit*.

Prayer is good with fasting and alms and TZEDAQAH. A little with TZEDAQAH is better than much with unrighteousness. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold: **for alms delivers from death, and shall purge away all sin**. Those that do alms and TZEDAQAH shall be filled with life.¹¹

TZEDAQAH is usually translated as "righteousness," but here it specifically means "almsgiving." There was another Jewish group that held other beliefs about baptism, the Essenes. In 1948 the first of

the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered and they provided scholars with a treasure of new information this group. Below are a few of their ideas about baptism.

"No one may enter the water . . . unless he has repented of his evil, because uncleanness clings to all transgressors of His word."¹²

"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."¹³

"He shall be cleansed from all his sins by the spirit of holiness."¹⁴

The teachings of the Essenes about baptism were a significant departure from those of other Jewish sects. *They taught that the waters of ritual self-immersion cleansed the outward person, while Spirit of God cleansed the inward person.*

As you can see, **there were different ideas about what baptism does among Jews sects** at the time of Jesus. But, there was no conflict about how baptism was done. It was by self-immersion. The question that many ask is why doesn't the New Testament say anything about self-immersion? According to the late Dr. Robert Lindsey, a Greek scholar and Christian pastor, the original Gospels did teach self-immersion. *The problem is that this was lost when the Hebrew account of Jesus' life were translated into the Greek language, and then later, translated into English.* Dr. Lindsey pointed this out in his study of Luke 3:21. Most translations read like this:

"Now when all the people **were baptized**, and when Jesus also **had been baptized** and was praying, the heaven was opened."

Dr. Lindsey argued that the our misunderstanding of how first century Jews immersed themselves is due to the use of the passive Greek verbs translated as "they were baptized" and "he had been baptized" in the above verse. The original Greek writer was faced with the need to translate the Hebrew verb for self-immersion into Greek. The Greek verb form that he chose created a new problem for the English translators. He had the choice translating the Greek verb as we saw above, or he could translate it as a reflexive, in which case the English translation would be this ó

"Now when all the people **had baptized themselves**, and when Jesus also **had baptized himself** and was praying, the heaven was opened."

This is just part of the evidence that the Greek words of the Gospels were originally written in Hebrew. But, in order for our Gospels to be correctly understood we must view their words through the culture of the Jewish people of the time of Jesus. It is one of the greatest resources for understanding the words of the Synoptic Gospels. **When did Christian views about baptism change?**

Early Christians of the Roman Empire were divided over how baptism was to be done. It should be noted that the Roman Empire itself was divided into two distinct parts, Eastern Empire and Western Empire. Differences in theology and rituals often reflect this division.¹⁵



Source¹⁶

Eastern Christian leaders predominately practiced baptism by submerging individuals in moving bodies of water. This appears to be the beginning of the familiar ritual of baptism by complete immersion began. Western Christian leaders of the Roman Church practiced **aspersion**, which is **baptism conducted by sprinkling holy water onto someone's head**. About the 10th century, **affusion**, pouring water on the head, became the predominant method of baptism. Today, the Roman Catholic Church believes that baptism is valid only if the water that a person touches is moving. The Eastern Orthodox Church practices complete immersion.¹⁷ Protestant denominations are divided and all of three of the above Christian baptism rituals can be found in Protestantism.

Conclusion

The evidence indicates that at the time of Jesus baptism meant self-immersion in waters that met the requirements of Jewish laws. People would do ritual-immersions many times in lives for different reasons. Every time one visited the Temple ritual-immersion was required. Every month after her period, ritual-immersion was required for the woman. After preparing a body for burial, ritual-immersion was required.

In the Jesus Movement we find three core beliefs that are related ó *ritual-immersion*, *TESHUVAH* (*repentance*), and *TZEDAQAH* (*almsgiving*). All three played a role in the forgiveness of sin, not just one. Jesus drew from well-known beliefs in his teachings. **It must be understood, in Judaism, only God forgives sins, not a ritual, whether it is offering a sacrifice or baptism**. *Forgiveness of sin requires TESHUVAH* (*repentance*) first.

One other point is important to understand ó *sacrifices for sin were presented only for “unintentional” sins*. **There were no sacrifices for “intentional” sins**. So, what did a person do when he or she committed an *ōntentionalō* sin? *The answer is “trust in the loyalty of God,” “do TESHUVAH,” and “do acts of TZEDAQAH* (*almsgiving*).

Over the years I have received questions from concerned Christians about what they should do if they had not been baptized according to the way that it was practiced by Jesus and his followers. My answer is that I do not believe that the ritual of baptism isn't that important to God. Jesus doesn't teach about baptism and how to do it. **Do what Jesus spent the majority of his time teaching his disciples to do -- trust in the loyalty of God, do TESHUVAH, and do acts of TZEDAQAH (almsgiving).**

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¹ Mark 1:4-5

² <http://www.puritanboard.com/f57/jewish-background-christian-baptism-41025/>

³ http://www.myjewishlearning.com/life/Life_Events/Weddings/Liturgy_Ritual_and_Custom/Mikveh/how-to-mikveh.shtml

⁴ <http://yehudafm.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/ancient-mikveh-in-jerusalem.jpg>

⁵ Exodus 19:10

⁶ Leviticus 15:27

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- ⁷ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0014_0_13881.html
- ⁸ <http://www.puritanboard.com/f57/jewish-background-christian-baptism-41025/>
- ⁹ <http://mum6kids.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/baptism-of-jesus.jpg>
- ¹⁰ Antiquities 18:117 (Antiquities, book XVIII, Chap. 5, sec. 2)
- ¹¹ Tobit 12:7-10
- ¹² Community Rule [1QS] 5:13-14
- ¹³ Community Rule 3:5-6
- ¹⁴ Community Rule 3:7
- ¹⁵ <http://www.nvcc.edu/home/lshulman/rel232/lectures/christianity/east&west.htm>
- ¹⁶ <http://explorethemed.com/Images/Maps/RomeDivided936.jpg>
- ¹⁷ http://www.ehow.com/info_8406858_3-types-baptism-christianity.html