

The Baptism of John

Jesus once asked the question: “*Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men?*”(Mark 11:30).¹ The religious leaders whom He asked this question, after considering their various options in answering, decided to not answer Jesus’ question. They said, “*We do not know.*”

The baptism of John was certainly from heaven. The simple fact that Jesus submitted Himself to the baptism of John, being “*baptized by him in the Jordan*” (Mark 1:9), should provide enough proof to the reasonable person. But the Scriptures also reveal this baptism was conceived in the mind of God, being pre-planned as evidenced by prophecy and confirmed by Jesus to His followers. Also specific directions were given to John directly by God Himself.

A few days after John’s birth, “*his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied*” (Luke 1:67). Part of the prophecy stated: “*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; To give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins*” (Luke 1:76-77). In this passage John is called-out as the prophet of the Most High; as such he would go before the Lord to prepare His way, and would give the Lord’s people the knowledge of salvation through forgiving their sins.

Zacharias identified his son John to be the prophet of the Most High, specifically quoting the prophet Malachi who prophesied some 400 years before John was born. The New American Standard translation from the Hebrew quotes God as saying through the prophet Malachi: “*Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me*” (Malachi 3:1). Jesus Himself also confirmed John as being the messenger referred to by Malachi: “*Jesus began to speak the crowds about John... ‘This is the one about whom it is written BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU’*” (Matthew 11:7a, 10).

All four gospel accounts; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all quote the prophet Isaiah (circa 700 B.C.) as also prophesying of John’s mission. The longest gospel passage quotes Isaiah 40:3-5 and describes John’s mission in this way:

*“as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,
‘THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS
STRAIGHT.
‘EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED,
AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW;*

¹ The full account found in Mark 11:23-33. Also found in Matt. 21:23-27, Luke 20:1-8.

*THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT,
AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH;
AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.”*

(Luke 3:4-6)

John’s mission then was to go before the Lord Jesus to prepare the way for Him.

In ancient times, kings traveling through a land would routinely send a delegation ahead of themselves to ensure the route was open, safe, and in good condition. Also emissaries, known as forerunners, would herald the king’s coming so the people would prepare themselves to properly honor his majesty. Such was John’s position and ministry for our King Jesus.

The Scriptures even indicate that God called John to this ministry directly. Speaking of Jesus publicly, John stated:

“I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.” John testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God” (John 1:31-34)

Note John’s statement in verse 33: *“I did not recognize Him, but **He who sent me to baptize** in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’”* According to this verse, “He,” the One who sent John to baptize, must have been God. Only God could have known that the Spirit would descend on Jesus as a dove, coming down out of heaven to remain upon Him (John 1:32). This of course happened when John baptized Jesus. As Jesus came up out of the water the Spirit descended upon Him, and the Father’s voice pealed out of heaven, *“This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased”* (Matthew 3:16&17, Mark 1:10&11, Luke 3:21&22). In this way, Jesus was first *“manifested to Israel”* (John 1:31).

All of God’s preparations and personal directives for John underscore the importance of his ministry. Central to John’s ministry was his *“preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3).

John’s message and baptism centered first on repentance. Matthew’s gospel account introduces John in this way: *“Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’”* (Matthew 3:1-2). In the Book of Acts, Paul consistently referred to John’s baptism as a *“baptism of repentance”* (Acts 13:24, 19:4). John himself is quoted as saying: *“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance”* (Matthew 3:11).

As a matter of fact, John refused to baptize anyone who did not first repent. The following passage demonstrates this clearly:

“So he [John] began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”” (Luke 3:7-9).

John even called the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers” when they came for baptism and called them to repentance (Matthew 3:7-8). When asked by the common people “*What shall we do?*” in order to repent, John would instruct even the tax-gathers and soldiers:

“And the crowds were questioning him, saying, ‘Then what shall we do?’ And he would answer and say to them, ‘The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.’ And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.’ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, ‘And what about us, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.’” (Luke 3:10-14).

Following repentance, John’s message centered on the forgiveness of sins. Zacharias, John’s father, prophesied that John’s mission centered on the following objective: “*To give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins*” (Luke 1:77). John’s water baptism of repentance was done for the expressed purpose of forgiving a repentant person’s sins. So John paved and heralded the way for Jesus, by giving people the first taste of the salvation that Jesus would bring.

That this water baptism could actually forgive sins has been, and continues to be, debated by many. This is probably an important underlying reason why the religious leaders refused to answer Jesus when He asked, “*Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?*” (Mark 11:30). But for those who believe John’s baptism was from heaven, the phrase “*for forgiveness of sins*” seems pretty clear-cut. The people being baptized by John obviously thought so. Matthew 3:6 points out: “*and they were being baptized by him [John] in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.*”

The Biblical phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” has everything to do with the reason why people were coming to John for baptism. In the Greek, the word

“for” translates into the English literally as “with a view toward.”² The people baptized by John had a “view toward,” an expectation or belief, that their sins would be forgiven. This constitutes the saving faith that must be present at water baptism to receive forgiveness from God. Repentance, coupled with the obedience of faith, produces salvation from God consistently in the Scriptures.

This baptism which John performed consisted of total immersion in water. The Greek word “baptizo” which was transliterated as “baptism” into the English language, specifically means “to immerse, dip, or plunge in to.”³ The fact that the Greek Language also contains separate, unique words for “sprinkling” (rhantizo)⁴ and “pouring” (cheo),⁵ eliminates the possibility of these modes applying to John’s baptism (or anywhere else in the Scriptures where the word “baptism” is used). In one instance John 3:22 points out that “*John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized [immersed]...*”

The fact that water is the element into which John immersed his followers is clearly revealed in many Scripture texts. Mark 1:5 states: “*They were being baptized by him [John] in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.*” Jesus Himself, when baptized by John, is described as “*coming up out of the water*” (Mark 1:10). Therefore John’s baptism consisted of complete immersion in water, and yielded forgiveness of sins for the repentant person so immersed.

Historically, John baptized for only about six months before he was imprisoned and finally beheaded by Herod. Obviously the rulers of the Jews did not care for John, especially when he called them to repentance when they arrived at the Jordan River to be baptized. Matthew 3:7-9 recounts John’s confrontational statement to them: “*You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance...*”

The Jewish rulers also opposed John because he in effect broke the monopoly they had over the forgiveness of sins. Under the Mosaic Law atonement for the forgiveness of sins was confined to the Temple sacrifices and the altars. In a sense those who controlled the Temple had the sole franchise to reach God for forgiveness of sins. The baptism of John, in effect, broke that franchise by offering forgiveness of sins upon an individual’s repentance and immersion in water.

Even before John was imprisoned, Jesus’ disciples were also baptizing. John 3:22-24 states: “*After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land*

² Greek text and literal translation found in: The NASB-NIV Parallel NT in Greek and English, Interlinear Translation by Alfred Marshall, Zondervan Co., c.1986, pg. 100.

³ Baptizo—W.E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of NT Words, Fleming H. Revell Co., c.1966, pg. 97.

⁴ Rhantizo—Ibid, Vol. IV, pg. 69.

⁵ Cheo—Ibid, Vol. III, pg. 195-196.

of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and they were coming and were being baptized. For John had not yet been thrown into prison.” Then John 4:1-2 goes on to further clarify what was happening: “*When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were)...*” So Jesus’ disciples were baptizing [immersing in water] more people than John while under the tutelage of Jesus, even as John was still continuing to baptize.

A major question arises from this information: Why were Jesus’ disciples baptizing people? The Bible does not specifically give the answer to this question for the time period while Jesus was alive and teaching His followers. Since no Biblical clarification exists, the most logical conclusion would be that Jesus’ disciples were duplicating John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

If this indeed was the case, this expanded the breaking of the Jewish rulers’ control of atonement for the forgiveness of sins available at the Temple. But more importantly, repentance and immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins passed from the Messiah’s forerunner John to the disciples of Jesus. And in so doing a precedent and continuum is set. At this point common men were, under Jesus’ supervision and authority, preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as first begun by John.

The next question which arises concerns how long the disciples continued the baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins under the ministry of Jesus. Did they stop practicing water baptism after John was imprisoned, or did they continue until Jesus’ crucifixion? Again the Bible accounts do not specifically answer this question. Obviously Jesus and His disciples continued to preach repentance to prepare the people for the coming New Testament church age.

Most likely the disciples of Jesus continued to preach repentance along with water baptism for the forgiveness of sins throughout the entirety of Jesus’ ministry. If they did not continue baptizing in water for the forgiveness of sins, one would expect the Scriptures to clearly indicate this. Also the question arises as to why Jesus would have His disciples start baptizing in the first place if they would not continue this practice. But the fact remains that the disciples did practice water baptism for the forgiveness of sins while under the guidance and authority of Jesus Himself, at least initially.

That the disciples of Jesus baptized with water during their Master’s ministry has important ramifications for us, this side of the cross, during the church age. When Jesus walked the earth, as the Son of God, He could forgive sins whenever and under whatever conditions He chose. For example, in Mark chapter 2 when a paralytic was brought to Him carried by four men, Jesus said to the

paralytic, “*Son, your sins are forgiven.*” Some of the scribes present thought that Jesus was blaspheming, so Jesus responded in the following manner: “*Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven;’ or to say, ‘Arise, and take up your pallet and walk?’ But in order that you may know that **the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins** ---He said to the paralytic--- I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.*” And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all; so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God saying, “*We have never seen anything like this*” (Mark 2:9-12).

But once Jesus died, the forgiveness of sins could only be granted according to the terms of His written will or testament. Hebrews 9:16-17 puts it this way: “*For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.*” So after Jesus’ death forgiveness of sins could only be obtained through the terms of His New Testament [NT].

Often the reading of a person’s will comes several days after the funeral, when the family can be all gathered together. In like manner God chose the next feast day after His Son’s death, when all the Jews were gathered for the day of Pentecost, to proclaim the terms of salvation according to His Son’s will or testament. According to Acts chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many who had heard the message were “*pierced to the heart*” and asked Peter “*What shall we do?*” Peter answered: “*Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:37-38).

Note Peter’s answer in Acts 2:38 commanded repentance followed by baptism for the forgiveness of sins. That this baptism consists of immersion in water can be traced back to John’s baptism. Peter and these very same disciples, now apostles of Jesus Christ, had immersed people in water previously in the likeness of John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But some have preferred to teach that the baptism of Acts 2:38 has no water involved. If God chose to forgive sins without water baptism on the day of Pentecost, would He not have clarified and defined such a change from the precedent set during Jesus’ ministry? Since God did not specify any changes, the logical conclusion remains that the baptism of Acts 2:38 must be water baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Peter’s statement in Acts 2:38 draws upon the precedent set earlier by John and the disciples of Jesus immersing in water for the forgiveness of sins before Christ’s death. On the day of Pentecost, following Christ’s ascension into Heaven, two new features were added to John’s baptism which constitute today’s NT water baptism. From this Pentecost onward water baptism invokes the name of Jesus and culminates in receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. The phrase “*in the name of*” has

to do with the authority of Jesus: God's Son Jesus certainly has the authority to forgive a person's sins. But much more significantly, Acts 2:38 promises the gift of the Holy Spirit for those who obey this command to repent and be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Himself modeled the promise of Acts 2:38 concerning receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit when He was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:16 gives us this picture: "*And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him.*" The night before His death Jesus promised His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit from Heaven.⁶ So the NT fulfillment of the baptism John inaugurated includes receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In summary, John's baptism initially manifested Jesus to God's people and began a process which finds its fulfillment in NT baptism practiced today. John as the Christ's forerunner, preached repentance and introduced water baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus Himself was baptized by John in the Jordan River as an example and prototype of water baptism for the coming Church Age under His New Testament. And of great significance the disciples under Jesus' supervision continued this water baptism for the forgiveness of sins, as first initiated by John. After His death, burial, resurrection, appearance for forty days, and ascension into Heaven, the NT terms of salvation were first proclaimed on the day of Pentecost. As first commanded by Peter in Acts 2:38, repentance and water baptism in the name of Jesus for forgiveness of sins culminated in the person being baptized receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this way God has revealed His ordered, logical progression for bringing the salvation of Jesus Christ to mankind, beginning with the baptism of John.

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⁶ For Jesus' specific statements, see John 14:16-18, 15:26, 16:7.