

What About ... the Origin of Water Baptism?

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As far as anyone knows, the first clear text for water baptism is this: *the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins* (Mark 1:4-5; see also Matthew 3).

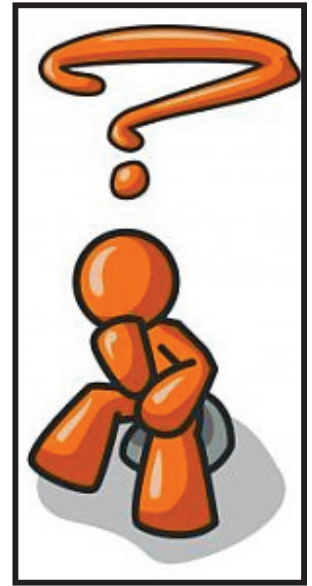
If you take a course on religion at your favorite university (and no one should ever do that), they will probably tell you Christians adopted baptism from pagan rituals. This is just another liberal attempt to debunk Christianity. Early Christians avoided anything that even looked like the pagan religions. Even most liberal scholars today have abandoned this approach.

If we look in the Old Testament, we find many commands for water used in purification:

- The high priest was to wash himself on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:4; Ezekiel 44:19).
- Washing with water was necessary after being cured of a skin disease (Leviticus 13:4).
- Washing with water was necessary after sexual uncleanness (Leviticus 15).
- Washing with water was necessary after touching a dead person or animal (Leviticus 11:25).
- The command to wash is given 28 times in Leviticus alone (NASB).

From archaeology, we learn that the Jews, before and after the time of Christ, were carrying out these Old Testament ceremonial washings in containers called Mikvahs. The Mikvah was a like a bathtub but with water flowing in and out of it. These were common in the Essene community at Qumran. It has been pointed out that John the Baptist grew up in the Judean Wilderness, very near the Qumran community. Some suggest he lived there for a time. That is unlikely, but, for sure, he knew about them.

For a long time, many scholars believed that John's baptism, and hence Christian baptism, came from the Jewish ritual of baptizing Gentile converts (proselytes) to Judaism. The biggest problem with this view is there is no evidence of it existing in Judaism until after the beginning of Christianity. The first clear reference to Jewish proselyte baptism is in the second half of the first century in the Sibylline Oracles, dated about A.D. 80, and the Dissertation of Epictetus, dated about A.D. 90 ("Baptism in the First Four Centuries," David Cairns, SCM, 1960, p. 24). So there is no good evidence that Jewish proselyte baptism preceded Christian baptism. Both may have originated with John the Baptist.



The question still remains as to where John got the idea of baptizing converts. The reality is, we will never know. But there are some things we can be pretty sure of:

1. John did not get his baptism from the pagan world. No sincere Jew would do that.
2. John did not just copy Jewish ceremonial washings because the washings needed to be repeated, and John's baptism was a one-time event. (For example, the apostles were not re-baptized when they began to follow Jesus or after Pentecost.)
3. John did not copy proselyte baptism, because it began after Christian baptism.
4. John was a Levite priest by birth and would be keenly aware of all the Old Testament ceremonial washings for purification.
5. John lived in the Judean Wilderness, near the Qumran community, so he would be aware of their mikvah tub washings.

It seems that the evidence leads us to conclude that John the Baptist, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, was the originator of water baptism. After calling himself a voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way for the Messiah, John reported:

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11).