John’s Baptism (Matthew 3:6)

This is the first use of baptism in Matthew. He uses it seven times; it is found seventy-seven times in the New Testament. John’s use of baptism introduces the questions: Who told John to baptize people? What was the purpose of John’s baptism? Those answers will be provided at the end of this section.

John no doubt would have been familiar with pagan baptisms, which were common in the ancient world. Outside of pagan sources for baptism, John would have been familiar with three baptisms in Israel; one, Old Testament Baptisms, two, Qumran Baptisms, and three, proselyte Baptisms. Let’s look at these three and then draw some conclusions.

Old Testament Baptisms: Baptisms were common to the Old Testament (Hebrews 9:9-22) and they still were in John’s day. They were done for the purpose of ritual purification. The following were all baptisms in the Old Testament.

“The following aspects might be noted: (1) Priests (Ex 29:21; Lv 8:6) were washed and Levites (Nm 8:6–13) were sprinkled with water when initiated into their sacred offices. (2) The priests ceremonially washed their hands and feet in the bronze laver before performing the sacrifices (Ex 30:17–21). (3) The high priest on the Day of Atonement had to bathe himself and clothe himself with “holy garments,” sprinkle the mercy seat with the blood of a bull offered for himself and his “house,” and then sprinkle it again with the blood of a goat offered for the people; finally, he had to shed his clothes and wash himself again after performing the ritual (Lv 16:1–28). (4) Vessels, clothes, and people which had been defiled by contact with something considered unclean had to be washed in pure water (Lv 11:24–40). (5) The ashes of a red heifer were mixed with water and then sprinkled to purify one who had contact with a corpse (Nm 19:11–22). (6) Both sprinkling and bathing were elements of the ritual for leprosy (Lv 13, 14). (7) After intercourse, menstruation, or birth a ritual bathing must occur (Lv 12, 15).”

Qumran Baptisms: The baptism of the Qumran community was not required or even known in the Old Testament.

“Qumran was the Dead Sea community of the sect of the Essenes. It originated about 100 B.C. from the priestly ranks and so stressed ritual and cultic cleansing. They viewed themselves as the covenant community of the last days and so dwelt in the desert, living an ascetic life and immersing [dipping] themselves daily in acts of ceremonial cleansing.”

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**Proselyte Baptisms:** In addition to baptisms required by the Scriptures, Judaism added another baptism for proselytes, those Gentiles desiring to become Jews. However, this was not a biblical rite but one they created to admit converts to Judaism.

“Converts from pagan religions were admitted to Judaism only after fulfilling certain obligations, which included the study of the Torah, circumcision, and a ritual bath to wash away the impurities of the gentile background. … However, there is some debate as to whether we can declare this ceremony pre-Christian. It is not mentioned in intertestamental literature, Philo, or Josephus. The earliest references are at the end of the first century. Probably it evolved concurrent with Christianity, and we may note the parallels while realizing that great differences exist, especially the necessary connection with circumcision, the Christian view of baptism as union with the Messiah, and the importance of the rite for Jews as well as Gentiles.”

However, John was not preaching to gentiles calling them to become members of the Jewish faith. His message was strictly to Jews.

John was an Old Testament prophet and importantly a priest. John’s was an Old Testament call to repentance. “In the mouth of John the conception could only be that of the Old Testament … expressing the transformation according to the moral requirements of the law, but not yet the Christian idea, according to which μετάνοια [repentance] has as its essential inseparable correlative, faith in Jesus as the Messiah…” The expression of this Old Testament call could only be fulfilled in the context of an Old Testament ritual purification.

The fact that John’s “repentance” is an Old Testament call of obedience to the law and not to Jesus as savior of sinners also suggest that his baptism was also an Old Testament act of ritual purification common to that period and not to New Testament Christianity and certainly not to something extra biblical. Interestingly, anchoring his baptism in the Old Testament addresses and solves the “mode” question on baptism. It would be the mode common to Old Testament acts of purification. That was sprinkling or pouring of water.

John was from a priestly family. He is here acting like a priest and performing priestly rites of purification.

Who told John to baptize? God called this priest to this ministry.

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What was the purpose of John’s baptism? The purposes was ritual purification of the nation in preparation for the coming of God.

in

The Greek word is ἐν (in) as in “in the river Jordan.” It is often used as proof that John dipped people in baptism. However, this is a sophomoric error, this Greek word can be translated in, on, at, near, to, by, before, among, with, within, or when. So, in fact it gives no assistance to those that dip in baptism.

the river Jordan

It was noted in verse 3:5 that Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him for baptism.

That language is rather all embracing suggesting that very large numbers came to him for baptism, perhaps as many as 100,000 people. If you were dipping people in the Jordon and it took about 3 minutes per person, and you baptized non-stop for 8 hours a day, you would baptize 160 people a day. It would have taken John 625 days to baptize this many people. It is not likely that John ministered more than about 120 days before his arrest. You might suggest that there were far fewer people that presented themselves for baptism, not more than 50,000. That then would have taken about 312.5 days. It is far more likely that John baptized these multitudes by sprinkling them with a hyssop branch—the common way to baptize in the Old Testament.

When it comes to John’s baptism, one must ask under what circumstance would it be possible for John to stand in water hour after hour, day in and day out and not become sick perhaps even to the point of death? So, if you believe that John was actually standing in the Jordon river for hours on end, not wearing a rubber suit, dipping people in the river, you might want to consider how long he would have to be there before he suffered hypothermia and died.5 These effects suggests that John’s ministry was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IF THE WATER TEMPERATURE (F) IS:</th>
<th>EXHAUSTION OR UNCONSCIOUSNESS</th>
<th>EXPECTED TIME OF SURVIVAL IS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>Under 15 Minutes</td>
<td>Under 15 - 45 Minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.5 - 40.0</td>
<td>15 - 30 Minutes</td>
<td>30 - 90 Minutes</td>
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<td>40.0 - 50.0</td>
<td>30 - 60 Minutes</td>
<td>1 - 3 Hours</td>
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<td>50.0 - 60.0</td>
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<td>60.0 - 70.0</td>
<td>2 - 7 Hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>70.0 - 80.0</td>
<td>3 - 12 Hours</td>
<td>3 Hours - Indefinitely</td>
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<tr>
<td>OVER 80.0</td>
<td>Indefinitely</td>
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5 Hypothermia Chart
probably during the summer months, a time in which John could stand in the water of the Jordon longer without deadly side effects.

But even though the water would be warmer in the summer, the temperature of the water would always be less than 98.6 degrees, which means that prolonged exposure of the body to temperatures below this number would significantly stress the health of the body.

But beyond temperature, consider the speed of the current of the Jordan.

“... the river Jordan flows from the mountains to where it empties into the Dead Sea, down a steep of 3,000 feet. The direct length of the Jordan to the Dead Sea is sixty miles, by its windings it is two hundred miles. The water from the melting snowcapped mountains is very cold, and falls fifteen feet to the mile (counting the windings), or sixty feet to the mile (as the crow flies). The fall of the Mississippi is a little over five inches to the mile, yet it runs from three to five miles an hour, much as it winds. The Jordan is so rapid a stream that even the best swimmer cannot bathe in it without endangering his life. In the neighborhood of Jericho (there is where John baptized) the bathers are compelled to tie themselves together with ropes, to prevent their being swept away by the rapidity of the current. John the Baptist could not have baptized in the river under such conditions. The cold water would alone make this impossible. The tumultuous rush of the dangerous current would make it impossible to immerse the great numbers John baptized, for “while a man could take another and dip him by being very careful, it is not possible that one man could immerse great numbers in such a rapid stream, for the physical labor, the certainty of many being swept away from his hold and drowning, forbid. In a few minutes the limbs would become so numb in such a cold stream as to make the action of the lower limbs impossible” (J. Ditzler, Baptism, p. 40). Baptism in the river itself being out of the question....”

The last point I think we need to consider is the detrimental effect prolonged exposure of water has on human skin. Such long hours in water over many days would result in severe skin damage. For this reason, people who spend a long time in water wear rubber suits. John did not. If we eliminated the issues of cold water and treacherous currents, still John could not have spent such a prolonged period in this water. His skin would have been destroyed; he may have died.

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7 Clinical and histologic observations of test sites exposed to water for 72 to 144 hours revealed intense subacute dermatitis. http://www.nature.com/jid/journal/v60/n3/abs/5617754a.html
8 By means of small waterproof chambers held on the backs of rats with adhesive, areas of skin were exposed continuously to sterile distilled water for 1-, 2-, and 3-day periods. All test areas showed discernible changes and many exhibited vesicles, bullae or abscesses in the epidermis. Dermal changes ranged from mild inflammatory cell infiltration to severe oedema and haemorrhagic inflammation. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7437305
So, we have noted four elements that would have made dipping in the Jordan a most difficult effort: 1) The time needed to baptize such a large quantity of people was prohibitive. 2) The coldness of the water and the biological impossibility of staying in the water so many hours a day and for so many days is also prohibitive. 3) The swiftness of the flow of the river making it impossible to safely baptize even a few people without danger of drowning them is prohibitive as well. 4) John’s skin would have been destroyed and he would have experienced a severe threat to his health under these circumstances.

The conclusion of the matter is simple enough, John was baptizing as priests had always done, by sprinkling probably using a hyssop branch. And, although Matthew does not give us the mode of baptism, the author of the Book of Hebrews does. He says, “...with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled...all the people....” (Hebrews 9:19). That’s almost certainly what John was doing as well, sprinkling the crowds with water using a hyssop branch. It was an ancient tradition.

“Then a clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there and on whoever touched the bone, or the slain or the dead or the grave.” (Numbers 19:18, ESV)

“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Psalm 51:7, NRSV)

To purge with hyssop was to experience a ritual purification with water, just what John was doing.

In baptizing this way, all the detrimental issues engendered by dipping in the Jordan would

The mode of John’s baptism and Christian baptism is considered by all to be one and the same. It is for this reason that giving extra attention to the above points in John’s baptism is so important. In Christian baptism, at Pentecost for instance, the numbers presented for baptism were significantly lower than at John’s baptism. There were three thousand at Pentecost. At that point, the twelve apostles could have each baptized 250 people and completed the job in a very few days. And they would not have done so in the cold and treacherous Jordan, but in the safer conditions found in Jerusalem.

In the years that followed, certainly multitudes came to faith in Christ and were baptized. But their baptisms would have been easily performed by their pastors over long periods of time in less threatening circumstances. The point here is that John’s circumstances were so unique that they provide undeniable problems for those suggesting that John did in fact dip multitudes in the Jordan river, problems that would not occur thereafter in the history of the Church. So, John’s baptism presents us with an unusual opportunity to address the mode of baptism. If John simply could not have dipped this multitude in
such cold, fast moving, water for the reasons mentioned above and if Christian baptism was in mode identical to John’s baptism, then Christian baptism was not by dipping either.

Of course, there are a plethora of reasons for sprinkling in baptism. I can go no further here on baptism here but I do suggest that you go further by reading:

*What about baptism? : A discussion on the mode, candidate, and purpose of Christian baptism* by Ralph E. Bass, Jr. and

*Baptidzo, A 500 Year Study in the Greek Word Baptism* by Ralph E. Bass, Jr.

**Baptism**

On the topic of baptism, we can look at the Old Testament through the Book of Hebrews in 9:9-22 and learn something about this subject.

9 … According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings [βαπτισμός, baptismos], regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. 15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. 16 For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. 17 For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. 18 Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. 19 For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.” 21 And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. 22 Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. (Hebrews 9:9–22 ESV)
Let’s break this down a bit and look at the Old Testament passages that the writer of Hebrews is addressing and then give the counterpart in the Book of Hebrews.

“Then for the unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the burnt purification from sin and flowing water shall be added to them in a vessel. And a clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there, and on the one who touched the bone or the one slain or the one dying naturally or the grave.” Numbers 19:17–18 (Hebrews 9:13)

“And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” Exodus 24:6–8 (Hebrews 9:19)

“And Moses slaughtered it and sprinkled the blood around on the altar.” Leviticus 8:19 (Hebrews 9:21)

“Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.” Leviticus 16:14 (Hebrews 9:21)

From these passages we can see that there were many baptisms in the Old Testament. All were done by sprinkling for the purpose of ritual purification. If John had his mind on the Old Testament as a model for his baptism, then we can see that his baptism was by sprinkling for the purpose of ritual purification. John’s own statements confirm this.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2, ESV)

“and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Matthew 3:6, ESV)

What we don’t have in the Old Testament is a baptism for repentance. We do however have baptisms for sin. But it would seem that a repentance baptism for sin would fit firmly in with the idea of purification. But in every case sin baptisms were done by sprinkling blood, not water.

Ex 29:16 and shall take its blood and sprinkle it around on the altar
Ex 29:20 of their right feet, and sprinkle the rest of the blood around
Le 1:5 up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar
sons, the priests, shall sprinkle its blood around on the altar

the priests, shall sprinkle the blood around on the altar

Aaron’s sons shall sprinkle its blood around on the altar

sons of Aaron shall sprinkle its blood around on the altar

in the blood, and sprinkle some of the blood seven times

in the blood, and sprinkle it seven times before the Lord

He shall also sprinkle some of the blood of the sin

and he shall sprinkle its blood around on the altar

of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the

the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his

the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and

his finger he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it seven

And the priest shall sprinkle the blood on the altar of the

are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and

blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward

and their libations; and sprinkle on it all the blood of the

offerings on it and to sprinkle blood on it

Therefore, it is perhaps not wrong to suggest that every baptism in the Old Testament, no matter what the medium used, was for ritual purification. And so John continues the Old Testament tradition of baptism for ritual purification with a new application for those who are repenting of sin. His is a repentance baptism.

Mode

Let’s take another look at mode. A study of baptisms in the Bible show that there were three baptisms: The Bible speaks of a baptism by John, a baptism by the Holy Spirit and a baptism by Moses. In addition, there is Christian baptism which symbolized the
baptism of the Holy Spirit. How do these baptisms differ? Is it in mode? For many, this is the one point in which they must not differ; they must all be dippings. But is that under discussion in these baptisms? No, actually modes were most diverse in the ancient world. There you will find various modes of baptism: flowing, placed into, pushed down, marched, advancing, sinking, thrown down, drowned, soak, sprinkle, pour, drunkenness, debt, anger, grief, sorrow and misfortune. And these are only a portion of the "modes" used in the Classic period of the Greek language.1

If the difference was not in mode, then what was it in? They differ in the result of the baptism, the effect achieved. Baptisms are distinguishable based on which particular effect is achieved in the baptism. They are not distinguishable in their modes. To ask the question, how they differ, is not to ask which mode was used. Baptism requires no particular mode but is served by any mode capable of achieving a desired result or effect. Each one produced a unique change of condition. This is something many find impossible to understand.

First, in the case of the baptism of Moses, the effect achieved was union with Moses. The Exodus population was baptized to Moses in the crossing of the Red Sea. Theirs was a ritual baptism into Moses. They accepted that they were now a people of God and Moses was the God appointed leader. I think it could be said that ritual purification was also the result of his baptism. Through the Exodus and their baptism unto Moses they became ritually clean and a people of God. Ritual purification was in fact the purpose of all baptisms in the Old Testament.

Second, as for the baptism of John, the effect achieved was a demonstration of true repentance. That was the goal symbolized in his baptism. So, if his differed from the other Old Testament baptisms it was for repentance and forgiveness of sins. But even here, the idea of purification is present.

“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mark 1:4, ESV)

Third, as for the baptism by the Holy Spirit the effect achieved was regeneration; that was the result of the baptism by the Holy Spirit, it is the baptism we emulate in water baptism today. Holy Spirit baptism was not a ritual baptism with water. It was a Holy Spirit baptism. John’s baptism was symbolic, it could not achieve repentance but could only symbolize it. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was not symbolic but real. It did achieve its purpose, it regenerated. Other baptisms could look forward to a real purification and forgiveness of sins in their ritual; this baptism achieved that end.
“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11, ESV)

In each case the mode is given little or no attention in Scripture, while the result of the baptism is identified as the very purpose itself."