

Question: Is there justification for baptism in the Bible?

Answer: The word baptism comes from the Greek word *bapto* or *baptizo* which means to wash or immerse. Baptism in its present form has been a practice in Christian circles since Jesus was ministering to the multitudes. Before him, ancient Judaism did not have a clearly defined ritual of purification by the use of water. With this said there are many practices within the text of the Old Testament that closely resemble baptism. Through the writings of Paul we are given a good example of this. Paul writes that when the Israelites passed through the Red Sea in escape from Egypt they, “were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2) For Paul, the Israelites passing through the Red Sea was the first example in salvation history of people being baptized by water.

Looking for more parallels between baptism and the ancient Israelites, we find other specific practices in the Mosaic Law created to keep believers ritually pure. These practices were meant to “wash” an individual from the impurities that they had obtained. While these practices would not have been referred to as a *baptizo* by the ancient Israelites, they certainly would have held similar connotations. An individual in the Israelite community could become ritually impure for many specific reasons. This impurity caused the individual to become disconnected from the rest of the faith community. To become pure again, the individual would often be required to undergo a series of specific rituals and directions. These rituals were set in the Mosaic Law so that those who had committed impure acts could undergo a process of ritual purity to be allowed back into the faith community. While the rituals that were required to obtain purity may not have used water, they did “wash” the individual of their sins and bring them back into the community. An example of this “baptism” by other means can be found in the ritual of circumcision. It was in essence a baptism by blood. When a male was circumcised according to the Mosaic Law, they were initiated into the faith community and became a person endowed with the same hopes of their fellow brothers as sons of Abraham. Being circumcised welcomed them into a faith community that expected them to participate in the covenant God had given his people. (Genesis 17:11) There are many other indications that the Israelites were performing ritual acts similar to baptism. These acts were intended to wash and cleanse the individual of their sins, faults, and misdirection.

Baptism begins in the New Testament with John the Baptist. John baptized the people of Jerusalem and Judea along the Jordan River. Men and women alike came out to him, “confessing their sins.” (Matthew 3:6) Even Jesus was baptized by John, though John was hesitant to do it. John said to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14) The institution of water and calling it baptism was not necessarily a new phenomenon created by the early Christians. Surprisingly, many pagan religions had throughout the centuries used water to cleanse including the Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hindus, and others. (New Advent) The difference between the baptism done by other religions and the baptism that Jesus would institute involves the production of grace. Even John the Baptist testifies to this when he states, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11-12) Jesus brings a new dynamic into the practice of baptism. Through Jesus’ initiation, baptism carries more than a symbolic act of cleansing; it brings real grace upon its recipients. John states in Matthew’s gospel that his own form of baptism is merely preparing the path for what Jesus will do. When speaking with the Pharisees Jesus states that, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” (John 3:5) Jesus’ final instruction to his disciples after the resurrection gives clear direction regarding the importance of baptism. He tells them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The gospels are not the only place we see baptism explicitly discussed. Baptism finds its way into the subject of conversation both in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters. In Acts, Philip baptizes both men and women in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 8:12) Peter also baptizes many. He asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (Acts 10:47-48) Peter makes the declaration to all that were listening to him that they should, “Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

Paul also puts high priority on baptism for Christian believers. He writes to the Romans that by being baptized into Christ as believers and followers of his ways, we come to share in his death. Through this sharing of Jesus’ death we are given new life. Paul says that through our baptism in Christ we too can resurrect. By being baptized we are rejuvenated in our own lives so that “we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3) By being baptized we become “members of one another.” (Ephesians 4:17) “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” (1 Corinthians 12:13) The message that Paul gives is ultimately grounded in the fact that through baptism, it becomes the responsibility of all to recognize and act as an integral part of the body of Christ.