

# BAPTISM

## ITS ORIGIN AND PRACTICE



**T**he word “baptism” comes from the Greek term *baptizo*, meaning to dip, immerse, or submerge. The Jewish practice of ritual cleansing was the precursor to Christian baptism. Ritual cleansing was necessary before Jews participated in worship or after some action had rendered a person ritually unclean. This cleansing or ritual bathing had to be performed in “living water,” meaning running water that was naturally filtered and clean. Ritual cleansings were performed in springs, streams, rivers, or ritual cleansing pools known as *mikvehs* (also spelled *mikvaot*). Hundreds of *mikvehs* have been discovered in Israel, many near the Temple Mount, some at the fortress of Masada, and some in Qumran. Some synagogues had *mikvehs*. *Mikveh* stairs were sometimes divided, so persons descended on one side and exited cleansed on the other. The *mikvehs* in Jerusalem were used by both the residents and pilgrims who came to town for the various annual Jewish festivals. Jews who became believers on the day of Pentecost were likely baptized in the *mikvehs* adjacent to the Temple Mount (Acts 2:37-41).

*I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

—MATTHEW 3:11, CSB

### DO NOT TOUCH

**A**ccording to the Old Testament, a person became ritually unclean by coming into contact with certain people or things (Lev. 11:1-15:33; Num. 5:1-3; Deut. 14:3-21). Being unclean meant a Jew could not participate in worship or other religious practices. A person could become unclean through contact with:

- Bodily secretions
- Corpses and carcasses
- Gentiles
- Unclean animals
- Unclean Jews



**Above:** Early Christian art often depicted John baptizing Jesus by pouring water from a shell.

**Upper left:** One of several *mikveh* at the Essene community of Qumran on the western shore of the Dead Sea.

**Far left:** A baptismal service at the traditional site of Jesus’ baptism at Bethany Beyond the Jordan.

**Right:** Baptismal font from the Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt.



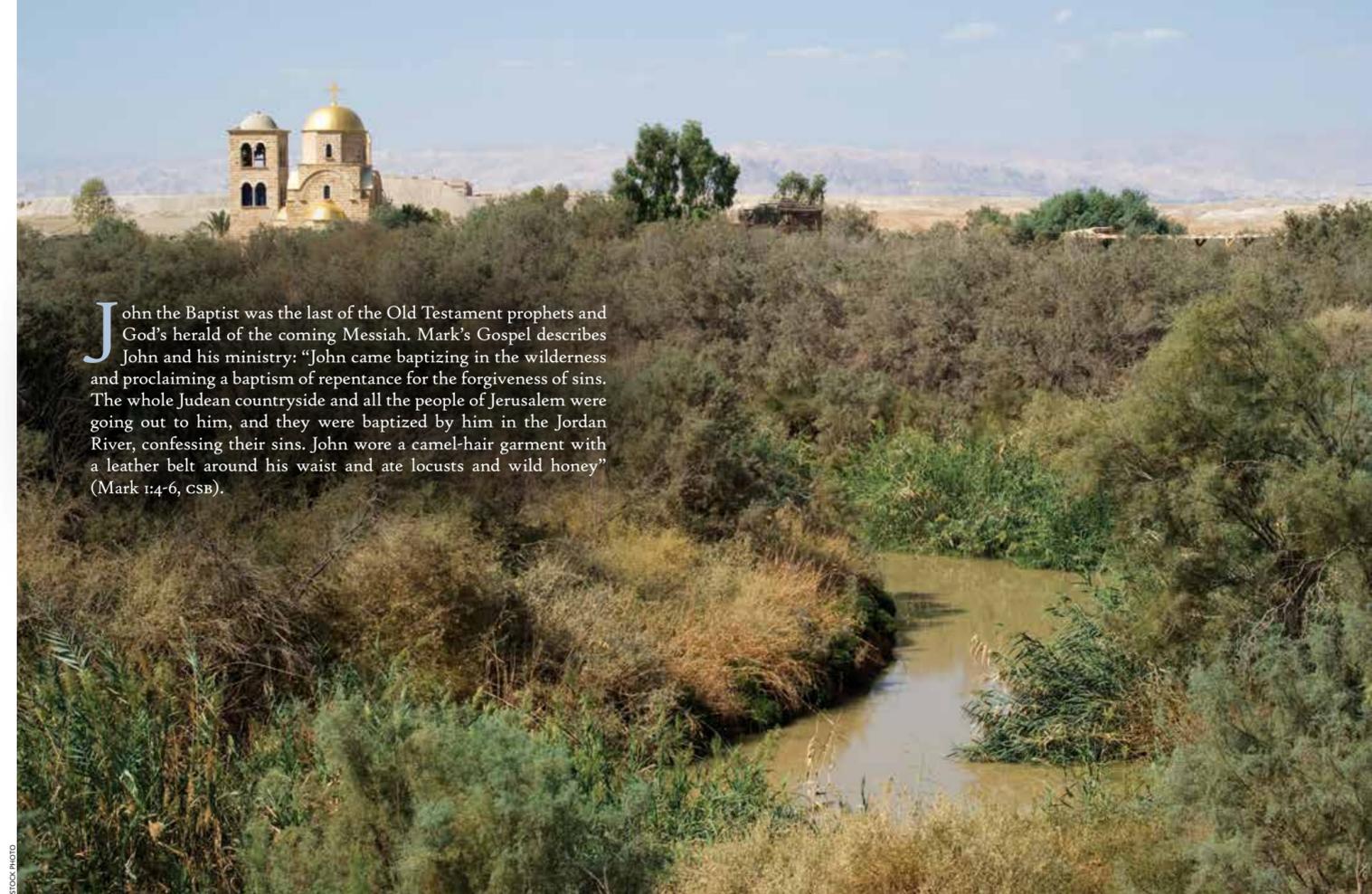
**Right:** Seen above the tree line, the Greek Orthodox Church of St. John the Baptist at Bethany Beyond the Jordan; built near the site believed to be where John baptized Jesus. The Jordan River meanders through the thicket.

**Left:** Baptistry at the Church of St. John at Ephesus. Steps led into the pool—indicating the church practiced immersion. The apostle John lived in Ephesus after Jesus’ ascension, and except for his time on Patmos, was there until his death. Christians in the 4th cent. erected a chapel over John’s burial site; baptistry shown dates to the 6th-cent., when Byzantine Emperor Justinian enlarged the church.

### JESUS’ COMMAND

**S**ome of Jesus’ final instructions involved baptism: “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, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20, CSB). Baptism symbolizes “the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus.”

—*The Baptist Faith and Message*, 2000



**J**ohn the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets and God’s herald of the coming Messiah. Mark’s Gospel describes John and his ministry: “John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:4-6, CSB).



**Left:** On his second missionary journey, Paul visited Philippi. One of his early converts there was a woman named Lydia. Paul proclaim the gospel, and “the Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying” (Acts 16:14, CSB). She and her household were then baptized. Located about 1/2 a mile from Philippi is the Krenides Stream, which the locals refer to as the “River of Lydia.”

**P**AUL WROTE, “CHRIST DID NOT SEND ME TO baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17, CSB). Was Paul discouraging early converts from being baptized? The short answer is, “No.”

Paul baptized some new believers in Corinth, including Crispus, Gaius, and the family of Stephanas (v. 14,16). Many others became followers of Christ during Paul’s ministry there and were baptized (Acts 18:8), but evidently not by Paul.

Paul was baptized shortly after his conversion (9:18), as were Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and their households (16:15,33). In his letters, Paul presumed new believers had been baptized (see Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12).

Why then Paul’s statement? He did not want believers to focus on him (1 Cor. 1:11-16). In his preaching and his practice, Paul instead wanted the focus to be on Jesus.