

JOHN'S BAPTISM AND PURIFICATION RITUALS IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM (1ST CENTURY BCE–1ST CENTURY CE): DIFFERENCES IN MEANING, AUDIENCE, AND PURPOSE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined purification practices in Second Temple Judaism, focusing on John's baptism as an innovation relative to traditional rituals. The central objective was to identify differences in meaning, target audience, and purpose between Jewish purification rituals and Johannine baptism. The research employed a qualitative approach, analyzing primary and secondary sources, including biblical texts, historical works, and apocryphal documents. Data collection focused on characterizing purification practices and understanding the social and religious context in which John's baptism emerged. The results indicated that Jewish purification rituals were rigidly structured around the Law and priesthood, whereas John's baptism stood out for its accessibility and emphasis on moral and spiritual transformation. The study concluded that, although they shared formal elements such as immersion in water, the practices differed profoundly in their purposes and meanings. John's baptism not only democratized access to purification but also represented a response to the social tensions of the time, establishing a more direct connection between the individual and God. This analysis enabled a deeper understanding of the dynamics of continuity and innovation in late Judaism, revealing how religious practices can be reinterpreted in new historical contexts.

Keywords: John's Baptism; Purification; Judaism; Second Temple; Religious practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Second Temple Judaism, spanning approximately from 516 BCE to 70 CE, constitutes a central period in the religious, social, and political history of the Jewish people, marked by profound transformations that impacted the organization of the Temple, community life, religious practice, and interpretation of the Law. During this period, the diversity of religious currents and sects—including Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and prophetic movements—reflected different approaches to the observance of the Law, ritual purity, and messianic expectation (Neusner, 2006; Feller, 2015). In this pluralistic context, purification rituals played a central role, not only as expressions of religious obedience but also as instruments of social cohesion, collective identity, and the maintenance of holiness in the daily lives of individuals and the community.

The practice of John's baptism, which emerged in the late phase of the Second Temple period, fits into this panorama as a significant innovation. Although it dialogued with Jewish purification traditions—such as immersion in mikvot and purification rituals for sinners or converts—Johannine baptism presents an ethical, prophetic, and inclusive dimension, aimed at inner transformation and spiritual preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God, emphasizing the need for repentance and personal conversion (Wright, 1996; Feller, 2015). This practice, therefore, was not limited to formal compliance with the Law but incorporated a moral and eschatological purpose, expanding the social and religious function of ritual purification.

This study focuses on the distinction between traditional Jewish purification rituals and John's baptism, investigating differences in meaning, target audience, and purpose of each practice. The general objective of the research is to analyze and compare these practices, identifying continuities and ruptures, as well as understanding how these dynamics reflected and shaped religious and social experience in Palestine during the 1st century BCE–1st century CE. Among the specific objectives are: examining the audience served by each ritual; understanding the symbolic, theological, and social meanings involved; and evaluating how these practices fit into the context of messianic expectations and prophetic movements.

The relevance of the study is multifaceted. In the historical and religious domain, it contributes to understanding the evolution of purification practices, the tension between tradition and innovation, and the emergence of prophetic movements that significantly influenced later religiosity, including the formation of early Christianity. Academically, the work provides support for interdisciplinary debates among History, Theology, and Jewish Studies, expanding the understanding of ritual practices as constitutive elements of identity and social cohesion.

The article is structured into three main sections: initially, it presents the theoretical framework on Second Temple Judaism and John's baptism, discussing relevant literature and historical contexts; next, it



details the methodology employed in the comparative analysis of purification practices; and finally, it presents the results and discussion, highlighting continuities, differences, and symbolic, ethical, and social meanings of the practices analyzed. This organization aims to provide the reader with an integrated view of the topic, articulating theoretical foundation, critical analysis, and contextualized interpretations.

JUDAISM OF THE SECOND TEMPLE

This historical period, approximately spanning from 516 BCE, with the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, to 70 CE, with its definitive destruction by the Romans, constitutes a central phase in the religious and social history of the Jewish people, marked by profound political, cultural, and theological transformations (Neusner, 2006). It is characterized by a significant diversity of religious practices, ideological currents, and social groups, situated within a context of intense Hellenistic influence, Roman domination, and internal tensions regarding the observance of the Law and the interpretation of Jewish tradition (Goodman, 2007).

Historically, the 1st century BCE–1st century CE represents the final phase of the Second Temple period, a time of political instability and foreign occupation, initially under Seleucid influence and later under Roman rule. Palestine became a mosaic of kingdoms and provinces, with an administration that combined centralized Roman power and local authority of Jewish leaders, such as the high priests and the Herodian dynasty. This political reality directly influenced religious practices, social organization, and messianic tensions that permeated Jewish society (Johnson, 1997).

According to Sanders (1992), socially, Second Temple Judaism reflected a stratified society in which different groups played specific roles in religious, political, and economic life. Notable among these were the priests, who centralized Temple rituals; the scribes, responsible for interpreting the Law; the Pharisees, who emphasized rigorous observance of the Torah and oral traditions; the Sadducees, connected to the priestly and aristocratic elite; and the Essenes, who formed separate communities dedicated to ritual purification and ascetic life (Horbury, 1989). This social diversity was mirrored in the plurality of religious practices, the application of the Law, and the ways in which the Jewish people understood their relationship with God and with one another.

Religiously, the Second Temple period is marked by the deepening of Mosaic Law, the centrality of the Temple as a space for worship and sacrifice, and the emergence of new forms of religiosity, including purification movements and communal practices aimed at personal and collective holiness (Feller, 2015). The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of religious life; beyond being the site of sacrifices, it functioned as a symbol of God's covenant with Israel and a point of social cohesion (Wright, 1996). However, Judaism during this period was not limited to Temple worship; religious practices



external to the Temple emerged, such as prayer, Torah study, and purification rituals, which would later influence contemporary movements, including John's baptism (Wright, 1996).

Another relevant aspect is the influence of Hellenism, which introduced external cultural, philosophical, and religious elements into Judaism, stimulating internal debates about fidelity to the Law, cultural assimilation, and resistance to foreign domination (Meyer, 2001). This context fostered the emergence of messianic and apocalyptic currents, anticipating national restoration and divine intervention. The coexistence of different interpretations and religious practices reveals a dynamic, pluralistic, and often conflictual scenario, within which reformist movements emerged seeking purification, repentance, and closeness to God (Cohen, 1987).

In summary, Second Temple Judaism, especially between the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE, presents itself as a period of historical, social, and religious complexity. The diversity of groups and practices, combined with political instability and external cultural influence, shaped an environment in which purification rituals, observance of the Law, and messianic expectation became central to Jewish religious experience (Neusner, 2006). Understanding this context is essential for analyzing phenomena such as John's baptism and other movements of late Judaism, revealing how purification practices and the relationship with the divine assumed varied meanings depending on the audience, purpose, and interpretation attributed by different groups (Goodman, 2007).

Ritual purification in Second Temple Judaism constituted a central element of religious practice and community life, reflecting concerns with holiness, obedience to the Law, and the separation between the sacred and the profane. The laws of purity, primarily expressed in the Torah—especially in the books of Leviticus and Numbers—and later interpreted by the Pharisees and scribes, regulated both individual and collective behavior, encompassing food, contact with the dead, diseases, menstruation, sexual activity, and purification rituals following various situations of impurity (Neusner, 2006). These norms were not merely legal; they carried profound symbolic meaning, mediating the individual's relationship with God and functioning as mechanisms of social cohesion (Horbury, 1989).

The purification rituals were varied, with particular emphasis on those involving water, sacrifices, and other cleansing elements. Water purification, perhaps the most widespread, included full-body baths (mikvot) and washing of hands, feet, or objects, performed in situations such as contact with corpses, skin diseases, or bodily discharges (Sanders, 1992). The ritual bath not only removed physical impurity but also symbolized spiritual renewal, repentance, and the individual's reintegration into communion with the people of Israel and the Temple (Feller, 2015).

Sacrifices and offerings played a crucial role in purification rituals, being offered at the Temple to atone for sins, restore purity, or celebrate specific festivals (Cohen, 1987). Notable among these were the burnt offering, the sin offering, and the peace offering, each governed by detailed rules regarding the



species, age of the animal, and method of offering, reflecting the complexity of the ritual system and the need for precision in observing the norms (Goodman, 2007).

Additionally, there were rituals involving other elements, such as ashes of a heifer mixed with water, incense, oil, and grain offerings, each with specific symbolic and liturgical significance. These procedures functioned as mediators between the profane and the sacred, demonstrating that ritual purity transcended physical hygiene and was a prerequisite for full participation in religious life and in the presence of God (Wright, 1996).

The symbolism of purification extended beyond the ritual dimension: impurity was not only physical but also moral and spiritual, capable of distancing the individual from the community and divine presence (Sanders, 1992). Thus, the rituals functioned as mechanisms of social control, delineating who was in communion with God and who required reconciliation. Moreover, they ensured the sanctity of the Temple, maintaining sacred spaces separate from the profane (Horbury, 1989).

The diversity and complexity of the rituals reflect the pluralism of Judaism, in which different groups interpreted the Law in distinct ways. The Pharisees emphasized detailed observance and continuous purification; the Sadducees focused on the Temple and sacrifices; the Essenes practiced rigorous communal rituals and separation from the outside world (Goodman, 2007; Meyer, 2001). Ritual purification was, therefore, an act of legal obedience, a symbol of holiness, and a social marker distinguishing segments of the Jewish people.

In summary, ritual purification articulated legal norms, liturgical practices, and symbolic meanings, demonstrating the complexity of Jewish religious experience, which sought holiness, community regulation, and deepened relationship with God (Sanders, 1992). Understanding these rituals is essential for situating later practices, such as John's baptism, within the historical and religious context, revealing continuities and transformations in the meaning of purification and penitence (Neusner, 2006).

John's baptism, a central figure in late Second Temple Judaism, constitutes a religious practice with specific theological, social, and symbolic meanings—distinct, though related, to traditional Jewish purification rituals (Sanders, 1992). Historical sources about John the Baptist derive primarily from the canonical Gospels of the New Testament, complemented by Jewish apocryphal texts and works by historians such as Flavius Josephus, which provide information about his context and activity (Josephus, 1987).

In the Gospels, John is described as a prophet who preached repentance and performed baptisms in the Jordan River, reaching Pharisees, Sadducees, soldiers, and peasants. Baptism symbolized spiritual purification and preparation for the Kingdom of God, functioning as a rite of conversion and moral renewal. Unlike traditional rituals, which depended on the Temple and the Law, John's baptism was public and accessible, emphasizing penitence and ethical transformation (Wright, 1996; Meyer, 2001).



Josephus confirms John as a prominent figure—a righteous man who attracted crowds and emphasized moral uprightness prior to purification. Although he does not associate baptism with Temple practices, he highlights John’s social role as a mediator between Jewish tradition and a movement of spiritual renewal (Josephus, 1987).

Apocryphal texts, such as those from Qumran and Essene sects, indicate that immersion and purification by water were common in some communities, showing that John operated within a broader context of ritual practice. However, while the Essenes emphasized separation and continuous purity, John proposed public repentance and ritual immersion as ethical and spiritual preparation for personal and collective transformation (Feller, 2015; Goodman, 2007).

John’s baptism symbolized repentance and messianic expectation: the water not only purified but marked the beginning of a new life, pointing toward the Kingdom of God and the need for ethical change (Sanders, 1992). Unlike traditional purification, centered on the Law, baptism carried a moralizing and prophetic character, preparing individuals for salvation and divine judgment (Wright, 1996).

Its purpose was inner transformation, forming a community of the repentant and socially and religiously demarcating those who accepted the message of repentance. In contrast to Jewish rituals, it did not require participation in the Temple nor was it limited to priests or elites, making it accessible to all (Meyer, 2001; Cohen, 1987).

In summary, John’s baptism emerges as an innovative ritual practice, combining water purification with ethical and prophetic emphasis (Wright, 1996). Historical sources reveal its public, accessible, and moralizing character, oriented toward repentance and spiritual preparation, highlighting both continuities and differences in relation to traditional rituals, with symbolism of inner transformation, broad inclusion, and ethical and messianic purpose (Neusner, 2006).

Comparative studies between Jewish purification rituals and John’s baptism are fundamental for understanding the continuities and ruptures in religious practices in Palestine during the 1st century BCE–1st century CE (Feller, 2015). Although they share formal elements, such as the use of water, they differ in theological meaning, target audience, and ritual purpose, reflecting distinct historical and social contexts (Sanders, 1992).

According to E. P. Sanders (1992), Jewish rituals were structured within a legal and priestly system, centered on the Temple and the rigorous observance of the Law, aiming at the maintenance of ritual holiness and social cohesion (Goodman, 2007). John’s baptism, although also involving water, had a prophetic and moralizing character, inducing personal repentance and preparing individuals for the Kingdom of God, without dependence on the Temple or priests (Wright, 1996).

Feller (2015) interprets Johannine baptism as a “democratized” purification, accessible to peasants, soldiers, and marginalized groups, whereas traditional rituals required legal knowledge and had



restricted access. Baptism was public and educational, while Jewish rituals were private or communal, centered on the Law (Feller, 2015; Meyer, 2001).

Cohen emphasizes that the difference in purpose is significant: Jewish purification had a legal and priestly dimension; John's baptism had an ethical and eschatological purpose, promoting inner transformation, penitence, and behavioral change, preparing for future events in line with messianic expectations (Cohen, 1987).

Goodman and Horbury reinforce that, despite formal continuities—such as immersion in water—Johannine baptism is not a mere extension of traditional rituals, but an innovation that re-signifies existing practices, adapting them to a broader audience and ethical purpose (Goodman, 2007). Thus, it combines familiar elements with a morally directed religious reform proposal, essentially differentiating itself from purification rituals, whose primary concern was the Law and collective holiness (Horbury, 1989).

In summary, the literature shows that Jewish rituals and John's baptism share external forms but differ in meaning, audience, and purpose. The former are normative, centered on the Law and collective holiness; the latter emphasizes moral conversion, repentance, and ethical preparation for divine intervention, demonstrating how familiar practices can be reinterpreted and re-signified (Feller, 2015; Sanders, 1992; Wright, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as qualitative research, with a historical and comparative approach, based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources. To investigate Second Temple Judaism and John's baptism, canonical biblical texts were examined—especially the Gospels of the New Testament—as well as historical works by authors such as Flavius Josephus, in addition to apocryphal texts and materials from communities such as Qumran, which contextualize purification and water immersion practices.

Data collection focused on identifying central elements of Jewish purification practices—including ritual baths, sacrifices, and purity regulations—and on characterizing John's baptism, with special attention to its target audience, ritual purpose, and the symbolic meaning of immersion. The analysis was conducted comparatively, aiming to highlight continuities and ruptures between traditional rituals and Johannine practice.

The methodological approach also involved reviewing and systematizing academic literature, with authors specialized in Second Temple Judaism, rituality, and the history of early Christianity, allowing for the grounding of historical and theological interpretations of the practices analyzed. The synthesis of data



sought to articulate historical, social, and religious information, contributing to the understanding of the context in which John's baptism emerged and its relationship with the Jewish tradition of purification.

CONVERGENCE AND RUPTURE

The analysis of Second Temple Judaism reveals a profoundly complex religious and social landscape, in which the diversity of groups, practices, and interpretations of the Law shaped the daily life and spiritual experience of the Jewish people. The findings indicate that ritual purification constituted a central axis in Jewish religiosity, serving multiple functions: maintaining the sanctity of the Temple, fostering social cohesion, delineating status within the community, and mediating the relationship between the individual and God (Neusner, 2006; Horbury, 1989; Sanders, 1992).

It was observed that traditional rituals, based on Mosaic Law, were structured around detailed rules of purity and sacrifice, requiring technical knowledge and the participation of specific groups, such as priests and scribes. Immersion in water, animal sacrifices, and the use of other liturgical elements (ashes, incense, grains) held symbolic significance, transcending mere physical hygiene and reinforcing collective holiness (Goodman, 2007; Cohen, 1987; Feller, 2015).

In contrast, John's baptism presents itself as an innovative practice, though articulated with the tradition of Jewish purification. Analysis of the sources demonstrates that Johannine baptism used water as a symbol of purification but shifted the focus from legalism and ritual observance to an ethical and prophetic dimension. Its function was to prepare the individual for the Kingdom of God, promoting public repentance, inner transformation, and social inclusion of peasants, soldiers, and marginalized individuals, without dependence on the Temple or priests (Wright, 1996; Meyer, 2001; Feller, 2015). The comparison between the practices highlights formal continuities, such as immersion in water, but significant differences in terms of purpose, target audience, and social context. While Jewish purification emphasized obedience to the Law and the maintenance of collective holiness, John's baptism assumed a democratized and educational character, oriented toward moral transformation and preparation for eschatological events (Sanders, 1992; Cohen, 1987; Goodman, 2007).

The findings also reveal that Johannine baptism not only re-signified existing practices but represented a response to the sociopolitical and religious context of the 1st century CE, marked by instability, Roman occupation, and messianic tensions. In this sense, John the Baptist acts as a mediator between tradition and spiritual renewal, reinterpreting elements of Jewish rituality to construct an accessible, ethical, and prophetic practice capable of engaging different segments of late Jewish society (Josephus, 1987; Feller, 2015).

The discussion thus shows that ritual purification and John's baptism reflect distinct strategies for mediating the relationship with the divine and regulating community life. Jewish purification structured



the social and religious space through the Law and ritual observance, while baptism emphasized ethical and spiritual transformation, anticipating later Christian practices and demonstrating the adaptability of religious traditions in contexts of historical change (Neusner, 2006; Wright, 1996; Meyer, 2001).

In summary, the findings indicate that John's baptism represents a point of convergence and rupture in relation to the Jewish rituals of the Second Temple: it retains traditional symbolic elements but redefines their purpose and audience, promoting inclusion, repentance, and ethical preparation. This analysis allows for an understanding of how purification practices can be adapted and reinterpreted in different historical contexts, revealing dynamics of continuity and innovation in late Judaism.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The conclusion of this study on John's baptism and the purification rituals in Second Temple Judaism highlights the complexity and richness of the religious practices of this period, evidencing both the continuities and ruptures that mark the Jewish tradition. Second Temple Judaism, which spans from the 6th century BCE to the 1st century CE, is characterized by a dynamic setting in which various religious, political, and social currents coexisted, influencing worship practices and individuals' relationships with the divine. In this context, purification rituals—especially those involving immersion in water—played a crucial role in community life, serving as mechanisms of social control and expressions of obedience to the Law.

However, the figure of John the Baptist emerges as a landmark of innovation by introducing a baptismal practice that diverged from established traditions. By emphasizing the need for repentance and personal transformation, John recontextualized the act of purification, making it accessible to all, regardless of social status or compliance with legal requirements. This democratization of the purification ritual not only reflected the social and political tensions of 1st-century Palestine but also allowed for a new interpretation of the relationship with God, centered on ethics and inner change. Johannine baptism, therefore, was not merely an extension of traditional Jewish rituals; rather, it represented a significant response to the needs of a society in crisis, offering a space for spiritual renewal and inclusion.

The research shows that, although John's baptism employed formal elements similar to Jewish purification rituals—such as water—its purpose and target audience were markedly different. While traditional rituals were regulated by a legal and priestly system, John's baptism broke through these barriers, promoting a collective experience of repentance and preparation for the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. This transformation not only resonated among John's contemporaries but also prefigured practices that would become central to the Christian tradition, revealing how religious traditions are malleable and susceptible to reinterpretation in response to evolving social and spiritual contexts.



In sum, the comparative analysis between Jewish purification rituals and John's baptism underscores the plasticity of religious practices and the capacity of traditions to adapt over time. The impact of John's baptism, with its focus on ethics and moral transformation, suggests that purification practices can be understood not only as rituals of cleansing but also as expressions of a deeper search for meaning and connection with the divine. Thus, understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing subsequent religious movements and for appreciating the rich tapestry of late Judaism, which continues to influence religious traditions to this day. The study, therefore, not only illuminates the past but also invites reflection on how faith practices can evolve and adapt to the needs of their communities over time.



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