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*Immersed in Immanuel*

## Water Baptism

by haRold Smith  
a citizen of the Commonwealth (Ephesians 2:19)

*"Husbands, love your wives, even as Messiah also loved the assembly, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the assembly to himself gloriously, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." Ephesians 5:26*

My friend, Clint, just sat looking at me in astonishment. He simply could not fathom the words reaching his ears when told that the Christian doctrine of water baptism he had embraced and taught all of his life was not unique

to that religion but, rather, originated in a Hebraic purification ceremony that had nothing to do with salvation. And, also, that Hebrew ceremony did not involve someone pushing another under water - the individuals immersed themselves.

In the first century, those who embraced the Hebrew Yeshua as the promised Hebrew Messiah to Israel were called followers of **the Way** - a sect of Judaism practicing all the Hebrew rituals of Torah in **synagogues** ([click on highlighted words to view content](#)) as the only place to learn of the Holy One *of Israel* ([Acts 9:2](#), [Acts 24:14](#)) before being set aside by the man-made religion of "Christianity." However, the Torah does not say much about immersion and the centerpiece of that ritual, the *mikveh*, that appears to have become an essential part of Hebraic religious life by Temple times - the times the Hebrew Messiah was born into. In the course of the instructions given to Moses regarding the ceremonial washings that would be required of the priesthood that they not die while coming into the Presence of Spirit, YHVH established the unchanging principle of cleansing - not to remove physical contamination but to establish ritual purity. From the record of scripture, water always played a key role in the life of the Israelites. [Leviticus 12:5](#) speaks of washing for purification for women, and [Leviticus 14:8-9](#) of purification for leprosy. [Exodus 29:4-5](#) gives instruction for consecrating the priests. A search on the word "bathe" will produce many verses, such as [Leviticus 15:13](#). Immersion, however, is not mentioned; but the context of these commands is of the moving **Mishkan/Tabernacle** in the wilderness where immersion in a *mikveh* was presumably impractical. Upon entering the *Mishkan*, when the priests approached the altar of the tabernacle, they washed their hands and feet in water from a laver so that they would be ceremonially clean when they stood in the Holy Place ([Exodus 30:20-21](#)). As the post Babylonian-exiled Israelites began to consider the importance of YHVH's demands on the priests of the temple, they took upon themselves some of those priestly requirements to be pleasing to Him as well. The reasoning was that if YHVH required the priests to be ceremonially clean through ablutions and immersions, then it would surely be proper for any worshiper to demonstrate the same purity of heart through the outward sign of immersion. It should be noted, however, that this was the reasoning of men - not something instigated by YHVH Himself.

This reasoning formed the foundation for the *mikveh* tradition among the Israelites after they returned from Babylon to restore Jerusalem and the temple. Eventually, these ceremonial pools were constructed throughout the Land. The *mikva'ot* (pl. of *mikveh*) were designed to facilitate the *t'vilah* (ritual purification) by means of the immersion of worshipers in water - not for personal hygiene. Because the *mikveh* is for ceremonial purity, the water must touch every part of the body necessitating the worshiper be completely nude with no object interposed between the body and the water (Ronald L. Eisenberg, *Jewish Traditions: A JPS Guide* [Philadelphia, PA; Jewish Publication Society, 2004], p. 556). The *mikva'ot* were patterned after the pools in which the priests immersed themselves before going before the presence of YHVH in the temple. By the first century, the Hebrew people were not even permitted to enter the temple complex unless they had first immersed themselves in one of the *mikva'ot*

of the immersion complex that had been constructed at the southern end of the temple (William James Hamblin and David Roth Seely, *Solomon's Temple: Myth and History* [London, UK; Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 2007], p.45). It was these *mikva'ot* that made it possible for 3,000 new believers in Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel to be immersed on *Yom Shavu'ot* (day of pentecost) in a city that has no river, lake or significant stream. The one small stream, the Brook Kidron, between the city and the Mount of Olives, would have been inadequate to accommodate such a crowd. In Jerusalem today, you can see the remains of the *mikva'ot* outside the Temple, where ritual immersion was practiced. The *mikveh* pictured can be found on the south side of the Temple Mount, just outside the Hulda Gate, where it was part of the Temple facility for immersion before entering with a sacrifice. Here, you can see steps with remains of a dividing wall. The worshiper would descend one side, immerse himself (herself) and ascend the other side. Naaman, who was not a Hebrew was told to immerse himself seven times in the Jordan for his cleansing from leprosy (**2Kings 5:14**). Was the prophet merely spelling out to this foreigner what all Hebrews understood as a normal practice of purification?

All of this information throws some light on the ministry of **Yochanan haMatbil** (John the Immerser), who was calling for a repentance, not only from the standpoint of individuality, but also from the corruption of YHVH's Words practiced by Temple priests, whom he publicly called hypocrites, through their rituals (**Luke 7:29-30**). Thus, his informality in using the Jordan river to accommodate the Immersions instead of the Temple *mikva'ot*. Incidentally, the baptism of John was by full immersion as Mark 1 records Yeshua *coming up out of the water*. In using the title **Yochanan haMatbil**, it should be noted that John did not put people under the water in the same manner as most do today; John was the one who caused people to immerse *themselves* in the ritual of the *mikveh* through his preaching (**Acts 8:38**). A Hebrew person being immersed would wade into the water and then crouch down just below the surface. That way, no contact from the immerser prevented the water from reaching their whole body. The birth of **Yochanan** is recorded in Luke 1, where we note that his father was a priest ministering in the Temple. So John was of the priestly line as well as being a child of special promise of YHVH. It is believed that John should have been High Priest at the time when he commenced his ministry in the Jordan wilderness, but the priesthood had become corrupt and had been bought by men with wealth and influence. Yeshua submitted to immersion by John, in spite of John's reservations, "...to fulfill all righteousness" (**Matthew 3:15**). John was, as the legitimate high priest, initiating Yeshua who he had identified as "the Lamb of YHVH" into the priesthood. He was not immersing him for repentance for sin but as a transference of kingdom from the Levitical priesthood to that of the priesthood of Melchizedek (**Hebrews 6:20**).



*remains of a temple mikveh*

**"He will turn many of the children of Yisra'el to YHVH, their Elohim. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready for YHVH a people prepared." Luke 1:16-17**

It was into this milieu that **Yochanan haMatbil** came, preaching the message of repentance and immersing those who did repent in the waters of the Jordan River. John did not somehow dream up the idea of immersion. He was simply following the culture of his Hebrew family. **Yochanan** purposefully positioned himself at the southern end of the Jordan River, just north of Qumran and began preaching the need for all of the people of Israel to repent and be immersed in order to prepare for the breaking forth of **the Kingdom of YHVH**. John 1:28 says, *"These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan where John was baptizing."* The word **Bethabara** means "house of the ford". This was the village situated near the junction of the Jordan River and Wadi el-Kharrar, just five miles north of the place where the Jordan emptied into the Salt Sea (the "Dead Sea" is a misnomer). This location at the ford of the Jordan was the exact place where the Israelites some fifteen centuries earlier had entered the "Promised Land". When the newly repentant Hebrews were led by John into the Jordan River, they were walking back into the river at the same place where their ancestors had come into the Land. In this physical demonstration, it was as though they were momentarily abandoning their status as YHVH's Chosen People. Then, when they turned around, immersed in the waters of the river and returned to the Land, it was as though they had been "reborn" into the covenant of YHVH. The Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, is more accurately understood as **shuv** ("to turn around"), the Israelites' physical act demonstrated graphically the repentance they were experiencing within.



Clearly, John's immersing in the Jordan and his ministry in the wilderness evoke the exodus-conquest tradition of Israel's beginnings as a nation. It was a demonstration that was pregnant with meaning to all of the Hebrews who came to be immersed. What John had done was to take the *mikveh* experience out of the ceremonial immersion pools and returned it to the Jordan River for the purpose of making a graphic illustration. YHVH wanted repentance of His People, the turning of the hearts of the people back to the Father (**Malachi 4:6**). Only those who manifested real change in their life demonstrated the true fruit of repentance and were deemed worthy of immersion as an outward sign of that inward determined change of direction.



**a natural bend in the Jordan River**

The waters of the *mikveh* had to contain "living waters" either from a spring, a moving stream or, in some circumstances, from rainfall. Usually, a minimum of three witnesses were to observe the self-immersion to be certain that the worshiper had been completely submerged in the water and to later hold the repentant one accountable to his or her declaration. This witnessing factor was based on the Hebraic idea that every matter is established in the presence of two or three witnesses (**Deuteronomy 17:6, Matthew 18:16**). Witnesses were so important that those who immersed themselves were often said to have been immersed "in the name" or "under the authority of" the witness(es). Thus, those being immersed along the Jordan were said to have been "immersed unto John" (**Acts 19:3**) just as the Israelites had been "immersed unto Moses" at the Red Sea

(**1Corinthians 10:2**). Because the actual immersion ritual was performed in the nude, there was a segregation between women serving as witnesses to women and men to men so a natural bend in the river would have served as a sufficient partition between the two.

Since immersion in water would inevitably eventuate in death if one were to remain for too long under the surface, those who immersed themselves in the *mikveh* came to be viewed as having a "death, burial and resurrection" upon their emergence (Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices* {Nothvale, NJ; Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994}, p.569). Additionally, the immersion experience was understood as a rebirth process (Thomas Macy Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* {Mahwah, NJ; Paulist Press, 1997} p.132). Because the waters of the *mikveh* were believed to symbolize the waters of the womb, those who emerged from those waters after having been immersed were considered to have been "reborn" or "**Born Again**". This concept was extended to various areas of life, including the monthly renewal that takes place in the bodies of women when they are re-equipped with the potential for generating new life. The immersion of women after menses was a rebirth process and it was also part of the *tumah* and *taharah* - death and resurrection process; a transition from being forbidden to participate in holy things concerning the temple sacrifices into being completely free to engage in them. *Tumah* means "to become impure". When applied to women refers to the state of ritual impurity that is associated with menses. It never implied that any physical impurity was associated with menses. It is also thought to mean "entombed" - meaning that a person is blocked or unable to participate in holy things. *Taharah* means "to be transparent or clean". It is purification, freedom from ritual impurity. Immersion produced a change of status - from "forbidden" to "permitted" in the case of the removal of ritual impurity in the lives of the Israelites. In the case of the transformative rite of proselyte immersion, it also represented a forensic change of status in which a Gentile actually became a Hebrew. What one was after immersion was different from what he had been prior to immersion. For this reason, the practice was also used in the consecration of priests, the coronation of kings and the elevation of individuals to other offices - but never was immersion considered a means of salvation. Not then, not now.

*"I indeed immerse you in water for repentance but he who comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to carry. He will immerse you in spirit and fire."  
Matthew 3:11*

???Questions???

Please feel free to email me at [harold@hethathasaneer.com](mailto:harold@hethathasaneer.com). While not claiming to have all the answers, it would be an honor to partake with you of what Spirit is uncovering.

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**a discussion of Water Baptism**

