

THE JEWISH WAY OF BAPTISM

The Origin of Baptism in the Jewish Culture and its Implications for All People Today

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One of the recurring themes of life is how things that are good by nature become turned into something corrupted and distorted. Such was the case with the beautiful relationship between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden being broken because of sin. Likewise, the long-promised coming of Messiah, when it actually occurred, was twisted from a wonderful blessing into a perceived act of blasphemy and a threat to the religious system of that day. This was also true with some of the ways of worship and righteous living, including the act of baptism.

Originally a simple act of obedience to a command by God, baptism was turned into a weapon used to force people to submit to religious authority. The Church of Rome, once it became the dominant force in Europe, set out to make sure that everyone was baptized, because in their unsound way of thinking, baptism was the actual means of salvation, and thus initiated you into membership in the church universal, never to turn back. Everyone was the goal. That included every Jewish person.

There are many stories of Jewish communities being confronted with the demand that they be baptized and convert. Otherwise, the alternative was to leave their homes and flee to somewhere else. And so they were pursued from country to country, with great numbers of Jewish people giving in and accepting the “choice” presented to them. Often that choice was enhanced by the destruction of their homes and synagogues. Nearly 200,000 Jews of Spain and Portugal became what were called *conversos* to Christianity. Although some of them, known as *marranos*, practiced Judaism secretly.

Sometimes Popes issued edicts saying that violence should not be used to force Jews to be baptized. But if a local church leader should ignore the edict and pursue violent means, the baptisms were considered to be valid anyway and the victim would not be able to return to Judaism. As late as the year 1747, Pope Benedict XIV ruled that a Jewish child who was seized illegally and baptized, nonetheless had become a Christian and would have to be raised in a Christian home, against the wishes of his parents.

These things are not just a reminder of the tragic reality of the past, but they help us to understand how they make an impact on our testimony to the Jewish community today. What started out as a blessed act of true spirituality has become a symbol of every criticism of Christianity, not because our message is flawed, but because our collective history *is*.

What then ought to be our response? First and foremost, we need to have a solid grasp of the nature of biblical concepts like baptism.

Baptism is commanded by Yeshua

There are over fifty commands given by Yeshua in Scripture. Many of them are general and on-going, such as “love one another” (Jn. 13:34) and “forgive others” (Mat. 6:12). Two of them are considered to be ordinances, meaning commands that have a more formal application and a ceremonial character. One is the observance of the Lord’s Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19). The other one involves baptism: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Mat. 28:19). So baptism should be considered not as an optional expression of worship, but as having the weight of a command given by Messiah.

Baptism is not the act of salvation

Within Christianity there are those who teach that you are saved when you are baptized. Roman Catholicism considers it to be a sacrament, which is a ritual in which God is said to be uniquely active and is the means that He uses to give divine grace.

In their view, baptism bestows upon a person grace *ex opera operato*—the sacrament is effective in and of itself. In other words, it does not depend on your attitude, but simply because the act of baptism is done to you, you receive salvation. As a result, repentance is de-emphasized and it opens the door to infant baptism. The idea is that you just can’t resist the saving grace that is being done to you. So it seems reasonable to impose it on children in order to have peace of mind by securing their place in heaven.

Now while that might sound like something with good intentions, it lacks a biblical basis. And it is ironic that the most zealous attempt at imposed baptisms turns out to be the most compelling evidence that this belief is false. Because if saving grace is bestowed upon a person simply by the act of baptism, all those Jewish people in the Middle Ages who were forced to be baptized would have gladly lived their lives as Christians. And there would be many generations of Jewish believers that followed because they would have been raised in genuinely Christian homes.

But the fact of the matter is, the vast majority of them rejected Christianity and secretly practiced Judaism. And the negativity felt toward baptism and the church carries forward to today. So in that way, we can see how this belief in the act of baptism compelling you to be saved cannot be true.

Some Protestants also believe in baptismal regeneration. It is taught that you might have faith and a willingness to believe in God, but your actual salvation does not occur until the moment you are baptized. Proof texts are cited to support this position. An example is John 3:5 -

Yeshua answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

The passage does not deal with baptism at all, but when you read the context it has everything to do with the difference between natural and supernatural birth, or physical and spiritual birth. And so it goes with each of these supposed proof texts.

The insistence that baptism is necessary for salvation is parallel to the Judaizers in New Testament times who argued that circumcision was necessary for salvation, a claim that Paul vigorously rejected in Gal. 5:1-12. Remember, the Bible is clear in saying that salvation is not

the result of any kind of act, but is a matter of faith alone:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9)

Altogether the portrait that emerges in Scripture is that salvation occurs entirely by faith and without any kind of ritual to secure it.

Baptism is Jewish

Not everyone knows the Jewish cultural background of baptism, including most Jewish people. This is especially evident in the way that baptism is commonly perceived today. On the other hand, if we return to the Bible, it's another story.

Who were the first Baptists? They were Jews! This would include Yochanan ben Zechariah, better known as John the Baptist. It would also involve all the Jewish *talmidim* (disciples) of Yeshua who subsequently baptized new believers. Moreover, it goes all the way back into the *Tanach* many centuries earlier.

The Biblical Principles of Baptism

Biblical principles are always established first in some manner in Torah. It might be a specific command by God that later is brought out in its totality in the life and teachings of Yeshua. Or it might be in a historical event that foreshadows a fulfillment later on. Both of these concepts are evident in the case of baptism.

Exodus—the historical foreshadowing

After the culmination of the story of Passover, the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt. Exodus 14 tells about how Pharaoh changed his mind and his army pursued after them. When they reached the Red Sea, Moses worked a miracle and parted the waters. The people followed God's pillar of fire that was leading them and then we are told:

“But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.” (Ex. 14:29)

The order of events is very informative to us.

- The people had previously been redeemed by God, spared the plague of Death and released from slavery.
- Then by faith they passed through a wall of water on either side that was higher than their heads.
- Their emergence on the other side would enable them to become a nation serving God and being blessed by Him, when they reached Mt. Sinai a short time later. But at the moment of their deliverance at the sea, they testified in the form of a song, in which they sang: “The Lord is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will extol Him” (Ex. 15:2).

This, then, is the historical context of immersion: God does His work of redemption and

the people follow Him in obedience. This act is followed by a sign that serves as a witness to the ways of God.

Mikveh—the foundation in the Torah

The foundation for all biblical principles, including baptism, is found in the *Torah*. Within the writings of Moses, it has been determined that God gave 613 instructions, commonly called the Law, to the nation of Israel. These principles were distinguished by three distinct categories. Many biblical passages describe the commandments in this manner (i.e. Deut 4:44-45; 1 Ki 2:3; Ps 119).

Categories of <i>Torah</i> commandments – מִצְוֹת (<i>mitzvot</i>)	
Ordinances – מִשְׁפָּטִים (<i>mishpatim</i>)	Civil ordinances enabling people to exercise justice and to live in harmony, such as laws prohibiting murder, theft, etc.
Testimonies – עֵדוּת (<i>edot</i>)	Commandments that relate particularly to sacrificial worship.
Statutes – חֻקִּים (<i>chukim</i>)	Practices that strengthen the bond between God and people and signify obedience to Him, often without any explanation why the people should do them. These include the Sabbath and feasts, dietary laws, not mixing wool and linen in clothing, etc. They demonstrate the willingness of people to submit to the Lord rather than exercising our own independent will alone.

One of the commandments from the category of statutes (*chukim*) was the *mikveh* bath. It involved the way individuals signified their eligibility for full privileges and responsibilities within the community.

In the Torah, it is taught that there were a variety of ways that people could become symbolically unclean, such as touching a dead body or during a woman’s monthly menstrual cycle. The entire 15th chapter of Leviticus provides the specific details.

God commanded that whenever someone became ritually impure, he or she had to go to the *mikveh* bath in order to restore one’s status in the community. The word *mikveh* literally meant “a collection or gathering together.” Over time it came to be most associated with a collection of water (such as a pond or reservoir).

We also know this about the *mikveh*—the water had to be “living water” from a spring or river. It had to be running water. The individual was completely immersed under the water (Heb. *tevilah*). And it had nothing to do with the salvation of the person.

It was all about signifying that you had been given a new life of blessings and responsibilities in the community. In biblical times, it demonstrated through obedience that a person was spiritually clean and eligible for full privileges and service within the nation of Israel.

As a result, the availability of a *mikveh* has been essential throughout the history of Israel. You can still see an example of an ancient *mikveh* on top of Masada, the fortress near the Dead Sea where Jewish zealots fled from the Romans and ultimately perished in the late First Century.

Today, many Orthodox synagogues have their own *mikvot*. The modern version is filled with water to about chest high. Just below the water line is a small hole that enables water to

recirculate from a pit on the other side. If there is not a river next door, rainwater is collected and mixed in as the “living water.”

The Orthodox community will use their local *mikveh* on a regular basis, according to Torah instructions. The ceremonial immersion of utensils also takes place there. In addition, a Gentile will use the *mikveh* as part of the formal conversion process.

So there are certainly some common characteristics between the *mikveh* and baptism:

- Salvation was unrelated to the *mikveh* bath.
- The person was completely immersed under the water.
- It signified a new or renewed life of blessings and service.

The Baptism of John (Yochanan ben Zechariah)

John was the one prophesied and sent by God to herald the coming of Messiah (Mal. 4:5). As someone who had lived his entire life in the culture of Israel, he understood the meaning of the *mikveh* well. So as He went about preaching God’s message and people responded by repentance and faith, he confirmed their spiritual transformation with a ceremony based on the *mikveh*. There are some key parallels between the rituals of the *mikveh* and John.

- **John’s baptism did not determine a person’s salvation.** Luke 3:3 tells us that he was calling the people to repent of their sins. And John baptized them in the Jordan River as confirmation of that act of faith. But we are later told in Acts 19 that when Paul met some of those people who had been baptized by John and had later believed in Yeshua, he had them baptized again. So we are given a clear indication that John’s baptism was not the determining factor in the salvation of the people who participated. It was all about believing by faith in Yeshua.
- **John completely immersed the individual under the water.** Both *baptizo*, the Greek word from which we get baptism, and its Hebrew equivalent *tevilah*, mean “to dip.” The root meaning of *baptizo* comes from the way in the Ancient Near East that a piece of cloth would be dipped into dye in order to soak up the solution. The process entailed completely covering the cloth, not just sprinkling or pouring dye on it.
- **John’s baptism signified new life of blessings and service in the community.** The reason that the ministry of John was necessary was the spiritual decay of the nation of Israel. No longer were they keeping their hearts pure before God. In the ministry of John, he was calling the people back to the purity and sincerity of their biblical heritage. He challenged the people: “Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (Lk. 3:8). These fruits were blessings and acts of service within their community. He called them to share material goods with others (v. 11), he told tax collectors not to abuse their duty (v. 13) and soldiers not to extort civilians (v. 14). All of these things were manifestations of people living harmoniously by assuming responsibilities by being part of a community. And that was just like the role of the *mikveh*. Surely his act of baptism in the rushing waters of the Jordan River was a sign of God’s desire for an active, living relationship with His people.

Baptism in the greater context of Scripture

- **Baptism follows a previous inward change** (baptism follows after repentance in Acts 2:37-41; 8:12; 18:8; 19:1-7).
- **The practice of the early church was by immersion.** This was the exclusive means of baptism from the beginning. Even in the historical sources cited by Catholicism as justification for sprinkling, the actual instructions say that you may only pour instead of immerse if water is scarce or unavailable (Didache, c. 70 A.D.; Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21 [A.D. 215]).
- **Baptism signifies our new life in Messiah by blessings and service in the Church.** Going beneath the waters of baptism and then coming back up is a symbol of the judgment of dying because of sin, but then being resurrected through the redeeming power of Messiah Yeshua:

“Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4)