

The Jewish *Mikveh* Rite and Water Baptism

BY RAY GANNON

The elderly, Jewish Los Angelino glared at me with his fiery eyes. This recently past president of the local *B'nai B'rith* chapter stood trembling with rage before me as sweat beads formed on his reddened bald head and upper lip. The words flew out of his tightly coin-shaped mouth, "Look, I believe in Jesus and speak in tongues and all that stuff. But if I get baptized, I'll be a Christian."

I had just conveyed that in 2 nights we would be having a *mikveh* service at a Beverly Hills home swimming pool. Louis Brooks wasn't the first Jewish person to strongly react against the idea of water baptism, so his eruption in a North Hollywood living room Bible study that Tuesday night did not surprise me. As happy as we tried to make it, many of our new Jewish believers really struggled with water baptism.

The reasons for traditional Jewish contempt for baptism have historical foundation. Throughout the centuries there are numerous accounts concerning imposing—on pain of death—Christian baptism on religiously

communities everywhere to discourage any new Jewish faith in Jesus. Modern baptized Jews, with an obvious choice in the matter, are viewed as *meshumadim* (traitors) who have joined the anti-Semitic religious camp.

After assuring Louis Brooks that we would not impose anything on him, we sent him home with a printed teaching on the *mikveh*. It had served as a useful eye-opener to other new Jewish believers who were hesitant to be baptized. It offered a Jewish perspective on this age-old Jewish practice.

OLD TESTAMENT USAGES OF MIKVEH

What many came to discover was that, to their surprise, water baptism was not original with the Messiah Jesus, or even John the Baptist. Immersion in water had many Hebrew Bible usages long before Jesus adapted it for God's Kingdom purposes in His Matthew 28 messianic mandate.

The temple priests were unable to engage in spiritual worship of God without first being ceremonially

ritually cleansed in water in preparation for ordination to their worship ministries (Exodus 40:12). The high priest was to wash his body in water before he was entitled to offer a sacrifice to God. The one releasing the scapegoat on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) also needed to bathe in water before being permitted reentry into the camp of God's people (Leviticus 16:23–26). One having been contaminated by touching anything unclean, such as a dead person, was forbidden to partake of holy things unless he had bathed with water (Leviticus 22:6).

In the case of the healed leper (Leviticus 14:1–9), the high priest functioned as medical examiner, but only outside the camp of God's people. After establishing that no hidden marks of leprosy remained, the high priest offered appropriate sacrifices, but still outside the camp. Only after the leper had been ritually cleansed by the blood of the sacrifice and had bathed in water was he permitted to enter the faith camp and ultimately take up his sanctified role in clean society.

Without intelligent awareness of the exciting Hebraic perspective on biblical baptism, the Christian's baptismal experience may be seriously diminished.

MIKVEH IN NEW TESTAMENT JEWISH RELIGIOUS LIFE

In the rabbinical Judaism, which evolved alongside early Christianity, water baptism was utilized for the Gentile conversion process. In fact, the rabbis taught that since water immersion applied equally to both genders, it was water baptism that made one Jewish rather than circumcision itself.

There have been additional uses for water immersion in Jewish religious life through the centuries. The most common is for purification after the

oppressed Jewish masses. Martyred Jewish resisters to water baptism were made heroes of the Jewish faith while others, more prepared to save their lives by embracing Christian idolatries, were held in profound disdain as defectors. Horrific stories of forced baptisms are still perpetually rehearsed in Jewish

cleansed by washing both head and feet, symbolizing the totality of their sanctified devotion. The bronze basin was to be used for ritual purity prior to pure worship on pain of death, a fact Moses mentioned twice (Exodus 30:17–21).

The priestly sons of Aaron were to be

menstrual period and prior to resumption of normal conjugal rights. Privately sheltered community baths were built for this purpose. Many rabbis, Jewish scholars, Torah scribes, and other devout Orthodox Jews still practice the *mikveh* rite in preparation for spiritual contemplation, the holy days, or even the Sabbath. In fact, the construction of a public *mikveh* baths typically preceded the construction of a synagogue throughout the ages. As modern American Jews are experiencing an Orthodox revival, *mikvaot* (ritual baths) are being constructed in the larger American cities to serve a growing number of neoorthodox Jews.

John the Baptist's water immersion in anticipation of the kingdom of God (Matthew 3:1–8) was recognizable to first-century students of the Hebrew Bible. Yet it is probable John's baptism was also largely based on the Qumran's Essene community. While water immersion established one's clear choice to completely identify with the God of all righteousness, it also spoke to one's desire for protection against the coming cataclysm between the sons of light and the sons of darkness in the pending *eschaton*.

Jewish people of all stripes, including Sadducees, Pharisees, common Jewish people, and even Jesus, were coming to John for the *mikveh*. Jesus had no need to repent, but pursued total identification with fallen man through the standard Jewish purification ritual. This was a prelude to His ordination into the high priestly ministries of atonement maker, chief worshiper, and the leading personality for all other sanctified priests to obey and follow.

When Jesus issued the messianic mandate in Matthew 28, He commanded that every believer follow His own example of total immersion in water. Total immersion was the biblical and traditional Jewish means of the *mikveh* purification ritual as the Greek *baptidzo* signifies. The circumstantial evidence found in Acts 8:38 likewise strongly suggests New Testament

mikvaot (baptisms) were done by complete submersion.

The New Testament significance of water baptism includes the washing away of the impurity of sin (Acts 22:16), the believer's victory over the dominion of sin (Romans 6:1–14), total identification with the Messiah Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12,13;

comprehension of the true scriptural significance may yield successful follow-through on a lifetime of meaningful discipleship.

When Louis Brooks called me the next day, after understanding the teaching on the true biblically Jewish significance of water baptism, he forcefully asked, "Listen, am I supposed to bring a towel and a change of clothes?"

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1 Peter 3:21,22), and the believer's public desire for complete identification with the redeemed messianic faith community (Acts 2:41).

Paul made it clear that water baptism is the functional substitute for circumcision (Colossians 2:11,12). Just as circumcision publicly registered one as a bona fide member of the covenant community, water baptism publicly marked the newborn Christian as a covenant member of the family of God. Moses forbade uncircumcised sympathizers from partaking in the Passover meal since they did not bear the mark fully identifying them with the redeemed community. Only those marked as the redeemed were to be celebrants. If water baptism is biblically likened to circumcision and the Lord's Supper to the Passover, it may raise the question of when a new believer should partake of Communion.

CONCLUSION

It seems unfortunate that the practice of the biblical *mikveh* is often not accompanied by more than superficial knowledge. One wonders about the spiritual benefit of water baptism to one simply "getting dunked" after a trip to the altar. Without intelligent awareness of the exciting Hebraic perspective on biblical baptism, the Christian's baptismal experience may be seriously diminished. However, a new believer's

We baptized Lou, his wife Lillian, and a number of other new Jewish believers that Thursday night in Beverly Hills. Several came up speaking in tongues. One Jewess gained victory over her 52-year phobia of water after a near-drowning experience. But they and hundreds of other Jewish believers in greater Los Angeles came up out of the waters of baptism in love with Jesus, in recognition of their spiritual purification for divine worship, quickened by the Spirit of God, ordained into priestly ministry, and ready to make sacrifices for God's great glory, having left sin and its clutches far behind.

Recently I received an E-mail from a Jewish lady attending an Assemblies of God congregation in Las Vegas, Nevada. She had been a teenager in a Jewish family of five, all of whom I had baptized the same evening in that Beverly Hills swimming pool. I hadn't seen or heard from her for over a quarter century. But the knowledge Hillary and her Jewish parents and siblings received when they chose to follow Jesus in the *mikveh* has helped each of them stand tall for the Lord for three decades. In fact, she closed her E-mail with the happy news that her own two Jewish sons were now both clamoring to be baptized. 

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