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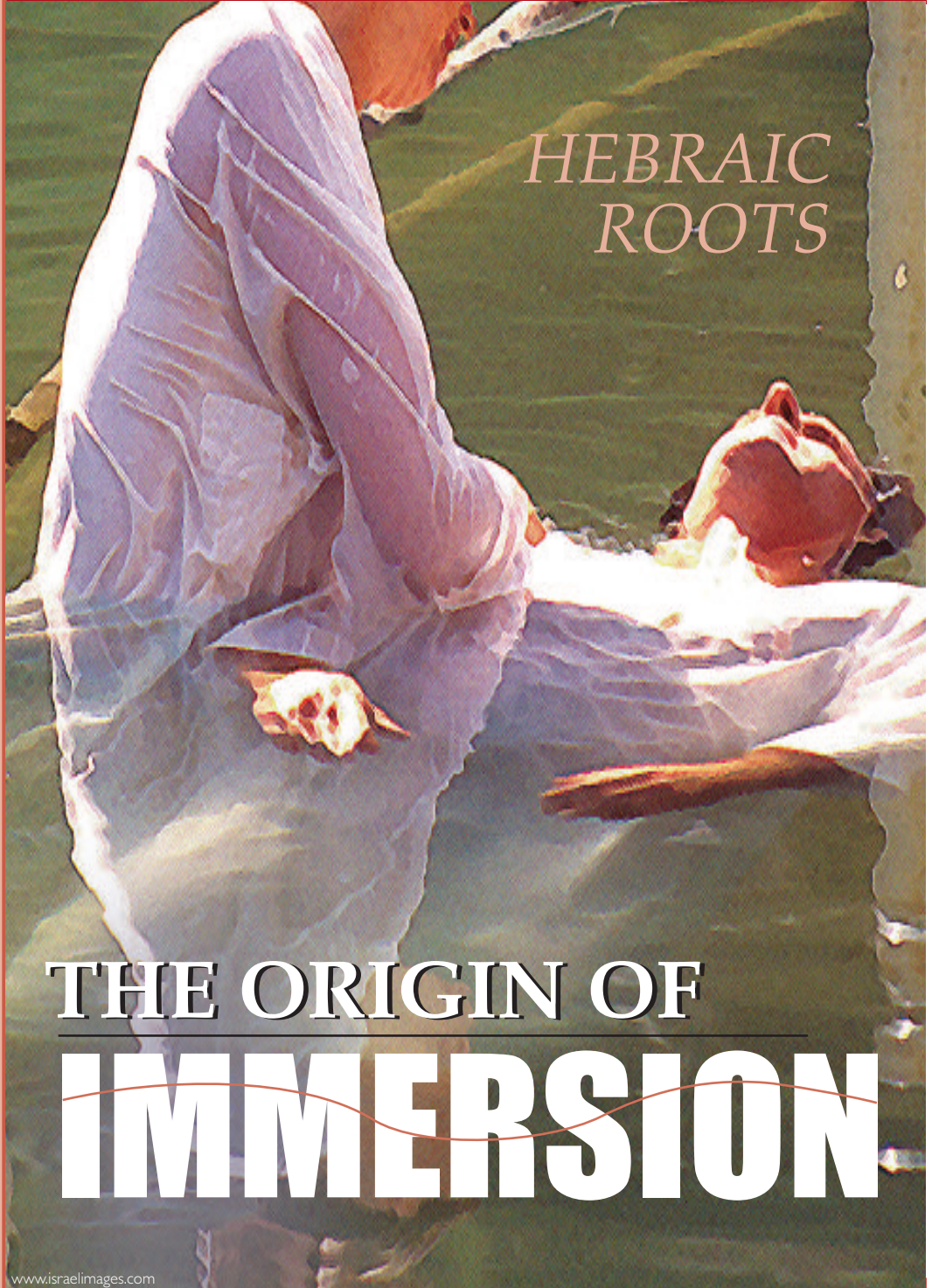
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Vol. #771105

November 2005



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THE ORIGIN OF IMMERSION

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IMMERSION

The history of immersion has been submerged in muddy waters. One matter is certain: baptism means immersion, and immersion was the original way to baptize. Whether there were other ways to satisfy the mode of immersion, and whether the subject should be a babe or a believer are matters of historical and contemporary debate. A consensus on origins would be nice, but one does not appear forthcoming. Gordon Lathrop noted: "Behind the word-service stands the synagogue; behind the Christian meal stand the meal-patterns of hellenistic Judaism. There is no such consensus about the origins of Christian baptism" (Lathrop, 505).

An accurate definition of baptism helps reveal the origin and mode of this simple yet controversial practice of the Church. Considering that this practice began long before John the Baptist in the wilderness, an examination of pre-New Testament immersion is instructive. John's baptism is the next subject of interest, especially since Yeshua (Jesus) asked, "The baptism of John—where was it from?" (Matthew 21:25a, NKJV). Finally, a look at the practice of baptism in the early Jewish Church sheds light on the murky origins of immersion.



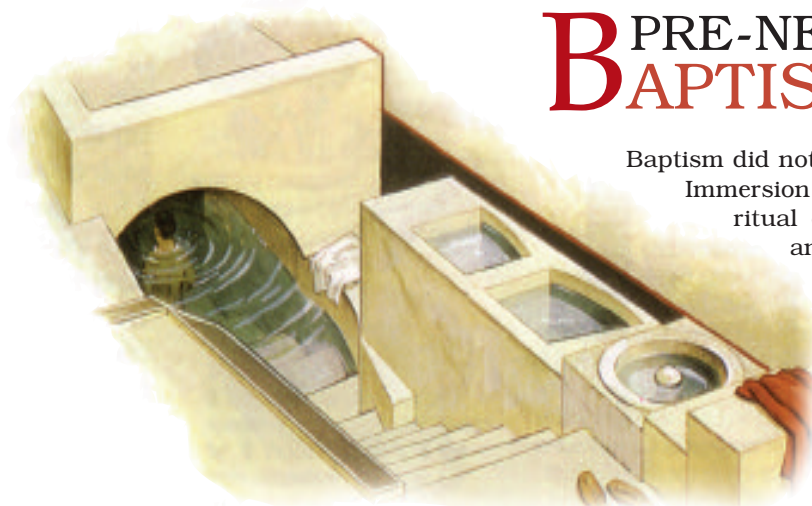
BAPTISM DEFINED

The Greek is quite instructive in the case of baptism. T.J. Conant states simply, "The Greek word baptizein expresses nothing more than the act of immersion, the religious significance of which is derived from the circumstances connected with it" (Conant, 101). Scholars widely agree that this Greek word, standing alone, means "to dip," with the idea of complete immersion. W.A. Jarrel offers: "Greek literature shows that baptizo is used to indicate being put within and under, whatever the mode by which it is done—whether by an overflowing flood, by a sinking ship, or otherwise. But, whatever the mode by which the immersion is accomplished—always an immersion" (Jarrel, 4). Perhaps if the English rendered the word according to its meaning, pastors today would find it difficult to say, "I immerse by sprinkling."

The emphasis of the action of immersion from the Greek verb baptizo is on the result of immersion, rather than the act of immersing. Biblically and historically in other Greek writings, the verb was applied to any act of dipping. As in dipping a garment in dye, the buyer is far more interested in the result of richly dyed fabric than in the effort the dipper took to achieve it. In Christian baptism, the result of a saint fully obedient, and thereby saturated in Yeshua, is far more valuable than the debate over how exactly to get it done.

David Dockery points out that "the noun form, baptisma, is not found outside the New Testament and is only found in the singular. The term implies not only the external act of baptism, but also denotes the inner meaning and force of the act" (Dockery, 5). This sounds a lot like God's heart on the matter. He has always sought internal change with external results. It follows that He would give an external act of obedience an inward reality.

PRE-NEW TESTAMENT BAPTISM



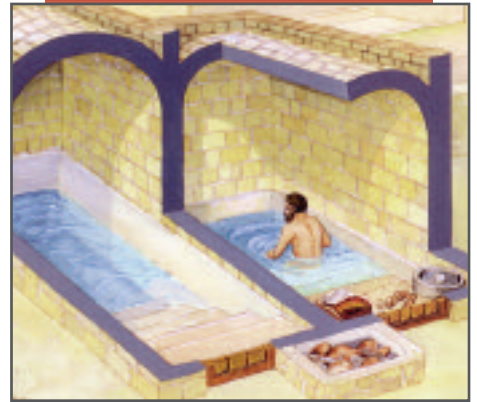
Baptism did not originate with John the Baptist in the wilderness. Immersion was practiced for centuries prior, usually as a ritual cleansing. William Lumpkin states: "Some of the antecedents of the rite can be found in the Jewish religion. All of the Oriental religions seemed to have used ablutions, but in Judaism, this washing and dipping in water occupied an important place" (Lumpkin, 5). Perhaps the most important use of immersion was in the rite known as "proselyte baptism." Lumpkin notes, "Before the Christian era, the Jews...employed solitary lustrations (purifications) to mark individual transition from one state of life to

another, from pagan to true worship” (Lumpkin, 5). It appears that the total immersion of a willing convert would never have been questioned as the proper and acceptable mode of baptism.

Immersion for ritual cleansing is embedded in the Jewish root and heritage of the Christian faith.

The Church distancing herself from her biblical, Hebraic origins appears to have contributed to the profound ignorance of immersion in the act of baptizing. Referring to the Church’s Jewish origin, G. R. Beasley-Murray explains, “So also ritual cleansing in water was practiced from immemorial antiquity, and if their history has been largely forgotten, their associations have shown an extraordinary tenacity for life” (Beasley-Murray, 1).

Jewish writer Alfred Kolatch brings the contemporary perspective: “Some very Orthodox men still follow an old practice of immersing themselves in a mikva [ritual immersion or place of ritual immersion] prior to the Sabbath and holidays. Scribes engaged in writing a Torah [Genesis–Deuteronomy] scroll immerse themselves before beginning the process...” (Kolatch, 123). One must only go to Leviticus and Numbers to find ritual cleansing by immersion, which the most Torah-observant Jews practice to this day. Dockery points out, “The purification rituals of Judaism stressed cleanliness and worthiness to serve the Lord (Leviticus 13–17; Numbers 19)” (Dockery, 6). The New Testament writers, in Mark 7:1–5 and Hebrews 9:19–20, made reference to these ritual washings in the water of purity and the blood of sacrifice. The ablution or sprinkling mode of these cleansings could give credence to baptism by something other than immersion. However, the standard Jewish application of complete bodily immersion in water gives a personal testimony of conversion to God.

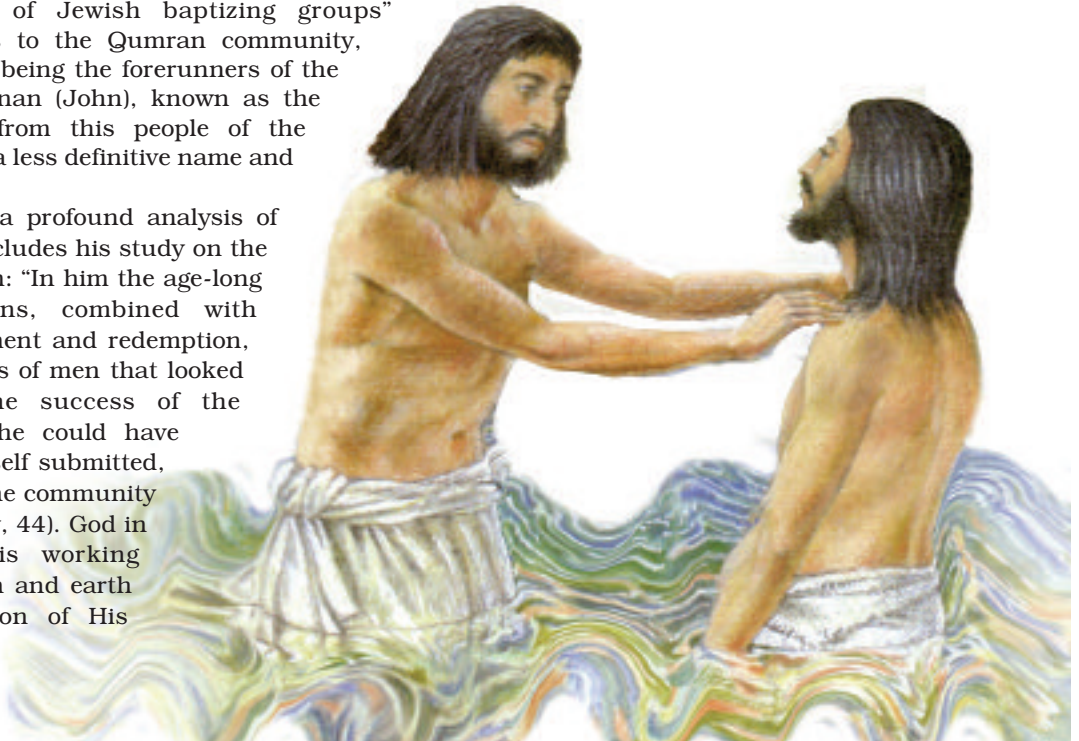


JOHN THE BAPTIST'S BAPTISM

Where did John the Baptist’s baptism come from? Even Yeshua asked this question. If Yeshua asked a question, then the answer was very important. He asked the chief priests and elders in the temple courts of Jerusalem if John’s baptism was from heaven or from men (cf. Matthew 21:23–27). Could it be the answer is both? Yeshua would not tell but left it up to the hearer to ponder the matter.

An even bigger question may be—Where did John come from? Beasley-Murray said, “Thanks to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now possess first hand testimony from one of the most influential of Jewish baptizing groups” (Beasley-Murray, 12). He refers to the Qumran community, which shows strong evidence of being the forerunners of the Essene sect of Judaism. Yochanan (John), known as the “immerser,” very likely came from this people of the wilderness. He is best known by a less definitive name and title—John the Baptist.

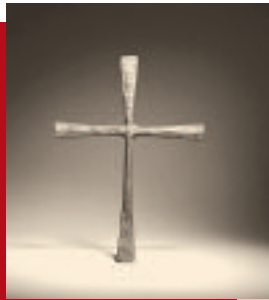
Beasley-Murray provides a profound analysis of John and his baptism as he concludes his study on the antecedents of Christian baptism: “In him the age-long traditions of ritual lustrations, combined with prophetic anticipations of judgment and redemption, found a medium in the ablutions of men that looked for redemption in Israel. The success of the instrument was greater than he could have dreamed: to it the Messiah himself submitted, then invested it with power for the community of the Kingdom” (Beasley-Murray, 44). God in His infinite wisdom, and His working through history, brought heaven and earth together through the immersion of His prophet-servant, John.



CONCLUSION CONNECTION

Since its origin in Jewish ritual cleansing, the matter of immersion is a case of lost and found. Indeed, the early Church was a Jewish church, which had no good reason to question their centuries-old practice of immersion signifying conversion. Marvin Wilson explains a proselyte's self-baptism: "The [naked] candidate...immersed himself in the waters, symbolically cleansing himself from the antecedent defilement. His past behind him, he emerged to take his stand with the people of Israel" (Wilson, 22).

It is not hard to imagine the early Church baptizing their first 3,000 in Jerusalem on Shavuot (Pentecost). The mikvot (ritual baths) still sit with water in them at the entrance to the Temple Mount. Without ceremony, and without a baptizer in the small pool with them, the new Jewish follower of Yeshua probably dunked himself—as he always did for cleansing before entering the Temple. However, now, through Yeshua, he was entering the Kingdom, which had come to earth.



"That immersion was the proper mode of baptism the Church never doubted in the first thousand years and more of its history."

William Lumpkin observed: "That immersion was the proper mode of baptism the Church never doubted in the first thousand years and more of its history. Whence then came the aspersion and sprinkling?" (Lumpkin, 12). That is a question for another teaching. Suffice it to say, the evidence is ancient and strong that immersion comes from the Church's rich Jewish root.

Like many other riches God channeled through Israel for the world's good and the establishment of His Kingdom on earth, the origin of immersion was partially lost and is now being found again. As the most heritage-honoring and God-honoring mode of baptism, immersion stands to proclaim the transforming power of the Redeemer of man.

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Many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

