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Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing

In the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature

Dissertation Abstract

Christian baptism and Jewish ritual bathing are related and many assume that Christians transformed and rejected Jewish bathing practices. Most studies have considered textual and archaeological evidence separately. This dissertation examines these sources together to outline a larger context for Jewish and Christian bathing: a spectrum of ritual, metaphorical, and initiatory uses for bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple literature.

Specific passages were selected for themes or vocabulary related to washing and purification. These passages were categorized as ritual, metaphorical, or initiatory and analyzed from a historical-critical perspective to illuminate the development of ritual bathing.

These texts demonstrate a range of approaches to bathing from which Jews, Christians, and other groups drew at the turn of the millennium. In the Hebrew Bible, only ritual and metaphorical uses of bathing are found. In the Dead Sea Scrolls and other Second Temple Literature, initiatory uses and other new ritual contexts for bathing appear as well.

An examination of the archaeological evidence in light of these texts offers hints about the origin and development of ritual bathing. During the Second Temple period, *miqva'ot*, Jewish ritual baths, were concentrated in Jerusalem and Judea, first appearing in the second century BCE. After 70 CE, very few *miqva'ot* were constructed, most of them in the Galilee. Thus texts and artifacts both indicate changes in the significance and practice of ritual bathing during this period. Further, parallels in textual and archaeological evidence for Jerusalem and

Qumran indicate a shared tradition predating the formation of the Qumran community in the mid-second century BCE.

Many issues remain concerning the relation of Jewish ritual bathing and Christian baptism, such as the role of ritual bathing in the post-exilic reconstruction of Israelite practice and its relation to Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman washing rituals. This project offers a new approach to the study of ritual bathing and suggests that despite the polemics of later Christian and Jewish texts, the earliest Christians drew on a tradition shared with the Qumran community and other Jewish groups of the time, in which each group chose its own emphases – ritual, metaphorical, or initiatory.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Chapter 2 – Hebrew Bible

Chapter 3 – Second Temple Literature

Chapter 4 – Dead Sea Scrolls

Chapter 5 – Archaeological Evidence

Chapter 6 – Conclusions

Appendices – Exhaustive Lists of *miqva'ot* and references to washing and purification

Bibliography