

Before we get started, we should clarify some terminology. The English word “baptism” is from the Greek word meaning “immersion” which appears in the Greek versions of the “New Testament”. The Hebrew word for this practice is “T’villah” (the Hebrew word for immersion). Another term often used in “Jewish English” is “Mikveh” however “Mikveh” is actually a Hebrew noun referring to the water itself used for this ritual.

Washings in the Written Torah

While the practice of ritual immersion (Baptism/T’villah) is not found in the written Torah, there are several rituals that involved “washings”.

In Exodus 19:10 the people washed their clothes before receiving Torah.

In Leviticus 8:6 Aharon and his sons were washed as part of their ordination as priests.

In Leviticus 16:4 Aharon was to wash himself before and after performing the Yom Kippur rituals.

In Numbers 19:7f there is a commandment to be washed for ritual purity after coming into contact with a dead body.

In Numbers 31:21-24 we read of water of sprinkling being used to purify Israelites and their plunder after their battle with Midianites.

In Leviticus chapters 13-15 we read of ritual purification via “washing” for men and women who have become ritually impure for various reasons.

The Hebrew word used in these passages is רחץ which simply means “to wash, or bathe” and does not necessarily involve complete “immersion” (T’villah, Baptism).

The Jewish Practice of T'villah

While the written Torah only has commandments that involve washings, the Oral Law requires many of these “washings” to involve complete immersion. There are three general reasons for T'villah in Rabbinic Judaism:

1. Purification for ritual impurity.
2. Initiation of a Priest or Rabbi.
3. Conversion to Judaism.

Baptism for Conversion

While the first two of these are extensions of written Torah, the third, T'villah for conversion, is purely a practice of the Oral Law, as we read in the Talmud:

As soon as he is healed (from his circumcision) arrangements are made for his immediate immersion, when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his immersion he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects. (b.Yebamot 47b)

An entire tractate of the Mishnah (Tractate Mikvaot) is dedicated to the various matters of Oral Law surrounding T'villah and specifications for what constitutes an acceptable Mikveh.

T'villah in the Dead Sea Scrolls

Baptisms played an important part in the lives of the Qumran Community, for whom ritual purity was very important. Archaeologists have even uncovered several of the actual Mikvaot used at Qumran, cisterns with steps leading down into them. These mikvaot meet the same specifications laid out in the Mishnah. A Mikveh excavated at Qumran

The Dead Sea Scrolls speak several times of these baptisms. The Manual of Discipline (1QS) says of those who refuse to enter their community:

Ceremonies of atonement cannot restore his innocence, neither cultic waters his purity. He cannot be sanctified by baptism in oceans and rivers, nor purified by mere ritual bathing. Unclean, unclean shall he be all the days that he rejects the laws of God, refusing to be disciplined in the Yahad of His society. (1QS 3,4-6)

None of the perverse men is to enter purifying waters used by the Men of Holiness and so contract their purity. (Indeed, it is impossible to be purified without first repenting of evil, inasmuch as impurity adheres to all who transgress His word. (1QS 5,13-14)

Other scrolls tell us that these mikvaot required at least enough water to form ripples (Damascus Document 10, 10-13) and that the individual was to bathe his entire body in living water (The Temple Scroll 11Q19 XLV 15–16) and in 4Q274 the verb yitbôl is used, telling us that these ritual bathings definitely involved complete immersion (T'villah).

Josephus on Yochanan

This brings us to Josephus' description of the ministry of Yochanan. Josephus states that Yochanan:

...commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism [immersion] for that the washing would be acceptable... (Josephus; Ant. 18:5:2)

Baptism in the “New Testament”

Yochanan the immerser’s Baptism for the remission of sins (Matt. 3:6, 11; Mk. 1:4-5; Luke 3:2-3, 7; Acts 19:3-4) certainly recalls the Qumran immersions to purify one from the ” impurity [that] adheres to all who transgress His word.” (1QS 5,13-14)

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, we see Baptism being clearly used as a ritual for conversion, when Yeshua sends out his Talmidim in the “Great Commission” saying:

19 Go you therefore, and teach all nations, immersing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Ruach HaKodesh:

20 Teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

(Matthew 28:19-20)

Yocahnan’s Baptism for the remission of sins comes directly from the Essene practice of Baptism for purification from the impurity that adheres to all who transgress the Torah (sin), and Yeshua’s Baptism for conversion echoes the ritual immersion for conversion to Judaism found in the Talmud.

The doctrine of ritual immersion rather than mere “washings” which would not necessarily involve actual immersion, and the use of these immersions for “remission of sins” and for conversion, are traditions taken from Essene and Pharisaic Judaism, and which originated in the Oral Law.

Baptism is Oral Law.