

The Waters of Immersion

How do today's Messianic people approach the issue of water immersion? There are varied Jewish and Christian traditions and customs we have doubtlessly been affected by, in both direct and indirect ways, when approaching this. In Judaism, water immersion, or the usage of the *mikveh* bath, is rooted within Torah instructions regarding ritual purity, for both the Levitical priests and the people in general. In Christianity, the process of being baptized has normally been employed to signify an outward identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), and often takes place after a public commitment of trust in Him has been made. In Judaism, water immersion of some kind is often a regular process for the faithful. In Protestant Christianity, baptism is considered a sacrament, and as such tends to only be a one-time or singular practice.

Where does today's Messianic community stand? We stand somewhere in-between the recognition of water immersion or *mikveh* as a regular, important practice for the people of God, as well as recognizing that what is commonly known as "Believer's baptism" is also quite significant for men and women of faith. Too frequently, however, Messianic people have not adequately explored some of the particulars of water immersion. For much of today's Messianic community, our understanding of water baptism is cosmetic: we speak more in terms of "immersion" or "*mikveh*," and a surface-level comprehension of various evangelical Christian cultures of baptism are given a Messianic veneer. While appreciating many Christian emphases present surrounding water immersion for those who have made a confession of faith in the Messiah is important, there is much more about the waters of immersion, often represented by today's Messianics as *mikveh*, to be considered.

What is a mikveh?

The alternative term to "baptism," witnessed in today's broad Messianic movement, is the Hebrew *mikveh* (מִקְוֵה).¹ One of the first places it is mentioned in the Hebrew Tanach is in Leviticus 11:36, where instruction is issued regarding how "only a spring or a cistern, a gathering of water, shall remain pure—but one who

¹ Also transliterated as *mikvah*, *miqveh*, *miqvah*, etc.

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touches their carcass shall become contaminated” (ATS), *mikveh-mayim* (מִקְוֵה-מַיִם) being a “collector-of waters” (Kohlenberger).² God’s command of Genesis 1:9, “Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear,” include the related verb *qavah* (קָוָה), which in the Nifal stem (simple action, passive voice), means “collect” or “gather” (CHALOT).³ While not stated explicitly, the baths constructed for Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 7:23) would be considered gatherings of water designated as *mikveh*. As the term *mikveh* is widely used in Rabbinical literature, the *Jastrow* lexicon defines it as a “gathering of water, esp. the ritual bath of purification.”⁴ A *mikveh*, a collection or gathering of water for ritual immersion, is traditionally one with a quantity of water deep enough to completely immerse or submerge one’s body.

Older Christian resources are more keen to emphasize water immersion, i.e., baptism, as something widely unique to the New Testament, post-resurrection period. Much newer theological resources, quite thankfully, are at least prone to give water immersion or post-salvation baptism for the redeemed, more of an association with the Tanach and/or Second Temple Judaism. Included within its glossary entry for the term “baptism,” the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* details,

“[It is] immersion in water, a practice found throughout Mediterranean antiquity for ritual purification. John the Baptist (Mk 1.4) may have...derived his practice from Jewish purification ritual (Lev 15.18). Paul’s connection of baptism with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6.1-14) changed its meaning from purification to initiation into a new community and new identity.”⁵

This same resource does include an entry for “miqveh,” which describes it as “a bath designed for ritual immersion.”⁶

Why has “baptism” become the common term used to describe water immersion today? Baptism as an English term is widely derived from the Greek verb *baptizō* (βαπτίζω) and Greek noun *baptisma* (βάπτισμα). The verb *baptizō* appears in not just the Greek New Testament or Apostolic Scriptures, but also the Septuagint, or ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Tanach. As is noted by the *Thayer* lexicon, *baptizō* can mean “to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water;”⁷ and this resource specifically notes a connection to 2 Kings 5:14:

“So he went down and dipped *himself* seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean” (2 Kings 5:14).

In the LXX, the verb *baptizō* rendered the Hebrew verb *taval* (טָבַל), which in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice) means “dip,” often “in water, for

² John R. Kohlenberger III, trans., *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:297.

³ CHALOT, 315.

⁴ *Jastrow*, 829.

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, NRSV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 605.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 612.

⁷ *Thayer*, 94.

purification” (*BDB*),⁸ in Rabbinical literature often involving “to immerse, to bathe for purification” (*Jastrow*).⁹ However, given how the term *mikveh* more frequently tends to involve connections to the purification rituals of the Tanach, as well as the Tabernacle/Temple, this might be why it is more common in contemporary Messianic settings to see the noun *mikveh*, and a derived verb *mikvehed*, employed instead. The Hebrew term *mikveh* appears in two places in the Complete Jewish Bible, which some might consider a bit subjective, but are included to clue readers into purity rituals that go beyond the usage of water for general cleanliness:

Ephesians 5:26:

“[S]o that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (NASU).

“[I]n order to set it apart for God, making it clean through immersion in the *mikveh*, so to speak” (CJB).

Titus 3:5:

“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (NASU).

“[H]e delivered us. It was not on the ground of any righteous deeds we had done, but on the ground of his own mercy. He did it by means of the *mikveh* of rebirth and the renewal brought about by the *Ruach HaKodesh*” (CJB).

That the English term “immerse,” is more frequently used in Messianic terminology than “baptize,” is usually on account of the Christian theological and social associations which can commonly be made with the term baptism. It is usually not because “baptism” is a bad word; it is because “baptism” can have certain associations with various theological traditions (and the Baptist denomination), which Messianic people tend to want to maintain some distance from. So, Messianic teachers or leaders will often speak in terms of “water immersion or baptism,” with the former term more often employed. And, as a resource like the Friberg Lexicon notes for the verb *baptizō*, it means “strictly dip, immerse in water.”¹⁰ More than anything else, Messianic people using “water immersion” or “*mikveh*,” as opposed to just “baptism,” is intended to decisively clue others in to how such a practice is not something exclusive to the New Testament era, as is often misbelieved. In the estimation of Barney Kasdan, in his book *God’s Appointed Customs*,

“Baptism sounds like such a non-Jewish concept, *oy veh* (oh my)! Most people jump to this conclusion based on the last two thousand years of church history. However, as with so many other aspects of Christianity, virtually everything goes

⁸ *BDB*, 371; cf. Numbers 19:18.

⁹ *Jastrow*, 517.

¹⁰ *BibleWorks 9.0: Friberg Lexicon*. MS Windows 7 Release. Norfolk: BibleWorks, LLC, 2011. DVD-ROM.

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back to its Jewish roots. Some may find it difficult to make the connection between baptism and Jewish customs, but the historical facts are irrefutable....[T]he concept comes entirely from the ancient Jewish practice of *mikveh*. Water baptism is not therefore something 'Gentile,' or even pagan...[as] both Gentile Christian and Jew should look back at the historical reality of *mikveh*. As one reads the New Testament's teaching concerning water immersion, Christianity's connection to its Jewish roots becomes more obvious."¹¹

While there are undeniable connections between water immersion, more commonly called "baptism," and *mikveh* or water purity rituals in the Tanach—Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in today's Messianic movement have often been affected by a variety of religious practices associated with water:

- Jewish ritual *mikveh/miqveh* at a synagogue or designated place
- Christian baptism traditions ranging from baptistry full-immersion baptism, to full-immersion baptism in an outdoor setting or swimming pool, to baby sprinkling or christening in a church
- immersions in the Jordan River, often conducted by Christian tour groups to Israel, regardless of whether someone had been baptized as a Believer before

With the exception of infant baptism, Messianic people are affected by the Jewish traditions of *mikveh* for various kinds of purification, and they are affected by Christian baptism traditions involving (new) Believers confessing their faith in the Messiah. In order to better value how water immersion can be employed by God's people, we will review immersion in the Tanach, the Second Temple period, and in the Apostolic Scriptures, surveying each so we can see how there is not just one exclusive reason for taking a *mikveh* bath.

Immersion in the Tanach

Because water immersion is too frequently associated with various Christian traditions and customs regarding "baptism," it can take Bible readers being prodded a little to see that it actually has deep roots in the Tanach or Old Testament. Yet as can be detected, when Tanach origins for the water immersion of new Believers is properly recognized, our appreciation for this practice should be enhanced, and an under-utilization of water immersion should also be identified. As the entry for "baptism" appearing in the *NIDB* properly directs,

"The idea of ceremonial washing, or cleansing, appears repeatedly in the Mosaic laws of purification (e.g., Exod 29:4, 14; 30:17-21; 40:12, 30; Lev 1:9, 13; 6:27; 9:14; 11:25; 14:8, 9, 47; 15:5-27; 16:4-28; 17:15-16; 22:6; Num 8:7; 19:7-21; 31:23-24; Deut 21:6; 23:11). In the Septuagint version of the OT, translated into the Hellenistic idiom of the NT, the word *baptizō* is used twice: 2 Kings 5:14 (where the meaning is cleansing) and Isaiah 21:4 (where its meaning is obscured). It is clear, however, that later Judaism incorporated this connotation of cleansing and purification into its

¹¹ Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Customs: A Messianic Jewish Guide to the Biblical Lifecycle and Lifestyle* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1996), pp 112, 117.

idea of the new covenant relation and used baptism as a rite of initiation, as reflected in the practices of the Qumran sect and the Dead Sea Scroll communities.”¹²

Within the Torah, a wide variety of causes for the need of ritual cleansing in water are witnessed, some of this related to priestly purity in association with Tabernacle or Temple procedures, but more generally for the people at large immersion was required after contact with the dead (Numbers 19), an unclean emission (Leviticus 15), and females following menstruation (Leviticus 15:19). Cleansing with water for a leper is also something to be recognized (Leviticus 14:1-7, 7, 9), as Yeshua Himself directed a leper who He healed to observe it (Mark 1:44; Matthew 8:4; Luke 5:14). Cleansing with water may also extend to clothing (Exodus 19:10). While there were certainly hygienic benefits of immersing or washing oneself with water, the array of reasons for employing water for ritual cleansing, involve both physical and moral dimensions. Consecrating one’s actions to the Lord, some of which occur during the normal processes of life, and others which take place because of conscious choices—and how both broad categories require purification—overshadow the importance of ritual cleansing in water.

While Tanach instructions regarding water immersion or cleansing were employed for Second Temple practices associated with the *mikveh* bath and one’s spiritual standing before God, not to be overlooked, and still observed today in sectors of Judaism without the presence of a Tabernacle or Temple, are the water immersion rituals associated with post-sexual or post-menstrual activity. This is certainly an area where more consecration, of both thought and action, is critical for the people of God.

Immersion in Second Temple Judaism

Many of today’s Christian examiners are hesitant to make connections between Tanach purity rituals, and what they regard as the rite of Christian baptism, as such Old Testament rituals might appear to be more vague and less defined for them. What today’s Christian examiners cannot overlook are the certain connections in Second Temple Judaism between the water immersion performed by proselytes, and the water immersion which was performed by men and women who professed faith in Yeshua of Nazareth. Water immersion for becoming a Jewish proselyte, as summarized by various Talmudic regulations (b.*Yevamot* 47b), was widely regarded as a one-time experience. New Testament scholars are quite keen to note some connection between the usage of water immersion present at the Qumran community, and how it was employed by John the Immerser/Baptist. As is evidenced in the Dead Sea Scrolls,

“Through an upright and humble attitude his sin may be covered, and by humbling himself before all God’s laws his flesh can be made clean. Only thus can

¹² Clarence B. Bass, “Baptism,” in *NIDB*, 123.

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he really receive the purifying waters and be purged by the cleansing flow” (1QS 3.9).¹³

While the emphasis in the DSS is on seeing that initiates are keen to obey the Torah of God, and be cleansed from sin, John’s emphasis would be on turning from wicked ways and ungodly attitudes, as his prophetic work preceded the arrival of Yeshua. As is summarized by the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*,

“The precise relationship between John’s baptism and the purifactory rites alluded to in the Qumran Community Rule (1QS 5:13) is unclear. This passage proves a striking parallel to gospel material about John because it describes a radical conversion associated with one’s entry into the ‘Covenant of God’ (1QS 5:7-15), and it emphasizes the need to dissociate oneself from the mass of wicked humanity and to live as God demands. John’s call to ‘bear fruits that are appropriate to repentance’ is paralleled by the Qumranite requirement to obey the Torah. It is unclear what the precise relationship is between this complex of ideas and the testimony of Josephus that the Essenes bathed daily before their meals (*War* 2.8.5 sec. 129).”¹⁴

There might not be an exact correlation between John’s immersion and the immersion of the Qumran community. But, there is enough of a parallel present for today’s Believers to recognize, historically for sure, that the water immersion practiced by the First Century *ekklēsia* was hardly something new. While immersion did take on significant Messianic importance in identification with a cleansing from sin and an association with Yeshua’s resurrection, water immersion as an outward religious act was a normative practice within the Second Temple Jewish world.

Immersion in the Apostolic Scriptures

Some kind of Jewish ritual cleansing with water, either directly prescribed or indirectly derived from the Torah, is witnessed within the Gospels (Matthew 15:2; John 2:6). The first encounter that readers have with baptism or water immersion, though, is seen in the prophetic ministry actions of John the Baptist, who was specifically called out by God to prepare the way for the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah:

“In those days, John the Immerser¹⁵ came proclaiming in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Turn away from your sins, for the kingdom of heaven is near!’ For he is the one Isaiah the prophet spoke about, saying, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of *ADONAI*, and make His paths straight [Isaiah 40:3].”’ Now John wore clothing from camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were being immersed by him in the Jordan River” (Matthew 3:1-6, TLV).¹⁶

¹³ Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 129.

¹⁴ “baptism,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 76.

¹⁵ Grk. *Ioānnēs ho baptistēs* (Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής); Delitzsch Heb. NT *Yochanan ha’matbil* (יוֹחָנָן הַמַּטְבִּיל).

¹⁶ Also Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-9, 15-17; John 1:19-28.

It is recognized how “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), and theologically such a statement has caused a wide degree of misunderstandings to emerge, specifically as some might take this as meaning that water immersion is required as an outward rite to receive eternal salvation. Historically, some misappropriation for the immersion performed by John the Baptist is detectable in the record of Josephus:

“[F]or Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness toward one another, and piety toward God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body: supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.117).¹⁷

In considering the water immersion of John, there is doubtlessly debate among examiners. The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, for example, notes, “The possible relationship between Qumranite practice, John’s baptism, Christian baptism, and Jewish proselyte baptism is disputed. At the very least, proselyte baptism is a one-time initiatory rite by which a non-Israelite ‘is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects’ (B. Yebam. 47b).”¹⁸

The Phillips New Testament notably paraphrases Mark 1:4 with John “proclaiming baptism as the mark of a complete change of heart and of the forgiveness of sins.” This is widely how the rite of water immersion for new Believers in Yeshua has been viewed in evangelical Protestantism. While it is much clearer for today’s Messianic people how water immersion or *mikveh* is rooted within the Torah rituals of cleansing—it too easily escapes many people how water immersion for those seeking repentance and cleansing from sins, bears importance because of the Tanach prophecies of the New Covenant and a cleansing from God with water:

“I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. It will be to Me a name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them, and they will fear and tremble because of all the good and all the peace that I make for it” (Jeremiah 33:7-9).

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

¹⁷ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 484.

¹⁸ “baptism,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 76.

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“In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity. It will come about in that day,’ declares the LORD of hosts, ‘that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered; and I will also remove the prophets and the unclean spirit from the land’” (Zechariah 13:1-2).

Some of the key passages, appearing in the Apostolic Scriptures, involving water immersion or baptism, definitely take on some great significance for those who connect the description of cleansing by water, to Tanach expectations of God forgiving His people of their sins, purifying them, and restoring them to a right relationship with Him:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the *Ruach ha-Kodesh*” (Matthew 28:19, TLV).

“Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be immersed in the name of Messiah *Yeshua* for the removal of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the *Ruach ha-Kodesh*” (Acts 2:38, TLV).

“For all of you who were immersed in Messiah have clothed yourself with Messiah” (Galatians 3:27, TLV).

The imagery of water cleansing, rooted within the Tanach expectation of the New Covenant, is surely in view in Yeshua’s word to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5-6). The immersion of the Spirit,¹⁹ while involving various charismatic gifts and activities, is to most principally concern the transformation of the human heart from dead to regenerated. It is clear that outward water immersion, as important a rite it is—certainly symbolically—is not enough if the attendant immersion with the Holy Spirit and internal cleansing of the heart and mind do not take place. As Yeshua directed His disciples before *Shavuot*/Pentecost, “for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5).

As important as the rite of water immersion tends to be for new Believers—and the ritual of water immersion or baptism can frequently be a time for meaningful supernatural activity—there is an emphasis present within the Apostolic Scriptures regarding how immersion also represents participation in the reality of Yeshua. This involves a lifelong commitment of not only being a disciple of Yeshua and emulating Yeshua’s example of service and love toward others, but also recognizing the possibility of suffering and dying for God’s Kingdom. This is especially evident in the inquiry of James and John to their Lord, and where they would sit in His Kingdom:

¹⁹ Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16.

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“James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Yeshua, saying, ‘Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.’ And He said to them, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on *Your* left, in Your glory.’ But Yeshua said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’²⁰ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ And Yeshua said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized’” (Mark 10:35-39; also Matthew 20:20-28).

The rite of water immersion, involving a complete submersion of oneself, is something that most certainly involves a symbolic portrayal of how born again Believers have participated not just in being cleansed from sins, but have participated in Yeshua’s death, burial, and resurrection. As is asserted by the Apostle Paul, even with the general resurrection of the dead a future reality still to come in history, the power of the resurrection is already accessible now in the present age:

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Messiah Yeshua have been baptized into His death? 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. For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection” (Romans 6:3-6).

“[H]aving been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12).

Recognizing some of these important components of immersion or baptism, the *NIDB* entry keenly directs how it is far more than just an outward symbol, or even a religious rite or sacrament. A fully Biblical approach to immersion or baptism will involve the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Believer, and what it means to life a new life of faith unto God:

“While much recent emphasis among Evangelicals has been on the ‘symbol only’ concept of baptism, and while the NT pointedly abstains from ascribing a sacramental value to the act itself, a renewed emphasis on Spirit baptism will restore to its proper place a much neglected aspect of this doctrine. No statement on the doctrine can be a truly biblical one if it fails to emphasize that beyond the symbolic and commemorative act performed by a person there is also the Holy Spirit’s inward operation. Spirit baptism brings the regenerated person into a redemptive relationship through his participation in and identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the subsequent infusion of the merits

²⁰ “But Yeshua answered them, ‘You don’t know what you’re asking! Are you able to drink the cup I drink, or endure the immersion I must endure?’” (Mark 10:38, TLV).

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of that death and resurrection into the life of the believer, by which he may live as one dead to sin but alive to God (Rom 6:11)."²¹

The central focus in any person going through water immersion, baptism, or *mikveh*, as a new Believer, has to be Yeshua the Messiah. As made clear by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, water immersion is an act which is universal for all Believers regardless of background, as all are to be immersed into the Body of Messiah, with access to the same Holy Spirit:

"For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Messiah. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

This is a definite place where we see how membership in the Kingdom of God, via an outward rite, is predicated on water immersion or baptism. Unlike Second Temple Judaism, which would have required both water immersion and physical circumcision for proselytes (b.*Keritot* 9a), the sole emphasis on immersion places the focus not on something that had become an ethnic identifier for First Century Jews, **but on a cleansing identification with the sacrificial work of Israel's Messiah on behalf of all human beings.**

Is water immersion a one-time occurrence?

Water immersion as a ritual for Second Temple Judaism converting proselytes, would seemingly have been a one-time occurrence, given the word, "He immerses and comes up, and lo, he is an Israelite for all purposes" (b.*Yevamot* 47b).²² At the same time, though, given the presence of water immersion rituals in the Torah and Tanach—often regarding a ritual cleansing from normative human activities ranging from touching something dead to having sexual relations to being able to go into the Tabernacle or Temple—a *mikveh* immersion is hardly a one-time occurrence in the Jewish tradition. For that same matter, not all evangelical Christians see baptism for Believers as a one-time occurrence, as there does tend to be variance, or at least allowances, beyond some sort of water immersion subsequent to salvation.

Today's Messianic approaches toward *mikveh* (מִקְוֵה) or water immersion have to weigh the significant Jewish and Christian perspectives present throughout history. These involve synagogues or designated areas that have a *mikveh* for ritual bathing, often used in conjunction with life cycle events. Frequently during tours to Israel, Messianic people (and many Christians, for that same matter) will choose to be immersed in the Jordan River, as a memorial to the immersions of John the Baptist, and to most certainly emulate Yeshua's immersion by him.²³ It is also true that some Protestant denominations or churches require (re)baptism for

²¹ Bass, "Baptism," in *NIDB*, pp 124-125.

²² *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

²³ Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22.

membership, and although not at all frequent, it might be that one or two Messianic assemblies might have a similar procedure.

Even though water immersion for proselyte conversion in Second Temple times was a one-time affair, and similarly water immersion is an act of new Believers making a declaration of faith and being dedicated to the Lord—water immersion in the *mikveh* is hardly a single event in one's life. There are many other reasons why born again Believers would choose to go through a *mikveh* immersion, beyond that of some kind of rededication to the Lord. People may choose to go through a *mikveh* immersion at an important time of transition or personal change, as a means of symbolically being cleansed of a previous life chapter. In the Orthodox Jewish community, more than other sectors of the Jewish population, water immersion tends to be an almost weekly practice:

“Pious Jewish men immerse their bodies in the Mikveh every Friday and on the day preceding each festival as physical and spiritual purification in preparation for the Sabbath or the festival. Especially important, according to tradition, is the Mikveh for Jewish women, required by Jewish law after each menstrual period. On the modern scene, as with the men, it is observed only by the more pious women. This ritual obligation is one example of the practices of bodily cleanliness which, in former times, distinguished the Jews from other groups in matters of personal hygiene” (*New Jewish Encyclopedia*).²⁴

The Waters of Immersion and Today's Messianic Believers

Ritual immersion in water is a component of the Jewish experience, of the Second Temple period for certain, which influenced First Century Messianic thought—not just in terms of an outward act to note a new Believer's cleansing from sins, but the language which meant a participation in the salvation work of the Messiah. *But how are Messianic people to approach water immersion today?* It would seem obvious enough that Christian traditions which offer some form of infant baptism should be dismissed. And, in present Jewish observance, a *mikveh* immersion would be viewed more as a ceremonial than an actual physical ritual of purification, at least in a Western context where taking showers and baths is most commonplace.

For Orthodox Judaism today, and a lesser extant Conservative and Reform Judaism, the *mikveh* is used certainly in association with modern proselyte conversion, but for the former also with feminine cleansing after menstruation (Leviticus 15:19-24). Throughout the past two millennia, using the *mikveh* for ritual cleansing was one of the few outward rituals which was able to be preserved to some degree, despite the absence of a Tabernacle or Temple:

“Even after most of the laws of defilement fell into abeyance with the destruction of the Temple, the ritual bath remained an essential component of family life for observant Jews, since a wife has to immerse herself in it after her menstrual period before cohabitation...Immersion in a ritual bath is similarly

²⁴ “Mikveh,” in *The New Jewish Encyclopedia*, pp 321-322.

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required for initiating proselytes and to purify metal cooking utensils and glassware manufactured by non-Jews” (*The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*).²⁵

The entry quoted above goes further, in describing how the *mikveh* bath is employed within the Jewish community outside of Israel. The Torah prescription of water immersion, and the associated traditions, are most frequently used by the Orthodox, although a *mikveh* could seemingly be found at various Conservative or Reform synagogues. It also notes discussions about alternative sites for immersion, namely natural bodies of water, which would have certainly been among those used by the First Century Body of Messiah for immersing new Believers:

“Outside of Israel, the ritual bath is almost exclusively confined to Orthodox communities. CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM observes the main traditional laws and insists on *tevilah* (immersion) for proselytes. Despite some suggestions that lakes, oceans, rivers, and certain types of swimming pools are halakhically fit for immersion, the majority view of all law committees of the Conservative movement has upheld the traditional *mikveh*—for its historical, symbolic, and deep spiritual meaning. REFORM JUDAISM in the United States considers the *mikveh* superfluous in the modern age, but outside the U.S. most Reform congregations insist on immersion for proselytes.”²⁶

Very few Messianic congregations or assemblies have an actual *mikveh* on their premises, and so water immersions for new Believers are very likely to take place in natural bodies of water like lakes, rivers, or oceans, as well as in the swimming pools of congregational members. This would certainly be permitted by the record of the Apostolic Scriptures, and water immersions for Messianic Believers, who have recently made a commitment of faith to Yeshua, would bear some continuity with Christian traditions that fully immerse men and women in water. What is, to be sure, different is the discontinuity with the common Christian thought that water immersion is a one-time, or singular, event. Messianic people, who have been Believers for most of their lives, will choose to immerse for reasons other than making a public declaration of faith. Reasons for Believers employing some sort of *mikveh* bath (perhaps at a local Jewish synagogue, or via some makeshift method employing a swimming pool or bathtub), may range from wanting to be ritually pure to recognizing an important transition point in life. More or less reflecting on how the *mikveh* has been used by traditional Jews, a Messianic Jew like Kasdan observes,

“Despite all the tedious details, one should not lose sight of the *mikveh*’s meaning. The Bible draws a distinction between the holy and the profane, between the clean and unclean. The waters of the *mikveh*, according to the rabbis, teach the Jewish people a great deal concerning these truths. The *niddah* period is to teach husbands and wives the need for discipline, respect, and moderation in all things. The waters symbolize spiritual cleansing, as seen in the *mikveh* for Gentile converts

²⁵ “Mikveh,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, 535.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 536-537.

The Waters of Immersion

to Rabbinic Judaism. For traditional Jews, the ritual immersion is also a graphic reminder of their need for God's cleansing and new life."²⁷

Having a greater appreciation for, and deeper understanding of, the *mikveh* in the Jewish tradition—which would go beyond water immersion or baptism for new Believers—is something that each of us will need to consider as we all find ourselves soiled by the effects of sin in the world, and may need a *mikveh* from time to time, not so much as a “Believer’s baptism,” but as a means of marking a new period in our lives. The famed word of the Psalmist is, “Create in me a clean heart [לֵב טָהוֹר, *lev tahor*], O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me (Psalm 51:10). Frequently, through the physical action of immersing ourselves in water, we can designate a point in our lives when we have needed to sanctify a moment, recognizing the work of the Lord for our having come to salvation, or having experienced His goodness—and most especially for remembering how “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

²⁷ Kasdan, *God's Appointed Customs*, 116.