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What is the Purpose of Ritual Ablutions in Ancient Judaism?[1]

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The interfacing of Ritual and Jewish Studies helps significantly to analyze the processes of ritual ablutions and its meanings. In the case of Second Temple Judaism ablutions carry a rich density of meaning. They often functioned as a means of protecting sanctuaries and their sancta and also marked social boundaries. For several Jewish authors of this period, ablutions symbolize the divine rejuvenation of the mortal, human being and dramatize a passage from death to life. On an experiential level, many Jews performed ablutions in order to facilitate access to God in anticipation of spiritual renewal and divine blessing.

Key Words: ritual, second temple Judaism, ablution, ritual studies

1. Introduction

While the subject of ritual ablutions in ancient Judaism has found a steady press in the last decade, very few scholars have addressed the question of their basic purpose. The easy answer is that it removes ritual impurity, but is that it? Ritual studies experts can be helpful in providing methodology and context for such an inquiry. Sociologists claim that ritual is a wordless channel of communication which can convey a rich density of meanings.[2] What then is the multi-faceted message of ritual ablutions in Second Temple Judaism? This study attempts to apply insights from Ritual Studies to texts of Second Temple Judaism in an effort to understand what ancient Jews expected from the act of ritual ablutions.

1 The present study was first presented during a session of the Ritual in the Biblical World consultation at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, Nov. 2008.

2 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London–Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 124; idem, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London–Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 269, for example, argued that rituals are a way of expressing group values and constraining social behavior. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81–82, refines this statement by noting that participants in a ritual both define (i.e., impose) and receive (i.e., experience) a culture's values. She emphasizes the importance of interpreting ritual activity vis-à-vis its particular cultural context.

A common purpose or "message" underlying ablutions in ancient Judaism may seem unwarranted given the variety of types of Judaism in ancient times.[3] Recently, it has been suggested that ritual washing was not even practiced in the First Temple period and that the ablutions of the Priestly Code reflect Second Temple practice only.[4] In another category, the Qumran sect and John the Baptist supposedly diverge from traditional Judaism by using immersion for spiritual renewal.[5] Furthermore, the Rabbis are said to view immersion as simply a halakhic requirement in contrast to Pauline Christianity which regarded baptism as an initiation into a divine mystery.[6] However, while each of these Jewish groups had their distinctives, they are not as polarized as it seems. All of them hold the Torah to be sacred text and this forges a certain bond between their laws.

This study presents basic principles about ritual ablutions which can be identified across a wide range of texts from ancient Judaism. Three questions from the field of Ritual Studies will guide the discussion: (1) What was the practical function of ritual ablutions? (2) What symbolism was attached to ritual ablutions? (3) Was there any experiential character to ritual ablutions? While individual Jews may have answered these questions differently, a

3 Jacob Neusner, *The Judaism the Rabbis Take for Granted* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), 12, 18.

4 Jonathan D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (SBL Academic Biblica 23; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 35–41, suggests that references to purification in the Deuteronomistic History and in Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles could simply be metaphorical, a purging of the heart, as found in the Psalms (cf. Pss 26:6; 51) and prophets (cf. Jer 4:14; Ezek 36:25) and that washing for ritual purification was likely unknown in the time of the first Temple. Lawrence asks why the writers give details on the temple's construction but not on purification practices. He suggests that purity practices were inserted later into Tabernacle descriptions by Second Temple authors seeking to authenticate their own observance. In my view, this argument from silence is dangerous especially since washing is a routine, usually mundane, activity which would not necessarily be discussed in a narrative. Also, Lawrence overlooks the genre of these books, none of which are legal compilations or priestly handbooks. Furthermore, the authors do indicate a familiarity with the practice of washing for ritual purification (cf. 2 Sam 11:2; 2 Kgs 5:12–14), a practice common not only to Israel but attested throughout the ancient world; cf. James J. Preston, "Purification," in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd rev. ed.; ed. Lindsay Jones; 15 vols.; Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 11:7507–10.

5 Robert L. Webb, "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTTS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 222.

6 Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115–17, discusses the "compartmentalization" of ritual and moral purification among the early Rabbis. For Paul's view, see Rom 6:1–23 where baptism is associated with Jesus' death, cf. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 154.

cross-section of their texts support a certain complementary picture which comes to light upon close examination.[7]

2. Function

The definition of "ritual" has eluded ritual studies experts. Catherine Bell argues against a single, universal theory of ritual and emphasizes the variety of interpretations of the same ritual activity.[8] Roy Rappaport defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers."[9] However, even with this haze as to the definition and significance of ritual, scholars agree that ritual is in some way operative. A good example is a marriage. The ring is not only symbolic of the new union but it affects the marriage. The coronation ritual makes a new king.[10] As Rappaport puts it, "ritual contains within itself, not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but tacit social contract itself."[11]

Further studies have been helpful in unpacking the function of ritual. Arnold van Gennep, long ago outlined stages in rites of passage as (1) separation; (2) transition, and (3) reincorporation.[12] By means of these stages ritual can process an individual who becomes unacceptable to the community by first separating him from society temporarily and then returning him to the group. An example would be the convicted criminal who is first removed from the community, spends a transitionary period in prison, and is finally restored to society.

How do these sociological insights apply to the meaning(s) of ritual ablutions in ancient Judaism? To be sure, the most vulnerable item in the Israelite priestly system is the sanctuary, where God resides, and its sancta (cf.

7 Cf., for example, these conflicting interpretations for the origin of Christian baptism: Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 213, claims it was "originally derived from Jewish lustration rites of repentance for one's sins." Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 49–55, regards it as originally an initiation/conversion rite.

8 Catherine Bell, "Ritual" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (ed. Robert A. Segal; Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 406. Bell nevertheless admits to certain recurring activities to ritual (e.g., repetition, limited vocabulary, formality).

9 Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24, cf. 26–27: morality, sealing of social contract, representation of creation, generation of the sacred, order, experience of numinous, et al., are secondary derivations of ritual.

10 Ibid., 35; cf. also Bell, "Ritual," 404.

11 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 138.

12 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* [1909] (trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

Lev 7:20; 16:16–20). However, these items are placed at risk not just by improper priestly service, but also by the impurities of the people of Israel (cf. Num 19:20). Jacob Milgrom has argued that Israel's impurities, both moral and ritual, defile the sanctuary even from afar, and thus the people must maintain a certain level of purity even when not approaching the sanctuary.[13] Ritual ablutions are the most common mode of maintaining purity among Israel.[14]

According to the Torah, the purity laws of Israel protect not only the holiness of the sanctuary but they also effect a separation between them and non-Israel: "...I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean..." (Lev 20:24–25). The author of Exod 34:15–16 is concerned about the possibility of idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan inviting Israelites to worship and eat together: "If one invites you, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons," leading to idolatry and apostasy. Keeping ritual purity (in this case, a ritually pure diet) will guard Israel from social and eventual marital intercourse with her pagan neighbors. Indeed, because of this forced separation of people by ritual purity, it became imperative that the early Church, composed of both Jews and non-Jews, abolish the levitical pure food system (Acts 10:12–15; 15:29; cf. Col 2:16–22).

The inner workings of the levitical purity system reveal a process for reinstating an unacceptable person back into society and the function of ablutions conforms to van Gennep's "transition" stage cited above. Israelites are constantly becoming impure by various physical conditions and moral transgressions and having to be removed from the community. Handling certain impurities, such as burial of bodies, require a sort of "time out" to restore the person to "clean" society. Some impurities, such as scale disease or corpse contamination, require extensive processing with complicated procedures. For example, the person who has been healed of scale disease is inspected by a priest and asked to bathe among other rituals (Lev 14:8). This partial purification marks the person's admission back to the community but not into his house. After one week the individual bathes again and shaves and is allowed into his house (Lev 14:9). The final ceremony, the

[13] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 257.

[14] Jacob Neusner, "Contexts of Purification: The Halakhic Theology of Immersion—Mishnah-Tosefta Tractate Miqvaot in the Context of Tractates Tebul Yom and Parah," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6 (2003): 74. Neusner argues that ritual immersion in still water is meaningless and that only the daily cycle with its closure at sunset truly purifies a Jew. However, this is controverted by the fact that the scale diseased person of Lev 14 is called pure immediately after he bathes in water no matter what time of day (Lev 14:8–9). It is also controverted by Neusner's own recognition that sometimes ablutions are added or intensified in order to counteract the effect of impurity.

offering of sacrifices and blood daubing, occurs on the following day, and the individual is formally restored to the community. Thus on an ordinary, recurring basis, prescribed purification rites, including ritual ablutions, maintain community boundaries and provide a means of return to those who seek re-entry. Each ablution marks a stage in the transition process.

Victor Turner built on van Gennep's work and provides another angle to his three-stage hypothesis. He labels them (1) structure; (2) liminality; (3) revised structure.[15] Here, the liminal, or ambiguous period in the middle could be seen not only as restorational but as an entry key into a more desired circle, e.g., graduate school test or fraternity hazing initiation. If we apply Turner's stages to ritual ablutions, this would mean (1) the original community of an individual; (2) the liminal or transition stage in which the person is purified by ritual ablutions; and (3) not only restoration but entry into a new sphere of activity. In ancient Israel, priests perform ablutions in order to enter sacred space, the washing transferring them from the profane to the sacral realm. Priests and Levites are washed when they are inaugurated into service (Lev 8:6; Num 8:6–7). Israel performs ablutions before the divine encounter at Sinai (Exod 19:14). Thus, both van Gennep's and Turner's models work for biblical Israel. Purified persons can simply be restored to society or they can gain entry into a new sphere of activity.

So, what function do ritual ablutions serve in Second Temple Judaism? To be sure, ablutions before Temple entry were required, but a cross-section of Jewish texts reveals that the use of ablutions as social markers and transferers becomes more intense in this period. In addition to the simple reincorporation of a temporarily impure individual, e.g., due to menstruation or sexual intercourse, many cases follow Turner's model in which one gains entry to a new social group, one believed to have more direct access to the holiness of God. John the Baptist immersed those who would be his disciples (cf. Josephus' statement that they were "joined together by means of baptism," *Ant* 18.116–17). According to the Talmud, the early sages observed a formal procedure for the proselyte to enter Judaism through baptism, circumcision and sacrifice (*b. Ker.* 8b). Among the Essenes, ablutions marked rank: a member of lower standing would defile a member of higher standing simply by touching him (Josephus, *War* 2.150). The Essene novitiate had to submit to an introductory three-week period in which he was taught the laws of the sect (Josephus, *War* 2.138). Each week was marked by ritual washing and a level of acceptance into the community, first access to its pure food and then access to its pure drink. A similar process is reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 6:16–22; 7:20–23). As Lawrence Schiffman puts

[15] Victor Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," in *Secular Ritual* (ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), 36–52.

it, "All these stages [of initiation] serve to link the instruction in sectarian teachings with the initiation into the sect through the medium of ritual purity."[16] To utilize Turner's model, these stages are the liminal period before which a person is allowed entry into a sort of "gated community"; the washing ritual is a guard at the gate.[17] In all of these examples, ablutions serve to establish a new identity for a group of Jews which believed they had special access to God. In fact, for many of these Jews, much of the significance of the temple is transferred to the group; the people of God become his temple (4Q174 I, 6; 1 Cor 6:19).

In addition to marking off a new social identity it appears that in many cases ablutions also invite supernatural activity, transferring individuals into another level of holiness. For example, according to the Mishnah, the high priest performs multiple ablutions on Yom Kippur in preparation for mediating atonement (*m. Yoma* 3:3). The Dead Sea Scroll sectarians kept strict purity because they believed the angels were operating among them (1QM VII, 3–6; cf. 1QH XIX, 10–14).[18] And, Essenes performed purification in anticipation of prophetic revelation (Josephus, *War* 2.159).

Thus, Jewish sects in Second Temple times shared a certain basic outlook on the function of ritual ablutions. In all of the cases discussed above, Jews performed ablutions in order to shed ritual impurity and prepare for encounter with the sacred. Nevertheless, they differed as to the frequency of the ablutions and the level of purity necessary. No doubt, many Jews only performed ablutions in order to purify themselves before sacred festivals (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.285; John 18:28; *m. Hag* 3:6). But, apparently many others practiced ablutions habitually in order to mark off the closed fellowship of their group, especially at mealtimes, and to invite special access to God. While Jews differed with regard to who was an "outsider" (i.e., "Gentiles" or all, including Jews, who did not conform to the group's beliefs and

[16] Lawrence Schiffman, "Holiness and Sanctity in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *A Holy People: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Religious Communal Identity* (ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz; Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series 12; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 53–67. Among the Essenes, ablutions are necessary for a person who touches another in a lower grade of sanctity (*Wars* 2.150).

[17] Cf. discussion in Bell, "Ritual," 37.

[18] As Schiffman, "Holiness and Sanctity in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 56, explains of the Qumran Community (which I believe to be a group of Essenes), "Effectively, purity functioned in the life of the sect in a way very similar to its role in the temple—as a sign of greater sanctity and closeness to the divine. However, in addition, purity statutes served as a means of demarcation of levels of sanctity and, hence, sectarian status. This of course was its function as a boundary marker in the temple—here transformed to the life of the sect."

practices), in all of the examples cited above, the borders of group identity were marked, reinforced, and penetrated by ritual ablutions.

3. Symbolism

The second question regarding ablutions that Ritual Studies helps to address is, "What is the symbolic message, if any, behind ablutions?" That is, beyond the purely functional aspect of contributing to group identity and cohesion, what else is behind ritual ablutions in Second Temple Judaism? Socio-anthropologist Mary Douglas argued that a society's purity rituals form a symbolic language which is a mirror of its values. She claimed that purity in Israel had nothing to do with physical hygiene but symbolized order, wholeness and normality in society.[19] Applying Douglas' early work to ancient Judaism, Jacob Neusner argued that with the experience of ablutions and sunset "Israel returns to its natural condition of cleanness."[20] However, the problem here is that Israel's natural condition is not cleanness but uncleanness. Without purifications, Israel only generates greater cultural impurity, even as occurs in the physical realm. A person who never takes a bath will simply become more and more impure left in his natural state.

So, what symbolism might be attached to ritual ablutions in antiquity? Anthropologist Mircea Eliade examined ritual immersion in various cultures and concluded that it is universally associated with death and rebirth:

> Immersion is equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of the water implies both death and rebirth. Contact with water always brings a regeneration—on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a new birth, on the other because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential for life.[21]

In Mesopotamia, water is sprinkled on the diseased with the incantation, "As the water trickles away from his body so may the pestilence in his body trickle away." Ishtar is sprinkled with the "waters of life" and the primordial gods, Apsu and Tiamat are fresh and salt water, the sources of life.[22] In Egypt, multiple ablutions were performed on the dead to regenerate them

19 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

20 Neusner, "Contexts of Purification," 77.

21 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 130. Cf. Moshe Weinfeld, "Social and Cultic Institutions in the Priestly Source against Their Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1983), 114–15; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 335.

22 Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 960–62, for citations and further examples.

into the afterlife as well as on the living, several times daily: "The sacred water, like the primordial sea from which the world came in the beginning, is regenerative: whoever is sprinkled with it feels himself invaded by a new power, raised from this life below to the eternal world where the gods reside."[23]

While the above examples can be interpreted to associate ritual immersion with a passage from death to life, is that the symbolism in ancient Judaism? Ritual studies experts caution that since ritual is based on repetition, formality, and little verbalization, it is not always possible to ascertain symbolism behind it and often the ritual is not fully understood by its performers.[24] Nevertheless, Jesper Sorensen suggests that meaning in ritual can be teased out by combining perceptual clues (e.g., water must touch the purificant's head) with symbolic interpretations given by the particular group and that is the approach followed here.[25]

By looking for clues in biblical literature, Milgrom brings certain principles regarding ritual ablutions in the Hebrew Bible to light.[26] First of all, death is the most potent of the three categories of biblical impurity (i.e., death, scale disease and sexual discharges). The corpse cannot be purified and contact with it affects persons and items even second and third hand. That is, those who touch certain items in contact with the corpse become impure and require ablutions. Also, blood and the color red are significant in the purification of corpse impurity and forbidden animals are impure only when they are dead. Second, as Milgrom has argued, scale disease, with its visual deterioration on the body of the diseased seems to reflect the dead among the living and thus the person is excluded from human habitation. Third, as David Wright has pointed out, sexual discharges not only concern the loss of life-giving fluids but along with death they emphasize the fact of human mortality as opposed to the divine essence which shares no sexual processes and is not subject to the life/death cycle.[27] Thus, Milgrom's argument for a death-life struggle underlying Israelite purity law

[23] Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Grove, 1960), 79. In the coronation of the pharaoh, water issues from vessels as strings of beads in the shape of the ankh, the symbol of life to transfer to the new king, Alan H. Gardiner, "The Baptism of Pharaoh," *JEA* 36 (1950): 12.

[24] In fact, in some cases, the ritual may give rise to the belief, Jesper Sorensen, "Acts that Work: A Cognitive Approach to Ritual Agency," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 19 (2007): 297. Also, see Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 12, who emphasizes that rituals and their meanings are subject to change since they are "flowing processes, not just rigid structures or momentary events."

[25] Sorensen, "Acts that Work," 294.

[26] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 766–68.

[27] David P. Wright, "Clean and Unclean (OT)," *ABD* 6:729–41.

has merit. The forces of impurity and death threaten to overcome the people of holiness and life but through ritual ablutions, among other requirements, Israel expresses hope in the life-giving Creator.

Post-biblical Jewish texts add other clues to those found in the Hebrew Bible. First, the Mishnah, although compiled ca. 200 CE, often describes Second Temple times, especially in the matters of purity and cult.[28] The sages list several categories of water which can be used. Water of still pools and cisterns are at the bottom of the list while the most effective water is מַיִם חַיִּים "living water" or that which flows from a spring (*m. Miq.* 1:8). This connection between water and life is maximized by the New Testament where Jesus' gift is compared to "living water" and the promise of eternal life (cf. John 4:14; 7:37–39; Rev 7:17; 21:6). Indeed this preference for מַיִם חַיִּים comes from Scripture where it is prescribed for the purification of especially potent impurities (cf. Lev 14:5, 50; 15:13). מַיִם חַיִּים is part of the prescription for *me niddah*, a special purgation water recipe used primarily for purification from corpse impurity (Num 19:17).

Another clue to the symbolism behind immersion lies in the rabbinic instruction that only water which comes directly from a natural source and has not been subject to human intervention is effective for purification. To this end, the Rabbis require that immersion pools be filled directly by a natural source of water, e.g., rain, or that they be connected by a pipe to such a source of water; this reservoir of water is referred to as *otzar*. This direct flow of purification water reflects the belief that only God can truly provide purification for his people and thus only water which comes directly from the Creator, not drawn by human hands, symbolizes the divine role (Sifra *shemini sheratzim* 9:1; 11:7).[29] Archaeologists have demonstrated that such *miqveh/otzar* combinations existed much earlier than rabbinic literature, and that the practice was current in Second Temple times.[30]

Finally, water must be sufficient to cover a person. This requirement no doubt stems from Lev 15:16 where the couple who has just had sexual relations must bathe the whole body in water. The Dead Sea Scrolls echo this concern for sufficient water (CD 10:10–13). The Rabbis even specify an

[28] Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (vol. I–III; Leiden: Brill, 1971).

[29] For full discussion, cf. Hannah K. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis: Biblical Foundations* (SBLDS 143; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 134–35.

[30] Ron Reich, "Synagogue and Ritual Bath during the Second Temple and the Period of the Mishna and Talmud," in *Synagogues in Antiquity* (ed. A. Kasher et al.; Jerusalem: Izhak ben Yad Zvi [Hebrew], 1987), 205–12; also idem, "*Miqwa'ot* at Khirbet Qumran and the Jerusalem Connection," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after Their Discovery 1947–1997* (ed. Lawrence Schiffman et al.; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society), 728–31.

amount, 40 *seahs*, which will ensure the complete coverage of the purifying person even to the ends of the fingertips, and indeed, immersion pools in Israel from Second Temple times reveal the capacity to hold such large amounts of water. Thus, the act of complete submersion in water, most likely naked or wearing just a loincloth, must have expressed not only cleansing and rejuvenation but also a certain vulnerability.[31]

It can be argued that there is no proof that the average Jew would have considered all of the symbolism when performing routine ritual immersion. Be that as it may, the point is rather that Jewish texts from this period reveal an underlying symbolism which should not go unnoticed. The emphasis on water and life, baptism and rejuvenation is present not only in the foundational text of Scripture but also in post-biblical texts. This attests to a certain mode of thinking on ablutions across the strata of Second Temple Jewish groups.

I would answer the question on symbolic value for ritual ablutions in Second Temple Judaism then as follows: The message of ritual washing of the body is that the human being, by definition, is a finite and limited creation which generates hindrances to divine access which must be habitually removed especially before contact with the sacred. Water is the universal cleaner and works well as a symbolic purgative for what is unacceptable on the socio-cultural as well as the physical level. Ritual ablutions in Second Temple Judaism symbolize the necessity of divine rejuvenation of the human being which, in contrast to the deity, is subject to deterioration and mortality.

4. Experience

According to socio-anthropologists, ritual ablutions do more than symbolize; they make ideas concrete. As Rappaport puts it, "corporeal representation gives weight to the incorporeal."[32] Gary Selby applies Rappaport's insight to baptism,

> [B]aptism does more than symbolize or 'reflect' ideas or state of consciousness; it also creates them or makes them real, taking what would otherwise be theological abstractions and making them present and tan-

[31] While the Rabbis order immersion to be performed naked, this was not necessarily the case among the varieties of Second Temple Judaism. Essenes apparently wore a loincloth (Josephus, *Wars* 2.161) and perhaps others, especially those who performed the ritual publicly, e.g., John's followers, did as well.

[32] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 153.

> gible in the experience of the worshipper...the performer incarnates the message.[33]

But, is this true for the varieties of Second Temple Judaism? Did ritual immersion entail some kind of spiritual experience?

In his examination of the biblical priestly material, Milgrom insists that the priests have rejected all possibility of potency in their water rituals: "Water is not regenerative, only purificatory and even in this latter aspect, is devoid of any magical component. That is, water purifies not inherently but only by the will of God."[34] Milgrom regards biblical ablutions only as a technical process in which layers of impurity are removed one-by-one with each washing. On this view, ablution carries no hint of regeneration and is a "wordless ceremony; it is unaccompanied by prayer."[35] But, is this the predominant view in Second Temple Jewish literature?

Scholars are currently engaged in a lively debate over the definition of religious experience: Is it pathos only? Does it have a cognitive element? But the question here relates to the experience in the view of the participants; how did they interpret their performance of ritual ablutions? Following Jonathan Z. Smith's challenge, more focus should be, not simply on an objective analysis of function and symbolism in a ritual but also on the view from within the group itself, i.e., how did constituents imagine and understand what they were doing?[36] Thus, how did Jews in Second Temple times interpret their experience of ritual ablutions? Was it just a functional ritual which marked the shedding of ritual impurity or the entry into Temple courts for a festival? Or, did the experience carry any vibrancy? Apparently, for many Jews there was an experiential character to ritual immersion that went beyond merely fulfilling technical requirements.

Milgrom may or may not be right about the biblical priests, but the message of regeneration and spiritual renewal is maintained in many varieties of Second Temple Judaism. In order to discover what this experience entailed, one has only to listen to the testimonies of the participants.

[33] Gary Selby, "(Em)bodying the Faith: Baptism as Ritual Communication," *ResQ* 48 (2006): 2, 5.

[34] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 963.

[35] Ibid. The Torah never describes water itself as "pure." Only once does the term "living water" (Lev 15) occur except when used with other elements, e.g., hyssop, cedar, as in the red cow rite, and Milgrom thinks this is a vestige of pagan theurgic rites.

[36] Smith defines ritual as the dramatization of how things should be not how they are. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); cf. also Bell, "Ritual," 403.

4.1. Spiritual Renewal

For some participants, immersion in water "dramatizes," to use Turner's term, the need for innocence.[37] In some apocryphal texts, the penitent immerses in water as he pleads for forgiveness. In the Life of Adam and Eve 6–7, Adam says to Eve, "Stand clothed in the water up to [your] neck, and let no speech come out of your mouth, because we are unworthy to entreat the Lord since our lips are unclean." Similarly, the Sibylline Oracle 4:165–68 calls for immersion of the whole body in rivers followed by prayer for forgiveness. In the same vein, the author of the Testament of Levi explains that it is in the water that divine cleansing takes place: "And the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him in the water" (*t. Levi* 18:7). Levi is obligated to bathe before he prays that the Lord make known to him the "spirit of holiness" (*t. Levi* 2:3; cf. also Jdt 12:7–8). Thus, spiritual renewal was often expected during the course of ritual washing.

The Qumran authors take the biblical purity laws as mandatory and even add to them on occasion, but it is clear from several texts that ablutions were not just considered a technical duty but a means to spiritual renewal as well.[38] According to the Community Rule, new members are cleansed by their humble repentance and purification in cleansing waters (1QS III, 6–9). In 4Q414 God is described as the one who wills "to purify his people in cleansing water" (10 VII, 1). According to the Damascus Document, it is only after ritual purification that the word of a sinner is trusted (CD X, 2). In the Thanksgiving Hymns (*Hodayot*), the sinner washes his hands before he entreats God for mercy; ritual purification anticipates forgiveness:

> And because I know that You have recorded the spirit of the righteous, I myself have chosen to purify my hands (להבר כפי) in accordance with your wil[l]. ...And I entreat your favor by that spirit which You have placed within [me], to fulfill your [mer]cy with [your] servant for[ever], to purify me (לטהרני) by your holy spirit, and to bring me near by your will according to the greatness of your mercy.... (1QH VIII, 18–21; cf. also 11Q5 XIX, 13–14).[39]

[37] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

[38] A different view is expressed by Hartmut Stegemann, "The Qumran Essenes—Local Members of the Main Jewish Union in Late Second Temple Times," in *The Madrid Qumran Congress. Volume I* (ed. J. Trebolle-Barrera and L. V. Montaner; STDJ 11; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 110. "Nor did the bath have any sacramental meaning such as forgiveness of sins, but provided only ritual purity." The dichotomy between ritual and spiritual here seems overstated.

[39] In 4Q texts divine blessing comes only after washing while the cleansed person was standing in the water (4Q512; 4Q414 2–3 II, 3–5, "And then he shall enter the wa-

Here the individual is purifying himself in anticipation of divine cleansing. As Joseph Baumgarten puts it, "Far from being merely external acts for the removal of ritual uncleanliness, the purifications were viewed as the means by which the holy spirit restores the corporate purity of Israel."[40]

In fact, already in the Hebrew Bible, the priestly texts notwithstanding, ritual ablutions facilitated access to God and spiritual renewal. Both Job and Jacob order their families to wash themselves before attending expiatory sacrifices (Job 1:6; Gen 35:1–3). The Psalmist expresses his guilt and need for forgiveness in terms of washing, as he pleads, "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps 51:7). Similarly, Naaman's healing and change of heart were preceded by bathing in the Jordan River (2 Kgs 5:14). All of these ablutions are in quest of spiritual renewal.

In New Testament Judaism this attitude continues. John pleaded with his audience to repent and be baptized (Mark 1:3–4). Paul too exhorted putting off the old creature, and putting on the new by baptism (Rom 6:4; Gal 3:27; cf. Titus 3:5). The thought expressed is that the old creature is damaged, problematic, deteriorating, imperfect; ablutions admit that and plead for God's intervention and renewal. The physicality of ritual expresses and effects change in a way words cannot. The recognition of a deteriorating creation and need for renewal was not just a Hellenistic idea but one embedded in the texts of ancient Judaism. So, for many in Second Temple Judaism, water was viewed as a means to renewal, both physical and spiritual. Although compiled at a later date, the rabbinic Midrash sums up the earlier attitude toward water and washing in this statement about the Torah: "Like water, the Torah [it] refreshes, renews life, cleanses from defilement and purifies the morally defiled" (*Cant. R.* 1:2).

4.2. Divine Access

From the evidence of a cross-section of post-biblical texts, many Jews in Second Temple times considered ablutions instrumental not only in atonement rituals but also in gaining access to divine revelation and power. For example, Essenes purified themselves in expectation of prophetic revelation (Josephus, *Wars* 2.159). The Dead Sea sect, in order to keep the angels living

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ter...And he shall say in response, 'Blessed are Y[ou...] ....'"). Thus, the act of immersion dramatizes and expresses the need of divine grace and intervention by the community (4Q414 2 II, 5–6; 4Q512 II, 42–44).

40 Joseph M. Baumgarten, "The Law and Spirit of Purity at Qumran," in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Second Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian Origins. II. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 104.

among them, required extra purifications, more than specified by Scripture (1Q28a II, 3–11; 1QM VII, 6).[41] Jesus' baptism prompted divine manifestation in the form of a dove while he was still standing in the water (cf. Matt 3:16-17). Although recorded much later than Second Temple times, rabbinic literature still carries the notion of supererogatory ablutions. According to one legend, Moses immersed before the divine revelation and eventually had to separate permanently from his wife so that he could be constantly pure and ready for additional revelation (*Sifre Num.* 102; *b. Shab* 87a, 88b; *ARN* A 2, p. 10, Schechter; *Tanhuma Zav* 13).[42]

Ablutions in anticipation of divine actions have Scriptural precedents, most notably, in the ablutions of Israel before the divine revelation at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19:14). On this occasion, Israel was told to abstain from sexual relations and launder their clothes. Many ancient Jewish interpreters assume bathing to be included in this command.[43] Indeed, washing anticipates supernatural experience in several biblical instances. The rolling back of the Jordan river, and the manifestation of divine power at the Temple dedication too were preceded by ritual ablutions.[44] One purpose of ritual ablutions then was to facilitate access to the deity, to mediate holiness into Israel.

Performing ablutions in the pursuit of a sacred encounter is apparently not just a Jewish phenomenon. Fritz Stolz, after examining Mesopotamian texts, concludes,

> Cleansing the body is ... a common human technique to mark the transformation from the natural to the cultural state. These techniques serve

[41] As Schiffman, "Holiness and Sanctity in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 57, says, "These purity rules and their connection with the initiation rites were what made the Qumran sect truly a Holy House." The sect "pre-enacted the future messianic banquets in their communal meals...The sectarians strove to live in perfect holiness so that they would live to experience the eschatological battles and tribulations of the dawning of the messianic era and the promised glory of the end of days." Ibid., 60–61.

[42] More discussion and references can be found in Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin; 2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003) 1:701.

[43] Philo, *de Decalogo* 11; *Mekh.* RS 96–97; *baHodesh* 6, 63b–64a; *Yitro* 3; b. *Yeb* 46a; *Ker.* 9a; *Ger.* 2; *y. Shab* 9, 12a; cf. 11Q19 45:7–10 where temple entry appears to be influenced by the Sinaitic model.

[44] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 965–66, demonstrates that *hitqadesh*, generally translated "sanctify," is the "non-priestly technical term for purification through bathing in preparation for receiving the presence of the Lord the following day, either in the sanctuary or in a theophany."

> also as transformation from a 'normal' to an 'extraordinary', from a profane to a holy state."[45]

This observation seems applicable to the ablutions in Israel as well. For example, from a psychological perspective, Israel's washings helped her to prepare for divine encounter at Sinai, i.e., to move "from a profane to a holy state."

The use of ablutions to gain access to the sacred beyond the requirements of Scripture is evident both in physical and literary data from Second Temple times. Eyal Regev argues from archaeological remains, i.e., number and placement of ritual baths on the Temple mount, that worshippers added extra purifications for entry into the Israelite and women's courts even though they were already pure.[46]

Thus, ritual ablutions in Judaism filled more than a sociological function or symbol. They also provided a sense of control by inviting the deity to be present and effecting change personally and physically. In a way, the ritual puts the individual's prayer into physical form. As Catherine Bell says, performing the ritual displays that the "human realm is not entirely subordinate" to the spiritual realm.[47] Indeed, the Rabbis make the point of human intention in ritual explicit.[48] Unless there is human deliberation and activity in the process, purification does not take place.[49] So, for many Jews in Second Temple period times, at least those described in the texts above, ritual

45 Fritz Stoltz, "Dimensions and Transformations of Purification Ideas," in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions* (ed. Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa; Numen Book Series 83; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 228. See also Petra von Gemundern, "Die Urchristliche Taufe und der Umgang mit den Affekten," in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions* (ed. Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa; Numen Book Series 83; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 115, who argues that the early Christian notion of putting on the new creature in Christ reflected a psychological, not just a social, change.

46 Eyal Regev, "The Ritual Baths near the Temple Mount and Extra-Purification before Entering the Temple City," *IEJ* 55 (2005): 199–204; Yonatan Adler, "The Ritual Baths near the Temple Mount and Extra Purification before Entering the Temple Courts: A Reply to Eyal Regev," *IEJ* 56 (2006): 209–15, opposes this view by stating that these purifications were required by the Rabbis before entry to the Temple to remove rabbincly defined, not biblical, impurities. In either case, however, individuals have designed extra purifications in order to meet the challenge and anticipation of encountering the sacred.

47 Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 120.

48 Without human intention, for example, the deliberate watering of crops or produce cannot even become susceptible to impurity. Likewise, without the proper intention and attention to numerous instructions regarding the nature of the water, purification is not accomplished.

49 Neusner "Contexts of Purification," 68–86, argues that the major point of the rabbinic purity system is that man can overcome death by deliberate action.

ablutions were a deliberate activity which anticipated divine access and human transformation.

4.3. Technicality

Some Jewish texts give the impression that no experience beyond the simple observance of the ritual was expected by ancient Jews. Like the priests of Leviticus, the rabbis of the Mishnah do not discuss life-giving qualities of immersion. No talk of regeneration or renewal comes into their recital of ritual purification laws. The same is true of some of the Qumran documents, e.g., the Temple Scroll. The writers write in the same vein as the priests of the Torah emphasizing correct observance rather than spiritual experience. In fact, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's disciples were aghast that he would describe the red heifer ritual to a non-Jew as a magical practice, but later, the rabbi explained that he was just speaking in a way the pagan could understand but that actually he rejected any efficacious power accompanying the rite (*Num. R.* 19:4). In light of the many texts cited above which seem to suggest the opposite, one can perhaps detect a polemic against the possibility of magic. Another possible explanation would be simply the recognition that the genre of texts like the Temple Scroll is legal and not homiletical; spiritual experience is simply not a topic. As noted above, other rabbinic texts do regard ablutions as instrumental to divine access.

To answer the question regarding religious experience connected to ritual ablutions, Second Temple texts indicate that across a variety of Jewish sects it was considered a key to divine access. Whether in pursuit of spiritual renewal, divine revelation or miraculous power, ablutions were often used beyond the simple requirements of Scripture. While some texts are opposed to a non-technical view of ablutions, their witness must be balanced with the large number of testimonies to the contrary.

5. Conclusion

The interfacing of Ritual and Jewish Studies helps significantly to analyze the processes of ritual ablutions and its meanings. In the case of Second Temple Judaism, it becomes clear that like other rituals, ablutions carry a rich density of meaning. They often function not only to protect sanctuaries and their sancta but also social boundaries, the group itself becoming the "house" which receives God's holiness. For several Jewish authors of this period, ablutions symbolize the divine rejuvenation of the mortal, human being and dramatize a passage from death to life. With regard to experience, the matter is more complex, but for many Jews ablutions were

expected to facilitate access to the deity for spiritual renewal and divine blessing.