

When I was very young I had a Bible that was given to me, I assume, by my parents. In the front of the Bible was the page that had my name and the name of the person who gave me the bible, then in the back was a page that had important dates – birth date, wedding date, and of course, your baptism date. Being quite young, I never got past the birth date, and being that after leaving home religion was - for me - mostly a social thing, the Bible was lost and soon forgotten. In 1978 I met Angie, and knowing that she was a “baptized member of THE CHURCH”, and not wanting to be unequally yoked, I thought I’d better get baptized. So, I dutifully began the process – the counseling, reading the required books, etc. I say I began the process, because I didn’t complete it. It just seemed so hard, so I let it slip. Then in 1979, the new pastor of the church, knowing that I was soon to get married, mentioned to me in passing, “Don’t you think it’s about time to get baptized?”. “Yes it is” I thought and I began in earnest to finish what I had started. This new pastor was much more merciful to me than the one I had previously counseled with, so with just one short counseling session the date was set and I got baptized. “Boy, that’s over with” I thought.

As time went on, I noticed that people would refer to the time that they got baptized as a significant marker in life. They knew the date just like they knew their birthday. I always felt somewhat embarrassed when someone would ask me – “When were you baptized”, because I didn’t know the date! “Early February 1979” I would answer, determined that I would call someone someday to find out the date . . . which I never did.

Baptism is important. For many people, it marks the time when they “gave their life to The Lord”. It’s the day they were “saved”. But baptism is more than just an event. It’s often called “an outward show of an inner change in heart”. So, if baptism is not coupled with the “inner change in heart”, as was my case, is it really baptism?

There are many approaches we could take to the study of baptism, but for the purpose of this series of talks, we will approach it from the perspective the Exodus story. But first, let’s take a look at the Biblical definition of *baptism*.

The first place in the Bible where we see the word “baptize” is, of course, in the New Testament with the baptism of Yeshua¹. Being that *baptize* is simply the English transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo* (Strong’s #907), it’s natural that we would not see the same word in the Tnakh, the Old Testament. Whereas most Greek words in the New Testament were *translated* into English, the word *baptizo* was *transliterated*. Therefore, we are required to look up the meaning of the word to find out what the text is talking about.

The Strong’s definition of *baptizo* is “*to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge*”. In the Greek, the word has no spiritual application. In fact, there are a number of ancient Greek secular writings that mention ships that were baptized, i.e. they sank.

If we trace this word back through the Septuagint, we find the Hebrew word *taval* (Strong’s #2881). This is the word that’s used in Exodus to describe how the blood from the Passover lamb was to be applied to the doorpost of the house –

^{NKJ} Exodus 12:22 "And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, *dip* it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning.

It’s also the word used to describe what Naaman did in order to be healed of leprosy –

¹ Matthew 3

2 Kings 5:14 ¹⁴ Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

In both cases, this word *taval* is translated *baptizo* in the Septuagint. So, in the case of the Passover, we would be correct in saying that the hyssop was *baptized* in the blood. It's also important to realize that the dipping is not what's important, instead, it's the result that comes from the dipping.

So if the word itself has no spiritual significance, then what's so important about being *baptized*? If we look again at the first time the word is used in the Bible – Yeshua's baptism – we see that the writer simply states that Yeshua was baptizing. He doesn't describe what's going on; he assumes you know what's going on, and since we find that people from all over the land of Israel were making the journey to the Jordan River to get baptized², it's obvious that the Jewish people in the first century did have an understanding of baptism. So, contrary to common thought, *baptism* is not a New Testament concept. To understand *baptism*, we must go to the Tnakh.

Going back to the Hebrew word *taval*, we find that it first occurs in Genesis 37 –

Genesis 37:31-32 ³¹ So they took Joseph's tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and *dipped* the tunic in the blood. ³² Then they sent the tunic of many colors, and they brought it to their father and said, "We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?"

What was their purpose in *dipping* Joseph's coat in the blood? It was to serve as a *sign* of their deception, that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. In this case, it was the proof to substantiate their deception - it was not the deception.

The next place we see *taval* is the first place it is translated *baptizo* in the Septuagint – Exodus 12:22. In this case the hyssop was dipped in blood that's in the basin, the threshold³ of the door, and the blood was painted onto the door posts and lintel over the door of their house. Thus, when the Israelites walked through the door into their house, they *passed through the blood*. Since blood *outside the body* is associated with death, then those who passed through the blood were in essence *dead*, and since you can't kill a dead person, the destroyer passed over the homes of those who had passed through the blood⁴. Thus baptism can be associated with death.

Continuing with the Exodus story we see that Israel passed through the water, the Red Sea. The water was walled up on both sides. This had to have been a frightening experience; even more so the further they got from the shore. Here they were – water on both sides, towering over their head. At any time, whatever was holding the water back could have released and they could have all been killed. On the other hand, if they made it to the other side, they could enjoy a new life as free men and women.

Paul likens what happened to them as a baptism -

^{NKJ} 1 Corinthians 10:1 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ² all were *baptized* into Moses in the cloud and in the sea . . .

Notice that they were baptized in the *cloud and* in the sea. As we know, God placed a cloud to lead them during the day and a pillar of fire to lead at night. But the text says that they went through the sea at night. In addition, nearly every time you see the word *cloud* associated with YHVH, the cloud is a *thick* cloud, and even though the fire was for light to the Israelites, was that light for those on the shore or for all of them, even those in the sea? Light or dark, for anyone who has had to drive through dense fog, you know how disconcerting it

² Matthew 3:5-7; the text indicates people from all over Judea were coming to get baptized

³ *caph* (Strong's 5592) – the threshold of the door (see Judges 19:27), in ancient middle eastern cultures it was common to make sacrifices at the door (Leviticus 1:3)

⁴ See Brad Scott's discussion on this subject - <http://www.wildbranch.org/teachings/lessons/lesson137.html>

can get – you don't know what's ahead of you, you can't see off to the side, you're only aware of what's immediately surrounding you. If you're on foot, it's easy to get turned around, and if it's dark, it's even worse. If indeed they were surrounded by the cloud as well as the water, with no ability to even see the sky, they may have thought they were walking through a valley of death.

But as we know, they didn't die. Instead, they emerged on the other side as a free people, just in time to see the waters close in on their pursuers. Thus the same waters that brought them freedom, killed their enemy. With their enemy dead, they were able to take on a new life. Their status had changed. On one side of the water, they were slaves; on the other side, they were free. It's as if they were *born again!* And for the second time in a week, a *tavel*, an immersion had changed their life.

Thus far we see that baptism symbolizes both life and death, as well as a change in status.

Another case where a change in status is associated with baptism is in the case of a Jewish wedding. The ancient Jewish wedding custom is a study within itself – far too much to cover here, but briefly – when it has been determined that a couple is going to be married, they settle on the terms of the marriage, the *ketuba*, and then a *bride price* is paid by the groom to the parents of the bride. This, in effect, *purchases* the bride from her father. The next step is *ritual immersion*. Some say that this step is taken to purify the bride, but others say it symbolizes the *change in status* of the bride. She is no longer bound to her father and is now awaiting betrothal to her soon to be husband.

This is very similar to the case of Israel after going through the sea. God had indicated His intent to marry Israel in Exodus 6 when he said "*I will take you as My people, and I will be your God.*" (Exodus 6:7). He then offered the firstborn of the Egyptians to Pharaoh in exchange for Israel's hand⁵. That was the bride price. Israel was then immersed in the sea, slaves of Pharaoh on one side, free to marry on the other.

How then, do we apply this understanding to our Salvation Cycle? Quite simply, to be a follower of the God of Israel, you must let your old self die and be raised up a new man, and what better way to illustrate that than with water.

In practically every case where we see the word *baptize* in the New Testament (*tavel* in the Tnakh), it's associated with water. Water is a remarkable liquid. Though it's one of the simplest forms of matter (H₂O), it's one of the most unusual. Water is the only type of matter that expands as it gets colder, the only liquid that will evaporate at both temperature extremes. It will dissolve practically anything given enough time, and is considered essential to life. In fact, scientists, in their effort to find life on other planets, look first for water. On the other hand, water is associated with death since, if humans stay under water long enough, they will certainly die. We know that God used water to destroy all mankind except for Noah and his family, and then used water again to make the covenant sign⁶ that He would never do it again. Therefore, baptism is associated with death and with life as well as with cleansing.

Israel needed to rid itself of the slave mentality. Think about it . . . as slaves your life is very structured. You are expected to work as directed, and in return, you will be fed and housed. You don't really have to think for yourself because someone is always thinking for you, and if it is found that you might be thinking (especially about how you might be able to make your situation better), you may be severely reprimanded. God cannot work with a slave mentality. He needs individuals who think and reason; people who have a desire for a better life and are willing to step out and reach for it. God does not want people who are simply happy with the status-quo.

⁵ *Isaiah 43:3 For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place.*

⁶ A rainbow is simply the refraction of the sun's light through water vapor. Shortly after a thunderstorm, when the sun begins to appear as the clouds break, the humidity is near 100%. Thus sun's light passing through the water droplets in the air refract into the colors of the rainbow.

Going through the Red Sea was an act of faith. The Israelites had a choice – they could follow Moses and YHWH with the hope of freedom ahead, or they could turn back, surrender to the Egyptians, and be assured of a life of slavery for themselves and their children. In this case, they chose freedom. The slavery aspect of their life *died* in the waters of the Red Sea and they were *resurrected, born again*, as free men, able to serve a benevolent king. Unfortunately, their free man mentality didn't last long and they quickly began to look back at Egypt.

Ritual immersion is mentioned numerous times in the Tnakh. It is required of the priests before they do their service in the tabernacle. It's required of anyone who becomes unclean through contact with blood or a dead body. By the time of the first century, it was required before anyone could approach the Temple, whenever a person felt the need to repent of a low point in his life, and it also became a ritual in the process of becoming a convert to Judaism. In every case, it pictured a person becoming fresh and new . . . born again.

In every person's salvation cycle, they reach a point when they recognize they are in bondage and in need of renewal. Once they recognize their redeemer, and realize that He has saved them from a life of bondage, they must make that commitment to their new life by letting the old life die. Baptism doesn't save you, baptism is what saved people do.

It was not until I had been baptized in the church for over 20 years that I realized what baptism actually meant. On a Sunday morning, shortly before the beginning of the fall festival season, my wife and I, along with a number of others in our Torah study group, met south of Tyler on the shores of Lake Palestine, and witnessed each other immerse in the lake's *living waters*. Since that time, my wife and I have immersed a number of times as a recommitment to the salvation we've received through Messiah Yeshua.

Shalom Alecheim!