



Baptism and the Bride of Messiah

by Tim Kelley

In a little over a week we'll be celebrating the beginning of a new month – the sixth month of the year which on the Hebrew calendar is called Elul. Like most of months in the Hebrew calendar, the name is not Hebrew, but was brought by Judah from the Babylonian captivity. Elul (**לול**) is actually an Akkadian¹ word that means *harvest*, and according to Jewish tradition, the word is an acronym for **אני לדודי לדודי לי** - "Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li" –

^{KJV} **Song of Solomon 6:3** I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine . . .

Thus in the Jewish mind, this month has overtones of a marriage.

The Bible is a story about a wedding. The concept of a man taking a woman and having children to populate the earth is one of the first pictures Yahweh provides us:

^{ESV} **Genesis 2:24** Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

One of the greatest wedding stories of the Old Testament is that of Isaac and Rebecca (Gen. 24). In this story, Abraham sends his trusted servant Eliezer to find a bride for his son Isaac. Eliezer is instructed to not take this bride from among the Canaanites, but to go to Abraham's own people and take a bride for his son. As a result of miraculous intervention, Eliezer finds Rebecca. The story goes on to say that Isaac loved her from the beginning (Gen. 24:67).

The Biblical concept of a wedding is further confirmed in the words of the Apostle Paul as he describes the relationship between a man and a woman:

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 5:31-32** "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³² This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

There are many other references in the Old and New Testaments that show that the relationship between Yahweh's son Yeshua (Jesus) and that of the body of believers is a marriage relationship, and because the season that we'll soon be entering does carry the concept of a wedding, I want to spend a few minutes discussing one of the very important, though often misunderstood, aspects of the ancient Hebrew wedding – *baptism*, and how baptism is a very important part of another theme of this month – *Teshuva*, or in English – *repentance*.

How does baptism fit into the Hebrew wedding? To understand, we'll take a brief look at the ancient Jewish wedding customs since they're derived from the Biblical picture.

In Judaism, the marriage ceremony has two parts – *betrothal* and *consummation*. In ancient times, the young man's father would search for a bride for his son. Oftentimes that search would begin at his son's birth with the father continually scanning the greater Jewish community for the perfect maiden. Sometimes his son and his future bride would grow up as playmates. When the son became of age, and if the father had decided on a bride for his son, the father would go to the maiden's father, and if he was willing to have his daughter marry the young man, a bride price was agreed on, and either the son or his father would ask the maiden to marry him. She, of course, had the option to say no.

¹ A Semitic language used in Ancient Babylonian

Baptism and the Bride of Messiah

If she agreed to marry, the two young people would sign a *ketubah* (a marriage contract dictating what was expected from each party) and seal the deal with a shared glass of wine . . . signifying that they were now in covenant with each other. At this point, they were legally married. She takes her husband's name, and to break the union would require a *get*, a bill of divorce.

Though they were married, they had not consummated the marriage, nor did they live together. Instead, the groom would go back to his father's house to prepare the *chuppah*, the house or marriage chamber where they would later consummate their marriage. The bride, on the other hand, would begin to prepare for the marriage. She would learn and practice all the things that she knew of that would please her husband . . . what he likes to eat, his daily schedule, and the various aspects of life that would help her to be a part of his life.

Shortly after the betrothal, she would perform a ceremony that would mark her change of status - that from being under the covering of her father to being under the covering of her husband. That ceremony was a ritual immersion, or as we call it today – baptism.

In the Jewish world, baptism signified a number of things, and thus there were many baptisms. For instance, after a woman's cycle, she would be immersed thus signifying that she was now *ritually pure*. If a man had touched a dead body, he would do the same thing. In each case, the baptism marked the *change of status* . . . before he was unclean, but after the baptism, he was clean. For the Jewish maiden who was recently betrothed, the baptism marked her change in status from being the daughter of her father, to being the wife of her husband. Where before her primary concern was to please her father, now her primary concern is to please her husband. She is no longer simply a daughter, she is now a wife.

This same picture is, in many respects, portrayed in the history of the Hebrew people. Yahweh went to Israel's father - Abraham - and told him he would give him the land of Canaan for the hand of his daughter (Abraham's future descendants - Israel). Abraham agreed.

Years later, YHVH formally proposed to Israel at Mount Sinai by providing a ketuba in the form of the the Ten Commandments and associated covenant. Israel, the bride, agreed to it (Exodus 19 - 24) and after agreeing to the covenant, representatives of Israel ate and drank (a glass of wine) with God and confirmed the covenant (Exodus 24:9-11).

But where does baptism fit in to this picture? There are no perfect analogies - all break down in some ways. This analogy breaks down in that the bride (Israel) had already immersed herself. She did this when she went through the Red Sea. Paul makes a direct relationship here between Israel going through the Red Sea and 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, ³ all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Israel – the bride – was baptized when they went out of Egypt and were forced to make a decision, go down into a watery grave – the Red Sea - or be taken slaves again by Pharaoh. As we know, they chose to go through the sea. They chose to trust in and follow the one who had delivered them up to that point. In effect, they (at least for a moment) put their old life behind and were “born again”. Instead of being slaves to Pharaoh, they are now slaves to YHVH, and when they got to Mount Sinai, they were willing to enter into covenant with Him.

So, in the case of ancient Israel, the pattern is reversed in this one aspect. Instead of the maiden becoming betrothed, signing a ketuba, then being baptized, Israel was baptized before signing the ketuba.

Baptism and the Bride of Messiah

What part does baptism play in the season of Teshuva? In many ways all we have to do is to think back at the time when we were engaged to be married. During that time, men generally get giddy when they see their fiancé do the little things that show she is trying to please him. For instance, when she begins to like his music, cook the foods he likes, or dresses in matching clothing when they go on a date.

On the other hand, his heart sinks if she's late or forgets a date, says something bad about him in front of his friends, or mentions – or worse yet – is seen with a previous boyfriend. When those things happen, the relationship is strained, and the only thing that can repair it is repentance and forgiveness.

Such is the same for our relationship with Messiah. When we walk in His Torah, it makes Him feel good. It's not necessarily that we're going through the motions; it's that we have this desire to please our husband. On the other hand, when we walk contrary to what pleases him, or let something or someone else come between us and him, His heart sinks and we must repent in order to restore the relationship. This is where baptism and Teshuva – repentance – comes in.

So what is baptism? Did you know that The Bible nowhere tells us what it is, it just seems to come on the scene. A study of various Christian and Jewish references shows that baptism and immersion are synonymous. In fact, immersion was very common in the first century (the time Yeshua lived on the earth). Like I mentioned before, the scriptures show that a person was immersed every time he or she had a change of status. That status change could be from being unclean² to clean or when he had a change of responsibility or position, such as when Aaron and his sons changed from being just common people to being priests³.

By the time of the first century, immersion had become a common thing. Along with its historical significance as described in the Torah, it came to signify a person's desire to repent and be brought back into the covenant, and in some Jewish circles, became part of the conversion process. It had become customary to be immersed shortly before or during the days of "teshuava", the 40 days of repentance leading up to the day of Atonement. This may very well be what was happening in Matthew 3 when Yeshua began His ministry.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 3:1** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'" ⁴ And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him ⁶ and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

People from all Judea came to John's baptism of repentance . . . even Pharisees and Sadducees. They all made the day long journey from Jerusalem to be immersed in the Jordan. Some may have come from as far as Gaza, a three day journey. It was that important for them to be baptized during this particular time of the year.

Why did they come to John's baptism? Why not be baptized in their own community? The answer is quite simple, John was understood to be a picture of Elijah, the "friend of the

²It is not a sin to be unclean. To be unclean only meant that you could not (while in an unclean state) go up to the Tabernacle or Temple and take your offerings and have fellowship with Yahweh. You could become unclean for a number of things. You became unclean whenever you had a baby, whenever you touched a dead body (Yeshua became unclean when he touched the body of the dead girl - Luke 8:49-56), even if you were to walk over someone's grave. Though we should not desire to be unclean, to be unclean has little relevance today since there is no Temple and no red heifer.

³ Lev. 8:6; Ex. 29:4

Baptism and the Bride of Messiah

bridegroom” who would appear before the coming of The Messiah. We all know that Elijah came teaching repentance to Israel. Malachi says that Elijah would come again and turn the hearts of the children back to the fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

^{NKJ} **Malachi 4:4-6** "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments. ⁵ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. ⁶ And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

To be baptized into John would imply your desire to repent and welcome the coming Messiah. This was widely understood in Judea, even by the Jewish leadership.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 21:23-26** Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: "The baptism of John -- where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet."

As we know, Yeshua Himself made the 3 – 4 day journey from the Gallilee to John's baptism as well. In fact, this event marked the beginning of His ministry that most scholars agree was 3 ½ years long. This would indicated that Yeshua was baptized sometime close to the fall festival season, possibly during the time of Teshuava.

The Jewish tradition of baptism continued even after Yeshua was crucified. Just shortly after His ascension we find Peter continuing to preach baptism of repentance.

^{NKJ} **Acts 2:38** ³⁸ Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion we find that baptism is an ancient Jewish practice that predates Christianity. It's based on various Torah instructions pertaining to purity and change of status, and it was part of the ancient Hebrew marriage culture. By the time of the first century it had become associated with repentance and the coming of the Messiah.

We, God's people Israel, along with all who come into Israel, are by covenant betrothed to the Messiah. As we see His day approaching it is good for us to consider our role as His bride, how we are to conform to the ways of our husband, and how we can acknowledge our status as the wife of The King through the ritual of baptism.

Shalom Aleichem