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HOW DID THE JEWS BAPTIZE?

THE appeal to Jewish custom is generally regarded as affording one of the strongest arguments in favour of the theory that the Apostolic and Early Church administered baptism by submersion. It is important, therefore, to examine the evidence generally given for the belief that this was the custom of the Jews.

For, obviously, it is not enough to assert that the word commonly used, *tabal*, implies submersion. The meaning of a word is determined by its use and not vice versâ. To argue that *tabal* means to submerge, and that therefore it was the custom of the Jews to plunge the whole body at once in the water is to beg the question, and is as illogical as to assume that the Greek word βαπτίζω means to immerse totally, and from that to conclude that such was the primitive method of administering Christian baptism. As Hooker wrote (*E. P.* iv 1, 7) 'words must be taken according to the matter whereof they are uttered'. The right method of understanding the significance of a word is to examine its use and, if possible, to gather its connotation from its context.

Moreover, the question has been complicated by an inexact employment of English terms. Immersion may be partial or total. But frequently writers after proving that baptism is spoken of as involving immersion, assume that that immersion was total. To prevent confusion, therefore, in what follows the ambiguous term 'immersion' will be avoided, and the word 'submersion' will be used to express the act of plunging the whole body at one time under the water. Thus the whole body may be washed in a shower bath, or with a sponge in a hip bath, and the act though rightly spoken of as one of immersion will not be one of submersion. Even the word 'to dip' does not necessarily imply submersion. When we dip a cup in water we only put about half of it under the surface. When we 'take a dip in the sea' very few of us dive in, or completely cover our bodies at any time while we are bathing.

Evidence from the Old Testament.

If we examine the Old Testament use of the word *tabal* we find from the *Oxford Lexicon* that it is employed some fifteen times in different connexions. There seems to be no distinction in its use in concur with them in judgement, and would to the end: and meant not to suffer any man to impugn them openly or otherwise'. This, however, is only another way of saying that, as long as the Heads would make the articles their rule of judgement, he would support them. He had no idea of referring to such opinions of theirs as are not contained in the articles, e.g. irrespective reprobation; but assumes that they will maintain the agreement.

P., J., and JE. The English word 'dip' is given as its equivalent. The word appears to be used of wetting any object when it is more convenient to apply the object to the liquid than the liquid to the object. It is the term used to express the dipping of anything in blood, as Joseph's brothers dipped his coat (Gen. xxxvii 31), especially in connexion with sacrifice (Lev. iv 6 and ix 9, of the priest's finger). It is used also of dipping a rod in honey (1 Sam. xiv 27), of bread in vinegar (Ruth ii 14), and of a cloth in water (2 Kings viii 15). In none of these cases, except possibly in the last, would the immersion have been total.

In one passage the meaning 'to submerge' is admissible. In 2 Kings v 14 we read that Naaman 'dipped' himself seven times in the Jordan. Elisha's messenger ordered him to wash (*raḥaḥ*) in the river, and we read that when he 'dipped' himself he did it 'according to the saying of the man of God'. There is nothing to indicate that the word means anything more than ordinary washing. No stress is laid on the particular method to be employed, nor is any contrast drawn between washing by the ordinary natural process and washing by submersion. The same word for 'wash' is used in Num. xix 19, of the man who is ordered to bathe himself after defilement caused by touching a dead body, and there is nothing to indicate that more than ordinary washing is contemplated. Even in Job ix 30-31, the contrast is between washing with snow or lye and being defiled with ditch-water, not with being smothered in mud.

Again the extreme difficulty of submersion would render its practice improbable. If it had been contemplated, surely the command to adopt a difficult and awkward process would have been more explicit. The laws of purification, such as that of Num. xix, are set out as applying to the sojourn in the Wilderness, where submersion would have been almost impossible. Moreover, we read of no structural baths in the Old Testament, nor have any traces of them been found before the Hellenistic period.¹ The Hebrew word for balneator, 'ballan', was borrowed from the Greek.² The word 'miḳweh', which in the Mishnah means the ritual bath that has played such an important part in Jewish life since the Middle Ages, in the Old Testament simply means a gathering of waters (Gen. i 10, of the waters into seas, Exod. vii 19, of pools in Egypt, Lev. xi 36, of a cistern). Even the miḳwah of Isaiah xxii 11, was a cistern and not a bath.

The Baptism of Proselytes.

The mere use of the word *ḥabal* tells us nothing of ancient Jewish practice; what is the evidence of later Jewish custom? It is well

¹ Benzinger *Hebräische Archäologie*², 1907, p. 85.

² Buxtorf *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum, et Rabbinicum*, 1874, p. 164.

known that the proselyte to Judaism was 'baptized'; how was this baptism administered?

The writer of the article 'Baptism' in Hastings's *Dictionary of the Bible*, gives the following detailed description of the method of administration.

'According to the teaching of later Judaism, a stranger who desired to become a proselyte of the Covenant, or of Righteousness, i. e. in the fullest sense an Israelite, must be circumcised and baptized, and then offer a sacrifice; circumcision alone was not enough. Three of those who instructed the stranger in the Law became his "fathers" or sponsors, and took him to a pool, in which he stood up to his neck in water, while the great commandments of the Law were recited to him. These he promised to keep. Then a benediction was pronounced, and he plunged beneath the water, taking care to be entirely submerged. In the case of women, baptism and sacrifice were the things required to admit them to the full privileges of Israel. But for both male and female proselytes sacrifice was abolished after the destruction of the Temple.'

This is clear and decisive enough, and the last sentence shews that by 'later Judaism' is meant that of New Testament times and not that of the Middle Ages. The source of this description, however, is not stated; though at the end of the section the following references are given:—

'Literature. For the abundant literature on the subject, and for references to the Talmud, see Edersheim *Life and Times of the Messiah* II App. xii; Schürer *HJP.* II ii § 31, p. 319; Herzog *RE.* xii p. 250, first edition; less full in second edition, p. 300.'

Turning to Herzog's *Realencyclopädie* (first edition, vol. xii p. 297, art. 'Proselyten') we find a similar detailed description, which may be the source from which that in Hastings's *Dictionary* is drawn. No reference, however, is given to shew the authority on which it is based, and in the corresponding passage in the third edition, revised by Hauck (vol. xvi p. 118), the description seems to have disappeared altogether. A similar account, however, may be found in Buxtorf's *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum, et Rabbinicum* under art. *Ger* גר, p. 212, which is given as describing the modern custom based on the authority of Maimonides. The passage referred to seems to be that in *Hilc. Issure Biah* xiv which is thus translated in the *Dissertatio de Proselytis Judaeorum* of Paul Slevogt in Ugolini *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Sacrarum* vol. xxii p. dcccxviii:—

'Tres illi stant a tergo eius, eumque monent altera vice ex parte praeceptorum levium, ex parte praeceptorum gravium, idque dum in aqua stat. Si vero femina fuerit: eam quoque feminae in aqua collocant

usque ad collum suum et de foris consistentes, dum ipsa in aqua sedet, docent ipsam nonnulla de praeceptis levibus et gravibus; si baptizata est in earum conspectu, convertant facies suas et egrediantur ita ut non videant eam ex aqua ascendentem.'

For this a further reference to Yebam. 47 *b* is given, where the passage runs as follows:—

'Two learned men stand over him and inform him concerning some light commandments and some grave commandments, and when he has bathed and has come up again (out of the water) (מביל ועלה) he is like an Israelite in every respect. In the case of a woman women place her (משיכות) into the water up to the neck, and two wise men stand outside and inform her concerning some light and some heavy commandments.'

It will be noticed that it is only in the case of a woman that immersion to the neck is prescribed, and in neither case is there any direction clearly enjoining submersion. This would seem to suggest that, whatever may have been the mediaeval doctrine, the original precept was merely given for the sake of decency. In Schürer's *History of the Jewish People* II ii § 31, we find numerous references to the Talmud for the Baptism of proselytes, but on p. 324 the author writes 'the Talmud, so far as I am aware, contains as yet no precise account of the ceremonial. It is therefore purely gratuitous to assert that the *tebilah* (baptism) mentioned in the Talmud is different from that mentioned in the Mishnah'.

In Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus*, vol. ii, Appendix 12, we read 'that baptism was absolutely necessary to make a proselyte is so frequently stated as not to be disputed'. For this fact several references to the Talmud are given as well as to later authorities (Ber. 47 *b*, Kerith 9 *a*, Jer. Yebam. 8 *b*, Yebam. 45 *b*, 46 *a* and *b*, 48 *b*, 76 *a*, Ab. Sar. 57 *a*, 59 *a*, and other passages). These seem, however, unless I have overlooked any point, merely to refer to the fact that proselytes were baptized. Dr Edersheim then alludes to the controversy as to whether both circumcision and baptism were necessary, and describes the act of baptism thus:—

'The person to be baptized, having cut his hair and nails, undressed completely, made fresh profession of his faith before what were designated "the fathers of baptism" (our godfathers), and then immersed completely so that every part of the body was touched by the water. The rite would, of course, be accompanied by exhortations and benedictions.'

As this passage is perhaps more frequently relied on by modern writers on the subject than any other it is worth following up the references given. These are to Ketub. 11 *a* and Erub. 15 *a* in the Talmud, and two to Maimonides, one of the latter being that quoted above.

The evidence of mediaeval practice need not detain us, though it is somewhat misleading to quote it side by side with that from earlier authorities with no indication of the difference of date. The first passage from the Talmud mentions the baptism of a Ger and alludes to the fathers; the second refers to the water, and the same words reappear in *Ḥagiga* 11 *a*, *Peṣaḥim* 109 *a* and *b*, and *Yoma* 31 *a*. These four references, therefore, represent only one single authority. The passage thus repeated, which (so far as I am aware) is unique, is so important that it should be quoted in full. I translate from L. Goldschmidt's German edition of the *Babylonian Talmud* now in course of publication:—

'He must wash his body in water, in water of the bath ("mikweh", "Tauchbad", or in the translation of *Erub.* 14 *a*; "in angesammeltem Wasser"), his whole body, water for the whole body (שכל גופו "in Umfang seines ganzen Leibes", elsewhere, "es muss den ganzen Leib umgeben"), a cubit broad, a cubit wide, and three cubits deep ("zu einer Elle, in der Höhe von drei Ellen"), and the Rabbis have defined that the bath must have forty seahs.'

General Customs of Purification.

This passage is quoted four times in the Talmud but not apparently with direct reference to the baptism of proselytes. It is based on the Halakhic Commentary on Leviticus xv 16 preserved in the Sifra. We must therefore consider it in connexion with the general Jewish practice of ablution. For the law about proselyte baptism seems to have been based on the principle that the Ger was subject to the ordinary laws of purification. Is there any reason to believe that these involved submersion?

To answer this question we may refer to the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (Funk & Wagnalls). The art. 'Proselyte' adds little to our knowledge on this point. It merely says that 'the details of the reception do not seem to have been settled before the end of the second Christian century', and that 'it was based on the laws that proselyte and native Israelite should be treated alike'.

In the art. 'Ablution' we are told that there were three forms of washing, that of the hands (called 'baptism' in Luke xi 38), that of the feet, and that by 'immersion' of the whole body in water. Thirteen references to the Old Testament are given in which the latter is prescribed. Of these twelve merely read 'he shall bathe himself in water', or make use of some equally general phrase. The thirteenth refers to Bathsheba washing herself on the housetop. The author himself does not seem to mean submersion by his expression 'immersion of the whole body in water' as he illustrates one of his own examples by saying 'the Levites were purified by having water of the sin offering

sprinkled upon them'. A general washing of the whole body seems to be all that was originally implied in the texts, and it is to be noted that in the cases of ablution of the hands, at any rate, the water was usually poured over them instead of their being plunged into it.

In the art. 'Baptism' we read again that 'the Rabbis connected with this (the washing of clothes for purification) the duty of bathing by complete immersion', and reference is made to the legend that our first parents, as a means of penitence, stood up to the neck in water, Adam for forty days in Gihon, and Eve for seven in the Tigris. A later form of the story, written perhaps under Christian influences, places Adam in the Jordan to connect his penance with the idea of the Sacrament. The *Vita Adae et Evae* (called the *Apocrypha of Moses* by Tischendorf), though it may contain early traditions, is of late date, and there seems to be no real connexion between this legend and the earlier Jewish customs of purification which the author of the article connects with Ezek. xxxvi 25, 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you'.

The quotation from the Halakhic Commentary on Lev. xv 16, mentioned above as preserved in the Sifra, runs as follows: (Biblical text in italics) '*He shall wash in the water* even though it be a miḳweh, *all his flesh*; water into which his whole body can enter. How much is this? A cubit by a cubit to the height of three cubits. You are found asserting that the contents of a miḳweh is forty seah.'

The words 'even though it be a miḳweh' are introduced to shew why the running water is not demanded as in *v.* 13; still water will do as well if there is enough for the whole body. This is estimated by the measurement of a man as three cubits high, but it does not seem to be implied that the miḳweh must literally be of a sort of well shape. We may reasonably suppose that 'height' is merely used as a term to express the third dimension. The object clearly is the sufficiency of the supply, not the shape of the bath.

This is borne out by the discovery of 'a large rock-cut trough at which presumably ablutions were performed' near the remains of the altar recently discovered at the High Place above Petra. Its measurements are 5 feet 7 inches long by 18 inches wide, by 16 inches deep. 'The sacred place does not seem to be of more ancient date than shortly before the Christian era.' Cp. S. R. Driver *Modern research as illustrating the Bible*, Schweich Lectures 1908, p. 62, and the authorities quoted there.

The section Miḳwa'oth of the Mishnah deals with Jewish customs of purification. Only one section, that dealing with the purification of women, appears in the Jerusalem Talmud, and the regulations ordered in other cases seem to have fallen out of use in the Dispersion, even if they were ever really carried out in practice. The Mishnah may be

read in Surenhusius's Latin Translation, published with the comments of Maimonides and Bartenora in 1685, or reference may be made to the art. 'Mikwa'oth' in the *Encyclopædia*. In the first chapter we find that great stress was laid on the kind of water that might be used. There were six grades of sanctity. The lowest was that of water from a pond, ditch, cistern, or cavern, or of standing water which had flowed from a mountain, that is, apparent surface-water; then follows that of a body of water containing forty seahs; then that of a spring to which water drawn from some source had been added; then that of a mineral spring; and last, the highest of all, that of pure spring water. Elaborate discussions follow as to when, and how, drawn water affects the purity of the spring water, but nothing is said about submersion. The one kind of water which is apparently disallowed is water drawn in a vessel.

If an artificial bath is used it must contain at least forty seahs. But though stress is laid on the quantity, no mention is made of submersion. It is the measure sufficient to cleanse the whole body if spring water be not used that is insisted on; if two people bathe one after another in the same bath containing only just so much, the second is still impure because the first has carried out some drops. This, at least, I take to be the meaning of the passage. But if the first keeps his foot in the bath, or even if part of his mantle is still in the water, that which is on his body is still part of the bath of forty seahs, and the second man is clean. (Mikwa'oth chap. vii 6 'Si in lavacro quadraginta fiunt Sata congregata, et duo descenderunt lotum se, unus post alterum, primus mundus est, secundus autem immundus. R. Jehuda dicit, si primi pedes attigerint aquam, etiam secundus mundus est'.) An interesting passage in the Tosephta (Sekalim 1 a), containing a tradition dating from before the destruction of the Temple, tells how the legati Synhedrii, in the month before the Passover, were to see that the mikwa'oth were in good condition and contained the requisite forty seahs.

In the passage quoted above as occurring four times in the Gemara, and therefore giving evidence of later ideas, the size of the bath itself is mentioned. But the object seems to be that of securing the full amount of water rather than that of rendering submersion possible. Thus in Erubin 14 a, Solomon's sea is said to have contained 150 mikwa'oth, and the capacity of the mikweh is explained by the passage in question. In Peṣaḥim 109 a it is quoted as explaining the capacity of a quarter of a log in connexion with the observance of the Passover. In Ḥagiga 11 a, after contrasting laws which 'are as mountains suspended by a hair and have no basis in the Bible' with those of purification, the passage is again quoted as giving a standard for the measure (Goldschmidt *Mass*) of the ṭebilah. In Yoma 31 a, after describing how the

High Priest bathed five times on the Day of Atonement, it is stated that the first bath was taken over the Gate of Water near the High Priest's chamber, and the same quotation is made. From this it is argued that the spring from which the water came was twenty-three cubits higher than the floor of the court, since the gates were all twenty cubits high. To an objection that no allowance had been made for the architrave and bottom of the bath, it is answered that they were of marble and too thin to make any serious difference in the measurement.

In all these cases, except possibly the last, it is the quantity of the water and not the size of the bath on which the stress is laid. In the last it is pointed out that the depth of three feet was not exceeded, but this literal interpretation of height was probably, as we saw, not the original meaning. The exact length of a cubit is uncertain. In Biblical times it seems to have been 18 inches, but the ell of the Talmud was 56-58 centimetres, or 22-23 inches. It would be possible, of course, to submerge a man in a bath 22 inches by 22 inches by 5 ft. 6-8 inches, but the difficulty seems to have been felt in later times when the custom of submersion, it is asserted, was undoubtedly practised, for in the mediaeval critical explanation of the Talmud made in the twelfth century, and known as the *Tosafot*, it was explained that the bath must be four cubits, or over seven feet, deep, though the water need only have a depth of three, since the entrance of the body of the man who was being purified would make it rise to the required height. (Jo. Andreæ Danzii *Baptismus Proselytorum Judaicus* in Ugolini *Thesaurus* vol. 22, p. dcccviii, chap. xxiii note g.) Even more convincing a proof that the covering of the body up to the neck mentioned in the case of female proselytes in the passage quoted above, did not involve submersion, may be found in the Mishnah Berakoth III 4 and 5. Here we read that the man who, while saying the morning blessing, remembers that he is impure, must go down and purify himself and, if possible, come up, dress, and say the Shema before the sun rises. If he has not time he must cover himself with the water and say it:—

‘Descenderit ad lavandum (ירד לטבול), si ascendere possit, sese vestire et recitare priusquam sol emicet, ascendat et vestiat se, et recitet; sin minus aqua se contegat et recitet’ (ויתכסה) so bedecke er sich durch das Wasser und lese; Goldschmidt) Surenhusius vol. i p. 11.

Obviously the covering here is partial and, as in the passage quoted above, for the purpose of decency. He could not read the Shema with his head under water, and the command to cover himself as far as the hips implies that otherwise the immersion would not have been above the thighs. Moreover, the Jerusalem Talmud orders that, if the water

is still and pure, the man must trouble it with his feet so that it may hide his nakedness. I cannot find, in the other and very unpleasant comments of the Jerusalem Talmud on this and the preceding section about the ba'al kerî, anything that implies submersion.

Conclusion.

We have examined the authority usually given for the statement that the Jews baptized by submersion. We have found that in Old Testament times ceremonial washings were ordered. These were interpreted by the later traditions of the scribes as in some cases implying washing of the whole body, if possible in fresh or running water. Then in the period represented by the Mishnah we find elaborate precautions ordered to secure the right kind of water, and a certain standard of sufficiency in quantity, forty seahs, where running water was not to be had. In one passage also the water is to be sufficient for partial submersion as far as the hips for purposes of decency. In the later period of the Gemara we have a sentence, repeated in four different places, which describes the size of a bath that would hold the required quantity, and another passage which orders in the case of women proselytes an immersion to the neck for the purposes of decency. Some five hundred years later, long after Hebrew had become a mere ecclesiastical language, we find a fuller description of the administration of the rite of baptism of proselytes in which it is said that submersion is ordered and the word employed henceforth is generally held to imply total immersion. The whole offers a striking parallel to the growth of the idea in the Church that Christian baptism should be by immersion (cp. my 'Baptism and Christian Archaeology', *Studia Biblica* vol. v p. 301, &c.).

In the vast literature of the Talmud there may, of course, be other passages which throw more light on the subject than do those usually quoted to support the popular assertion; but, unless this be so, it can hardly be said that it is proved that the Jews in Biblical times, or even during the first centuries of the Christian era, baptized by submersion.

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