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Archaeology and Christian Baptism

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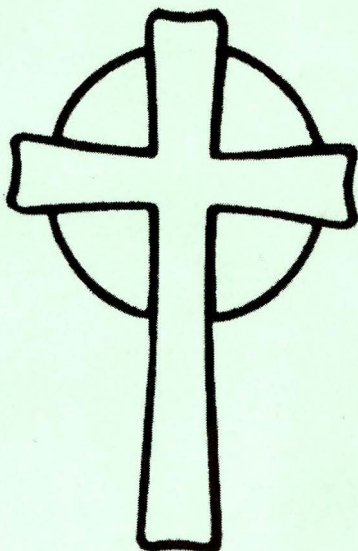
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ARCHAEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

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Interpreters of Acts have consistently questioned the historicity of the narrative of Acts 2, raising the question, "Where would they find enough water in Jerusalem to immerse three thousand people on the day of Pentecost if that is what Acts 2:38-41 suggests?" Now, however, because of archaeological discoveries in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the situation has completely changed. Over three hundred stepped-and-plastered immersion pools, called *miqva'ot* in Hebrew (singular, *miqveh*), have been discovered in Israel. Of these, about one hundred fifty have been found in Jerusalem dating from the first century B.C. to the end of the Second Temple period (A.D. 70).¹ About sixty *miqva'ot* have been found in the Upper City excavations of wealthy Jewish homes in the western part of Jerusalem. Professor Nahman Avigad of the Hebrew University reports finding at least one *miqveh* in each house and sometimes more. They were cut from the bedrock and fully lined with gray plaster.²

Forty-eight *miqva'ot* of various sizes have been uncovered just below the southern wall of the Temple Mount adjacent to the Rabbis' Teaching Steps. They were once enclosed within a large building with private facilities for the purification rites of both men and women.³ Excavations have also revealed some of the water channels that funneled water into the *miqva'ot* from one or more of the aqueducts that supplied the city with an abundance of fresh water in the first century.⁴ Other *miqva'ot*, however, were supplied

¹ Ronny Reich, "The Great Mikveh Debate," *BAR* (March/April 1993): 52.

² Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 139-42.

³ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108; cf. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 106-8.

⁴ Amihai Mazar, "The Aqueducts of Jerusalem," in *Jerusalem Revealed: Archaeology in the Holy City 1968-1974* (ed. Yigael Yadin; New Haven and

with water either from a nearby holding tank (*otzar*) or from one of Jerusalem's numerous cisterns.⁵

These ritual baths were used for Jewish purification rites and should not be confused with small hygienic baths for washing the hands and feet and/or the body for actual cleansing purposes prior to immersion in the *miqva'ot*. At a number of sites in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, small bathtubs for physical cleansing can be seen in another part of the room or in an adjacent room to those containing the *miqva'ot*.

Jewish *miqva'ot* had to be large enough so that complete immersion of the body was possible and no part of the body's surface was untouched by the water.⁶ This required a minimum of forty *seahs* of water (approximately sixty gallons⁷); however, most of the *miqva'ot* I have observed in Israel are much larger than this bare minimum.

The four dozen *miqva'ot* found at the base of the southern wall of the Temple Mount were primarily for purification of Jews who had contracted ritual defilement because of, for example, nocturnal emissions, sexual intercourse, or contact with blood or a corpse (cf. Lev 14–16). Such an immersion qualified them to enter the temple for worship, offer sacrifices, or participate in the activities of the religious feasts. It was precisely this kind of purifying immersion that Mary had to undergo forty days after the birth of Jesus before she and Joseph could offer the two turtle doves for her cleansing (Lev 12:1–4; Luke 2:21, 22). Also, after the establishment of the church, Jews in Jerusalem—including Paul on his return to the city after his third missionary journey—continued to participate in such cleansing rites at the temple, according to Acts 21:23–26; 24:11–26.

Furthermore, Josephus affirms that only those who had undergone ritual purification were admitted to the temple courts for worship: "It is unlawful for any foreigner to enter the enclosure of the temple which is forbidden to the Jews, except to those who are accustomed to enter after purifying themselves in accordance with the law of the country."⁸ In fact, the Mishnah states that none could enter the temple for worship without an immersion

London: Yale University and Israel Exploration Society, 1976), 79–84.

⁵ Avigad, *The Herodian Quarter in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1991), 19. Many of the *miqva'ot*, mentioned above, can be seen by tourists who visit the area below the southern wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and at the Wohl Museum of Archaeology, which also reveals excavations of Herodian Jerusalem from the pre-A.D. 70 period underneath the Jewish Quarter of the Old City.

⁶ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah, Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 742 n. 5.

⁷ Danby, *Mishnah*, 732 n. 5.

⁸ Josephus, *Ant.*, 12.3, 4.

“even though he is clean.”⁹ This latter statement indicates that even though a worshiper had not suffered actual defilement, he or she still had to undergo an immersion—evidently as an act of consecration—before undertaking a sacred task or entering into the nearer presence of God.

The foregoing may help explain the reason early Jewish synagogues also provided *miqva'ot* for worshipers who needed ritual cleansing and/or consecration as they entered the presence of God to hear the reading and exposition of the sacred Scriptures. It is noteworthy that visitors to archaeological sites in Israel today can easily observe that all of the pre-A.D. 70 synagogues that have been discovered—at the Herodium, Masada, and Gamla—had immersion pools in close proximity for the purificatory washings of those who attended their services.

Also the Theodotus inscription (from a Jerusalem synagogue that dates to the late first century B.C. or early first century A.D.) mentions not only the erection of the synagogue proper, but the construction of apartments for pilgrims who visited the city, including facilities for ritual baths for those needing cleansing.¹⁰ Confirmation of this practice comes from Ben Zoma, who, when questioned about the need for purificatory baths before attending worship, said that all who cross over to the sacred area of life need an immersion.¹¹

Of course, how many synagogues existed in Jerusalem in the Second Temple period is unknown. The Jerusalem Talmud maintains that when the Jews revolted against Rome (A.D. 66), all four hundred eighty synagogues in Jerusalem were destroyed in the war.¹² Most scholars believe that this is probably an idealized exaggeration of the religious situation in Jerusalem prior to A.D. 70 and that the number of synagogues was far less than this rabbinic estimate.¹³ Whatever the actual number of such establishments may

⁹ *Yoma* 3:3.

¹⁰ See Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 439–41. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (2d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 306. The Theodotus inscription is displayed in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, and since it was written in Greek, William F. Albright believed that it may have been the Hellenistic “Synagogue of the Freedmen” in Acts 6:9, where Stephen preached Christ (*The Archaeology of Palestine* [Baltimore: Penguin, 1960], 172).

¹¹ *B. Yoma* 30a. Since Ben Zoma lived after the destruction of Jerusalem (ca. A.D. 120), this indicates that purificatory immersions were still the regular practice for synagogue worshipers in his day.

¹² *Y. Meg.* 3:1, 73d; cited in McRay, *Archaeology*, 65.

¹³ John Wilkinson (“Christian Pilgrims in Jerusalem during the Byzantine Period,” *PEQ* 108 [1976], 76,77) estimates that in the late Second Temple period Jerusalem had 365 synagogues.

have been, literary and archaeological evidence concerning early synagogues suggests that Jews made a practice of either building them near sources of water for ritual bathing or constructing *miqva'ot* adjacent to them for the convenience of worshipers.¹⁴ Thus the availability of such *miqva'ot* in "Jewish" Jerusalem on that first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus undoubtedly made the immersion of three thousand a simple matter for the twelve apostles and the one hundred twenty to five hundred (Acts 1:15; 1 Cor 15:6) who may have accompanied them. Actually, it may have been easier then than it would be today in many cities in Europe or North America, where numerous churches simply use a small basin or fount for baptism rather than an immersion pool, as was the practice in the first century.

Since the law required purificatory baths for those who had contracted ritual defilement and first century Jewish tradition prescribed an immersion for all who went up to the temple to worship, it evidently was necessary for the Jerusalem authorities to provide an abundance of *miqva'ot* to accommodate the crowds who flocked to the city to observe the feasts. Hence the forty-eight *miqva'ot* at the base of the Temple Mount, as well as numerous other pools that were available at synagogues or in private homes within the Jewish capital, provided ample facilities for the baptism of three thousand people on the day of Pentecost. In fact, the above number is probably small in comparison to the multitudes of pilgrims who participated in ritual immersions on high holy days. Therefore, modern archaeology has again provided valuable background data to the biblical record.¹⁵

¹⁴ For numerous sources, see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. and ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:441 n. 65.

¹⁵ Cf. William S. LaSor, "Discovering What Jewish *Miqva'ot* Can Tell Us about Christian Baptism," *BAR* (January/February 1987): 57. LaSor claims that "almost surely these Jewish *miqva'ot* provided the background for Christian baptism."