# *Miqvaot:* Ritual Immersion Baths in Second Temple (Intertestamental) Jewish History

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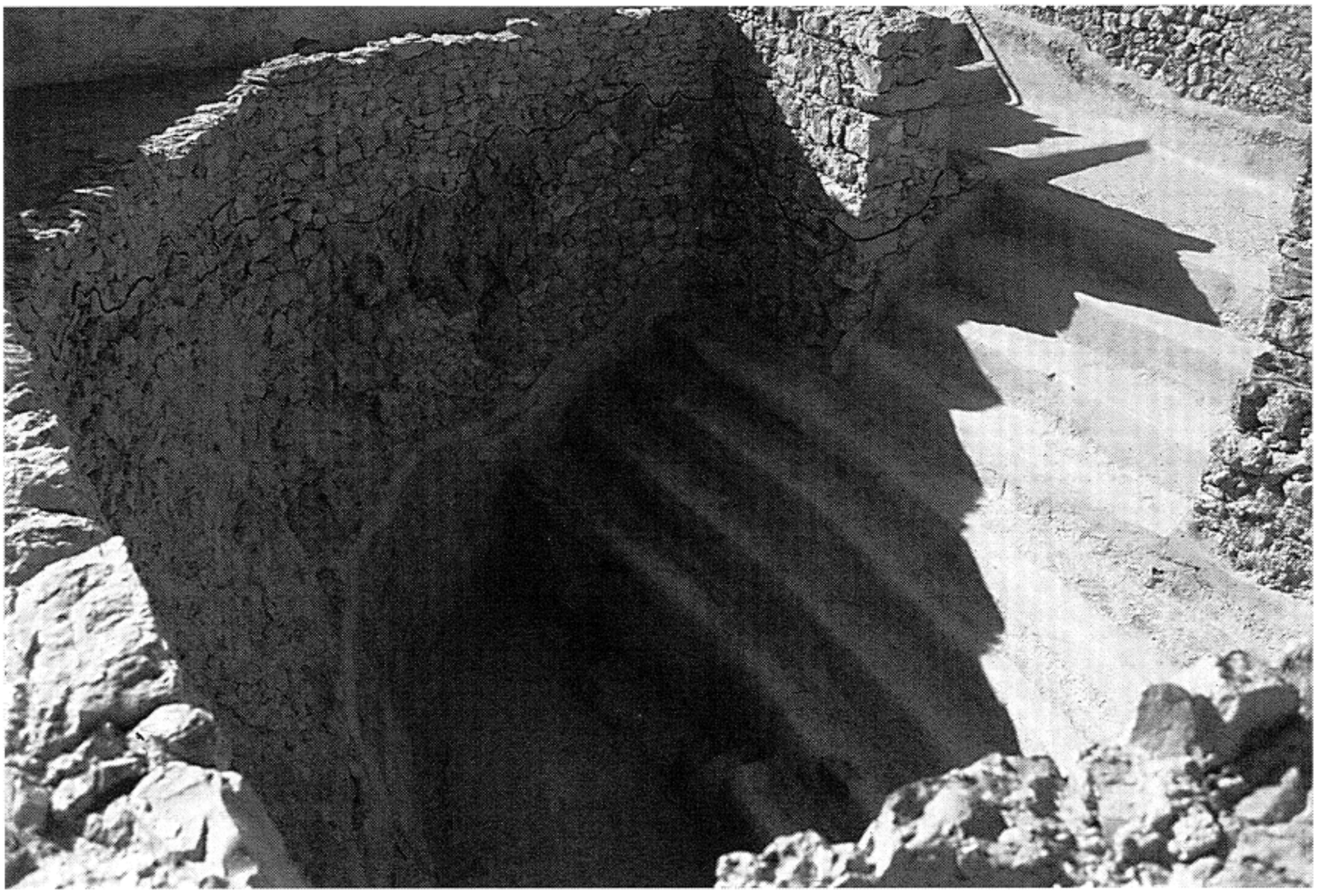
One of the most intriguing developments in the archaeology of the Second Temple (intertestamental) period of Judaism occurred during excavations supervised by Yigael Yadin and other archaeologists at Masada, the residence built for King Herod the Great. While excavating the south casemate wall at Masada, these archaeologists came upon three structures that looked like a Jewish ritual bath complex—a small pool, a medium-sized pool, and a large pool. During a routine press conference, it was announced that a possible Jewish ritual bath—a *miqveh*—had been uncovered. News of this discovery spread quickly throughout Israel, particularly in the very orthodox Hasidic community.

Yadin received word that Rabbi David Muntzberg, an expert on Jewish miqvaot and author of a study on the subject,[1] and Rabbi Eliezer Alter, another expert on miqvaot, wished to examine the miqveh installation at Masada. Yadin replied that he would be happy to receive them. One intensely hot day, Rabbi Muntzberg and Rabbi Alter arrived at the base of Masada. Without stopping to rest, the rabbis and their entourage slowly labored up the steep snake path on the western side of Masada in the torrid heat in their heavy Hasidic garb. When Rabbis Muntzberg and Alter arrived at the summit, they asked to be led directly to the miqveh installations. Armed with a tape measure, Rabbi Muntzberg went directly into one of the pools in order to determine if it conformed with the requirements of the rabbis. The furrowed brow and grave,

unsmiling expression of Rabbi Muntzberg placed the outcome in doubt, and Yadin and his associates were worried that the result would be negative. Finally Rabbi Muntzberg's expression relaxed, and he said with satisfaction that this Jewish ritual bath was "among the finest of the finest, seven times seven," a parade example of Jewish miqvaot.[2]



Masada miqveh, used for ritual immersion

## Jewish Ritual Baths

How was a miqveh, such as the one unearthed at Masada, constructed? To understand the answer to this question, we must, first of all, grasp two essential features of Israelite and Jewish religion: the need for ritual purity and the requirement of ablutions in "living" (that is, flowing) water.[3]

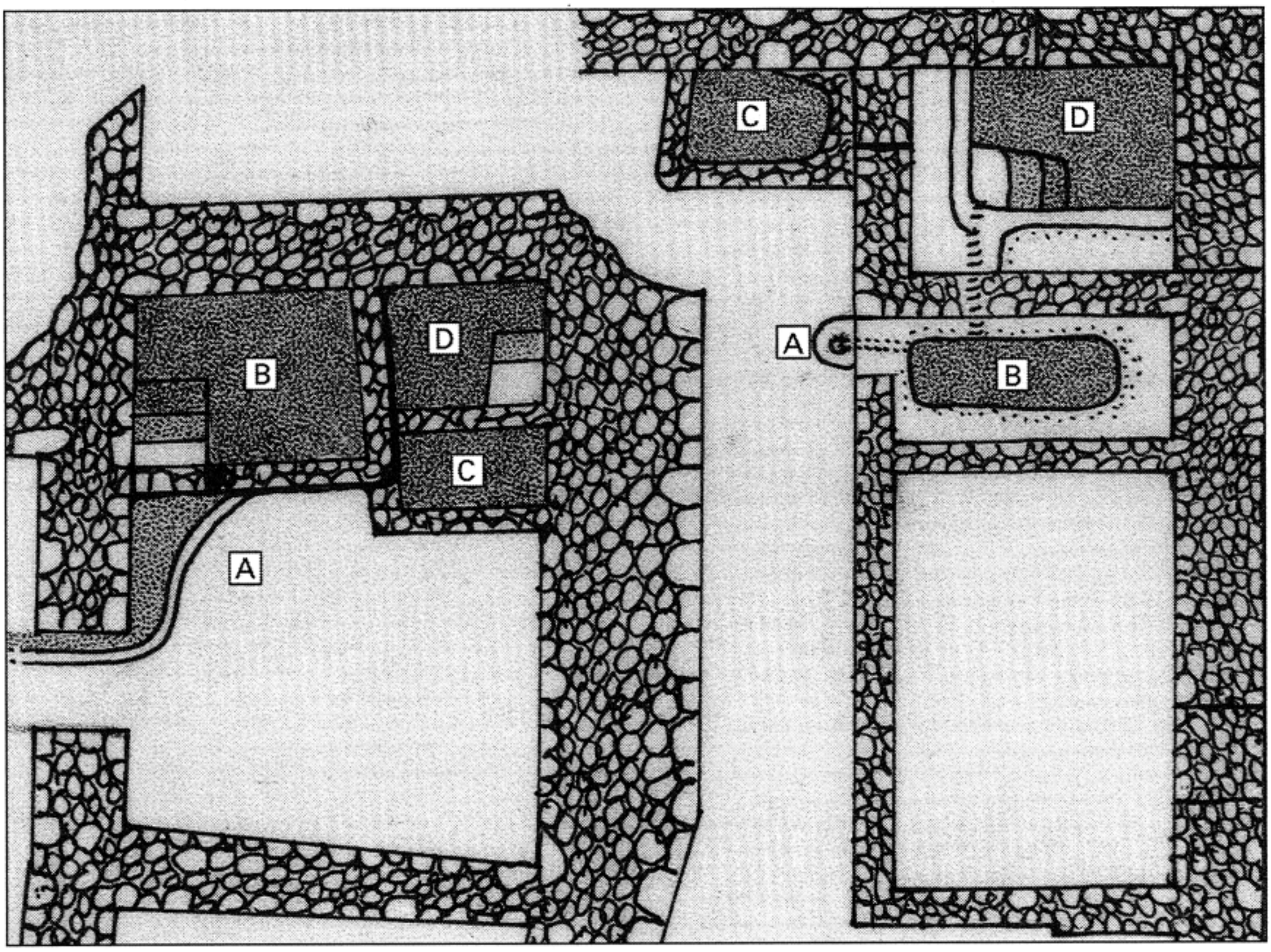
In Israelite and Jewish religious traditions, ritual purity must be achieved and maintained. Impurity results from nocturnal emissions (Deut. 23:10–11), sexual relations (Lev. 15:16–18), flows of blood from menstruation or childbirth (Lev. 12:2; 15:19), or contact with a corpse (Num. 5:2–3). Achieving ritual purity required lustrations in flowing water; failing that, "smitten" (salty or warm)

water was permissible, and, if that was unavailable, well water or "any quantity of water not less than forty seahs"[4] was also acceptable. However, rivers and streams in Palestine are rare, and during several months of the year—from late May to early October—there is little or no rain in this east Mediterranean land. As a result, structures such as miqvaot (into which water flowed) had to be built that would permit lustrations.

The miqveh complex included a conduit for rainfall; the pool itself, connected by a pipe to the reserve pool; and a small pool for washing one's hands and feet before immersion in the miqveh (see plan of miqvaot at Masada, p. 280).

Many other miqvaot dating from the Second Temple period have also been unearthed—all told about three hundred.[5] Besides the miqveh complex examined by Rabbi Muntzberg, another was discovered at the northern end of Masada in the court of the administration building.[6] In addition, miqvaot were discovered at a number of other sites, including the Herodium in the Judean wilderness,[7] Herod's winter palace at Jericho,[8] and in Samaria.[9] The late Professor Benjamin Mazar of the Hebrew University, excavating the area south of Herod's temple, uncovered approximately forty miqvaot near the monumental staircases that led to the Temple Mount.[10] These ritual baths served Jews who visited Jerusalem during the pilgrimage festivals—Passover (Pesach), Weeks or Pentecost (Shavuot), and Tabernacles (Sukkot).[11]

Professor Nahman Avigad, also of the Hebrew University, uncovered some sixty miqvaot in the homes of wealthy and priestly families in the Second Temple Upper City of Jerusalem, west of the Temple Mount across the Tyropoean Valley. At least one miqveh, and sometimes more than one, was found in each of the homes, cut from the rock and lined with gray plaster.[12] One particularly elegant miqveh installation excavated by Professor Avigad also had an *otzar,* or reserve pool, for collecting rainwater connected to the miqveh proper, the only such installation discovered in Jerusalem. A pipe, which could be stopped up with a bung, connected the otzar to the miqveh itself, allowing additional water to flow into the miqveh, which received its usual supply of water from a cistern. Beside the otzar and miqveh was another room with a bathtub designed for normal, not ritual, bathing.[13]




**Plans of Masada miqvaot.** *Left:* the southern miqveh. *Right:* the northern miqveh in the court of the administration building. Each structure had a method of capturing rainwater, either a cesspool or a conduit (A); a pool (B) for collecting the water from A; a small pool (C) for washing hands and feet before entering D; and an immersion pool, the miqveh itself (D).

In the early seventies, just outside of the wall of Jerusalem's Old City by the Dung Gate, Israeli archaeologist Meir Ben-Dov uncovered several miqvaot in the homes of wealthy families. Many of these immersion fonts contain stairways separated by a low plaster wall. These stairs were probably used by individuals to enter and exit the miqveh. According to Hershel Shanks, "Especially palatial *mikvaot* . . . have two sets of stairs divided by a low wall or pillars. Presumably one set of steps was used to enter (while the bather was in an impure state); the other sets of steps was used to leave the purifying bath, uncontaminated by any contact with the impurities of the entrance steps."[14]

The water installations at Qumran have recently been persuasively shown to be miqvaot. Earlier researchers of the site, including its excavator, Father Roland de Vaux of the École Biblique et

Archéologique (Biblical and Archaeological School) in Jerusalem,[15] Frank Moore Cross,[16] and even Yadin, either failed to recognize the water installations at Qumran as miqvaot or have rejected them as such.

Bryant Wood, of the University of Toronto, in his study of the water installations at Qumran, gives reasons for arguing that they are miqvaot: (1) In the view of Wood, who estimated the average population at Qumran and calculated their daily water requirements and the available water supply, the residents of Qumran had twice as much water as they needed to maintain themselves; the excess water was used for ritual baths.[17] (2) Wood observes that there are two types of water installations: those with stairs running the length of the water installations, and those without. Those with stairs Wood identifies as miqvaot, since "this design required more care in shaping and was, in fact, a very inefficient design for a water storage tank . . . necessitating an increase in the other dimensions to obtain the required volume."[18] Those installations without steps Wood views as cisterns for culinary and drinking water. (3) Wood believes that the water installations were too elegant to

Miqveh at Qumran

be merely pools for bathing: "Such a well-appointed bathing facility [is] totally out of keeping with the austere life of a religious sect living in an arid region. A simple tub is sufficient for most people, even those of us privileged to live in an affluent society where water is abundant."[19]

## Jewish Ritual Baths and Christian Baptism

What are the Jewish antecedents of Christian baptism? How are *miqvaot* connected to John the Baptist? Like Jesus, John the Baptist was of Jewish parentage. John's father, Zechariah, was a member of the priestly course of Abijah, who served by lot in the Jerusalem temple (Luke 1:5, 9). While John was preaching in the wilderness, a delegation of Pharisees asked him if he were Elijah or "the prophet we await" (John 1:19–28, esp. 21). John the Baptist was sent to preach repentance to his fellow Jews, saying that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Given the value placed by the Jews on observing and maintaining tradition, it is likely that John's mission of preaching repentance and performing baptism reflected traditional Jewish forms of ritual immersion.[20]

As we noted above, miqveh ritual immersions took place in "living water." This Jewish tradition was maintained in John's practice of baptizing in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:6; Luke 3:3). John 3:23 notes that John baptized "in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there." The actual location of Salim is unknown, but, as suggested by Eusebius and Jerome, it may have been Salumias, near the modern Beth-Shean, where there are numerous springs close by sufficient to satisfy the requirement of "living water."

In the Didache, a very early writing reflecting deep Jewish-Christian influence, directions are given for baptism in "running water."[21] This practice of baptizing in the Jewish fashion also reveals that baptism took place by immersion and not by affusion (sprinkling or pouring). Didache 7:3, however, moves away from the Jewish practice of baptism by immersion by allowing for affusion—pouring water "on the head thrice in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit."[22]

The baptism practiced by John and the Apostles and spoken of by Jesus was not only "purificatory" (for remission of sins) but

also "initiatory" (for entrance into the kingdom of God). This also appears to follow the precedent of Jewish proselyte baptism, which the majority of twentieth-century investigators of this subject regard as pre-Christian in origin.[23] While Emil Schürer observes that Jewish proselyte baptism is dated to the first century A.D. "because of the silence of Philo and Josephus," he notes that "the *argumentum e silentio* from Philo and Josephus would be valid only if it could be shown that reference to proselyte baptism is absent from passages where it should have appeared."[24]

Three things were required of proselytes to Judaism as an indication that they had accepted the Torah (Law): circumcision, the offering of a sacrifice, and complete immersion in a miqveh. Whereas the requirement of sacrifice was eliminated after the destruction of the Temple of Herod in A.D. 70, and circumcision was abrogated as the early church attempted to reach out to the Gentiles, baptism (by immersion) was retained and became a fundamental teaching and practice of the church.

At Qumran, too, there must have been a sort of "proselyte baptism" for those entering the community. The *Community Rule* approaches the subject negatively, stating that those "not reckoned in His Covenant . . . shall not enter the water to partake of the pure Meal of the men of holiness."[25] Interestingly, John the Baptist lived in the Judean wilderness at no great distance from the home of the Qumran covenanters, and, though he may never have been a member of the Qumran community, his proximity to Qumran surely heightened his appreciation for the vitality of baptist traditions within the movements of Judaism.

In the Talmud, a convert to Judaism is compared to a newborn child.[26] Jesus also compared baptism to new life when he said that "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). He explains his meaning by tying being "born again" directly to baptism: "Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, extends the metaphor to death and rebirth (Rom. 6:3–4).[27]

The birth of Christianity occurred in the matrix of Judaism, and for nearly a century the large majority of Christians were Jews either by birth or by conversion. The practices of earliest Christianity

were profoundly affected by preexisting Jewish rites, including rites and beliefs surrounding the miqveh, ritual immersion, and proselyte baptism. Learning about the impact of these Jewish practices upon Christianity will help us better to appreciate the nature of that influence and the underlying richness of the unfolding Christian tradition.

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## NOTES

[1]David Muntzberg (Mintsberg), *Mivneh Miqva'ot ve-Hekhšeram: al halakhot u-minhagim be-hakhsharat mikva'ot* (Jerusalem: Merkaz ha-artsi le-ma'an tāharat ha-mishpahāh, 1985/86).

[2]Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand,* trans. Moshe Pearlman (Jerusalem: Steimatzky's Agency, 1966), 164, 166.

[3]Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16,* Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 923, renders the Hebrew *bəmayim ḥayyîm* ("living water") in Leviticus 15:13 as "in spring water," noting that "the water is found in an artesian well (Gen. 26:29; Cant. 4:15) and in running water. . . . Thus spring water either above the ground . . . or below . . . is what is meant, but stored water ([Hebrew] *bôr,* "cistern") or drawn water . . . is excluded."

[4]Harold H. Rowley, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 15 (1940): 325–26; reprinted in Harold H. Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran: Studies in the Old Testament* (New York: Association, 1963), 224–25. The list of bodies of water that are suitable/unsuitable for lustrations is found in the Mishnaic tractate Miḳwa'oth 1.1–8.

[5]Ronny Reich, "The Great Mikveh Debate," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19 (March 1993): 52.

[6]Yadin, *Masada,* 167.

[7]Georg Foerster, "Herodium," *Revue Biblique* 77, no. 3 (1970): 400–1, esp. pl. XXIb. Compare V. Corbo, "L'Herodian di Gabal Fureidis: Relazione preliminare della terza e quarta campagna di scavi archeologici," *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967): 65–121, esp. figs. 7, 18, 19.

[8]Suzanne F. Singer, "The Winter Palaces of Jericho," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3 (June 1977): 1, 6–17, esp. figures on p. 11; Ehud Netzer, "The Winter Palaces of the Judean Kings at Jericho at the End of the Second Temple Period," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* no. 228 (December 1977): 1–13, esp. figs. 3, 6, 7; compare Ehud Netzer, "*Mikvaot* (Ritual Baths) of the Second Temple Period at Jericho" (in Hebrew), *Qadmoniot* 11 (1978): 54–59.

[9]J. W. Crowfoot, Kathleen M. Kenyon, and E. L. Sukenik, *The Buildings at Samaria* (London: Palestine Exploration, 1942), 134, pl. LXXII, 2; LXXIII, 1.

[10]Benjamin Mazar, *The Mountain of the Lord* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 146, 210–12; William S. La Sor, "Jerusalem," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia,* ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:1025.

[11]Shmuel Safrai, *Die Wahlfahrt im Zeitalter des Zweiten Tempels,* trans. Dafna Mach (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 18, 85, 163–73, 179, 217–18, discusses the requirements and ceremonies for achieving and maintaining purity at these pilgrimage festivals.

[12]Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 139–42.

[13]In a reply to Walter Zanger, Ronny Reich, "Great Mikveh Debate," 52–53, argues persuasively that a miqveh even without a otzar is still a miqveh.

[14]Hershel Shanks, "Report from Jerusalem," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3 (December 1977): 21. Ronny Reich has provided a thorough treatment of miqvaot with double entrances in "Mishnah, *Sheqalim* 8:2 and the Archaeological Evidence" (in Hebrew), in *Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period,* ed. A. Oppenheimer, V. Rappaport, and Menahem Stern (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980), 225–56.

[15]Roland de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 131–32; Roland de Vaux, "Qumran, Khirbet-ᶜEin Feshkha," in *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land,* ed. Michael Avi-Yonah and Ephraim Stern, 4 vols. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 983–86.

[16]Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), 50.

[17]Bryant G. Wood, "To Dip or Sprinkle? The Qumran Cisterns in Perspective," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* no. 256 (fall 1984): 53–58.

[18]Wood, "To Dip," 47.

[19]Wood, "To Dip," 51.

[20]William Sanford La Sor, "Discovering What Jewish *Miqva'ot* Can Tell Us about Christian Baptism," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13 (January/February 1987): 57.

[21]Didache 7:1.

[22]See also Nathan Mitchell, "Baptism in the *Didache,*" in *The* Didache *in Context: Essays on Its Text, History, and Transmission,* ed. Clayton N. Jefford (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 252.

[23]Wilhelm Brandt, *Die jüdischen Baptismen* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1910), 57–62 (with some caution); Joachim Jeremias, "Der Ursprung der Johannestaufe," *Zeitschrift fur die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 28 (1929): 312–20; Nahum Levison, "The Proselyte in Biblical and Early Post-Biblical Times," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 10 (1957): 45–56; Thomas F. Torrance, "The Origins of Baptism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 11 (1958): 158–71; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ,* ed. Fergus Millar and others, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1986), 3:174; Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1985), 26; compare Thomas W. Manson, "Baptism in the Early Church,"

*Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949): 392 n. 7. Nineteenth-century investigators of the antiquity of Jewish proselyte baptism took the view that Jewish proselyte baptism was instituted after (rather than before) the introduction of Christian baptism; compare Ernst Gottlieb Bengel, *Über das Alter der jüdischen Proselytentaufe: eine historische Untersuchung* (Tübingen: C. F. Ostlander, 1814); and Matthias Schneckenburger, *Ueber das Alter der jüdischen Proselytentaufe und deren Zusammenhang mit dem johanneischen und christlichen Ritus: nebst einer Beilage über die irriehrer zu Colossa* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1828).

[24]Schürer, *Jewish People*, 3:174 n. 89.

[25]*The Community Rule* (1QS) 5:11, 14, in Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 76; compare Otto Betz, "Die Proselytentaufe Taufe in der Qumransekte und die Taufe im Neuen Testament," *Revue de Qumran* 1, no. 2 (1958–59): 213–34.

[26]Babylonian Talmud, Yebamot 48b; on this see Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch: Das Evangelium nach Markus, Lukas und Johannes und die Apostelgeschichte*, 4 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1924), 2:421–23.

[27]La Sor, "Discovering," 59.