



RITUAL HAND WASHING

Should Disciples of Yeshua Participate?

Many disciples of Yeshua tend to be uncomfortable with ritual hand washing. The first reason is because it may be an unfamiliar ritual and it simply feels awkward. This is perfectly fine and no one should be coerced into participation if they are uncomfortable. The second reason people may be uncomfortable when it comes to ritual hand washing may be for theological reasons. We hope that this brief article helps to alleviate this tension by shedding light on possible misunderstandings of key passages in the Apostolic Scriptures that seem to indicate Yeshua did not look favorably on ritual hand washing. However, if these arguments are still unsatisfactory, one should not feel pressured into participating in a ritual if they are troubled by it.

First let's talk about the core issue and the passages that have caused consternation over this matter. The primary concern by those who have theological objections to ritual hand washing, or Jewish ritual in general, is the belief that Jewish rituals and

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traditions are subverting the authority of the Scriptures. This is a legitimate concern that should not be taken lightly. Let's take a look at what Yeshua had to say about this matter.

The key passages that involve this issue are Mark 7:1-23 and Matthew 15:1-20. In both of the passages Yeshua and his disciples are criticized by a group of Pharisees because some of his disciples were "breaking the tradition of the elders" and eating with "unwashed hands." These passages are essentially identical, so we will focus on the details of Mark's account.

In Mark's account, it appeared to certain Pharisees "that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed" (Mark 7:2). One thing to note is that only some of Yeshua's disciples had foregone this ritual, implying others (including Yeshua) most likely did partake in its observance. So, they questioned Yeshua about this, saying, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:5). Yeshua replied by quoting a passage from Isaiah:

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" [Isaiah 29:13]. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. (Mark 7:6-8)

Yeshua continued his rebuke by saying:

You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." But you say, "If a man tells his father or his mother, 'Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban'" (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do. (Mark 7:9-13)

Before we get into our explanation, let's work to understand a little about the origins of this tradition. Where did the ritual of hand washing originate and what is its significance? Both Matthew (15:1) and Mark (7:1) give us details about this particular group of Pharisees. It says that they "had come from Jerusalem." This is an important detail that is often left out of the discussion, but has an important bearing upon our understanding. Why is this important? Because it lets us know that these Pharisees were closely associated with the daily practices of ritual cleanliness that had developed within the observant Jewish community in and around Jerusalem during Yeshua's day. Because many of them were "daily in the Temple," similar to the disciples of the Master after his resurrection, ritual purity took on a higher status than among Jews living outside of the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. Frequent visitation of the Temple would necessitate an almost constant state of ritual purity.

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The practice of ritual hand washing developed within this context, based on the daily ritual of the priesthood as they ministered before the LORD. The reasoning behind the creation of this practice was a desire for the entire nation should all minister before Him in some capacity. This was not a novel idea of their own invention, but something expressed by God Himself. When Moses climbed Mount Sinai after leading the Israelites out of Egypt, the LORD revealed to him His desired purpose for the Children of Israel:

"If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." (Exodus 19:5-6).

With this in mind, it was natural for those who already working to maintain ritual purity to extend their practice to include additional rituals that mimicked those of the priesthood. The LORD had given the priesthood explicit instructions about the importance of ritually washing before entering into His service:

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When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations. (Exodus 30:20–21)

However, as important as ritual purity was for the priesthood, during the days of Yeshua it had become elevated to an unhealthy level. The Talmud records an account when two priests were competing over the performance of one of the duties in the Temple. As they were racing to their duties one took out a knife and stabbed the other in his jealousy. If this wasn't bad enough, what follows is unbelievable:

The father of the young man came and found him still in convulsions. He said: 'May he be an atonement for you. My son is still in convulsions and the knife has not become unclean.' [His remark] comes to teach you that the cleanness of their vessels was of greater concern to them even than the shedding of blood. Thus is it also said: Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other. (b.Yoma 23a)

As we can see in this example, around the time of Yeshua human life had taken a back seat to ritual purity. Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar noted this through a comment recorded for us in the Talmud saying, "Come and see how far purity has erupted in Israel!" (b.Shabbat 13a). Like Yeshua, Rabbi Simeon was commenting on the extremeness that some religious Jews were taking in relationship to ritual purity at the expense of more important matters of religious practice.

Today, washing one's hands before eating bread is a common practice to commemorate both the ritual of the priestly duties within the Holy Temple, as well as the aspiration of becoming a nation of priests. Modern practice accentuates the sacrificial commemoration by sprinkling the bread with salt and a small score across the top of the loaf with a knife.

Many people feel that Yeshua's statements are a blanket statement about Jewish practice, and that following tradition, especially Jewish tradition, means going against Yeshua and his teachings. However, if we take a closer look at this example, we can see that Yeshua's issue was not against the ritual itself, but the hypocrisy of those pointing the finger at his disciples. Yeshua's rebuke was aimed at the elevation of a tradition above a commandment. In this particular case, it isn't that the tradition of ritual hand washing is bad, but that his opponents had more concern for a non-biblical tradition than the actual observance of biblical instruction, such as honoring one's parents. They were quick to criticize the infraction of a tradition from others, but did not think twice about violating Scripture themselves.

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A major question we need to ask is, "Does the practice of ritual hand washing violate or mistreat the Torah?" Yeshua chastised his opponents who elevated this ritual to the exclusion of the weightier matters of the Torah. However, since hand washing is based on symbolic application of a priestly function, in and of itself it does not violate Torah. Performing the ritual does not elevate tradition above Torah since it isn't replacing or negating any commandments, but can actually enhance and elevate the sensory experience of a religious expression.

Being educated in this matter may help one to overcome aversions that may have been based on incomplete information. If it will enhance your experience and draw you closer to the God of Israel, then there should be no reservation about its practice. If, however, one is still uncomfortable about participating, then one should not feel pressured into doing something against one's conscience. Ultimately, the decision to participate in ritual hand washing or not should be left up to the individual without any coercion in one direction or another. ❧

