

The Strangest Scripture in the New Testament

As a Jewish person, I can tell you that the word *baptism* conjures up horrible images for my people. From the early years of Catholicism, Jews were forced to be baptized as Christians. Sometimes it was under the threat of death. Other times the consequences of not being baptized was “merely” being thrown out of your home and country.

For example, the Spanish Inquisition declared that Jews who would not convert to Catholicism (and thus be baptized) must leave the country.

In some cases, Jews were kidnapped and forcibly baptized—one being the son of a rabbi in 1762. The worst case was in Russia just two centuries ago. The Russian empire kidnapped Jewish males from the age of 12 for military service. “The number of forced or virtually forced baptisms which resulted, probably exceeded all similar cases in other lands throughout history.”

He Did What?

Because of this thuggish history, Jewish people tend to cringe when they simply hear the word *baptism*. When news gets out of a Jewish person coming to faith in Yeshua and willingly getting baptized, they are disgusted. And it’s understandable, based on the history. But it wasn’t always like that.

And that leads us to what I consider to be the strangest verse in the entire Bible:

“How can anyone object to these people being baptized in water?” (Acts 10:47).

Who are “these people,” and who is talking? The speaker is the Jewish apostle Simon Peter, and he is referring to Gentiles at

the home of Cornelius. It was a major controversy for Gentiles to be baptized as believers in Yeshua. This had not yet been done. For the first nine years, the gospel was preached exclusively to Jews.

Simon Peter, after a vision and a word from the Lord (Acts 10), slightly confused, goes to the house of this Roman soldier and shares with the people in the house the message of Yeshua. The Holy Spirit falls upon these people in the midst of his sharing. The Jewish believers witness this and are stunned—Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit!

Simon Peter declares, “How can anyone object to these Gentiles being baptized in water?” This was a major controversy that wasn’t settled for another 10 years at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

Reverse Controversy

But since when is baptizing Gentiles controversial? Can you imagine someone objecting at, say, First Baptist Church that they are baptizing non-Jews? That would be ridiculous. However, if they were baptizing large numbers of Jews, that might make some waves.

What most people—Jews and Gentiles—do not know, is that baptism (or water immersion) is Jewish. Long before Queen Isabella sought to compel the Jews of Spain to convert and be baptized, the Jews of Israel would wade through the waters of immersion.

When John the Baptist, the Jewish prophet, came preaching repentance through baptism, we have no record of anyone protesting, “What is this strange new tradition you are evoking?”

Water immersion was already a major part of Judaism. The Torah teaches that priests would need to be immersed in water as part of their consecration (Ex. 29:4-9). Before any Jewish man

could bring a sacrifice to the temple in Jerusalem, he would first have to walk through a *mikvah*, a water immersion tank, to symbolize ritual cleansing.

Immersing 3,000 People Without a River

Furthermore, have you ever wondered how Simon Peter and the apostles immersed 3,000 Jewish men in one day in Jerusalem? Jerusalem is not Tel Aviv or a city in Galilee, where the Mediterranean Sea or the Jordan River could be utilized. Jerusalem sits on a mountain. There are no lakes, rivers or seas nearby. However, archeologists have unearthed nearly 50 *mikvot*—immersion tanks—that were used in temple worship. With 50 tanks receiving 60 people each, 3,000 could be immersed in a matter of hours. Without these Jewish *mikvot*, it would have been impossible.

Today, mixing Judaism with an act of water immersion, as we see among the Jews of the New Testament, is like mixing oil and water. But in the first century, it was not like that. The controversy of their day had nothing to do with Jews being immersed, but *Gentiles!* And Simon Peter heard from other Jewish people almost immediately after he did the “unthinkable”—baptizing Gentiles into the body of Yeshua.

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” (Acts 11:3)

How strange is this?

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