

רָחַץ *rāḥaṣ**

I. 1. Etymology; 2. Occurrences and Meaning; 3. LXX. II. Washing and Bathing: 1. Practice; 2. Washing; 3. Bathing; 4. Purpose; 5. Figurative Usage. III. Cultic Ablutions: 1. Language; 2. Obligatory Ablutions; 3. Priestly Ablutions. IV. Dead Sea Scrolls. V. Summary.

I

1. *Etymology.* The root *rḥṣ* with the same or similar meaning is found also in Ugaritic (*rḥṣ*, “wash”), Arabic (*raḥaḍa*, “wash”), Old South Arabic, (*rḥḍ*, “wash”), Akkadian (*raḥāsu*, “flood, flush”), and Ethiopic (*raḥēḍa*, “sweat”), as well as in Egyptian Aramaic and in Aramaic papyri (*rḥ*, “wash”), and in Egyptian (*rḥt*, “wash”).

The variation in the second radical (*ḥ/h*) raises the question of the root’s original form. If we accept the common assumption that an original *h* became *ḥ* in Akkadian and Egyptian, we must posit an assimilation occasioned by the *ṣ* or *ḍ*. If, however, the *ḥ* is original, we would be dealing with a dissimilation to *ḥ*, likewise under the influence of the third emphatic radical.

2. *Occurrences and Meaning.* The root *rḥṣ* occurs 72 times in the OT, including two occurrences of the pual and one of the hithpael. In addition, there are two occurrences each of the nouns *raḥaṣ*, “washing,” and *raḥṣâ*, “pond” (NRSV “washing”). The semantic field includes the verbs *kbs*, “wash,” *šṭp*, “rinse,” *ṭhr*, “be clean,” *ṭm*, “be unclean,” *qdš*, “sanctify,” and *ṭbl*, “immerse,” as well as *swk*, “anoint,” and *khl*, “paint.” It also includes the terms *šō’â*, “filth,” and *dām*, “bloodguilt.” In parallel we find *zkh*, “purify,” *zkk*, “cleanse,” and *dwh*, “rinse,” as well as *ṭnp*, “befoul.”

In the Ugaritic texts we find 24 occurrences of the verbal root in the G and Gt stems.⁹ One of the duties of a son, for example, is to wash his father’s garment (*rḥṣ nṣḥ*) when it is dirty. El orders Keret to stop mourning his childlessness and prepare to offer sacrifice: “Wash yourself and paint yourself (*trḥṣ wt’dm*), wash your hands (*rḥṣ ydk*), your arms, [your] fingers up to the shoulder.” We are also told that the king washed himself (*yrḥṣ mlk*).

Most of the occurrences have to do with ‘Anat. After horrible carnage, “virgin ‘Anat washed her hand in a basin” (*bṣ’ trḥṣ ydh btl’t nt*); “she washed her hand of the blood of the warriors, her fingers of the blood of the squires.”¹⁴ “Water was drawn, and she washed herself with the dew of heaven, with the fat of the earth” (*[t]ḥs pn mh wtrḥṣ [t]l šmn ’rṣ*). Another text also says that virgin ‘Anat washed herself (*trḥṣ btl’t nt*). Yet another text says that Pḡt, the daughter of Danel, “washes and paints herself” (*trḥ[ṣ] wt’dm*) before setting out to avenge the death of brother Aqhat. One problematic text appears to mean “and she sat upon the serpent and washed herself” (*wttb ’l btnt trḥ[ṣ?]*). It is also noteworthy that Š’tqt came when Keret died, sat down, and “washed him [clean] of sweat” (*trḥṣ nn bd’t*), then force-fed him and thus snatched him back from death. Washing—as this text makes clear—is something that the living do and is associated with life. Dirt and the cold sweat of death, blood and the outward signs of mourning, are washed away. Washing is among the preparations for offering sacrifice or more generally for carrying out a divine command. Washing is both an everyday action and a ceremony that was “a

commonplace in Semitic religions.”²⁰ Washing is done with water; afterward, both men and women may paint themselves with cosmetics.

The Samaria ostraca often contain the phrase *nbl šmn rḥš*, “a jar of oil for washing,” referring to purified oil meant for cosmetic purposes.²²

The two occurrences in the Elephantine ostraca are not entirely clear. One text reads *’rḥ’h*, another either *trḥ’nh* or *trḥmnh*. There are four additional occurrences in the Testament of Levi from the Cairo Genizah, referring to the ritual ablutions of the priests (T. Levi 35:4, 8; 36:2, 10).

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain 18 occurrences of the verb (15 in the Temple Scroll, plus 1QM 14:2; CD 10:11; 11:1) and one of the noun (1QS 3:5).

3. *LXX*. To translate *rḥš* the *LXX* uses *louéin* 41 times, *níptein* 18 times, and *plýnein* 6 times. We also find *apoulóuein* (Job 9:30), *aponíptein* (Prov. 30:12), *ekplýnein* (Isa. 4:4), and *cheín* (Job 29:6). The *LXX* omits the passage Ex. 40:30–32, with 3 occurrences of the verb. The noun *rahšâ* is translated with *tó loutrón*. Ps. 60:10(Eng. 8) = 108:10(9) is not translated literally.

II. Washing and Bathing

1. *Practice*. The common expression *rāḥaš bammayim* makes clear that washing is done with water. For added emphasis Job speaks of washing himself “with the water of snow” (Job 9:30; NRSV “soap”)—water that is particularly clear or with special cleansing power. The same verse speaks also of washing with “lye” (*bōr*). Hands or feet are washed in a “washbasin” (*sîr*, Ps. 60:10[8] = 108:10[9]). The cultic inventory of the temple includes “basins” (*kîyôr*, Ex. 30:18; 40:30; 2 Ch. 4:6) and “the sea” (*hayyām*, 2 Ch. 4:6).

It is also possible to bathe in a tub in the courtyard of a house (2 S. 11:2; Sus. 15ff.) or even in a river (Ex. 2:5; 2 K. 5:10, 12). This is suggested by the idiom “bathe one’s flesh [i.e., body].” The “pool” (Cant. 4:2; 6:6) where sheep and goats were washed was probably also located near a river or pond.

After washing or bathing, the body or skin is anointed (2 S. 12:20; Ezk. 16:9; Ruth 3:3) and the face painted with cosmetics (Ezk. 23:40). The texts from Ugarit also speak of this procedure, and the Samaria ostraca mention cosmetic oil.

The information in biblical and extrabiblical texts is brought to life by the baths found in excavated palaces, as well as the washbasins, bathtubs, and other objects for personal hygiene that have been brought to light.

2. *Washing*. People wash to remove “filth” (Isa. 4:4; Prov. 30:12) or “blood” (Isa. 1:16; 4:4; cf. Ezk. 16:9). Thus a newborn infant is washed, rubbed with salt, and wrapped in swaddling clothes (Ezk. 16:4; a practice, possibly apotropaic, that could still be encountered in Palestine in the early 20th century). Most commonly the texts speak of washing feet, as a rule one’s own (Gen. 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Jgs. 19:21; 2 S. 11:8; Cant. 5:3). It is considered an extraordinary gesture of devotion to wash someone else’s feet (1 S. 25:41). Other texts speak of washing the face (Gen. 43:31) and hands (Dt. 21:6; Isa. 1:16; cf. Ps. 26:6; 73:13). In ritual texts, the same objects are washed: hands, feet, clothing, and also the whole body—in which case a bath may be meant.

3. *Bathing*. Besides these washings, which used only “the water available in jars or bowls,” there were also complete baths for personal hygiene, as in the case of Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex.

2:5), Bathsheba (2 S. 11:2), and Susanna (Sus. 15ff.). The bathing establishments mentioned by Josephus could also be used for cleanliness. When Ahab's chariot was washed, 1 K. 22:38 relates that the prostitutes at the pool of Samaria bathed in the bloody water. Rituals often speak of baths.

4. *Purpose.* People might wash or bathe for a variety of reasons. As in the case of Naomi's advice to Ruth (Ruth 3) and possibly also Bathsheba and Susanna, a woman might wash as part of her toilet to please a man; Ezk. 23:40 describes such a process to attract a lover. In Ezk. 16:9 the bathing and anointing of the young woman may be interpreted as a kind of "fetching the bride"; Zimmerli, however, connects it with the end of the "initial helplessness and natural dependence of the child."

In the case of Pharaoh's daughter, there may also be elements of pleasure and exhilaration: a cool bath is refreshing, just as providing water to wash a guest's feet gives comfort and refreshment after the day's journey. But the cleansing effect must not be ignored (cf. Isa. 4:4), just as washing one's feet before going to bed serves primarily to cleanse them (Cant. 5:3). Cleanliness is also associated with health and hygiene, especially in the case of the newborn (Ezk. 16:4). Conversely, dirty clothes and neglect of personal cleanliness are signs of mourning (Gen. 43:31; 2 S. 12:20; cf. 2 S. 19:25[24]).

5. *Figurative Usage.* The aspect of cleanness achieved by washing predominates in figurative usage. The description of the bride's beauty compares her white teeth to a flock of shorn ewes emerging washed from the pool (Cant. 4:2; 6:6), and the eyes of the groom to "doves that bathe in [white] milk" (5:12). Job describes his former prosperity by saying that his "steps were washed with milk" (Job 29:6).

We touch on the religious domain with the desire of the righteous to see vengeance done and "bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked" (Ps. 58:11[10]). One manifestation of wickedness is to think oneself clean while remaining uncleansed (Prov. 30:12). Here the concept of cleanness "is closely related to what is ethically and religiously good," just as washing one's hands corresponds to removing the evil of one's doings (Isa. 1:16), and, in a late oracle of salvation, the consecration of Israel is represented by the metaphor of Yahweh's washing away the filth of the daughters of Zion (Isa. 4:4). Finally, we cite the figurative idiom "I wash my hands in innocence" (Ps. 26:6; 73:13), because it presupposes the act of cleansing, reinterpreted in a religious and ethical sense. There is no convincing evidence that this statement echoes "the conventional rites at the oath of cleansing."⁴⁰ The washing of a corpse described in a Ugaritic text might also be cited here; it might possibly be associated with the custom, attested in the OT, of going unwashed to express mourning.⁴¹

III. Cultic Ablutions. The various commandments governing cultic and ritual ablutions grew increasingly elaborate and detailed in the course of history. Their retention of stereotyped formulaic language suggests an element of persistent conservatism.

1. *Language.* The expression *rāḥaṣ bammayim* occurs 21 times (Ex. 29:4; 40:12; Lev. 1:9, 13; 8:6, 21; 15:5–8, 10, 11, 18, 21, 22, 27; 17:15; Nu. 19:19; Dt. 23:12; Ezk. 16:4, 9). According to Elliger, this expression reflects "legal usage," because other texts using *rāḥaṣ* "do not mention the water as being self-evident" (cf. Ex. 29:17; Lev. 9:14). This formula is expanded by addition of

the object (*'et*) *b^ešārô* in Lev. 14:9; 15:13, 16; 16:4, 24, 26, 28; 22:6; Nu. 19:7, 9; without *bammayim*, Lev. 17:16). All these passages may be assigned to Priestly circles. “Stylistically unique in P is the section Ex. 30:17–21, together with the corresponding section Ex. 40:30–32. Here the object, when specified, is ‘hands and feet’ (30:19, 21; 40:31); it is not specified in 30:18; 40:30, 32.... Only in Ex. 30:20 do we find the totally unique *rḥs mayim*.”

2. *Obligatory Ablutions*. The ablutions required of every Israelite and hence as a rule of every priest can be listed according to their occasion. In first place stands washing to remove uncleanness. Because uncleanness comes through touching or external contact with something unclean, it can be removed by washing or rinsing, following which the person in question is again allowed to visit the sanctuary (2 S. 12:20) or partake of sacred donations (Lev. 22:6). In both the story of David and the story of Ruth, the individual steps in the process—washing, anointing, changing clothes—are identical; but Ruth prepares herself in this way to meet Boaz, whereas David prepares to visit the sanctuary. This observation accords with the general principle that cultic and ritual practices are rooted in the everyday life of the people.

The only directive in the OT given to a group may go back to an archaic “magical procedure”⁴⁴ to avert the possible consequences of murder by a person unknown: the elders of the town nearest the scene of the crime kill a heifer, then wash their hands over it and attest: “Our hands did not shed this blood” (Dt. 21:6–7). Von Rad rightly comments that we should picture the hand washing “as originally to be a real and not a symbolic action.”

The rituals required of individuals should be understood analogously. The person who sets free the goat for Azazel (Lev. 16:26) or removes the carcass of the sin offering (16:28) must bathe, as well as the one who burns the red heifer (Nu. 19:7–8). Here too the original motivation was “more likely actual uncleanness than the menace of the holy.” This category also includes the directives of the ritual law concerning ablutions to remove the uncleanness consequent to disease. We begin with leprosy, because the story of how Naaman the Syrian was cured by washing seven times in the Jordan (2 K. 5:10–14) furnishes a welcome reference to the curative power of water, then conceived in miraculous and magical terms. The “cleanness of the flesh” achieved by washing is more than a simple outward cleansing, and comes to pass without any understanding on Naaman’s part of the prophet’s command.⁴⁸ Lev. 14:8–9 specifies what someone who has been healed of leprosy must do next: wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe (*rḥs*) in water; then he is clean (v. 8; v. 9 is an involved repetition).

A very similar procedure is required of one who has eaten what dies of itself or has been torn by wild animals: “He shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water” (Lev. 17:15–16).

Finally the uncleanness arising from a sexual discharge is removed in the same way: the person affected must wash his or her clothes and bathe his or her body (Lev. 15:5–8, 10–11, 13, 16, 18, 21–22, 27). The camp ordinances have adopted a variant of this procedure: a soldier made unclean by a nocturnal emission must go outside the camp and wash himself with water in the evening; then he may come back into the camp (Dt. 23:11–12[10–11]).

3. *Priestly Ablutions*. In most of the laws, cleansing serves to enable someone to return to the normal social life of the community; the last example, however, is more concerned with the irreconcilable conflict between uncleanness and holiness: the military camp with Yahweh in its midst (v. 15[14]) is holy. Wellhausen gives classic expression to this situation: “The military camp,

the cradle of the nation, was also the earliest sanctuary. There was Israel, and there was Yahweh.”

The taboo character of holiness explains the requirement that “all who have participated in making the substance used for cleansing ... are rendered ‘unclean’ for the day in question ... and ... must perform certain ablutions”—the priests according to Nu. 19:7, laypeople according to v. 8 (see also v. 19). But because the priests as cultic functionaries spend substantial time in the sanctuary and are in contact with the holy, they have a particular need to perform punctiliously the appropriate ritual ablutions.

First of all, the investiture of Aaron and his sons is preceded by “a washing, obviously a plunge bath, of the priestly candidates,” performed by Moses, making the priests ritually clean (Ex. 29:4; 40:12; Lev. 8:6). The fundamental process here described is repeated every time the priests enter the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron (Ex. 30:19ff.; 40:31–32) and when Aaron by himself enters or leaves the sanctuary on the great Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:4, 24): before putting on the sacred vestments, he must wash his body with water. The same language appears in the requirement that he remove the sacred vestments before leaving the sanctuary, bathe, and put on other clothes before offering the burnt offering. Yahweh’s appearance in the temple has made the sacred vestments so holy that they may not leave the temple, and thorough ablutions are required before putting them on and after taking them off, lest their holiness imperil the priest who wears them. To this end, “a basin” (*kîyôr*) or “the sea” (*hayyām*) was installed in the temple (Ex. 30:18; 40:30; 2 Ch. 4:6). We note, however, that Ex. 30:19, 21; 40:31 speak of washing only the priests’ hands and feet in this basin.

The Testament of Levi assembles all these requirements in a single passage devoted to priestly ablutions (35:1–8). First comes a bath, after which the priest puts on the vestments and washes his hands and feet. The washing of hands and feet is repeated whenever something is to be placed on the altar.

For the sake of completeness, we shall also mention the priest’s washing of the entrails and legs of the burnt offering, an action perhaps carried out originally by the person providing the animal, because nothing unclean may be offered to Yahweh (Ex. 29:17; Lev. 1:9, 13; 8:21; 9:14; cf. 2 Ch. 4:6; T. Levi 35:22–38⁵⁷).

IV. Dead Sea Scrolls. The many basins discovered in the excavations at Qumran suggest that ritual ablutions and baths “played a central role” there—possibly in part because of the climate. If we may rely on Josephus’s information about the Essenes, members of the community washed daily before the common meal.⁵⁹ Because Josephus says that the dining room was considered to be “like a sacred precinct,” this meal may have had a sacral character, so that ablutions before and after eating appeared appropriate.

The texts describe a cleansing process required after battle, in which those who fought washed their clothes and washed from their bodies the blood of the slain (1QM 14:2–3, *wrḥšw mdm pgr̄y h’šmh*). This description fits with the instructions in Nu. 8:7; 19:19; 31:19. The Community Rule speaks of a “water of washing/ablution” (1QS 3:5, *my rḥḥ*) that cleanses and washes away guilt.

The prohibitions in CD 10:11 and 11:1, although consonant with the late P texts of the OT, go beyond them: the former prohibits bathing with water that is dirty or less than the amount

needed to cover the bather; the latter stipulates that “one who goes down to bathe may drink where he stands, but may not fill a vessel.” Here we recognize casuistic elaboration.

V. Summary. In the ancient Near East, washing was an everyday activity; as foot washing illustrates, however, it could also signify a friendly welcome to a guest entering the house. Because by removing uncleanness washing produces cleanness, ablutions clearly found their way into the archaic cult at an early date. Here there was established an association of washing with holiness; for holiness too was considered a “contagious” and life-threatening condition, which had to be effaced before reentry into everyday life. Here we can see that both uncleanness and holiness were conceived materialistically; appropriate ablutions could therefore remove these conditions, enabling one to escape the domain of holiness or uncleanness (e.g., due to leprosy) and enter the realm of normal life. There is accordingly a mysterious connection between outward bodily cleanliness and cultic cleanness.

Several passages still reveal how the archaic practices were preserved, handed on, and finally incorporated into the latest P legislation. The law concerning the ashes of the red heifer betrays this survival in a tension within the present text of Nu. 19:1–10: Noth points out the strange “cooperation of so many different people” and theorizes that “the introduction of the priest could already represent a more advanced stage,” that an originally materialistic magical ceremony became associated outwardly with the cult of Yahweh. According to de Vaux, these ablutions represent “an archaic rite which lived on side by side with the official religion; ... it was incorporated, at a very late date, into the Priestly legislation.”⁶² In the section dealing with leprosy, also, two different rituals have been combined: Lev. 14:1–9 and 14:10–32.

The recognition that many ritual laws have a long prehistory is certainly valuable, but it appears more important to ask why P included them, using them to develop and extend the Priestly legislative corpus. On this question, all critics agree that P was concerned above all to preserve and strengthen the postexilic community. Toward this end, two things were needed: clear, unambiguous separation from the surrounding world, and internal consolidation that dealt precisely with a wide range of detail. This separation of the Jewish community from its “gentile” environment was linked with inculcation of the “idea of holiness.” De Vaux sees the position of the “Law of Purity” (Lev. 11–16) preceding the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26) as a further expression of this process, representing “the two aspects ... of that holiness which is demanded by God.”

As the requirements stipulated in the law increased, so did the importance of the priestly instruction, through which the followers of Yahweh learned precisely what they must and must not do. Thus the priestly office became even more exalted. Moses “brings” the priests to the washing that precedes their investiture (Lev. 8:6). The expression *hiqrîb* is intended to cause this action to be interpreted “after the analogy of the sacrificial act” for which the same expression was employed, just as the verb *rḥṣ* is used by P “only of the priests and portions of the sacrificial victim.”⁶⁷