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Short Note:
Ritual Washing

By Ronald J. Sim[1]

An odd question-answer exchange pops up in 2 Kings 3.11 as King Jehoshaphat of Judah seeks oracular support for his budding alliance with the northern kingdom against Moab. In response to his question "Is there no prophet of the Lord here through whom we may inquire of the Lord?" a servant-official of the king of Israel replies, "Elisha the son of Shaphat is here, who poured water on the hands of Elijah" (ESV).[2] Commentators hesitate when it comes to explaining the relative clause, [3] and with a number of modern reader-centred translations take it to be synonymous with servitude; Elisha was Elijah's servant, so BBE, GNB NET, NIV, or assistant, so NLT, GWN.[4]

To some extent, translation like this is a leap in the dark, which admittedly has partial success because it seems clearer than the obscure original expression. It fails, however, in understanding the underlying custom, and loses accuracy in conveying the proposition expressed by the king's official. That custom is alive and well in many places across Africa to this day, and presumably more widely also.[5] Let's start there, and then come back to the biblical text.

The Custom in modern Africa

In an African home, before food appears, it is common practice that a jug of water, soap,[6] a towel, and a basin, are brought around the (soon to be) seated guests. It may be a house worker, the woman of the house, or even sometimes, the man of the house, who holds the jug and pours some water over the hands of a guest, with the basin underneath to catch the running water. The guest holds out hands over the basin while water is poured, perhaps using the soap, then allowing more water to rinse off the hands. The flow of water can be

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[2] A more colloquial translation might read: "Elisha ben-Shaphat, who used to pour water over Elijah's hands, is nearby." ESV, quite reasonably in English, right-shifts the relative to follow the grammatical complement. By putting the locative complement in first position, Hebrew preserves the continuity of Name+Rel.Cl. *poh elisha' ben-shapat asher-yasaq mayim 'al-yəde eliyyah* "Elisha ben-Shaphat, who used to pour water over Elijah's hands, is nearby." (This article uses a broad transcription of Hebrew.)

[3] This can be seen in the following selective quotes. "…i.e. (Elisha) had been with (Elijah) daily as his servant…" (Keil & Delitzsch 1988:303); "…here [Elijah] is portrayed as Elisha's servant. The pouring of water to provide running water for ablutions was a menial task" (Wiseman 1993:200); "The precise meaning is unknown … since it is without parallel in the Old Testament" (Hobbs 1985:36). Jones (1984:395) also adds that it shows respect from a host to a guest, but this also is misleading in the present instance.

[4] BBE= Bible in Basic English; GWN=God's Word for the Nations.

[5] My observation is that it is widespread in Africa, but not necessarily in every ethnic community. I speculate that it is also likely to be found in other world regions. Again, in my observation, African communities are extremely particular when it comes to washing hands before (and after) eating, perhaps more so than many westerners in some respects. When snacks or "finger food" are on offer, they may be held in paper tissues so that they reach the mouth clean; the tissue is not merely for keeping fingers clean, although it fulfils both purposes.

[6] The mention of soap is a distraction here, but some notes might be useful. Although not all ancient societies knew how to make soap, there is evidence that it was made from fats boiled with ashes in ancient Babylon around 2800 BCE (Willcox 2000:453), in Egypt from 1550 BCE, and the Phoenicians were making soap from goat's tallow and wood ashes in 600 BCE according to Pliny the Elder. A recipe from ashes, cypress oil and sesame oil "for washing the stones for the servant girls" is known in the reign of Nabonidus, 556–539 BCE (Levey 1958:341). It also had long-standing medicinal use. The mentions in Jeremiah 2.22; Malachi 3.2 show soap to be an astringent agent used for washing utensils and fibres like flax and wool, rather than for personal hygiene. In Greco-Roman times, bathers rubbed ashes and olive oil on their skin then scraped the skin clean with a *strigil*, without using soap.

nicely ended by raising hands towards the jug. Importantly, the washing water runs off the hands into the basin. Each guest's hands are cleansed in turn with clean water from the jug, and the used water gathers in the basin. In small rural restaurants, and in some modern homes, there is a wash-basin plumbed in at a corner of the dining room, and each person can wash his own hands in running water, but in a home it is more usual to bring a jug of clean water to each guest in turn. The courtesy is repeated after eating, to cleanse the hands from food and sauce. In ancient Israel, as in much of the majority world to this day, fingers are the proper eating implements.[7] This custom prevails across Africa.

Recently while having lunch with a colleague from Africa and a younger man who had grown up there, the first said, "Before we sit down, are you not bringing a jug of water for us to wash our hands?" We all immediately recognised an allusion to the custom described above, so prevalent is it, and laughed together, and agreed that it may be the head of the house, his wife, eldest son, or other son or daughter, who attends to the washing; it is part of hospitality, hygiene, respect, and commensality, not principally a menial task.

Discussion

[A] I suggest with some confidence, that this is similar to the custom mentioned in 2 Kings 3.11. Elisha was no mere personal servant, but was habitually with Elijah at meal-times, and was active in the courtesy of ensuring the older Elijah could wash his hands before eating. The significance is more one of constant close companionship and respect than of servitude. Elisha brought the jug of clean water to Elijah and poured it while the older man washed hands before eating. No doubt a catching-basin is implied. The point is that all of this action is to be inferred—the context of an imminent meal, the jug of water, the catching of running water below Elijah's hands, with the text only expressing the pourer (Elisha), the pouring-water action, and Elijah's hands.

But why should such information about Elisha be a relevant response to King Jehoshaphat's question? How can this former close commensal companionship form a relevant basis for commending Elisha as a prophet who can give a divine response to King Jehoshaphat? Commensal companionship is evidence for a further inference, that Elisha had been under the tutelage of Elijah, as a *ben-nabi* 'son of the prophet' (Amos 7.14), or follower-disciple. Evidence of prophetic guilds or schools at this period is reflected in 1 Kings 20.35; 2 Kings 2.3,5,15; 6.1; 9.1.

It is plausible that Jehoshaphat knew of Elijah by reputation. He may also have known of Elisha by reputation, but it would seem that the officer of the king of Israel assumes the former but is less confident of the latter.

Although translating the relative clause as "servant/assistant" simplifies the text's obscurity, it also tends to make the information less relevant in focusing on servitude rather than a commensal relationship with a prophet whose reputation King Jehoshaphat would know, a *ben-nabi*, a disciple and companion, not a servant or host. Jehoshaphat's next words, "The word of the Lord is with him" acknowledge Elisha's authenticity and strengthen such an inference.

Modern Bible readers have access to the stories of both prophets (1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 9) and of Elisha's role in succeeding to Elijah (2 Kings 2). They are likely to catch the commendation of Elisha without blinking, and only the mention of pouring water is likely to cause any distraction. If they can draw inferences from pouring water on the hands to a mentoring relationship, the difficulty resolves itself.

In Hebrew the hand-washing ritual is called *netilat yadayim* 'the raising of hands', referring to the lifting of hands over the basin to receive water poured from a pitcher, or less likely, the raising of hands under the pitcher to indicate that pouring should stop. The custom underlies passages like Mark 7.1–5. In the biblical text it is sometimes difficult to separate concern for ritual cleansing from simple hygiene, and perhaps we shouldn't try to. The following discussion is concerned with how ritual washing, and hand washing in particular, is carried out, rather than with its function in any single instance.

[7] Forks are a much later innovation for the meal table, possible originating from Byzantium, and not coming into common use until 17th century Europe.

[B] In Matthew 27.24 the text reads that Pilate "took water and washed his hands" publicly (λαβὼν ὕδωρ ἀπενίψατο τὰς χεῖρας ἀπέναντι τοῦ ὄχλου), leaving the necessary jug, basin, and act of pouring to be inferred. At best the modern western reader may assume that Pilate got himself some water, dipped his hands in a small basin and washed them together, but far more probable is that he had a servant pour water over his hands, and he allowed the water to run off them as he publicly cleansed himself symbolically from personal responsibility[8] for the judgement he was manipulated into. The aorist participle can carry the sense "got (water)," which would be a slightly more appropriate translation here.

[C] In John 2.6, the six stone[9] water pots (λίθιναι ὑδρίαι ἓξ κατὰ τὸν καθαρισμὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων) each held about 80–120 litres for washing hands and possibly utensils. Nothing more is said, but knowing that Jews washed their hands in running water and the water was to run off from the wrists and then from the fingers, the pouring of water from a jug individually for each guest is the strong inference.[10] At this late stage of the festivities, water would have been scooped out for repeated use in washing, so the pots would likely not be full. It would be preposterous to imagine that each person dipped hands into the water jars, leaving the water successively dirtier. Only the stored water is referred to, nothing of the washing custom itself. The ritual may suggest by analogy that it is pitchers of drawn water that turned to wine (John 2.8–9) rather than all water remaining in the six pots, however much they still contained at this point in the celebrations.

[D] Occasionally the vessel is referred to explicitly, as in John 13.5, in connection with a symbolic foot-washing, "Jesus poured water into a ewer/basin and began washing the disciples' feet" (βάλλει ὕδωρ εἰς τὸν νιπτῆρα καὶ ἤρξατο νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν). The rare word νιπτήρ might be either jug/ewer (Rieu 1952, Barclay 1968), or basin, as in most English translations (Morris 1971:616fn). It is probable that the majority of translations are influenced by western expectations, and that Barclay and Rieu have caught the custom better. Once more, rather than each disciple dipping his feet into water already soiled by previous dusty feet, and rather than the basin being emptied and refilled with fresh water for each, we are to imagine that Jesus poured clean water over each disciple's feet in turn, catching the run-off in a basin. Bernard (1928:459) gives an explanation similar to that proposed here. Morris is clear that "washing would not be in a basin as with us, but water would be poured over the feet from one vessel and presumably caught in another" (Morris 1971:616). Hendriksen (1954:230) envisages Jesus pouring fresh water from a jug into a basin for each disciple; while this is possible, the custom proposed here in explanation is simpler and closer to known Jewish practice. Neyrey (2009), although useful in other ways, does not discuss practical details of methodology.

Foot-washing has three functions in the ancient world: personal hygiene, comfort and relaxation after the day's activity (Genesis 18.4; 19.2; 24.32; 43.24; Judges 19.21; 2 Samuel 11.8); ritual cleansing[11] (Exodus 30.19–21; 40.31–32; Leviticus 8.6); and a gesture of hospitality to others for their comfort (1 Timothy 5.10; compare Luke 7.37–38 with 7.44–46, where Jesus interprets the woman's tears as foot-washing hospitality). Jesus interprets Mary's anointing of his feet as a burial rite, which also involves washing of a body (John 12.1–8).

In most references, individuals wash their own feet; only the hospitality referred to in 1 Timothy 5.10 speaks about washing another person's feet, with a serving aspect. In John 13, Jesus introduces a rite into a context of commensal hospitality with an expressed component of service and overturning of social relationships.[12] It is the overturning of conventional relationships that worries Peter.

[E] Returning to an Old Testament passage, in Deuteronomy 21.1–9 we read of a fascinating ritual to be performed in cases of unsolved murder. Ancient Israel, like most traditional clan-based societies had no law enforcement agency, and no prisons. The judiciary was the responsibility of community elders, Levitical

[8] We should read "clean hands" as signifying free from responsibility for wrong actions (Psalm 24.4; 73.13; Job 17.9).
[9] Remember that stone pots could be re-used, whereas clay pots were to be smashed after a single ritual use. See Leviticus 6.28; 11.32–34; 15.12; and compare in the same context Numbers 19.15.
[10] Morris 1971:182 and Bernard 1928:I.77 draw this inference, and state this explicitly.
[11] Thomas 1991:27. Neyrey 2009:364 also notes that before engaging in a holy war, warriors washed their feet to symbolise their engagement in a task requiring ritual purity.
[12] Foot washing in the modern church does not provide much parallel or seriously promote service of others. Overturning social conventions isn't involved. Western assumptions often prevail, with feet washed in a basin.

priests, and a family avenger. Retribution for crime was usually appropriate compensation, flogging, or capital punishment in limited cases, including murder, in which case a family avenger (*go'el ha-ddam*, lit. 'redeemer of blood') pursued and judicially killed the culprit (Numbers 35, esp. v. 19; Deuteronomy 19; Joshua 20). So, what to do about a murder whose perpetrator remained undiscovered?

In the biblical text, the elders of the village settlement nearest to the place where the corpse was discovered take responsibility, select a heifer (a cost is implied here), take it into a wadi with a running brook, and break its neck there (21.3–4). Then the text reads, "Then the priests shall come forward … and all the elders of that nearest village shall wash their hands over the heifer" (21.5–6) giving public verbal witness that "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed" (21.7). In the light of the hand-washing custom, it is virtually certain that we are to infer that they wash their hands in poured water scooped up from the running water in the wadi, which then runs off their hands onto the dead heifer. Perhaps the elders scooped up and poured water for each other. This would be a very natural reading of the text, though it is silent on this point. Alternatively, each elder scoops up running water and washes his own hands over the dead heifer; the former is more likely in context. The text reads that the Levitical priest(s) have stepped forward (21.5), but they are not said to do anything. One explanation is that they step forward to fulfil their general role of "settling disputes and assaults" (21.5) by witnessing and ratifying the rite, and perhaps as part of that role, the priests scoop up and pour the water over each elder's hands. The procedure given in the text does not distinguish between the three possibilities; either the method was not important, or it is contextually assumed although lost to us.

Then the elders' public invocation continues with the petition,

> kapper ləʾammәka yisraʾel ʾašer-padita yhwh wәʾal-titten dam naqi bәqereb ʾammәka yisraʾel wәnikkapper lahem haddam
>
> "Accept atonement for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, Lord, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for." (21.8 ESV)[13]

More literally, "Atone for your people Israel whom you have ransomed, Lord, and do not ascribe/hold innocent blood to/against your people Israel, that the blood may be atoned for them."[14]

Explaining the petition requires much more attention than the present short note can provide, but for completeness, something should be included here. The heifer's death appears to defray guilt, being the cost of the purging, although notably its blood is not shed in ritual slaughter,[15] and the hand-washing evidently symbolises the village elders' innocence, with the death and washing and petition together invoking the Lord to cover the guilt for the crime and confer innocence of it upon the community.

[F] As an aside, note that this passage has been compared with the red heifer ritual (Numbers 19), to which we now turn. In this a heifer is ritually slaughtered (*zabach*) and its blood thrown towards the altar before the whole carcase including intestinal contents (*peresh* 'dung') is burned to ashes. The ashes are mixed with water and stored for purification (this is the sense of the phrase "the water of impurity," Numbers 19.9,13,20,21). The heifer is also called a "burned sin offering" (*sәrepat ha-hatta't* Numbers 19.17). When referring to a sacrifice, *hatta't* is usually better translated "purification offering" (Milgrom 1971, 1976, 1983—see excursus). The water of purification is used to sprinkle the impure person or object to make them ritually clean, so that the symbolic rite has primacy over literal washing.

The priest who slaughters the heifer, sprinkles its blood, and throws some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn on the fire; the person who superintends the burning to ashes; the person who gathers the ashes after

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[13] The final clause may be an explanatory comment rather than within the elders' invocation, so Tanakh.

[14] *kappar* is a denominative verb, 'make atonement, make reconciliation, purge'. Note here the verb *pada* 'ransom, repossess, rescue', originally denoting purchase/change ownership, and compare *ga'al* 'redeem, avenge, revenge, do the part of a kinsman' (e.g. Exodus 6.6).

[15] In the absence of an identified murderer, the victim's blood cannot be avenged, and the ritual would seem to represent vengeance exacted. Is it stretching analogy too far to suggest that the dead heifer corresponds to either the dead person or to the undiscovered murderer? This would perhaps also explain why it is not slaughtered, but has its neck broken; representing a murderer or victim, it would be inappropriate to slaughter the beast.

burning and stores them in a clean place; and the person who sprinkles the ash-water on unclean persons and objects; all must launder (*kabas*) their clothes and bathe (*rachats*) their body (Numbers 19.4–10,19).

The ritual records in some detail how sprinkling with ash-water is used for cleansing, usually on the third and seventh day, and how those who administer the ritual take care to restore their own ritual purity.

[G] A final oblique reference to essentially the same hand-washing customary practice may be found in the tabernacle and temple furnishings. There is to be a large basin filled with water for washing (Exodus 30.17–21; 1 Kings 7.23–26; 2 Chronicles 4.15). In the case of the temple there are other, smaller, portable basins (1 Kings 7.38–39; 2 Chronicles 4.14). Priests ceremonially wash their hands and feet before offering sacrifice (Exodus 30.19, 1 Kings 7.38). We ought most probably to reconstruct inferentially that water is drawn from the large basin for washing in a separate place in the courtyard, catching the run-off in the smaller basins.

By late second temple times (i.e., including first century CE), it was customary for all to immerse themselves in a *mikveh* 'ritual bath' before entering temple precincts. Whatever form the ritual bath took in Davidic times, Bathsheba was "bathing … to purify herself from her uncleanness" (in 2 Samuel 11.2,4).[16] In the chapters on uncleanness in Leviticus 11–15, restoring ritual purity generally involves both laundering clothing and washing body.

Although there is no mention of ritual bathing in the New Testament, except perhaps implied in John 13.10, the practice underlies references to washing in New Testament; for example see Acts 22.16, 1 Corinthians 6.1, Titus 3.5, Hebrews 10.22, Revelation 1.5, noting the different Greek words used.

Explanations of reconciliation to God through Christ's death are more prominently linked to the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament. The red heifer ritual is mentioned in passing in Hebrews 9.13b, and washing rituals generally in Hebrews 9.22a. New Testament references to washing deserve much closer attention in the context of Israelite and other eastern Mediterranean societies.

Summary and conclusions

The above survey shows washing customs where literal washing is primary, others where the washing symbolises something else, and others where literal washing is thoroughly dominated by the ceremonial rite.

The mention of hand-washing and foot-washing in passages like those we have considered say very little about how it was done, but rely upon strong contextual assumptions that were, by definition, highly accessible in biblical societies. If these contextual assumptions are readily accessible to modern Bible readers, these readers may construct mental images similar to those of biblical times and societies.

Societies today which follow somewhat similar hand-washing customs may also have vocabulary items which denote washing-by-pouring. Such societies may have little difficulty translating 2 Kings 3.11, which is the most obscure reference, and where the difficulty is the most acute, simply because Elisha is identified solely by his role in administering the custom to Elijah. His close association with and discipleship under Elijah is the basis for proposing him as a prophet who would be acceptable to King Jehoshaphat of Judah and likely to provide an oracle that the king would trust. In its original context this would have been a strong assumption in context, but it would be unusual for it to be sufficiently strong in modern societies. A footnote might be useful.

Given an appropriate vocabulary item, the mentions in Matthew 27.24, John 13.5 and Deuteronomy 21.1–9 may carry sufficient indication in the text to lead to the correct inferences. The word νιπτήρ in John 13.5 is just as likely to denote a jug or pitcher, and this would be a better translation than basin, which probably reflects western custom and expectations.

In communities which do not follow a similar custom, and do not readily access similar contextual assumptions, or whose audiences do not immediately make a link from the text to the custom, a translation

[16] Although some read this "though she was still being purified after her period" (NEB, cf. GKC §141e) to imply that David ignored regulations prohibiting sexual intercourse during female ritual uncleanness, "this parenthetic note was intended to stress that it was a favourable time for conception, and, especially, that Uriah could not have been the father of the child that was eventually born" (Anderson 1989:153).

may need to alert readers. This can be done most aptly by an illustration and caption, of one individual pouring water over another's hands, into a catching-basin. Alternatively, the custom can be described in a footnote or glossary.

There is no serious loss if readers fail to catch on and imagine each case wholly in terms of their own, different cultural practice, but there is pay-off in identifying the custom. And there is certainly benefit for commentators reckoning with what may seem to be obscure but is in fact easily clarified and enriched for readers' thought world.

For completeness, ritual bathing is also covered briefly, mentioning its role in Leviticus 11–15 and Numbers 19. The brief remarks here only serve to draw attention to the concept for translators, and there is clearly much more to be said.

Understanding the washing customs involved can guide translators away from unnecessary re-phrasings (like GNB, NIV, NLT, NET Bible, Bible in Basic English or God's Word for the Nations in 2 Kings 23.11) or from circumlocutions that would wrongly point a translation down a different pathway. One is reminded of the humorous translation of Living Bible, "Saul went to the bathroom" in the back of the cave. This is fine for reading with children, but it creates distracting inferences for many readers—after all, that is why it became notorious for its unintended humour. In another translation, the draft of John 1.48 had Jesus saying "I saw you (sitting) under the fig tree" until one translator realised this sounded like squatting there for toilet functions. Knowing what is the correct but underdetermined custom, helps us to prevent infelicities.

Readers who wish to see what pitchers and basins for washing looked like might visit the site www.levantineceramics.org/vessels. The study of pottery over the biblical period is complex.

Excursus

Traditionally *hatta't* has been rendered 'sin offering'. But *hatta't* is built on the piel form of the root, which carries the opposite meaning of the *qal*, namely "de-sin, expunge, decontaminate, purify." Because of this, Jacob Milgrom has contested the traditional rendering in preference to "purification offering."

This position is supported by the use of *hitte'* 'cleanse, purify' to describe the intention/result of presenting a *hatta't* 'purification offering'.

- For example, four times in Ezekial 43.20–23 (cf. Lev 8.14–15) *hitte'* denotes purification of the altar by an act of *kapar* 'covering/atoning', so that after seven days of these rites it is *tahor* 'cleansed', and *milu' yad* 'consecrated' (43.26).
- In Ezekial 45.18 the presentation of *hatta't* 'purification offering' cleanses the sanctuary (*wehitte'ta et-ha-migdash*), thus making atonement (*kapar*) for it (v.20; cf. Leviticus 14.49,52).
- In Numbers 19.17–19, anyone who becomes unclean through touching a corpse then becomes *hatta'* 'purified' and *tahor* 'clean' after sprinkling twice, on the third and seventh days, with the ash-water from the red heifer *hatta't* 'purification offering'.
- Finally, a person who touches a corpse must take steps to purify himself/herself (Num 19:12,13,20, with the hithpael of *hatta'* denoting 'purify oneself') in order that he/she might be clean (cf. Num 31:19,20,23; 8:21).

In conclusion, Milgrom's proposal to render *hatta't* 'purification offering' is now the preferred translation in English. This denotes the specific function of this sacrifice and maintains the distinction with other expiatory sacrifices, particularly the reparation offering, *asham*. This excursus is drawn from Hartley 1992:55, "Excursus: The Purification Offering in Lev 4."

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