**Water Rituals in Medieval Christian and Jewish Culture**

Water is essential to sustaining life,[[1]](#footnote-1) and as such it has often been imbued with spiritual significance. In medieval Europe, water played a central role in the liturgy, ritual, and customs of both Christians and Jews. Water symbolized purity, life, and the teachings of the faith (believed to be as vital to human life as water). Both Christians and Jews prayed for rain, feared the effect of demonic forces over water sources, and depicted water as a central element of eschatological stories. Water was used in purification rituals, seasonal traditions, and holiday celebrations. While the symbolic meanings of water in the medieval world have been analyzed, the intersections between the material nature of water, its practical functions in ritual and everyday life, and water’s symbolic meanings has not been investigated. The tensions between the divergent meanings invested in water by medieval Jews and Christians, and its wide range of practical uses are the productive historical ground of this research project, which will examine both beliefs and practices regarding water in Jewish and Christian life from the eleventh to the fifteenth century in Western Europe.

During the Middle Ages the intersection of symbolic and ritualistic meanings of water in Christianity and Judaism led to arguments between members of these faiths about the content, significance, and consequence of water rituals – arguments that often stood at the heart of interreligious conflict. The most striking example is the conflict over the ritual of baptism or ritual immersion. Jewish communities practiced regular ritual immersion in clearly delineated bodies of water throughout the year. However, not all water was considered as ritually effective, and immersion was a purification ritual, mostly carried out by menstruating women, as well as men at particular points in the liturgical year.[[2]](#footnote-3) Thus, only certain kinds of material, water collected in specifically mandated ways and in particular natural settings, could do the **spiritual or religious** work of purifying Jews. For Christians, however, ritual immersion (baptism), while also associated with purification from sin, was linked exclusively to acceptance of new members into the faith [something about holy water].[[3]](#footnote-4) These differences came to the fore in arguments about the use of baptism in the conversion process. While both religions held that immersion was necessary for conversion to Christianity or to Judaism, they diverged on the meaning and practice of this ritual.[[4]](#footnote-5) They had different answers to fundamental theological, liturgical, ritual and practical questions; can forced baptism produce a valid conversion? Can baptism be reversed? What spiritual role does water play in this ritual? And what can cause this ritual to fail? The answers to these questions could determine who was a Jew and who a Christian, who was deemed to be polluted with sin and who was considered pure.[[5]](#footnote-6) However, these wide ranging questions shed light on the historical questions at the center of my enquiry; how did water function simultaneously as a ritual tool and ritual symbol? How did water facilitate a range of ceremonies from liturgical rites to folk magic? Religious conflicts over the nature of baptism demonstrate that the proper practice of water rituals was not the preserve of theologians, but was core to the identities of Jews and Christians, whose lives were symbolically and tangibly interwoven, their distinct identities often bound up in the very rituals that defined them against each other.[fn Boyarin etc]

While medieval scholars often wrote about the role of water in formal rituals,[[6]](#footnote-7) it is also clear that lay members of Jewish and Christian communities invested water and water rituals with their own symbols, ideas, and meanings. In both communities water was considered to be affected by positive and negative forces, which, in turn, could affect anyone who came into contact with the material substance of water. Jews drew water for Passover rituals only at certain times and places, and Christians believed that the water blessed on Easter would protect their houses.[[7]](#footnote-8) Individuals applied popular magic to bring rain and feared that witches would do the same to cause storms, showing water to be both influenced by unnatural forces and able to serve them. These popular practices were developed and enacted by non-elite members of both communities, who sometimes perceived themselves as more knowledgeable than scholars regarding the control of water and weather.[fn] Popular lay practices developed alongside official teachings regarding water rituals and did not always conform to the dictates of religious scholars. In fact, there is evidence of scholars, both Jewish and Christian, who tried to reject such popular traditions outright or fit them into the religious canon. Although the practice and interpretation of rites involving water often originated in antiquity, they significantly responded to the specific circumstances of medieval life.[[8]](#footnote-9) The long and complex history of interwoven meanings contained in the history of water rituals will enable me to move beyond the symbolic, elite, and purely theological meanings of water, and reconstruct medieval meanings of water in a holistic and comparative way.

Examining well-poisoning accusations leveled against minorities throughout high medieval Europe, my doctoral dissertation explored the social and political mobilization of water as a powerful socio-cultural, political, and religious force. I focused on the fear of water contamination and poisoning and showed how this fear was harnessed to justify legal violence against marginalized groups.[[9]](#footnote-10) In this research project, I will expand my lens of inquiry by examining water’s positive symbolic, social, and ritual significance in a wider cultural context.

Drawing on both the conclusions of my PhD and my work in Prof. Baumgarten’s research group ‘Beyond the Elite’, my new research project will compare the development of Jewish and Christian practices and beliefs regarding water, including baptism, the yearly blessing of water, and the use of water in seasonal holiday rituals. My study will not only describe how different rituals evolved *within* each faith, but will also identify *common* beliefs and practices that Jews and Christians shared, and examine regional differences in these beliefs and practices. This research aims to explain and contextualize the belief that water carried sanctity, and could provide physical and spiritual purity, held by Christians and Jews.

I will trace ceremonies (both formalized rituals and unsanctioned lay ceremonies) involving water through the Jewish and Christian calendars. Having compiled a comprehensive list of the ceremonies that include water (with appended primary sources), I will describe the mechanisms of each ceremony, and then use primary sources to explain how each ceremony was perceived, understood, and participated in by both Jews and Christians. To accomplish a truly comparative survey, I will draw upon a wide variety of sources, including prayer and ritual books, descriptions of religious practices (such as books on customs, hagiography, narrative sources), sources attesting to the built environment and physical spaces in which rituals took place, and visual art. I will examine Jewish sources in Hebrew and Christian sources in Latin and vernacular languages. I have begun to amass a corpus of relevant Hebrew and Latin texts,[[10]](#footnote-11) some of which I have already translated into English. The next stage of my research is to deepen my search for Hebrew sources in the National Library of Israel, and seek out more Christian sources in a number of European libraries, such as the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. Ultimately, by using water rituals as the thread that holds my enquiry together, I will compare and contrast my primary source material, from a range of genres, languages and media, in order to uncover and delineate the cultural assumptions that shaped each communities participation in water rituals, and better understand how water was perceived to hold spiritual meaning.

I will publish five case studies, each focusing on a different set of Jewish and Christian rituals that bear some similarity to each other. The first case study will contrast the Jewish *tekufah* (wherein Jews put iron needles into water vessels to prevent their being poisoned) and the Christian rituals around the day of St. John the Baptist (when Christians lit fires to protect their water sources from demonic forces). Both rites are seasonal, contain a strong popular element, focus on the purity and safety of drinking water, and reached the height of their popularity in late medieval Western Europe. The study will follow the development of the beliefs and practices bound up in these rites, and explore the reasons for this apparently parallel development in Christian and Jewish culture. My second case study will examine rituals of baptism or purification, as discussed above. The third will explore the yearly blessing of water, practiced by Christians on the Eve of the Epiphany and on Easter, and by Jews on the holiday of *Shemini Atzeret*. The fourth will discuss the use of water in burial rites in both religions, analyzing the practical and ritualistic use of water as a medium of purification through a different lens. The final case study will focus on theology, comparing parallel symbolism in the eschatological beliefs related to water in medieval Judaism and Christianity.[[11]](#footnote-12) The framework of these wide ranging case studies will enable me to analyze the development of particular rites in their immediate context, before presenting general conclusions based on common patterns.[[12]](#footnote-13) The research will be published in six articles: one on each case study, and a general concluding article. Taken as a whole, the articles will be used as the basis for a future monograph on water rituals in medieval Christian and Jewish culture.

Receiving the Polonsky Postdoctoral Fellowship would enable me to pursue this extended research project. By using my unusual combination of skills in working with Latin, Hebrew, and vernacular primary sources, I hope to present a new perspective on the divergent symbols, uses, meanings, and practices bound up in role of water in the shared culture of Jews and Christians. Through this unique prism, my study will increase our understanding of spiritual and material life in the Middle Ages, bringing together intellectual, social, and cultural history.

1. For practical use of water in medieval Europe, see: Roberta J. Magnusson, *Water Technology in the Middle Ages: Cities, Monasteries, and Waterworks after the Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Paolo Squatriti, ed., *Working with Water in Medieval Europe: Technology and Resource-Use* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2000); Jean-Pierre Leguay, *L’Eau dans la ville au Moyen Âge* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jeffrey R. Woolf, *The Fabric of Religious Life in Medieval Ashkenaz (1000-1300): Creating Sacred Communities* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 139-145, 157-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Spinks, *Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 109-156; Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, 179-266. In contrast with early Christian traditions: David Hellholm, Tor Vegge, Øyvind Norderval, Christer Hellholm, *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 337-1576. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Gary Porton, *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony,” *JJS* 41 (1990), 172–203. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For various discussions of purity in Judaism and Christianity, see: Carl S. Ehrlich, Anders Runesson, Eileen M. Schuller, and Susan Haber, eds., *Purity, Holiness, and Identity in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Memory of Susan Haber*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 305 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Robin M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, v. 105 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2011), 132-170; Spinks, *Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 109-156; Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, 179-266. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Inter alia: Elisheva Baumgarten, “’Remember that Glorious Girl’: Jephthah’s Daughter in Medieval Jewish Culture,” *JQR* 97 (2007): 180-209; Israel Ta-Shma, “The Danger of Drinking Water during the Tequfa – The History of an Idea,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 17 (1995): 21-32; Elisheva Carlebach, *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 160-181; Heidi L. Chrétien, *The Festival of San Giovanni: Imagery and Political Power in Renaissance Florence* (New York: P. Lang, 1994); ; Israel J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Tel-Aviv: ʻAlma/ʻAm ʻOved, 2000), 188-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See, e.g.: Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006); Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c. 200 - c. 1150* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002); Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Blessing of Waters and Epiphany: The Eastern Liturgical Tradition* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Tzafrir Barzilay, “Well-Poisoning Accusations in Medieval Europe: 1250-1500,” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2016). See abstract in the additional file. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Predominantly at the libraries of Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Also see; Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy, AD 400-1000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Susan A. Keefe, *Water and the Word: Baptism and the Education of the Clergy in the Carolingian Empire* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); Joseph H. Lynch, *Christinizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 23-55, 81-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See, for example: Caroline W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe,* (New York: Zone, 2011). And a different theoretical approach to the subject: Terje Tvedt, *Water and Society: Changing Perspectives of Societal and Historical Development* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)