

Baptism in the Old Testament

Baptism was used in ancient Israel as a symbolic act. We see a passing reference of baptism in the Old Testament in Hebrews 9:10, along with an explanation that baptism is symbolic of the cross. Note that in Heb 9:10, the word used for washings is baptisimos, To get the full context of this passage, it is necessary to quote a large part of Hebrew chapter 9.

Heb 9:9-10:1

9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience-- 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.

11 But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

16 For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. 17 For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. 18 Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. 19 For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you." 21 Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. 22 And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.

23 Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another-- 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will

*appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.
NKJV*

Let's go through this in a bit more detail.

Heb 9:9-10:1

9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience-- 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.

This passage is very clear regarding the symbolic nature of the various rituals. As pointed out earlier, the reference here to ritual washings is the same word used elsewhere in the New Testament where it is translated as "baptism".

11 But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

This part of the passage compares the blood sacrifices in the Old Testament times with the one sacrifice which was capable of taking away sins of men, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. What we see here is that the Old Testament rituals were prophetic of that which was to come. We see a comparison to the Old testament sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross which cleanses our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

16 For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. 17 For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. 18 Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood.

The focus of the covenant is the blood, both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The Old Covenant us the prophetic symbolism of animal blood and the New Covenant focuses on the blood shed on the cross of Christ, the only way that we can be truly saved through the forgiveness of sins.

19 For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God

Page 2 of 3

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The key is given here again. Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.

23 Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

The ritual washings and blood sacrifices were for purification, but they were just symbolic of the only means of purification from sin which was effective, the sacrifice on the cross.

24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another-- 26 He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.
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Romans chapter 6 re-states this truth, that water baptism was prophetic of the death and resurrection of Christ. In Romans 6, Paul referred to water baptism as the "likeness" of the death and resurrection.

Baptism was symbolic of the coming of Christ, just as many or most of the ancient rituals in the Old Testament pointed to Christ. And we keep some of them today, for example, Passover was pointing to the blood of Christ, whereas Easter looks backwards to the cross. Baptism in the OT Testament testified prophetically of the death and resurrection of Christ on the cross, and today we use baptism as symbolic of the same thing, only now looking back.

But the salvation is not in the symbolic act as scripture says, but rather it is to point us to that which does saved - to the blood shed by Christ on the cross of Calvary.

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Page 3 of 3

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