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Water

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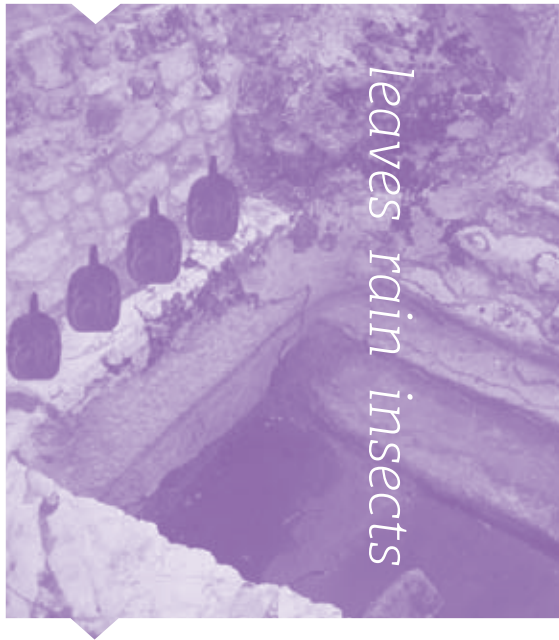
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A Greek inscription on the front says “One God who conquers evil” and in another place “IAW,” which is a Greek version of the Tetragrammaton. The back repeats the “one God” formula. Neither the text nor the images can definitively identify the owner of this amulet; the mounted rider could equally represent King Solomon or a Christian soldier-saint. Nevertheless, the purpose of this amulet as protection against the evil eye can be seen by the image on the back.

By carving a complete prayer or even just a few words onto an object, people were able to give material form to their requests for healing. Whether worn around the neck, carried in a pouch, or set into a ring, these amulets offered the wearers a tangible reminder of their beliefs that divine intervention would cure them. ●



RICK BONNIE

Water

Darkish grey clouds slowly start to block the clear blue sky. The first drops, still sparkling in the fading sunlight over the Galilee, fall down to the earth. What begins as a soft rain quickly becomes more intense. The rain is welcomingly received by grasses, trees, and flowers. These are the first drops after a long and hot summer, though with only four months without actual rain this year’s summer feels remarkably short. There have been years when the dry season lasted over seven months easily. Those years are much harsher for the people, animals, and plants the earth sustains, not least any ritual purification activity to be conducted. Some of the rainwater does not make it directly into the soil, but falls onto the flat, plaster-lined roof of a village house. The first raindrops are quickly soaked up into the roof itself. Subsequent water, however, due to the slight angle crafted into the roof, slowly rolls down into the corners. With it comes windblown dust, sand, and leaves that—despite regular sweeping by the occupants—have gathered.

Having reached the corner of the roof’s edge, the rainwater is channeled downward, either by a pipe feeding directly into a plaster-lined rectangular vat or a stepped pool, or by a downspout into the open courtyard of the house. The first batch of rainwater entering the house is filthy, as it still is mixed with roof debris, and thus does not end up directly in any of the larger bell-shaped cisterns in the house, which are essential for longer-term storage of water for drinking and cooking. Instead, this dirty roof water is, possibly, channeled into a plaster-lined



Miqveh (photo courtesy of Joe Goldberg)

vat or stepped pool that is connected to the house's cistern via a pipe. The stepped pool may therefore function not only as an immersion bath for ritual purification (*miqva'ot*), but also as a settling basin for the cistern. In other cases the filthy rainwater is diverted from the courtyard onto the streets, as it was in some of the peristyle houses in Pompeii, Italy. In Roman Palestine, however, no evidence of such a mechanism yet exists; water may simply have been too precious in this dry environment.

As the rain continues to fall, the water level in the stepped pool gradually rises. The pool has stood empty for several weeks now, after it was cleared of

the old rainwater that had led to algae growth along the walls and a thick clayish residue on the bottom. It will take at least a few weeks before rainwater fills the pool in its entirety.

Once the rainwater has entered the pool, it tends to go nowhere. Stepped, ritual immersion pools had no actual outlet for used or excessive water. The water in the pool is immovable, stale, and trapped in a darkened rock-cut cavity lined with plaster along all sides. The contrast with the liveliness and energy by which these earlier raindrops had fallen from the sky and, by gravitation, found their way into the stepped pool, could not be starker. In many cultures, in fact, the ritual significance of water

depends on *this* particular trait—its fluidity, its flow, its liveliness. Rabbinic texts and other ancient sources were no different and emphasized the use of “living water” for obtaining ritual purity. However, once having reached the pool, the water used for ritual bathing has effectively become mute and lifeless.

Over time the pool’s water grows stagnant and stale. In fact, if not treated in time, the water may generate a dangerous buildup of noxious chemicals, although the pool’s dark environment may inhibit this decay somewhat. Yet this same dark, damp environment also creates an attractive breeding ground for intestinal parasites, mosquitoes, and other flying, disease-carrying insects, which are known to breed in cisterns and wells. The microbiologist Israel J. Kligler noted in the 1930s that under the British Mandatory period in early modern Palestine, a local mosquito species (*An. Bifurcatus*) that bred only in cisterns and wells was responsible for nearly all the country’s urban malaria cases. It was considered the most dangerous malaria-causing species of that time in the region.

If not already decreased significantly by evaporation, the remaining water in the stepped pool will eventually become unfit for usage. The algae and debris that over time amassed has to be cleaned out of the pool. This is likely done at least once a year, which seems to have been a rather arduous task.

Jewish bathing to purify oneself of ritual impurity, widely recognized by scholars today, was in antiquity a socio-ritual practice that was largely undertaken in the *miqva’ot*, the manmade stepped pools. Hundreds of such baths have been found in ancient Jewish households from around the first century BCE up to the second century CE. They suggest that purity laws as recorded in textual traditions may

have been well-observed in everyday Jewish life. But how were these pools used and experienced by a household on a day-to-day basis? How did these pools shape life around them? A functional identification is no end unto itself for archaeology, but a beginning from which to investigate what such function meant for the users. The watery life flow of a physical object like an ancient *miqveh* shows that it was (and is) definitely not an inert or inactive item. Its “being” mattered and provoked different actions and activities in its surroundings. The watery approach taken here may elucidate somewhat the concealed qualities of the *miqveh* as object that may have affected its particular ritual function to emerge.

