

# A Historical-Liturgical Critique of זרקתי מים טהורים “I will sprinkle clean water” in Ezek 36.25-27 and Its Translation Options in English

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## Abstract

The key themes of sanctification and regeneration in Ezek 36.25-27 make it an important and well-known passage among theologians and exegetes. However, the translation of מים טהורים in v. 25 as “clean water” in most English versions obscures the rhetorical force of the allusion to certain liturgical practices within the religious context of the source language. This paper considers the semantic connotations of מים טהורים by trying to understand the author’s rhetorical intentions. Historical-liturgical criticism is used to examine the religious context of the source text with a view to suggesting the most accurate English translation of this technical term which would convey its closest range of meanings to a contemporary English-speaking audience.

## Keywords

זרק, מים טהורים, Ezekiel 36.25-27, historical-liturgical criticism, sanctification, allusion, ritual cleansing, מי חטאת, מי נדה

## Introduction

Ezekiel 36.25-27 is an important and well-known text among theologians and exegetes because of its key themes of sanctification and regeneration.

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However, the renderings of v. 25 in most English versions do not adequately convey the full religious and liturgical connotations to which the source text alludes, because those renderings are detached from the historical-liturgical context of the source language and the canonical context of the text.

This paper examines the semantic implications of the translation options for the phrase *מִים טְהוּרִים* in Ezek 36.25 from historical-liturgical and canonical perspectives. Translation from one language to another must take into consideration the semantic range of the meaning of the text in the original language as well as the range of meaning of the various translation options. The guiding principle is to select the word or combination of words that would most adequately convey the precise meaning signified by the source text, and exclude other meanings that contradict it. This implies that it is impossible to maintain a totally literal translation of the biblical text if the primary objective is to create a clear, accurate, and natural translation (see further Munger 1999, 17–20).

The first problem, therefore, is to determine the most accurate meaning, or range of meanings, of the technical terms in the phrase *מִים טְהוּרִים* as intended by Ezekiel, considering the historical-liturgical context of his audience. Meaning is derived, however, not only from the combination of words, but also from various other phenomena existing within the text and context of usage. One significant characteristic inherent in the literary texture of biblical literature is a sustained and intentional use, in new and diverse ways, of pre-existing texts and textual elements that are considered familiar to the audience (see further Marquis 1993, 131). This being the case, there is a need to answer the question why Ezekiel did not choose a phrase existing in earlier texts with which his audience was presumably familiar, but instead chose unique terminology to allude to a familiar liturgical practice. Finally, it becomes necessary to determine the English terms that would accurately convey the closest range of meanings of *מִים טְהוּרִים* within its context of usage to a present-day English-speaking audience.

The paper proceeds in three stages. First I attempt a historical-liturgical analysis of *מִים טְהוּרִים* in the context of the book of Ezekiel. I then conjecture the rhetorical purpose of Ezekiel's choice of the phrase *מִים טְהוּרִים* with a view to deriving the range of meanings he intended to convey to his audience. Finally, I examine a range of possible translations for the phrase in English, and suggest options that would most adequately convey to a modern English-speaking audience the message intended by Ezekiel for his own audience.

## I. Historical-liturgical analysis of the phrase זָרַקְתִּי מִיָּם טְהוּרִים in the context of the book of Ezekiel

Ezekiel 36.25

וְזָרַקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיָּם טְהוּרִים וְטָהַרְתֶּם מִכָּל טִמְאוֹתֵיכֶם וּמִכָּל-גְּלוּלֵיכֶם אֶטְהַר אֶתְכֶם.  
Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. (KJV)<sup>1</sup>

Historical-critical discussion on the book of Ezekiel has dissipated much energy on the interdependence of Ezekiel and the Priestly source (P) of the Pentateuch.<sup>2</sup> The debate has not reached a definitive conclusion, but consensus has been achieved on some salient points. First, it is commonly agreed that Ezekiel shares a large repertoire of literary language and ideology with P (Haran 2008, 211). Second, the internal evidence has led to a consensus that the two share a common interest in ritual and liturgical concerns.<sup>3</sup> Another area of consensus or perhaps near-consensus is the issue of dating—near-consensus in the sense that while all are agreed as to the date of Ezekiel, the debate on the date of P relative to Ezekiel is not yet conclusive. The question of priority and whether or which one of them made use of a written form of the other remains largely unsettled. I will focus on the date of Ezekiel in tandem with the cultic-liturgical background and specific ideological language or terminology common to Ezekiel and P for the historical critical examination of the phrase זָרַקְתִּי מִיָּם טְהוּרִים.

As regards date, the book of Ezekiel is cast in the historical setting of the early exilic period, the sixth century B.C., sometime after the destruction of the first temple. The emerging exigencies of the historical context necessitated a drastic review of the theology, religious institutions, and liturgical practices of the covenant community as it was removed to a foreign land. The elaborate system of animal sacrifices and the annual feasts at the central sanctuary suffered a great setback due to the destruction of the central worship centre and the loss of political independence. The texts of P provide a description of the ideal religious context and the officially prescribed details of the liturgical practices of the covenant community before

<sup>1</sup> The translation “clean water” is not peculiar to KJV, but is followed by almost all the other English versions, including NAB, NASB, ASV, NIV, RSV, NRSV, YLT, BBE, NLT, GNB, NKJV, ERV, and ESV.

<sup>2</sup> The connectedness of Ezekiel with the Holiness Code (H) is also the subject of ongoing debate; see Lyons 2005.

<sup>3</sup> P and H’s phraseology, concepts, and ritual outlook are very prominent in Ezekiel. These commonalities are so rife and obvious in the documents that scholars unanimously point to them as evidence of interconnectedness (Kohn 2000).

the exile, though it is possible that the documentation may have been post-exilic.<sup>4</sup> P therefore reflects a contextual background that provided a large repertoire from which Ezekiel derived his ideological framework, liturgical language, and specific technical terms with which he presented his message to his immediate audience.<sup>5</sup>

The particular religious activity to which Ezek 36.25 alludes<sup>6</sup> is the ritual cleansing liturgy described in P. Though ritual cleansing is also well attested in H, the specific formula for the liturgical element to which Ezekiel's unique technical term is applicable is peculiar to P. Whereas H and other Pentateuchal traditions give prominence to  $\text{דָּם}$  (blood) as the cleansing agent, P attaches particular significance to special water potions. The texts that provide this information are Num 8.5-8 and 19.1-22. The first passage describes the process of sanctification of priests, and also features the motif

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<sup>4</sup> The content of P records several scenes of the nomadic stage and refers to the central place of worship as a "tabernacle." However, literary features like anachronisms, theological outlook, ritual ideology, language, and style suggest a period of documentation long after the settlement in Canaan. The documentary source hypothesis JEDP dates P in the post-exilic period. Recent studies in the field of language history have revealed a distinction between various chronological stages of the Hebrew language, such as Early Biblical Hebrew and Late Biblical Hebrew. These have stimulated new interest in the dating of P relative to other biblical and extra-biblical documents. The evidence is marshalled from both inner-biblical evidence as well as linguistic evidence. The biblical evidence is "more problematic since later redaction and scribal modification influenced the biblical texts. Biblical Hebrew language scholars generally do not pay enough attention to this fact. The linguistic profiles of the texts we have may not be that of the original authors" (Ehrensverd 2006, 177). On the other hand, it is clearly admitted that the dating of the Hebrew of the period in which a particular biblical book is written is not the same as the dating of the book itself, since it is possible for authors or redactors to be versatile in and employ the language of a previous chronological stratum, due to scribal training (Zevit 2006, 84-85). The pendulum of the debate on P's dating now vacillates between the exilic and post-exilic periods, thus generating reasonable debate. On the other hand, the content of Ezekiel expressly indicates a post-exilic context, referring in many instances to the captivity, and citing precise dates after the exile of Judah (cf. Ezek 1.1-3; 3.10-15; 11.24-25; 33.21). Due to its affinities in language and terminology with P (and H), Ezekiel serves as the most certain representative of the exilic period for the historical linguistic approach to the dating of P (Hurvitz 1981, 9).

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars believe that Ezekiel knew and used P or H, or both (Lyons 2005, 74-82; 2007). But others, such as Menahem Haran, have effectively shown that Ezekiel does not necessarily have access to the literary documents of P or H. Rather, Ezekiel used the same literary style and language because he belonged to the same scribal school and had the intensive training of this school before he was exiled to Babylon where he composed his writing (Haran 2008, 214).

<sup>6</sup> Though Ezekiel does not quote the text, he uses familiar motifs and terminology in a deliberately unusual way to point to the previous context from which he draws his paradigm (Marquis 1993; Lyons 2007).

of separation from the people alongside the motif of sanctification by sprinkling of water, here called *מי חטאת* (water of purification).<sup>7</sup>

Numbers 19.1-22, on the other hand, not only features the motif of sanctification by sprinkling of water, here referred to as *מי נדה* (water of separation),<sup>8</sup> but goes farther to give a detailed description of how to prepare the *מי נדה*. As described in the passage, this is obtained by mixing water with the ashes of an animal offered for cleansing. Certain points are worthy of note:

1. The animal is slaughtered outside the camp (vv. 2-3).
2. The priest sprinkles the blood with his finger before the tent of meeting (v. 4).
3. The whole animal is burnt, along with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet<sup>9</sup> (v. 7).
4. The ashes are kept for future use; only a little is taken and mixed with water for preparing the liturgical element as the need arises (vv. 9, 13, 17-21).
5. The sprinkling is done by dipping hyssop leaves in the prepared water and sprinkling it on the person to be cleansed (vv. 17-18). An allusion to this process is also attested in Ps 51.7(9).
6. It is important to note from vv. 3-6, 9, and 17-19 that the blood of the sacrifice is not mingled with the water of purification, neither is it sprinkled on the person or things to be purified; it is sprinkled at the door of the tent of meeting. This deviates from the liturgical procedure for cleansing a leper in H as shown in Lev 14, and from other rituals, in which the blood of the sacrificial animal is sprinkled directly on the person or object to be cleansed and some of the blood is sprinkled or poured on the altar. The use of similar phrases without explanation in other parts of Scripture indicates that the author and audience are familiar with those phrases. Hence Num 8.7 and Num 31.23 presuppose that the audience are quite familiar with the processes of ritual cleansing explained in ch. 19. If that is the case,

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<sup>7</sup> Though KJV translates this as "water of purification," the literal rendering is "water of the sin offering," signifying that the active agent in the water is the ashes from the sin offering.

<sup>8</sup> This is literally "water of pollution," signifying that the active element in the water is the ashes of an offering to remove pollution.

<sup>9</sup> It is only Isa 1.18 that shares the Hebrew roots *שני* and *תלע* (i.e., scarlet dye/scarlet thread), used in connection with sin and removal of sin, with P and H. Also, except for 2 Kgs 9.33, Isa 52.15 uniquely shares the use of the root *נדה* with P and H in ways directly signifying or suggestive of ritual cleansing. Perhaps Isaiah is also alluding to the ritual cleansing process.

it is necessary to consider the variation in the particular liturgical terms employed.

The terms that Ezek 36.25-27 shares exclusively with P are from the Hebrew roots זרק (to sprinkle), מים (water), and טהר (to cleanse). The combination of the root זרק and מים is only found in Ezek 36.25 and Num 19.13, 20. In all three instances, it is used to describe the process of ritual cleansing or sanctification of people. Instances of the use of מים as a ritual cleansing agent without the verb זרק are found in Num 8.7, where נוה, which also means to sprinkle or spatter, replaces זרק, and in Num 31.23, where mention of מי נדה, and later מים in the same verse, implies that the same process described in ch. 19 is prescribed. The things to be purified here are not human beings but objects. The variations in the words in construct with מים in Num 8.7 and Num 19.1-22 indicate the component mingled with the water to obtain the liturgical element. In Num 8.7 the phrase מי חטאת indicates the sacrificed animal designated as the “sin offering,” hence the liturgical element is called “water of the sin offering.” In Num 19.1-22, however, the sacrificial animal is meant to remedy incidental pollutions, hence the term מי נדה “water of the pollution offering” indicates the ashes of the pollution offering mingled with water. Ezekiel therefore probably intended to indicate with the term מים טהורים (clean water) that this particular liturgical element is plain water. It is important for the understanding of Ezek 36.25 to consider the rhetorical intention underlying the combination of זרק, מים, and טהר in this text.

## 2. Rhetorical-critical analysis of מים טהורים in Ezek 36.25

Rooker has observed that “the adoption of linguistic innovations depends upon the prestige of the speaker, and with continued social acceptance and reinforcement they may spread throughout the entire speech community” (quoted in Block 1992, 521, summarizing Rooker 1990). Ezekiel is introduced as a priest,<sup>10</sup> presenting this credential as signifying competence to teach the people the law of God (see Marquis 1993, 138). Ezekiel deliberately employs the odd phrase מים טהורים עליכם as a rhetorical device alluding to the familiar ritual cleansing with a view to preparing his audience for a paradigm shift from a liturgical practice involving the use of blood sacrifices to a bloodless liturgy. This demonstrates intentional

<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel must have wielded considerable influence on the people of his time as witnessed by the canonisation of the book under his name and by the content of the book.

authorial ambiguity, displaying the characteristics of “double meaning” (see Blight 1999, 18).

On one hand, the device of inner-biblical allusion draws attention to the regular ritual cleansing procedures, reinforced with the term זָרַק—thereby recalling the “water of cleansing”; on the other hand, the unusual combination מֵיִם טְהוּרִים signifies a liturgical element that consisted of plain water, that is, “clean water.” The rhetorical implication is that the phrase מֵיִם טְהוּרִים signifies “water of cleansing that is clean,” or “clean water of cleansing,” to an audience that is familiar with the liturgical context to which the text alludes.

Christian writers recognized this rhetoric, and employed it to explain the paradigm shift from the ritual liturgy of the temple to the sacramental liturgy of the New Testament. In a manner similar to the way Ezekiel drew on earlier texts, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews drew on the liturgy of ritual cleansing to expound Christian baptism, understood as signifying divine action culminating in the washing of regeneration as mentioned in Titus 3.5, and alluded to in Heb 9.13-14; 10.18-22; and 1 Pet 3.21. It is also worthy of note that the use of plain water for ritual cleansing by John the Baptizer evidenced such liturgical practice before the Christian era. For the early Christian thinkers as represented by the writer of Hebrews, the use of plain water indicates the superseding of the sin and pollution offerings by the vicarious death of Jesus Christ on the cross and the eternal offering of his blood for atonement once for all. This is clear in the allusion to the liturgical processes of the sin offering described in Num 19.1-22 as pointed out in (1–6) in section 1 above (cf. Heb 9.12-15; 10.21-22; 13.11-13).

### 3. Translation options for מֵיִם טְהוּרִים in Ezek 36.25

The following options for translation lend themselves readily: “clean water,” “water of cleansing,” “water of sanctification,” “holy water,” or “sanctified water.” Having established that מֵיִם טְהוּרִים is employed rhetorically in Ezek 36.25 to allude to the liturgical element called מֵי חֲטָאָה in Num 8.7 (“water of purifying” in KJV) and מֵי נִדָּה in Num 19.13, 20 (“water of separation” in KJV), the literal rendering “clean water” in KJV loses its rhetorical force. It does not evoke the historical-liturgical context in P, which was reinforced in Ezekiel by the use of the root זָרַק. The most appropriate rendering that would retain this allusive quality would be “water of cleansing,” which, however, loses the significant emphasis that the liturgical element in this instance is plain water, and the rhetorical force that the ritual cleansing process no longer requires the sacrifice of animals. The option “holy water” deviates

from the root טהר, and alludes, through the root קדש of Num 5.17 to the *sotah* procedure (Num 5.11-31),<sup>11</sup> which is different from the ritual cleansing to which Ezekiel alludes. Moreover, it is possible that many English translators avoided the term “holy water” because of its connections with the doctrinal beliefs of denominations that use “holy water” in their liturgy.

The task, therefore, is to provide the combination of words that would fully convey to a contemporary English audience both components of the double meaning signified by מים טהורים. Among other possibilities, considering the canonical context of usage of the root טהר, the term “sanctified water” accompanied by an explanatory note would be most appropriate. This term would retain the double meaning, thereby stimulating inquiry into the sanctified nature of the water—partly signifying some religious procedure—while still conveying the nuance of cleanness. The explanatory note is indispensable to explain that the double meaning is intended by the author, and this meaning is derived from a source context which is far removed from that of the target audience. A note would also help to clarify possible confusion with prevailing liturgical practices that may exist within different denominational doctrinal orientations (Blight 1999, 18).

#### 4. Summary

In the foregoing sections, a critical analysis of the historical-liturgical context of the phrase מים טהורים עליכם in Ezek 36.25 reveals that the author intentionally selected a phrase with double meaning. On the one hand, the context of usage, considering Ezekiel’s method of allusive rhetoric, and the unique nature of inner-biblical allusions in Ezekiel suggest that מים טהורים in Ezek 36.25 signifies a liturgical element similar to מי חטאת in Num 8.7, translated “water of purifying” in KJV, and מי נדה in Num 19.9, 13, 20, 21, and 31.23, rendered “water of separation” in KJV. In this case, “water of cleansing” would be appropriate to convey this meaning. On the other hand, מים טהורים in Ezek 36.25 signifies a prophetic future which is fulfilled in the bloodless liturgy of synagogue worship. The Christian sacrament of baptism, in which the liturgical element is symbolic of Christ’s perfect unrepeatable cleansing referred to as the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit (cf. Titus 3.5), is shown as fulfilling Ezekiel’s prophecy in 36.25-27 in detail. Which word or combination of words in English would best convey both meanings to a contemporary English speaker therefore becomes problematic. Among other possibilities, considering the canonical

<sup>11</sup> מים קדשים (Num 5.17) is translated as “holy water” in KJV, but there is no adequate illumination from the biblical context to ascertain with certainty the composition of this liturgical element. See further Amzallag and Shamir 2017.



context of usage of the root טהר, the term “sanctified water” may be the most appropriate. However, this must be accompanied with explanatory notes.

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## Abbreviations

- ASV            American Standard Version (1901)  
BBE            Bible in Basic English (1950)

ESV	English Standard Version (2001)
GNB	Good New Bible (1992)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
NAB	New American Bible (1970)
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1971, 1995)
NIV	New International Version (2011)
NKJV	New King James Version (1982)
NLT	New Living Translation (2004)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1952)
RV	Revised Version (1881–1885)
YLT	Young’s Literal Translation (1862)