



# FOOT WASHING

## A HISTORY



BY DON H. STEWART

**T**ENSIONS FLARED. THE discussion became heated. The disciples were arguing about who among them was the most important. In this context, Jesus—unexpectedly and with humility—took a basin and towel, assumed the

role of a servant, and began washing His followers' feet (John 13:1-17). In doing so, He was challenging the sin of pride that hindered His disciples from serving the others. The confrontation came during what was to be Jesus' final Passover with the Twelve in the upper room in Jerusalem (Luke 22:12-24).

**Above:** Dated from 8th–7th centuries B.C., a basin for washing a person's foot. Once the basin

was filled with water, a person would rest his or her foot on the raised platform in the center.

### In Ancient Practice

The first biblical reference to foot washing involved three guests who came to see Abraham. As they



**Left: Roman Era, frieze depicting a banquet scene. Some persons recline. A 3-legged table with food is in the center. Two servants, shown in smaller scale, attend the banqueters.**

**Dynasty (664–525 B.C.). Bottles of this type were so common at the period when the Greeks were first becoming familiar with Egyptian culture that they called this type bottle an alabastron. From such an alabaster cruse of ointment Jesus' feet were anointed.**

**Below: Alabaster bottle dated to Egypt's 26th**



every good work” (1 Tim. 5:10, HCSB). This requirement of washing the saints’ feet referred to the widow demonstrating hospitality—not to her participating in an act of worship.

Given this historical backdrop, how did washing another person’s feet come to be seen as an act of worship?

### **In the Upper Room**

By the time John was writing the Fourth Gospel near the end of the first century, tradition indicates the other apostles had been martyred for their faith. Well advanced in years, John, being led by the Holy Spirit, shared details of Jesus’ life and ministry. His remembrances included events, like the foot washing observance (John 13:1-17), that did not necessarily portray the apostles in a positive light.

Jesus’ washing the feet of the prideful, bickering apostles followed His sharing Passover with the disciples and instituting what we refer to as “the Lord’s Supper.” Judging from Peter’s reaction, the disciples apparently had no hint that Jesus would wash their feet. Although Peter’s feet were dusty, his response to Jesus’ effort was that Jesus would never wash his feet (v. 8). When Jesus informed Peter that he did not belong in the kingdom unless he allowed himself to be partially cleansed as

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/ HATAY ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (12/17/8)

approached the patriarch’s tent, Abraham ran to greet them and said, “Let a little water be brought, that you may wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree” (Gen. 18:4, HCSB).

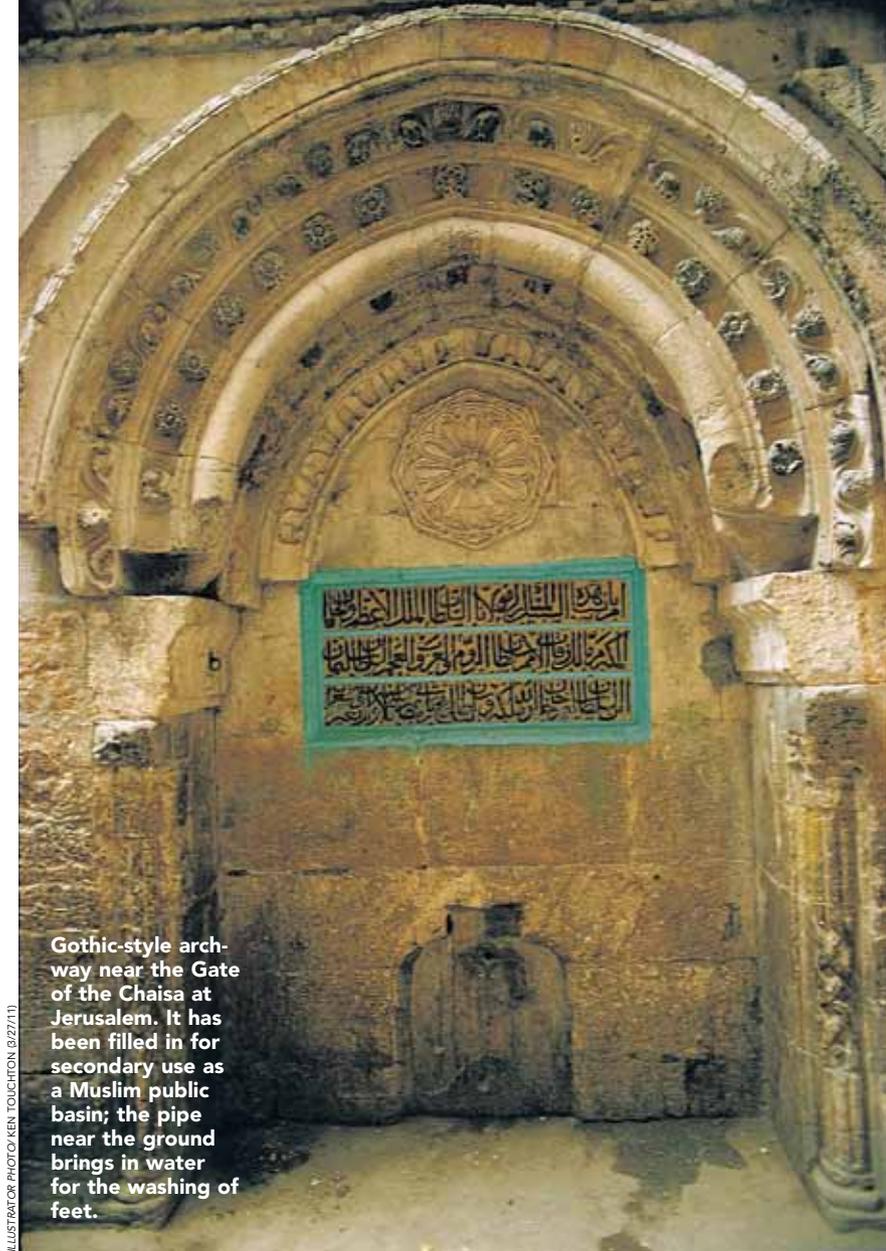
By the first century A.D., hospitable foot washing for one’s guests was a standard cultural practice of Middle Eastern peoples. In fact, to fail to offer such a gesture was an insult. Thus, at minimum, hosts provided a bowl of water and a towel by the door for guests to wash their own feet. On occasion the host would provide one or more household servants to wash and dry the feet of the arriving guests. Sometimes, a wife might wash the feet of special guests.

What happened to Jesus when He was a dinner guest at the home of Simon (a Pharisee) highlights the social importance of washing a guest’s feet in the first century (Luke 7:36-50). While Jesus was at Simon’s house, a woman who was a sinner washed His feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with perfume. Simon was troubled by Jesus allowing these actions from a woman with such a reputation. Jesus rebuked not the woman but His host: “Turning toward the woman,

He said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair’” (v. 44, NASB). Jesus knew Simon had not followed the common and expected hospitable courtesies of the day. Failing to wash his guest’s feet indicated Simon was rejecting Jesus and was trying to publicly humiliate Him.<sup>1</sup> Jesus wanted Simon to understand that He recognized His host had slighted and insulted Him. In Jesus’ eyes, this woman had not behaved inappropriately—Simon had.

Paul also addressed the importance of washing someone’s feet as an expression of hospitality. In writing to Timothy, the young pastor of the church at Ephesus, Paul addressed how Timothy was to determine which widows qualified for church benevolence. Those who qualified were those who had “brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to

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Gothic-style archway near the Gate of the Chaisa at Jerusalem. It has been filled in for secondary use as a Muslim public basin; the pipe near the ground brings in water for the washing of feet.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: KEN TOUCHTON (3/27/11)

needed, Peter went to the extreme and said, “Not only my feet, but also my hands and my head” (v. 9). Then Jesus explained that those who had bathed their whole bodies needed only to wash feet dusty from their journey. He informed the apostles that not all of them had been bathed—indicating that one of them would betray Him. Then Jesus continued, until He had washed each disciple’s feet.

### In the Early Church

Clearly, the practice of foot washing as a ritual of worship in some churches today has its scriptural foundation in John’s record. In the first century, however, foot washing was not a part of Christian worship. The New Testament writings never

record the practice of foot washing as an act of ritual worship.

Tertullian (about A.D. 160-225), in North Africa, seems to have been the earliest to refer to some who observed foot washing as a worship ritual. He did not indicate who participated or when.<sup>2</sup> Evidences from the writings of the fourth century, such as that of Ambrose of Milan, indicate that foot washing was observed as a worship ritual only in a few instances. Augustine, around A.D. 400, is the first known source to connect foot washing with Easter baptism.<sup>3</sup>

Scattered foot-washing observances in later years seem usually to have been part of the celebration of Maundy Thursday. The

earliest official instructions about foot washing as a worship ritual for the western church are from the Benedictine Order’s Spanish Liturgy dated A.D. 529.

Such an emphasis, though, was a departure from what Jesus was trying to demonstrate. In context, Jesus washed the feet of disciples who had been arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus’ actions exemplified what He wanted from His disciples: humility and surrender.

The Lord’s Supper and baptism were reminders of Christ’s redemptive work. Early Christians thus easily incorporated these actions into their formal worship. Yet foot washing—which did not point to Jesus’ work of redemption—was not a worship practice for the earliest believers. The early apostolic leaders understood that Jesus did not intend to establish a third ordinance. Instead, He intended that His followers accept the servant role and that each do as He had done in His powerful demonstration of servitude. “What is at hand is not the institution of an ordinance...but the life-style of humble servanthood.”<sup>4</sup>

In taking the basin and towel, Jesus gave His followers an example for life. Ultimately, Jesus’ attitude of absolute surrender of self set the stage for the monumental event of the next day—His crucifixion. **B**

1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 247.

2. John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 139-41.

3. Thomas, 142; Chris Church, “Footwashing” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 592.

4. *Holman Bible Handbook*, gen. ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 623.

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