

# What Does the Bible Mean When It Says, “Purify Me with Hyssop”?

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When the Bible says, “purify me with hyssop,” especially in Psalm 51:7, it means to ask God for deep spiritual purification from sin, using hyssop as a symbol of the Old Testament purification rituals where this plant was used to sprinkle blood or water, ultimately pointing to the complete cleansing power found in Jesus’ blood. It signifies a longing for total removal of sin’s stain, becoming spiritually “whiter than snow” through God’s mercy, just as the hyssop symbolized the application of sacrificial blood for cleansing.

## WHAT IS HYSSOP?

Hyssop (ὑσσωπος, אֶזֶב [êzôb]) is a wall-growing plant used by the Jews in ritual sprinklings. It is mentioned by the writer of Hebrews in his review of the ordinances of the Old Testament (Hebrews 9:19). Scarcely any other Scriptural plant has given rise to so much discussion. The hyssop cannot be the ὑσσωπος of Greek authors (*Hyssopus officinalis*) which is not native to the Holy Land.<sup>1</sup> Among the many suggestions that have been made, the most likely choice seems to be a kind of wild marjoram (*Satureja thymus*). It is excellently adapted for use as a sprinkler. Its identity with the hyssop is accepted by William McClure Thomson<sup>2</sup> who describes it as “having the fragrance of thyme, with a

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<sup>1</sup> Strahan, J. (1916–1918). “Hyssop,” In J. Hastings (Ed.), *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (2 Vols.). New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1:592. Public domain.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson, W.M. (1910). *The Land and the Book*. London: T. Nelson and Sons, 93. Public domain.

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hot, pungent taste, and long, slender stems.” The êzôb was used for sprinkling in some of the sacrifices and purifications of the Jews. In consequence of its detergent qualities, or from its being associated with the purificatory services, the Psalmist makes use of the expression, “Purge me with êzôb” (Psalm 51:7). It is described in 1 Kings 4:33 as growing on or near walls.

Besides being thus fit for sprinkling, having cleansing properties, and growing on walls, the true hyssop should be a plant common to Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine, and capable of producing a stick three or four feet long, since on a stalk of hyssop the sponge of vinegar was held up to Christ on the cross (John 19:29). It is impossible to precisely identify the plant, probably because the name was given not to a particular plant but to a *family* of plants associated together by qualities easily noticed rather than by close botanical affinities. Different species of the family may have been used at different times. The hyssop of the Bible is probably one (or all) of three plants.<sup>3</sup> G.E. Post, says: “The fact that many stalks grow up from one root eminently fits this species for the purpose intended. The hand could easily gather in a single grasp the requisite bundle or bunch all ready for use.”<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT WAS HYSSOP USED FOR IN THE BIBLE?

Since people in the biblical era did not have access to the products we do today, they often relied on naturally occurring resources such as plants, animal byproducts, and minerals for cleaning, cooking, food, medicine, and more. Hyssop, an herb in the mint family with cleansing, medicinal, and flavoring properties, was prolific in the Middle East and was used in a variety of ways.

The Bible mentions hyssop several times, mostly in the Old Testament. In Leviticus, God commanded His people to use hyssop in the ceremonial cleansing of people and houses. In one example, God tells the priests to use hyssop together with cedar wood, scarlet yarn, and the blood of a clean bird to sprinkle a person recently healed from a skin disease (likely leprosy). This act would ceremonially cleanse the formerly diseased person and allow him to reenter the camp (Leviticus 14:1–7). The same method was used to purify a house that had previously contained mold (Leviticus 14:33–53).

Hyssop is also used symbolically in the Bible. When the Israelites marked their doorposts with lamb’s blood in order for the angel of death to pass over them, God instructed them to use a bunch of hyssop as a “paintbrush” (Exodus 12:22). This was probably because hyssop was sturdy and could withstand the brushing, but it also likely signified that God

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, W. (1986). In *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*. New York: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, William (1863). *A Dictionary of the Bible*. Boston: John Murray, 1115, foot-note. Public domain.

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was marking His people as “pure” and not targets of the judgment God was about to deal out to the Egyptians.

David also mentions hyssop in Psalm 51:7: “Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”(LSB). David does not refer to physical cleansing—rather, he is asking God to cleanse him spiritually as he confesses his sin.

Hyssop also appears at Jesus’ crucifixion, when the Roman soldiers offered Jesus a drink of wine vinegar on a sponge at the end of a stalk of hyssop (John 19:28–30). This was, in fact, Jesus’ last act before He declared His work on earth finished and gave up His spirit. While the hyssop stalk may have been used for purely practical purposes (i.e., it was long enough to reach to Jesus’ mouth as He hung on the cross), it is interesting that that particular plant was chosen. It is possible that God meant this as a picture of purification, as Jesus bought our forgiveness.<sup>5</sup>

## BIBLICAL MEANING AND SYMBOLISM

- ✧ **Ceremonial cleansing:** In the Old Testament, hyssop (a bushy herb) was dipped in sacrificial blood or water and sprinkled on people or objects to purify them from ritual impurity, like leprosy or touching a corpse (Numbers 19:18, Leviticus 14:4-7).
- ✧ **Spiritual purification:** David’s prayer in Psalm 51:7 (“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean”) is a plea for God to perform this deep cleansing, removing the stain of his sin (with Bathsheba) and making him pure again.
- ✧ **Symbol of Jesus’ sacrifice:** The hyssop plant also appears at Jesus’ crucifixion when a sponge with sour wine is offered to Him on a hyssop stalk, connecting His sacrificial death to the purification rituals of the Old Testament (John 19:29).
- ✧ **Complete forgiveness:** The phrase signifies a desire for complete spiritual renewal, where God’s grace, symbolized by the blood applied with hyssop, washes away sin, making the believer spiritually clean and pure.

In essence, “purify me with hyssop” is a prayer for God to apply the ultimate cleansing, found in Christ’s blood, to make one truly pure and holy.

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<sup>5</sup> Got Questions Ministries. (2002–2013). *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered*. Logos Bible Software.