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## St John the Baptist and the Desert

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The traditions about the birth of St John the Baptist enshrined in St Luke's gospel would appear to have come from a Hebrew source, and they correspond to a literary type, we might almost say a theme, which recurs in the Old Testament. John, or 'the Lord gives grace' was a child of divine promise, born of aged parents against all expectation. The scriptures had already told how Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah, and told too of how an angel appeared to announce the birth of Samson. Whereupon Samuel was born in answer to prayer, to put an end to a would-be mother's anguish, and above all to be a prophet in the great designs of God. Jeremiah, we read, was sanctified from his mother's womb. All this, and more, in the scriptures prepared for, and pointed to, the precursor and herald of the saviour. And then the story of the Baptist's birth came to be intertwined with that of the saviour himself; partly to show the greatness of John, partly to bring out the contrast between precursor and saviour, for John 'was not himself the light but to give evidence of the light' (John 1. 8).

Now, familiar gospel stories can often leave us wondering. Thus we can note in Luke 1. 80: 'the child grew and became strong in spirit; *and he lived in the deserts* until the day he was manifested to Israel'. Why should the son of Zachary, a true Sadducee of priestly family, who was intent upon temple services and served in his due turn—why should the son of such a man live *in the deserts*, and seemingly not follow in his father's footsteps, and apparently show no interest in temple worship? These and like questions serve to show that there is something unusual and mysterious about the early days of the Baptist. Besides this, not only

did he live 'in the deserts' 'until the day he was manifested to Israel' but his very manifestation or outward ministry was mostly in the desert. He was a desert dweller, and his food and clothing were rough and hard and altogether in keeping. He preached and baptized in or very near the desert, and finally came to die, as Josephus tells us, in the desert fortress of Machaerus. Few men could ever have been more lonely than John the Baptist when he was held as a prisoner in a wholly pagan and alien little world. And he was perplexed too, no doubt, as when he sent a message to our Lord: 'Art thou the Coming One, or are we to expect another?' (Luke 7. 18-19). The fortress of Machaerus and the few people gathered round it was something thrust into the desert to flaunt the corrupt and corrupting power of Herod's ambience. John who had lived in the desert was of another world, and his love proved to be greater than his loneliness, and so he witnessed to the right order of purity which is required in God's kingdom, and bravely died for it. He had for the greater part of his life lived in the desert, so that in life as in death he was associated with the stony wastes of the Holy Land.

The desert in question is the desert of Juda in its northern extension; from the north shore of the Dead Sea, past the oasis of Jericho to the mouth of the river Yabboc, and from the township of Ephraim (John 11. 54)<sup>1</sup> to the western ridges of Gilead. This northern extension of the Judaean desert includes the famous heights of Djebel Qarantul or the traditional scene of our Lord's temptations in the desert. Through the whole region flows the river Jordan. Its immediate banks are lined with trees and thick growths; but once away from the life-giving water the country is arid and desolate, and nearer the Dead Sea are extensive ridges of clay and salt shale.

Zachary's message from God had come to him in the temple, but it was in a desolate land that 'the word of God came to John son of Zachary in the wilderness'. And once the word had come 'he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins' (Luke 3. 3). For one who so preached the water of cleansing had to be at hand, so the Jordan was his usual centre of activity. Perhaps when the Jordan was seriously in flood, we hear of his going to Aenon near Salim, in the north-east corner of Samaria, south of Beisan 'because there was plenty of water there'. This site, which can

<sup>1</sup>St John the evangelist records very accurately that Ephraim was 'in the country near the desert', in fact a border town with a fine view down to the Dead Sea. Its relation to the desert is analogous to the Tekoa of Amos in southern Juda.

be identified, has much water welling up from a number of closely related points. The whole scene is very impressive for anyone coming up from the Jordan depression, as St John the Baptist no doubt did. In a word, the scene of the Baptist's education was from Aenon to the northern end of the Dead Sea, which in turn is contiguous to the country of the Qumrân sectaries. This eliminates any need for a 'desert of John the Baptist' near Ain Karim, west of Jerusalem, as some guide books would have it. The hill country of Juda, west of the water-shed, is certainly not desert. The localization of a desert near Ain Karim was simply for the convenience of uncritical pilgrims who liked to have as much as possible on each of their routes through the Holy Land.

So we hold to the view that St John Baptist's desert was that which bordered the river Jordan and touched upon the country of the Qumrân dwellers. These last flourished till 68 A.D., and it seems impossible that the Baptist should not have known them. Many go further and say that he had direct contact with them, and even that he came from them. Such are the theories which we must assess.

The text of Isaiah 40. 3 characterizes St John's ministry:—

A voice cries in the desert  
 'Prepare the road for the Lord  
 Make his paths straight'.

Now it is well-known that the men of Qumrân very much prized and studied the book of Isaiah. Some fourteen scrolls, or parts of scrolls, of Isaiah have been found. And it is striking to read in the Manual of Discipline: 'When these things shall come to pass in the Community of Israel, in accordance with its destiny, let them depart from the city of men into the desert, to make a path for the Lord, as it is written:

Prepare in the wilderness the road of the Lord  
 Make straight in the desert the highway of our God.

The study of the law, which God gave to Moses, is necessary if one is to act in accordance with what is revealed to each generation, and in accordance with what the prophets have revealed by God's holy spirit' (viii. 12-14).

We are left wondering: is this use of Isaiah in the Manual of Discipline and in the Baptist's preaching simply a coincidence without further significance, or are we to argue that he was endowed with something of Qumrân's reverence for Isaiah—because he had learned it there as a child? Such indeed is the suggestion of some recent writers, together with the addition of a whole story of how the Baptist was sent while yet a child to Qumrân to be brought up at this centre, and how later

he left them to engage upon the very particular messianic preaching, as is made known to us in the gospels. The whole of this construction rests on more than the common use of Isaiah 40. 3. For we learn from Josephus that the main group of the Essenes 'disdain marriage, but they adopt other men's children, while yet pliable and docile, and regard them as their kin and mould them in their own principles' (Wars. 2, 8, 2 [120]). The suggestion then is that John was one such boy, deposited at Qumrân when, or because, his parents died of old age (Luke 1. 17). 'This life with the Essenes does fill a very important blank in the life of John the Baptist. It need not be regarded as merely fanciful or imaginary, for it explains in a marvellous way the teaching of John the Baptist'.<sup>2</sup>

Further, as we have seen, John the Baptist, according to the gospels, after early childhood never seems to have had any relation to the temple worship. And it is striking that the Qumrân folk did not worship at the temple, nor even send offerings there, because in their eyes the temple worship was in the hands of corrupt priests. This undoubtedly is the most startling feature of this utterly Jewish community who had broken so quickly and so thoroughly with the worship which was but a day's walk away and which normally engaged the whole Jewish world. And all the while they would stress interior 'renovation as opposed to sacrificial acts . . . the guilt of transgression and the perfidy of sin shall be absolved; and atonement will be made for the land more effectively than by any flesh of burnt offerings or fat of sacrifices . . .' (Manual ix. 5-).

St John the Baptist preached 'a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 3. 3); yet it would soon give way before a more perfect baptism with water and the Holy Spirit (John 3. 5). It has been argued that the moral conditions required in the Qumrân lustrations are the same as those demanded by the Baptist in his preaching, and an interior change of heart is always asked:—

'Only those who repent of evil will in fact be purified' (IQS v, 13-14). 'Unclean, unclean he remains so long as he rejects the government of God and refuses the discipline of communion with him. For it is only by the spirit of the genuine counsel of God in respect of human ways that all the iniquities of a man will be expiated and he will gaze upon the light of life . . . by the submission of his soul to all the commands of God will his flesh be purified when it is sprinkled with the

<sup>2</sup>Brownlee, in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. Stendahl. S.C.M. 1958 p. 35.

water of lustration, and sanctified by the waters of contrition'. Yet though true repentance is demanded both by the Baptist and at Qumrân, still it has been argued that the baptism of John and the lustrations of Qumrân are poles apart.<sup>3</sup> There is much to be said for the theory that John the Baptist derived his baptism from the proselyte baptism which obtained in synagogues, and which was intended to wash away the defilement supposedly clinging to one who had not been a Jew—a defilement which befell him for not having observed the Jewish law. It marked the turning point from paganism to the service of the true God. The originality of John would then be in that he applied the rite not merely to proselytes but also to born Jews. The implication thus was that the whole nation was apostate and sinful. John's stern language bears this out: 'You breed of vipers! Who warned you to fly from the coming wrath? Produce therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham for a father, for I tell you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham out of these stones . . .' (Luke 3. 7). We can find a similarly severe indictment of society in the Qumrân texts:—

While they—they went on contriving  
the mischief of their hearts,  
opening their shameless mouths  
unleashing their lying tongues,  
which were like the venom of adders  
fitfully spurting forth . . . (IQH v, 27-).

The men of Qumrân looked upon all outside their company as utterly defiled and as belonging to the realm of Belial or Satan. They themselves alone, with their frequent ablutions and religious rigour were the true Israel 'the people of God', 'Golah of light', 'precious corner-stone', 'congregation of men of perfect holiness', etc.

The messianic expectation at Qumrân is too big a subject for this essay. We can just say that the texts seem to suggest an awaiting of three great eschatological figures who would inaugurate the messianic age: a prophetic forerunner, an anointed priest and an anointed king. This is the more usual interpretation e.g. of IQS ix, 11: 'until the coming of a prophet and anointed ones of Aaron and Israel'. It is probably going too far to say that there was a tendency to unified messianic expectation. But such texts as we have do throw a great light on such passages as John 1. 19-28.

<sup>3</sup>H. H. Rowley, in *New Testament Essays in Memory of T. W. Manson*. M.U.P. 1959, pp. 218-229.

On the more material side we should note that the site of Qumrân is remarkable for its several well-constructed cisterns, some with steps leading down to the water perhaps to facilitate lustrations or merely the drawing of water. The water system of Qumrân is undoubtedly a major achievement in that parched region. We need, however, to remember that many other fine cisterns were dug out or built in Palestine and some are still in use today, without the slightest implication of liturgical usage. Still what we know of the men of Qumrân and their many purifications leads us to suppose that a number of these cisterns were kept for liturgical purposes.

Another material argument is drawn from the Baptist's food, wild honey and locusts. It has been pointed out that the Damascus Document lays down that locusts must be eaten roast or boiled (CDC xii, 14-15). Further Zachary had been instructed by an angel:—

'He shall be great in the sight of the Lord  
and he shall drink no wine or strong drink;  
and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost,  
even from his mother's womb'. (Luke I. 15).

It has been suggested that the men of Qumrân did not drink wine at their meals, but *tirosh* which has been interpreted as a soft-drink. This is quite unreasonable, for *tirosh* means new wine or must, which according to several biblical texts can be both enlivening and injurious (Judges 9. 13; Osee 4. 11).

So much for some suggested parallels between St John Baptist and Qumrân. Not all the evidence is compelling, and some we have rejected already. We need too to quote Professor H. H. Rowley's stringent criticisms:

- (1) There are cisterns for the storage of water at Qumrân, with steps running down into them; therefore they were used for baptism.
- (2) There are references in the Scrolls to ablutions with water; therefore the previous inference is confirmed.
- (3) The Sect of the Scrolls came into existence in the second or first century B.C.; therefore its practice ante-dated the baptism of John.
- (4) John lived in the desert in the neighbourhood of Qumrân; therefore he could have derived his practice from the sect, therefore he did.
- (5) Josephus tell us that some of the Essenes adopted children; therefore John could have been adopted, therefore he was'.<sup>4</sup>

This cold shower was needed as a salutary reminder of what is fact, what is proven, what is hypothesis. In our present stage of knowledge

<sup>4</sup>H. H. Rowley, *loc. cit.* p. 218.

we need to get a sound view of the appoort of Qumrân in respect of John the Baptist. It is considerable, but we need to proceed critically or we shall lapse into the errors of those whom we have criticised in the past. Thus the apocryphal writings are trying often simply to fill in a blank, to say what the gospels left unsaid, ever striving to reduce the area of the unknown and the mysterious. So nowadays it is not for us to fill in the blanks in the life of St John Baptist with unsubstantiated theories. St John Baptist *could* have been brought up at Qumrân; we cannot prove it. He *could* then have struck out for himself and preached the one Messiah whom he was to baptize. We retain all this and more as *possibilities*, and no more. It remains certainly true that the new finds have enlarged and deepened our knowledge of the Jewish world just before, and during, the time of our Lord. And John the Baptist, the man of the deserts, stands out even more wonderfully against that background. He had a moral greatness, a sanctity, greater even than could emerge from the world of Qumrân. He was praised by our Lord; and yet, mysteriously, the least in the kingdom is greater than he. This last is difficult and relates not to John's moral greatness, but to his position in the historical order as precursor. In this, he belonged to the old dispensation, though as regards his preaching and effect upon the world, John the Baptist is of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> In fact he bridges the old and the new, and he has a singular greatness of his own, born of years of ascetic life and true prayer in the deserts.

There are three facets to his greatness. First, and most obviously, he was to prepare the way for our saviour. That preparation was fuller and deeper than we usually realise. His whole ministry familiarized many with the practice of a baptism linked with the preaching and doing of penance, and with the teaching of the kingdom to come which already was now that our Lord was upon earth.

And then he was immensely great in his true humility. He saw with unflinching clarity his position before God and before God's Son sent upon earth; and from his lips fell those sublime words: 'He must increase, I must decrease'. (John 3. 30).

Finally he was strong with the strength of God. There was something interior within him built up over the years that was to prove unshakable. He acted in accordance with that interior power and the impulse of God's grace, and so died a martyr's death, because 'all virtuous deeds, in so far as they are related to God, are just so many protestations of faith, enabling us to realise that God requires such works of us

<sup>5</sup>cf. St Thomas *Summa* 3a, 38, 1 ad 2.

and rewards us for them. They too can be a ground of martyrdom. Hence St John the Baptist's death is commemorated in the Church, for he endured death not because faith was challenged but because adultery was reproved'.<sup>6</sup>

## Christian Materialism

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One of the recurrent objections to Christianity, from the time when, as St John records, many disciples forsook our Lord because he said he would give us his flesh to eat, is that it is materialist, and the objectors wish the materialistic lumps could be strained out of the soup, which would then be a pure nourishment, suited to the most delicate digestion. Leaving aside for a moment the fact that Christianity is not a mass of facts from which we can pick what we like and reject the rest, but an organic whole, and that truth is bound to present some difficulties to human minds, it may be worth considering what revelation has to tell us about matter.

Obviously to material beings such as ourselves the subject is meaningful. The world confronts us as a reality: so does our own flesh. And in neither is the distinction between matter and spirit pressed to the point of division, for though at the extremities of creation there exist pure spirits on the one hand and mindless beings on the other, showing the distinction to be more than a logical trick, yet we have no knowledge of matter so unrelated to intelligence as to be completely formless. If it existed mind could not, so to speak, pick it up. There would be no means of communication.

We are not concerned here with the tendency of sense to sink itself in matter, or the reputed tendency of Christians to cold-shoulder it as if it were the gate to hell; still less with the over-intellectual disdain of it as no more than a step ladder in the library to enable one to reach the highest shelves. What do the scriptures tell us of the place and origin of matter?

<sup>6</sup>*ib.* 2a-2ae, 124, 5.