

John the Baptist

By Craig Paardekooper

Perhaps the greatest expert on the Gospel of John in the twentieth century, Fr. Raymond Brown, once remarked that “virtually everyone who has studied the Qumran texts in the light of the New Testament has recognized the startling Qumran parallels in the narratives concerning John the Baptist; almost every detail of his life and preaching has a possible Qumran affinity.” [3] [5]

Indeed, the circumstantial case that John had contact with the Essenes at Qumran is very strong. The Essenes were the only sect of the Jews that produced prophets, observed strict asceticism, and practiced celibacy; and all that describes John: a celibate, ascetic prophet preaching repentance before an imminent judgment—a message also found abundantly in the Scrolls. But many of the connections between John and the Essenes are much more specific.

Josephus

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who lived during the time that the New Testament was being written, tells us about “John called the Baptist.” Josephus knew of John as a preacher who urged people “to join in baptism” and whom Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, “sent as a prisoner to Machaerus” and had “put to death”.

4. Ant. 18.5.2 §116-19. Josephus's text reads:

Some of the Jews thought that Herod's army had been destroyed by God and that he had been justly punished because of the execution of John called the Baptist. For Herod put to death this good man, who was exhorting Jews to live upright lives, in dealing justly with one another and submitting devoutly to God, and to join in baptism (*baptismō synienai*). Indeed, it seemed to John that even this washing would not be acceptable as a pardon for sins, but only as a purification for the body, unless the soul had previously been cleansed through upright conduct. When still others joined the crowds around him, because they were quite enthusiastic in listening to his words, Herod became frightened that such persuasiveness with the people might lead to some uprising; for it seemed that they might go to any length on his advice. So before any new incident might stem from him, Herod considered it far better to seize John in advance and do away with him, rather than wait for an upheaval, become involved in a difficult situation, and regret it. As a result of this suspicion of Herod, John was sent as a prisoner to Machaerus . . . and there was put to death. This made the Jews believe that the destruction of Herod's army was a vindication of this man by God who saw fit to punish Herod.

[1]

Dead Sea Scrolls

Yet in none of the 820 fragmentary or complete manuscripts from the eleven Qumran caves is there any mention of John the Baptist, at least so far. The reason for this lack of mention is that most of the Qumran scrolls were copied in the two centuries before the Christian era – before John the Baptist was born.

Adopted by the Essenes

John did not follow in his father's footsteps and serve in the Temple. His parents were elderly, and it seems as if John was adopted by the Essenes, and lived out in the desert. At some point he received a message from God, then set off on a mission to preach a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Josephus too spent 3 years with the Essenes as a youth in the desert – so it was common for the Essenes to take in children for training – a spiritual “bootcamp”

1. The Gospel of Luke depicts John as a child born of elderly parents, “who lived out in the desert until the day that he was manifested to Israel” (1:80). Luke also says that a “message came from God to John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert” (3:2), and that message has to be understood as the turning point in his career, no matter what he had been doing before it. In my view, John then broke off from the Essenes of Qumran, with whom he had been living for some time, to go forth and preach a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (3:3). Part of the reason for interpreting the Lucan text in this way is that John, though born into a priestly family, is never portrayed in any of the Gospels as serving in the Jerusalem Temple, as did his father Zechariah (Luke 1:5). After the death of his elderly parents, John might have been adopted by the Essenes, who according to Josephus were wont to take “other men’s children, while yet pliable and docile . . . and mold them according to their own ways.”⁵

[1]

Which Desert ?

John the Baptist preached and baptized in the Jordan only 8 miles from Qumran. We know from the Gospels that John preached and baptized “in the wilderness of Judea” (Matt 3:1), which refers to the desert areas to the east and downhill from Jerusalem. The fact that great crowds from Jerusalem and Judea went out to him virtually requires that John was ministering along the southern Jordan River, not far from the Dead Sea, the most accessible section of the Jordan for the Jerusalem populace. John would have been baptizing as little as a half day’s walk from Qumran. [4]

The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness

The reason why the Essenes were in the desert is given in their scroll – “Manual of Discipline”

“to go into the desert to prepare there the way of HIM, as it is written, ‘Make ready in the desert the way of Yahweh; make straight in the wilderness a path for our God’ Isaiah 40 v 3

And this very phrase, which defines the sole reason why the Essenes were in the desert in the first place, is used of John the Baptist in all 4 gospels (Mark 1 v 3, Matt 3 v 3, Luke 3 v 3-6, John 1 v 23)

After His baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days, where he faced trials. So the wilderness was a place for training and preparing people and making them ready for the service of God.

Baptism of Water

Ritual washing was central to the Essene community. Several cisterns and baths are found at Qumran.

The Essene Manual of Discipline speaks of ritual washing as a way of entering the covenanted life of the community. To “enter the Covenant” is to turn from one’s sin, to “enter into water”, and thus become a member.. However “they shall not be cleansed unless they repent of their wickedness, for unclean are all who transgress His word (1QS 5:13-14)

8. See also 1QS 3:3-5: “He shall not be counted among the perfect; he shall neither be purified by expiation nor cleansed by purifying waters: Unclean, unclean shall he be, as long as he despises the precepts of God, without being instructed in the community of His counsel.”

[1]

“Through an upright and humble attitude his sin may be covered, and by humbling himself before all God’s laws his flesh can be made clean. Only thus can he really receive the purifying waters and be purged by the cleansing flow.” (1QS 3:8–10)

In the Damascus Document, the Essenes describe themselves repeatedly as the “repentant ones of Israel”

Baptism of the Messiah

In this passage from the 18th chapter of the Testament of Levi we see many elements of the scene where Jesus is baptized by John in the New Testament –

“6 The heavens shall be opened, And from the temple of glory shall come upon him sanctification, With the Father's voice as from Abraham to Isaac. 7 And the glory of the Most High shall be uttered over him, And the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him in the water.

8 For he shall give the majesty of the Lord to His sons in truth for evermore ; And there shall none succeed him for all generations forever.” Testament of Levi, Chapter 18

- The heavens are opened
- The voice of the Father
- The descent of the spirit
- He is in the water

Baptism of Spirit and Fire

John claimed that he was preparing the way for one who was to come after him, who would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16).

We’ve seen that the Qumran community likewise expected one or more messiahs to appear shortly, and the wicked would be judged by fire (1QS 4:13), while the righteous would be cleansed by the Holy Spirit (1QS 4:21).

For the Essenes, God’s glory was surrounded by “the fire of the great Spirit of perfect holiness” (4Q405). No other Jewish sect put such emphasis on a soon-to-come judgment and the role of the Holy Spirit.

5. When John preached his baptism, he spoke of it as a baptism of water, but referred to another, coming baptism of “spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). The mention of water, fire, and spirit also has a remarkable parallel in the Essene *Manual of Discipline*, which speaks of God “purging by His truth all the deeds of human beings, refining [i.e., by fire] for Himself some of mankind to remove every spirit from their flesh, to cleanse them with a holy Spirit, and sprinkle them with a Spirit of truth like purifying water” (1QS 4:20-21). Here one finds “water,” “holy Spirit,” “Spirit of truth,” and “refining” as elements of God’s activity as He purges this community. This sounds very much like elements of John’s preaching about his own baptism and that of the coming “more powerful” one (Jesus).

6. Still another Essene rule book, the *Damascus Document*, says, “He made known to them his holy Spirit through his Messiah(s)” (CD 2:12). This text provides a Palestinian background for John speaking of Jesus, the Messiah, as the bearer of the Spirit (especially in the Lucan Gospel).

[1]

Are you the one?

[the hea]vens and the earth will listen to His Messiah, and none therein will stray from the commandments of the holy ones.

Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service!

All you hopeful in (your) heart, will you not find the Lord in this?

For the Lord will consider the pious (hasidim) and call the righteous by name.

Over the poor His spirit will hover and will renew the faithful with His power.

*And He will glorify the pious on the throne of the eternal Kingdom.
He who liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, straightens the b[ent]
 And f[or] ever I will cleav[ve to the h]opeful and in His mercy . . .
 And the fr[uit . . .] will not be delayed for anyone.
 And the Lord will accomplish glorious things which have never been as [He . . .]
For He will heal the wounded, and revive the dead and bring good news to the poor
 . . .He will lead the uprooted and knowledge . . . and smoke (?)*

Messianic Apocalypse 4Q521

This text was published in *Biblical Archaeology Review* in 1992 titled [The Messiah at Qumran](#).

[\[2\] A Cosmic Messiah Who “Makes Live the Dead” Among the Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments \(4Q521\) – TaborBlog \(jamestabor.com\)](#)

- First, the text speaks of a single Messiah figure who will rule heaven and earth.
- Second, it mentions in the clearest language the expectation of the resurrection of the dead during the time of this Messiah.
- Third, it contains an exact verbal parallel with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke for identifying of the signs of the Messiah.

Line 11 of this text also contains another highly striking feature. Indeed, it appears to be the closest and most direct linguistic parallel to a New Testament text that we have yet discovered. The line reads:

*For he will heal the wounded, resurrect the dead,
 and proclaim glad tiding to the poor.*

In both Matthew and Luke we read of a deputation that John the Baptist sends to Jesus while John is imprisoned. John's disciples ask Jesus, “Are you the coming one, or do we look for another?” The story is thus tightly framed around the question of *messianic identity*: what will the signs of the true Messiah be? Jesus answers:

*Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, **the dead are raised up, the poor have the glad tiding preached to them** (Luke 7:22-23 and Matthew 11:4-5).*

The phrase at the end of line 11, about “proclaiming glad tidings to the poor” is a direct quotation from Isaiah 61:1, which tells of an “anointed one” (i.e., messiah) who will work various signs before the Day of the Lord. This passage is quite important in the Gospel of Luke. In fact, he highlights it as the inauguration of the Messianic mission of Jesus. According to Luke, it is this very verse from Isaiah which Jesus reads and claims to fulfil in his home town synagogue of Nazareth.

However, what is most noteworthy is that Isaiah 61:1 says nothing about this Anointed One raising the dead. Indeed, in the entire Hebrew Bible there is nothing about a messiah figure raising the dead. Yet, when we turn to Luke and Matthew quote, regarding the “signs of the Messiah,” we find the two phrases linked: “the dead are raised up, the poor have the glad tidings preached to them,” precisely as we have in our Qumran text. [\[2\]](#)

Still another interesting Qumran fragment that sheds light on a New Testament passage is one that mentions the deeds of God's Messiah (4Q521).

Frg. 2, Col. ii

1 [the hea]vens and the earth will listen to His Messiah,
2 [and all th]at is in them will not swerve from the commandments
of holy ones.
3 Be strengthened in His service, all you who seek the Lord!
4 Shall you not find the Lord in this, all those (= you) who hope in
their hearts?
5 For the Lord will visit pious ones, and righteous ones He will call
by name.
6 Over afflicted ones will His Spirit hover, and faithful ones He will
renew with His power.
7 He will honor (the) pious ones on a throne of eternal kingship,
8 freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening up those
be[nt over].
9 For[ev]er shall I cling [to tho]se who hope, and in His steadfast
love He will recompense;
10 and the frui[t of a] good [dee]d will be delayed for no one.

11 Wond<r>ous things, such as have never been (before), the Lord
will do, as He s[aid].
12 For He will heal (the) wounded, revive the dead, (and) proclaim
good news to the afflicted;
13 (the) [po]or He will satiate, (the) uprooted He will guide, and on
(the) hungry He will bestow riches;
14 and (the) intel[ligent], and all of them (will be) like
hol[y ones]

55. See E. Puech, "Une apocalypse messianique (4Q521)," *RevQ* 15 (1991-92) 475-522 (+ 3 pls.).

This text provides, however, an interesting Palestinian Jewish background for the description of Jesus' activity in some of the Gospels. No Christian who reads this thoroughly Jewish text can fail to note the echoes of its phraseology in passages that record Jesus' answer to be given to the imprisoned John the Baptist in Luke 7:22 or Matt 11:5: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them."

Elijah

Luke makes more than passing use of this notion of the “resurrection of the dead” as a sign of the age of the Messiah. In the two places he quotes Isaiah 61:1 he also mentions specific cases of resurrection of the dead: as Elijah once raised the son of the widow, Jesus now raises the son of the widow from Nain (Luke 4:26; 7:11-17). This is hardly accidental, as the close juxtaposition of the texts makes clear. [2]

These were traditions shared between the community of John the Baptist and that of the early followers of Jesus. The text provides a most direct and significant example of a common messianic hope among the followers of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Teacher of Righteousness.

Testimony of John

¹ “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. ³² There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is true.

³³ “You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. ³⁵ John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

³⁶ “I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me.

John 5 v 16-19

So when the gospels say there were three testimonies to Jesus - which includes John the Baptist - they are referring not just to John as a single person , but to the vast amount of Essene prophecy of the messiah that existed at that time. So the testimony of John the Baptist is the testimony of all the ancient prophecies kept by the Essenes.

The testimony of the Essenes was particularly trustworthy since their lives were models of ascetism (uncorrupted by wealth) and of adherence to truth.

Unfortunately such testimony was naturally suppressed in the first century by the factions of Pharisees and Sadducees who rejected the Messiah , and who formed the new rabbinic Judaism - though some prophecies such as those found in Isaiah could not be ignored. The result of this suppression / redaction is a period of 500 “silent” years from Ezra till Christ. Peering into this silence, we find a new covenant, a Teacher of Righteousness, a holy community of the Essenes, who were assigned a mission of “preparing a Way for the Lord”, and a series of remarkable prophecies of a Messiah.

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