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JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE QUMRAN CONNECTION

ALAN TAYLOR FARNES

Alan Taylor Farnes is an ancient Near Eastern studies major, with an emphasis in the Greek New Testament.

A few words sprinkled in the New Testament lead many to theorize that John the Baptist¹ was a member of the community at Qumran.² This community was an ascetic group who, frustrated with the priesthood at Jerusalem, moved to Qumran during the second century B.C.E. to live there more purely. They also took upon themselves special dietary, clothing, ritual, and other practices. However, it is what is not stated in the New Testament that leads to the downfall of theorizing. The New Testament does not give us clues about the preministerial whereabouts of John the Baptist. John's interesting appropriation of Isaiah 40:3 has led scholars to wonder where John was raised and if it is possible to conclude that he was raised among the Qumranites. This paper wades through the debates and shows a possible interpretation.

Currently, scholars are divided on this topic. Examples of these opinions include the following: "I completely reject the simplistic assumption that . . . John the Baptist was actually a member of the sect."³ "Today no one would dare state . . . that John was an Essene."⁴ "John could have been a member

1. I will use the term "Baptist" in my own writing, whereas the term "Baptizer" may be used in quoting the works of other authors. The two terms may be used interchangeably.

2. This paper operates on the debatable assumption that those who dwelled at Qumran were the Essenes. For insight into that debate, see Edna Ullmann-Margalit, "Spotlight on Scroll Scholars: Dissecting the Qumran-Essene Hypothesis," *BAR* 34.2 (March-April 2008): 63–67, 86; the whole of Gabrielle Bobbaccini's *Enoch and Qumran Origins: New Light on a Forgotten Connection* (ed. Gabrielle Bobbaccini; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Albert I. Baumgarten, "Who Cares and Why Does It Matter? Qumran and the Essenes, Once Again!" *DSD* 11.2 (2004): 174–90; Geza Vermes, *Scrolls, Scriptures and Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 39–43; and many others.

3. Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 404.

4. Julio Trebolle Barrera, "The Qumran Texts and the New Testament," in *The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Florentino Garcia Martinez and Julio Trebolle Barrera; trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 205. I offer yet another example of a scholar unequivocally denying the possibility of John being connected to Qumran: "John the Baptist was neither an Essene nor a spiritual pupil of the Essenes. Were he ever to have made the effort to walk over to Qumran, as a non-Essene he would have been denied entry, and at best

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of the Qumran Community. There is nothing to deny this possibility.”⁵ “While the argument cannot be proved that John the Baptist was associated with the Essenes at Qumran, his circumstances certainly are suggestive.”⁶ Upon analyzing the possibilities, I conclude that John was adopted by the Qumranites at a young age, raised by them at Qumran, went through the initiatory processes but did not entirely complete them, and either left voluntarily or was expelled. He was therefore forced to subsist on food he could find on his own and clothes he could make himself. However, his beliefs and practices, as they differ from the Qumranites, are a result of the prophetic mantle placed upon him.

Heinrich Graetz, writing his *History of the Jews* in the nineteenth century, was the first to speak on this debate. Graetz claims that John was the Essene who prepared the way of the Lord.⁷ He gives many reasons why he believes John was an Essene, many of which are questionable today. Nevertheless, Graetz was the first to begin the discussion. Since his writings, scholars have continued to debate whether or not we can conclude that John was indeed a Qumranite.

Despite being in disagreement to the idea of John being a Qumranite, two of the three scholars cited above soften their view to allow for some possibilities. First, Julio T. Barrera: “The fact that, according to the gospel of Luke (1:80), John lived ‘in the desert’ until the time to begin his own mission, could refer to this [John having spent some time among the Essenes].”⁸ He even allows exactly what I am arguing: “if John did belong to the Qumran community, he must have left it at a certain moment to follow his own path.”⁹ To support this statement, he parallels John’s interpretation of Isaiah 40:3 in John 1:23 with 1QS VIII 12–16:

“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (Isa 40:3).

“And when these become members of the Community is Israel according to all these rules, they shall separate from the habitation of unjust men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare there the way of Him; as it is written, *Prepare in the wilderness the way of . . . , make straight in the desert a path for our God* (Isa. xl, 3)” (1QS VIII 12–16).¹⁰

provided with enough food and drink for the long walk back.” Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 225.

5. William Sanford LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 152.

6. Andrew C. Skinner, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the World of Jesus,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 2 (2010): 57.

7. Graetz even believes that John means Essene: “The Essene who sent forth this call to the Israelites was John the Baptist (his name doubtless meaning the Essene, he who daily bathed and cleansed both body and soul in spring water).” Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (6 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1893), 2:145–46.

8. Barrera, “Qumran Texts and the New Testament,” 205.

9. Ibid.

10. This paper employs the translation by Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 1962). Emphasis in original shows that the emphasized section is quoting scripture. The ellipsis is to avoid using the tetragrammaton—the name of the Lord.

“He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said” (John 1:23).

He then compares the baptismal rites of both John and the Qumranites and finds similarities and differences. He even parallels John’s use of the Spirit in Luke 3:16 with 1QS IV 20–21:¹¹

“God will then purify every deed of man with His truth; He will refine for Himself the human frame by rooting out all spirit of injustice from the bounds of his flesh. He will cleanse him of all wicked deeds with the spirit of holiness; like purifying waters He will shed upon him the spirit of truth (to cleanse him) of all abomination and injustice” (1QS IV 20–21).

“John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

However, in the end he concludes that due to the Qumranites’ “closed and sectarian spirit,”¹² John “could not have been at home”¹³ in such a community that forcefully rejected the very priestly line that his family hailed from. This may be true, but it is also possible that, rejecting the Hasmonean priesthood in the Jerusalem temple, Zacharias and Elisabeth would not have wanted their son John to be raised in such an environment but would rather have their son among the priestly elite at Qumran.

André Dupont-Sommer rejected the possibility of any connection between John and the Qumranites, claiming that John’s baptism was referred to as the baptism of *John*, not the baptism of the Qumranites.¹⁴ It is true that there are differences between John’s baptism and that of the Qumranites. For example, John’s baptism was performed only once for each believer, whereas the Qumranites practiced frequent, even daily, baptisms. Furthermore, John’s baptism was for a remission of sins whereas the Qumranites’ baptism was for ritual and purification purposes.

James H. Charlesworth asserts that he is “convinced that the similarities between John the Baptizer and the Qumranites are too impressive to be dismissed as merely an example of a shared milieu.”¹⁵ Charlesworth then gives five “striking points of similarity:”¹⁶

1. Both John and the Qumranites come from similar geographical locations.¹⁷

11. Both references portray a peculiar belief in the Holy Ghost that was previously rare.

12. Barrera, “Qumran Texts and the New Testament,” 206.

13. *Ibid.*

14. “He was an independent prophet, and the baptism which he administered was properly ‘the baptism of John.’” André Dupont-Sommer, *The Jewish Sect of Qumran and of the Essenes* (trans. R. D. Barnett; London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1953), 149.

15. James H. Charlesworth, “John the Baptizer and Qumran Barriers in Light of the *Rule of the Community*,” in *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Donald W. Parry and Eugene Charles Ulrich; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 356.

16. Charlesworth, “Baptizer,” 357.

17. Also, Skinner: “John comes preaching in the wilderness of Judea—the very

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2. “They both share a preference for prophecy, especially Isaiah.”¹⁸ Here Charlesworth comments on the connections with Isaiah 40:3.

3. They both used water as a means of expiation.

4. Both were eschatological.

5. Both were ascetic and even celibate. He concludes by saying that “John the Baptizer was one who refused full initiation because of the institutionalized hatred of all who were not within the community.”¹⁹

William LaSor argues that that Josephus never mentions John growing up with the Qumranites.²⁰ This is a classic argument from silence. LaSor also states that John could not have been a Qumranite because he did not wear the white linen of the Qumranites. This is easily solvable: if John was expelled from the Qumranites, he would have been excluded from wearing their sacred raiment and would have been forced to make his own. In effect, anyone who has left the Qumran community is thereafter a Son of Darkness and is anathema to the Sons of Light. Concerning the exclusion of those who stray from the path, *The Community Rule* states, “And no man among the members of the Covenant of the Community who deliberately, on any point whatever, turns aside from all that is commanded, shall touch the pure Meal of the men of holiness or know anything of their counsel until his deeds are purified from all injustice and he walks in perfection of way” (1QS VIII 16–19). Also, the whole of 1QS VII outlines the punishments of those who commit a sin in the eyes of the Qumranites. One particularly interesting rule in this section reads, “Whoever has murmured against the authority of the Community shall be expelled and shall not return” (1QS VII 17). Most of the other laws require the perpetrator to do penance or be cut off from the meal of the community, but “murmuring against the authority of the community” will get one expelled without possibility of reacceptance. Perhaps this was John’s situation. If so, he would be cut off from the community—even to the point that no member of the community is allowed to share food or property with him: “Moreover, if any member of the Community has shared with him his food or property which . . . of the Congregation, his sentence shall be the same; he shall be ex[pe]lled” (1QS VII 26–27). Therefore, John could not wear the linens of the Essenes because he had been cut off from the community.

One major piece of evidence supporting that John was indeed a Qumranite is found in Josephus, who wrote of the Essenes, “They neglect wedlock, but choose other persons’ children, while they are yet pliable, and fit for learning; and esteem them to be of their own kindred, and form them according to their own manners.”²¹ From this quote we can theorize that John was adopted by the Qumranites while still young. Many scholars have affirmed the notion that John was adopted.²² Perhaps due to Zacharias’ and Elisabeth’s

location of the Dead Sea Scroll community.” “World of Jesus,” 57.

18. Ibid.

19. Charlesworth, “Baptizer,” 375.

20. Both the white linen and Josephus’ forgetfulness are herein contained: LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, 146.

21. Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.2.

22. One being A. S. Geysler: “We can now assume with comparative certainty that John was brought up by the Essenes of the non-marrying type, who, according to Josephus, supplemented their numbers by adopting the children of others and forming them to their doctrines while they were still pliable.” “The Youth of John the Baptist: A Deduction from

advanced age, their death, or other circumstances, he was adopted out to live at Qumran.

A. S. Geysler uses the Lucan Infancy Accounts and the break therein to show that Luke records all events of John's life in parallel with the events of Jesus' life. He shows that the break in the record excludes the *bar mitzvah* of John, whereas Luke includes an account of the *bar mitzvah* of Jesus. Therefore, Geysler claims that John must have been adopted before the age of twelve. He continues that the very fact that Luke included everything about John's upbringing and then is suddenly silent about his whereabouts while he was "in the wilderness" (Luke 1:80) gives away that John was indeed an Qumranite.²³

Another piece of evidence supporting a connection between John and the Qumranites is that they both were communally exclusive.²⁴ In the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find a long recitation cursing "the men of the lot of Belial,"²⁵ which includes all of the Sons of Darkness or anyone not a Qumranite. The Qumranites closely followed a doctrine of hate and exclusion.²⁶ They were very eschatological and knew that all must have a judgment: if a man was a Qumranite, then he was saved; if he was a Son of Darkness, he was damned. We see that John, though not as extreme, held a similar belief. He believed that all were sinners and in need of repentance and baptism. At this time in Judean history to become a Jew, only Gentiles were baptized to wash away their defilement, but John proclaimed that *all* were in need of baptism—even Abraham's sons! (see Luke 3:8).

Even though John did believe in exclusion to a degree, it was this very

the Break in the Parallel Account of the Lucan Infancy Story," *NovT* 1 (Jan. 1956): 71. Another is W. S. LaSor: "If John went to the wilderness when he was yet a very young boy, it is obvious that he had to be in someone's care. Scholars have suggested that his parents placed him in the custody of the Qumran 'Essenes,' reminding us of Josephus' statement." *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, 146.

23. "Luke . . . avoided all mention of the Movement of Disciples of John the Baptist, although we know from the patres that they existed and we can surmise from the Fourth Gospel that they constituted a real danger for the Jesus disciples. . . . In like manner, Luke, in common with the rest of the New Testament, avoided scrupulously to mention the Essenes, although we know from Josephus, Philo, Pliny, and the Sadokite Fragments that they numbered thousands By . . . excising only that part which appertains to the Youth of John the Baptist, Luke unwittingly tells us who it was that formed this strange forerunner of Jesus." "Youth of John the Baptist," 74–75.

24. The whole of this article supports my claim: James H. Charlesworth, "John the Baptizer and Qumran Barriers in Light of the *Rule of the Community*." *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1999): 353–75. Also, LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, 149.

25. "And the Levites shall curse all the men of the lot of Satan, saying: 'Be cursed because of all your guilty wickedness! May He deliver you up for torture at the hands of the vengeful Avengers! May He visit you with destruction by the hand of all the Wreakers of Revenge! Be cursed without mercy because of the darkness of your deeds! Be damned in the shadowy place of everlasting fire! May God not heed when you call on Him, nor pardon you by blotting out your sin! May He raise His angry face towards you for vengeance! May there be no "Peace" for you in the mouth of those who hold fast to the Fathers!" 1QS II 4–10.

26. Hate and exclusion, even between the classes within Qumran, is shown vividly by Josephus: "So far are the juniors inferior to the seniors, that if the seniors should be touched by the juniors, they must wash themselves, as if they had intermixed themselves with the company of a foreigner." *Wars*, 2.8.10.

doctrine that may have led him to eventually leave Qumran.²⁷ In addition to the doctrine of exclusion, it was the Qumranite doctrine of double predestination that was something that John could simply not swallow. As he joined the recitations of Qumran, he would have felt comfortable with the recitations concerning the enumeration of sins²⁸ and the Aaronic Blessing,²⁹ but it is obvious that he would not have felt comfortable reciting the aforementioned cursing of the sons of Belial. John simply did not believe that God had elected all who would be saved and damned the rest. He could not have believed that his father and mother—and all those he knew in Jerusalem—would be damned. Further, if he accepted this doctrine, he would have also been forced to accept that Jesus the Christ himself was a Son of Darkness! Rather, John believed that all should repent and be baptized (see Luke 3:8).

It is my opinion that John stayed for more than one year of the Qumranite two-year induction process. *The Community Rule* VI outlines the initiatory process. Anyone who would like to join is examined by the Guardian and then the Congregation. If admitted, he is not able to eat of the meal of the community nor take part in the possessions of the community for the first year, but he retains his own possessions (see 1QS VI 20). Then, upon reexamination after the first year, he is admitted into the community, surrenders all of his possessions, and undergoes a year with almost full membership. After examination after two years, he is admitted as a full member. Therefore, it seems likely that John stayed the first year and surrendered all of his possessions but did not complete his second-year review. This may have been due to his inability and refusal to denounce all who were not Qumranites. Therefore, he either voluntarily left the group or was expelled. This departure or expulsion, after spending so much time as a Qumranite, answers many questions concerning John's life: Why did John dress the way he did? Why did he eat the way he did? Why did he not go back to Jerusalem and take part in the priestly order there? Where did he go after he left Qumran? Josephus reminds us that, in ancient days, once a covenant was entered into, it was never broken—even if the covenant maker no longer believed in the covenant.³⁰ John made certain covenants, and he would never break them even if he became disenchanted with the Qumranites. Therefore, John would have been bound to follow the oath stating that no food may be given to an expelled Qumranite. More encompassing, he would have held to the oath stating that no goods may be given to an expelled Qumranite, including clothing.³¹ Therefore, John made

27. Again, the whole of Charlesworth's article supports my claim, "John the Baptizer and Qumran Barriers in Light of the *Rule of the Community*," 353–75.

28. "And after them, all those entering the Covenant shall confess and say: 'We have strayed! We have [disobeyed!] We and our fathers before us have sinned and done wickedly in walking [counter to the precepts] of truth and righteousness.'" 1QS I 21–25.

29. "And the Priests shall bless all the men of the lot of God who walk perfectly in all His ways, saying: 'May He bless you with all good and preserve you from all evil! May he lighten your heart with life-giving wisdom and grant you eternal knowledge! May He raise His merciful face towards you for everlasting bliss!'" 1QS II 1–4.

30. Concerning those who are expelled from the Essenes Josephus writes: "As he is bound by the oath he has taken." *Wars*, 2.8.8.

31. The following is all encompassing: "And the person among the Community who fraternizes with (an expelled Essene) in concerns of purity or goods, who [. . .] the Many, and

his own clothes and lived on whatever food he could find in the Judean Desert: locusts and wild honey. In addition, after leaving the priestly class in Jerusalem, in a sense denouncing it for its apostasy, he could not return. Therefore, because John was alone in the world, he went on the east side of Jordan and preached there.

In conclusion, there is strong evidence that John was indeed a Qumranite, brought up at Qumran after being adopted. He was either expelled or voluntarily left before completing the two-year initiatory process and lived on his own in the Judean wilderness on the east side of the Jordan River, making his own clothes, and eating whatever he could find. For some differences between John and the Qumranites, be it in belief or practice, we have only one answer, asserted by LaSor: "How the Spirit works we do not know. We have enough records of men who claimed that they were, or were believed by others to have been, filled with the Spirit, that we can make a few observations. The Spirit uses holy men; the Spirit makes use of contemporary situations; the Spirit particularly works through the scriptures. We find in John something of each of these elements."³²

Truly, John, as any prophet ever has been, was immersed in the Spirit (see Matthew 11:11), and any differences between his doctrine and that of the Qumranites—such as the manner of baptism or the need for missionary work—were likely taught to John by the Spirit.

his sentence will be like his, he shall be exp[elled.]” Therefore we see that not only can an expelled Essene not take food, clothing or anything, but the Essene offering the goods would be expelled as well. 1QS VII 26–27.

32. LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament*, 153.