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IMMERSIVE RITUALS IN THE QUMRAN COMMUNITY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract: The baptismal rite performed by John the Baptist finds many similarities with the immersive rituals performed at the Qumran community, as detailed in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This has led many to assume that the Qumran immersive rituals were a prototype of Christian baptism. However, this paper will show that Christian baptism evolved naturally within its first century Jewish context, and the intersections of thought and practice between the rituals are nuanced. A careful analysis ultimately reflects different understandings of the ritual's purpose and effect.

For many scholars, John the Baptist has been a fitting candidate as a possible point of connection between Christianity and the community at Qumran.¹ The Dead Sea Scrolls have proven to be of major interest to scholars because they illuminate modern understanding of Second Temple Judaism (ca. 500 BCE to 70 CE) and the context of the emerging Jesus Movement. Debates have shifted in many areas of biblical study on account of the scrolls, especially concerning matters of potential influence on Christian baptismal rites. The task of this essay is to elucidate the significance of ritual purification in Second Temple Judaism and to examine the relationship between the Qumran community and John the Baptist. I will compare and contrast John's baptism with the rites practiced at Qumran to show that the similarities between the rituals are nuanced, but the two groups had significantly different understandings concerning the purpose and effects of ritual immersion.

1. Most recently, Joel Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2018).

Ritual washings were a ubiquitous rite in the ancient world and a regular practice for the observant Israelite. According to biblical law, the children of Israel were commanded to wash themselves to rid themselves of impurities (e.g., Lev 1:9, 15:27; Deut 23:11). The Torah consistently uses the word *rāḥaṣ* to refer to both everyday washings of the body as well as ritual washings. These washings were not isolated to the priestly caste but were required of all individuals.² Leviticus 15:31 holds a key to understanding the emphasis of purification rituals when it says, “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.” All Israelites were obligated to be aware of their ritual status because any defilement of the sacred would threaten the destruction of the nation. This collective significance is also evident in Lev 11:44 where God says, “For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” What is translated as “sanctify yourselves therefore,” is a single word in Hebrew, *wəḥiṭqaddiṣtem*. This word is conjugated in the second masculine plural form, indicating that the injunction addresses the entire nation of Israel as the audience. Their condition did not just have an individual effect on their eligibility to enter sacred spaces but was a matter that affected the community as a whole.³ Thus, every Israelite was engaged in general purification rituals involving water, and the rites took on a highly significant role to maintain the holiness of the sanctuary.

Though the root *raḥaṣ* is used in reference to the cleansing of impurity with water, it is not specifically indicated whether these washings were aspersions, affusions, or immersions.⁴ Oftentimes, the commands to wash seem to preclude immersion. For example, in Exodus 30:19, Aaron and his sons are commanded to wash their hands and feet with water. Because the text only specifies the priests’ hands and feet as the objects of the verb, it seems clear that the individual is not engaging in a full body immersion. Later rabbinical texts often employ the Hebrew root *taval* for full immersion, but in the Hebrew Bible *taval* primarily indicates the dipping of an object or a body part.⁵ Immersion rituals likely did not gain significant traction until the first century BCE.

2. Jonathan D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006), 29.

3. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 945–946; Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford, 2000), 25.

4. In a religious context, aspersions, affusions, and immersions are methods of baptism or washing. Aspersions are the sprinkling of water, affusion is the act of pouring water, and immersion is the total submersion under water.

5. See Lev 4:6, 17; 9:9; 14:6, 16, and 51.

The sudden emergence of the *miqveh* in the Second Temple Period reflected this rise in immersive rites. *Miqva'ot* are Jewish ritual baths. These stepped installations allowed the participant to submerge him or herself in water to achieve ritual purification. In a location where water was a limited resource, access to these pools was limited. Even still, archeologists have excavated many *miqva'ot*, dating to the Hasmonean period and later, in notable locations within Judea and Samaria.⁶ *Miqva'ot* are not mentioned specifically in any text from this time, but an understanding of both the historical record and the material culture aids in the attempt to reconstruct the history of these cultic features.

Many stepped pools have been excavated at Khirbet Qumran, and most scholars identify these installations as *miqva'ot*. The inhabitants of the community routinely immersed themselves in the purifying water that ran through these pools. Josephus writes that the Essene sect, a group many scholars consider to be those living at Qumran, rose early and bathed frequently with water to purify themselves.⁷ Interestingly, only a single text from Qumran specifies immersion as the means for purification.⁸ The instructions read, “[Whatev]er comes in contact with semen, whether a person or any vessel, shall be immersed (*taval*); and whoever bears it [shall immers]e; and the garment upon which it (the semen) is, as well as the vessel which bears it, is to be immersed (*taval*) [in wat]er.”⁹ The presence of *miqva'ot*, however, suggests that the washings in Qumran at this time were generally immersive and were a foundational feature of their faith.

Following the discovery of Qumran and the publications of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some New Testament academics largely dominated the scholarly conversation, viewing the ancient community as a forerunner of Christianity. The early discussion on the interesting similarities between the theologies and practices of John the Baptist and Qumran was heralded by W. H. Brownlee, who was among the first to suggest that there was an actual historical connection between the two.¹⁰ He proposed that John, upon the death of his parents, was sent to be reared by the Essenes in the wilderness, where he became acquainted with their sectarian thought and practices. According to Brownlee, John later abandoned the community to preach his new gospel of repentance and pave the way for the Messiah.

6. See Ronny Reich, *Miqva'ot (Jewish Ritual Baths) in the Second Temple, Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods* (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi and Israel Exploration Society, 2013).

7. Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1959), 2.8.121–161.

8. Yonatan Adler, “On the Origins of Tevilah (Ritual Immersion),” *The Torah.com*, 19 April 2017, <https://thetorah.com/article/on-the-origins-of-tevilah-ritual-immersion>.

9. 4QToharot A [4Q274] 2 I, 4–6 (J. M. Baumgarten, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader* [ed. Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov; Leiden: Brill, 2014], 316–317).

10. W. H. Brownlee, “John the Baptist in the New Light of Ancient Scrolls,” *IBC* 9 (1955): 71–90.

Brownlee cataloged the similarities he observed: he noted John's priestly lineage, his ascetic way of life in the wilderness, and his natural proximity to Qumran in the Judean desert. He further compared their similar theologies, eschatological thought, messianic expectations, and baptismal practices.

Ultimately what compromises Brownlee's hypothesis is that his purpose was not to prove a direct relationship between John and Qumran, but to offer a composite picture of the Baptist that would enlighten our understanding of him. While he conceded that he does not intend to construct a historically-critical biography of John, Brownlee surpassed reasonable conclusions in offering a quasi-narrative backstory of John the Baptist, complete with private thought processes and inner conflicts.¹¹ Ultimately, any supposition that the Qumran community directly influenced John enters the realm of speculation.

John Pryke responded directly to Brownlee's adoption hypothesis, claiming that John's history and views actually support the contrary.¹² Pryke examined the same evidence as Brownlee (the exegesis of Isa 40:3, similar ascetic lifestyles, the situation in the wilderness, washings and purity rites, etc.), but he reached a different conclusion. That is, John was a uniquely distinct figure and his preachings and baptisms were a departure from the sectarian lifestyle. He argued that John stands in mainstream Judaism and that his understanding and execution of baptism differed significantly in character from the purity rites performed at Qumran.¹³ He rightly saw John working within the context of many similar groups in the Judean wilderness but with an independent message of his own (a view which finds itself in agreement with others who advocate for a link between the two communities).¹⁴ There are noteworthy resemblances of Qumran thought and practice in John's ministry, but ultimately a collage of correspondence is not sufficient evidence to prove a direct association. The evidence does, however, show that the differences are significant and that John the Baptist was an independent figure from Qumran, engaged within a shared religious milieu.

John's immersions, viewed through a Jewish lens, no doubt paved the way for the Christian tradition, but whether or not he was influenced by the Qumran community is in question. From the scholarly literature, it is apparent that the relationship specifically between the immersion rites at Qumran and the ones practiced by John the Baptist has been contested over the years. Some argue that "the only thing John's baptism and the Essenes' baths of immersion had in common

11. Brownlee, "John the Baptist," 73–74.

12. John Pryke, "John the Baptist and the Qumran Community," *RevQ* 4 (1964): 495.

13. Pryke, "John the Baptist and the Qumran Community," 496.

14. See C. H. H. Scobie, "John the Baptist," in *The Scrolls and Christianity*, ed. Matthew Black (London: SPCK, 1969): 69.

was their ritual use of water for immersion.”¹⁵ This may be an overstatement, but the general implication remains sound. There are multiple points of intersection between the Qumran rituals and John’s immersions, but their similarities and differences are complex. It must be kept in mind that the similarities between the communities do not prove an immediate connection between John and Qumran, nor does it imply that the Qumran lustrations were in any way a prototype for Christian baptisms as John’s baptisms were.

One aspect of the ritual immersion that is consistent in both communities is the importance of repentance. The members of the Qumran community emphasized the significance of contrition with regard to ritual purifications. In their minds, the water itself did not confer purity, but a penitent and humble heart was necessary to be purged from uncleanness.¹⁶ The Community Scroll, a foundational text for their society, reads:

Unclean, unclean shall he be. For as long as he despises the precepts of God he shall receive no instruction in the Community of His counsel. For it is through the spirit of true counsel concerning the ways of man that all his sins shall be expiated, that he may contemplate the light of life. He shall be cleansed from all his sins by the spirit of holiness uniting him to His truth, and his iniquity shall be expiated by the spirit of uprightness and humility. And when his flesh is sprinkled with purifying water and sanctified by cleansing water, it shall be made clean by the humble submission of his soul to all the precepts of God. Let him then order his steps {to walk} perfectly in all the ways commanded by God concerning the times appointed for him, straying neither to the right nor to the left and transgressing none of His words, and he shall be accepted by virtue of a pleasing atonement before God and it shall be to him a Covenant of the everlasting Community.¹⁷

The emphasis on repentance continues in the text, reading, “These may not enter into water to [be permitted to] touch the Purity of the holy men, for they will not be cleansed unless they have turned from their wickedness.”¹⁸ Similarly, John the Baptist believed that baptism without repentance was fruitless and clearly bound up in the idea of forgiveness.¹⁹ The earliest accounts refer to him preaching a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3). From

15. Hartmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 222.

16. It is worthy to note that though sin did result in ritual impurity, not all ritual impurity was the result of conscious sin.

17. 1QS III, 6–12. (Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* [ed. Geza Vermes; New York: Penguin Books, 1997], 100–101).

18. 1QSa 13–14.

19. Stegemann, *Library of Qumran*, 219.

these parallels, one recognizes that both parties understood that without a pure heart and a genuine turn from unrighteousness, this choreography of cult would prove unavailing.

While both communities stressed the significance of repentance prior to immersion, the impetus behind it differed. The immersions practiced at Qumran were largely to cleanse the individual from physical impurity, whether by external contaminant or sin.²⁰ This finds itself in line with the Jewish tradition of the day. The Gospels, however, make no mention of John's baptism being a process to become ritually pure. His baptism was preceded by a confession of sin (Mark 1:5) just as the Qumran rites often were, but the lack of reference to contamination or uncleanness suggests that they were regarded as something distinctly different.

Another way in which the immersion practices of John and Qumran differ is in the number of participants involved. At Qumran, *miqva'ot* had steps leading down into the water, allowing the impure person to walk into the pool, enter the water, and come up cleansed—without the assistance of another.²¹ The directives for washings found at Qumran reflect the instructions from Leviticus,²² also indicating that the individual was to immerse himself or herself in the water, apparently without the assistance of another.²³ John's baptism stands in obvious contrast. The New Testament records John entering the water alongside the baptismal candidate to administer the baptisms. The participation of both an officiant and a recipient in John's baptism and later Christian baptisms reflects a notable difference in how the ritual was experienced and perceived.

The common employment of Isaiah 40:3 in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in connection with John's teachings has led some to believe that they shared a similar interpretation regarding the coming of the Messiah.²⁴ However, there are distinct differences in the ways the Qumran community and the gospel writers use the passage. An apocalyptic *kērygma* is evident in the Gospel authors' framing of John's role and teachings in connection with Isa 40:3. The Septuagint (LXX) is cited

20. See 4QToharot A [4Q274] and 4QToharot Bb [4Q277].

21. James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 331.

22. 4Q514 I, 1–6: “And he shall bathe and wash on the d[a]y of [his] uncleanness . . . and on the day of their [cl]eansing all those who are unclean of days shall bathe and wash in water and shall become clean.” This passage corresponds with the instruction found in Lev 14:8: “He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes...and wash himself in water, that he may be clean.”

23. According to the Hebrew Bible, priests were involved in purification rites, but the active participation of a priest in the washing of another individual is nowhere indicated. Instead, the text implies that individuals washed themselves, either through methods of affusion or bathing.

24. Brownlee, “John the Baptist,” 73.

exactly in describing John as “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). The LXX places the voice in the wilderness. The Qumran community, however, took a different interpretive approach to this passage of scripture as they read it in light of their location in the Judean desert. In 1QS 8:13–16, the voice calls “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”²⁵ The Community Rule, therefore, does not locate the unidentified voice in the wilderness, but rather calls for the preparation of the way in the wilderness.²⁶ This in turn serves to justify the establishment of a wilderness community.²⁷ Nothing suggests that John intended to establish a desert community or recruit his disciples to remain with him in the wilderness. Rather, the allusion to Isaiah 40:3 marks John’s mission with a sense of eschatological urgency. The difference in hermeneutical emphasis shows that the two were not related on this matter.²⁸

Although the lustrations at Qumran and by John the Baptist were not strictly initiatory, as later Christian baptisms could be characterized, there are intimations of an entrance into a covenant community through ritual cleansings. In *The Faith of Qumran: The Theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Helmer Ringgren writes that although the immersive rituals at Qumran were an everyday feature of the society, they were also considered part of the process to join the covenant fellowship.²⁹ It is apparent that through some act of ritual cleansing, the residents of Qumran believed that man “may take his place in the host of the holy ones and enter into fellowship with the congregation of the sons of heaven.”³⁰ These people believed that salvation itself was joining with this holy council. Angels and saved human beings constituted a great heavenly community, and its manifestation on earth was to be found at Qumran. These specific immersive practices, however, were features of a much larger and longer process of admission that included training and probationary periods, as well as a communal feast.³¹ The change that was brought

25. 1QS VIII 13–16 (M. Wise, M. Abegg, and E. Cook with N. Gordon, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader* [ed. Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov; Leiden: Brill, 2014], 24–25).

26. Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 26–28.

27. Taylor, *The Immerser*, 28.

28. It also cannot be assumed that John himself ever used the Isaian passage in his own ministry. Because the text is cited by the writers of the New Testament, Christian exegetes may have had their own purposes in connecting the prophecy to John.

29. Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran*, 127–128.

30. 1QH III, 21–22.

31. Josephus gives an account regarding the admission of neophyte members in his description of the Essenes: “Those desiring to enter the sect do not obtain immediate admittance. The postulant waits outside for one year; the same way of life is propounded to him and he is given a hatchet, the loin-cloth which I have mentioned, and a white garment. Having proved his continence during this time, he draws closer to the way of life and participates in the purificatory

about by the immersions was therefore a cultic purity to maintain the holiness of the community and its members, but the rituals themselves were not accompanied by the same soteriological thrust as Christian baptisms later were. In other words, the ablutions practiced at Qumran were sacral, but they were not sacramental.

This community's conception of a divine society at Qumran parallels John's vision of the kingdom of heaven. The first report of direct speech by John is found in Matt 3:2, where he says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This passage reveals John as one who understood that the need for repentance was due to the impending arrival of the Day of the Lord. For John, baptism was unequivocally connected to preparation for admission into the kingdom of heaven. John's baptisms, therefore, were unique in the preparatory aspect of their purpose.³² Baptism by water was not complete on its own but rather anticipated a more powerful saturation with the Holy Spirit by one who was greater than he (Matt 3:11–12).

Early Christian baptism then evolved from John's preparatory rite to a more developed initiatory and transformative sacrament. Stephen Ricks notes that, although the difference between the purpose of baptism as preparatory as opposed to initiatory is subtle, it can be summarized by saying "while John's rite prepared his disciples to become part of the kingdom of God, Christian baptism was the means by which one actually became part of the kingdom."³³ Early Christian baptism also differed from the lustrations at Qumran in that they were thought of in connection with death and rebirth.³⁴ The cleansings at Qumran are described as purifying, but nowhere does it speak of the ritual in terms of passing from death to life. It is clear that early Christians also thought of baptism as a regenerating force; Christ is accorded the following words in John 3:3–5: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The act of total submersion under the water is therefore understood uniquely by early Christians as a symbolic act representing the death, burial, and rebirth of the individual as a new and transformed creature (see, for instance, Rom 6:3–5).³⁵

baths at a higher degree, but he is not yet admitted into intimacy. Indeed, after he has shown his constancy, his character is tested for another two years, and if he appears worthy he is received into the company permanently," *War* 2.8.7.137–38.

32. Stephen D. Ricks, "The Doctrine of Baptism: Immersions at Qumran and the Baptisms of John, the Earliest Christians, and Book of Mormon Peoples," in *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in History, Scripture, and Practice*, ed. Daniel Belnap (Provo, UT: Deseret Book, 2013), 161.

33. Stephen D. Ricks, "The Doctrine of Baptism," 162.

34. Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran: Theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 124–125.

35. On total immersion baptism in early Christianity, see *Didache* 7.1–3, in which baptism

When assessing the purification rites of John the Baptist and the Qumran community, the relationships that can be established are almost always differences. There was no larger baptism movement to which the two belonged, but they both used immersion because purification was important in their shared historical-theological context. Proximity is not enough to convince one that the two groups were exclusively connected in any way. Each parallel must be interpreted and analyzed within its wider historical situation.³⁶ Whether John was directly or indirectly influenced by the community at Qumran, he did not work in a vacuum and was naturally influenced by the general milieu and Jewish culture he was born into. Additionally, to reduce the ritual washings recorded in the Old Testament and performed at Qumran to mere adumbrations of Christian baptism would be to deny both the original context and rich culture of Judaism as well as the uniqueness of John's baptism. While John may well have connected his baptisms with the general use of washing for ritual cleanliness outlined in the Mosaic law, it was not necessarily connected to the extensive and much more frequent use of immersion among the Qumran covenanters. John's repentance-oriented baptisms were thus employed for different ends and in different ways. The reviewed similarities and differences bring one to the conclusion that the sacrament of Christian baptism evolved naturally within the context of its first century Jewish setting and also that John's baptism was understood in unique and distinct ways from the immersions at Qumran. It seems to be the consensus that although John the Baptist's relationship to the Qumran community cannot be proven decisively, we can be assured that the texts provide us with a wealth of knowledge in our strivings to appreciate the background and message of the New Testament.

by affusion is presented as an exception.

36. See Jorg Frey, "Critical Issues in the Investigation of the Scrolls and the New Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. John J. Collins and Timothy H. Lim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 517.