

# John The Baptist And Qumran

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## *The Advent Liturgy*

From ancient times, the Church has fittingly given John the Baptist the spotlight in her Advent Liturgy. It is through the preaching of John that the Church wishes the faithful to prepare themselves for the coming of Christ. Yet we should not limit the role of John the Baptist in the Advent Event merely to prepare us for the Christ Child. John's function in the Advent Event is not only to introduce the Incarnational Event of Bethlehem, but to announce the total reality of Christ's coming: His birth, message, death, resurrection and Pentecost. The Advent Event initiates the entire Paschal Cycle through the mouthpiece of John the Baptist.

## *John the Baptist*

Who was John the Baptist? Scripture is the only source we have in trying to answer this question. All of the Evangelists reserved a special honor to John. Mark considers the role of John as the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ:

The Beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
It is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Look, I am going to send my messenger before you;  
he will prepare your way.

A voice cries in the wilderness:

Prepare a way for the Lord,  
make his paths straight,

and so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mk. 1:1-4)

Generally speaking, there are two distinct views of John in the New Testament. The synoptic gospels look upon John as a prophet, the

*Elia redivivus*, who announces the imminent coming of the Christ. In the fourth gospel, the focus is on John as a witness, testifying to the identity of the Christ.

John is clearly represented by the Synoptics as an Old Testament prophet: “. . . the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.” (Lk. 3:2). John was seen by his contemporaries, not as just another prophet, but as the long awaited return of the prophet Elijah. Even before John’s birth, the angel Gabriel in his annunciation to Zechariah links John to Elijah: “With the spirit of Elijah, he will go before him. . . preparing for the Lord a people fit for him.” (Lk. 1:17-18). John and Elijah are described almost identically: “This Man John wore a garment made of camel-hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” (Mt. 3:4). “He said, ‘This man who met you and said all this, what was he like?’ ‘A man wearing a hair cloak’ they answered ‘and a leather loincloth.’ ‘It was Elijah the Tishbite’ he said.” (2 Kgs. 1:4). Matthew records Christ on more than one occasion emphatically stating that John is the “Returned Elijah”: “Because it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and of the Law were leading: and he, if you will believe me, is the Elijah who was to return.” (Mt. 11:13-15).

So John is seen as a prophet, as a prophet very much in the stream of Old Testament prophets. John was a prophet who baptized with water and preached repentance. St. Mark gives us considerable information concerning the baptismal ritual of John. It is a baptism of repentance for sin: “and as they were baptized by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins.” (Mk. 1:5). It is John who is personally baptizing with water. It is a baptism that is seen in the context of John’s preaching. Mark reports that Christ had “come up out of the water,” indicating that total immersion was employed.

The pre-exilic prophets employed the theme of water in sketching the future restoration of Yahweh’s people: “Waste land, once desolate for every passer-by to see, will now be farmed again. Everyone will say: This land, so recently a waste, is now like a garden of Eden . . .” (Ez. 36:34). This same theme is repeated over and over again by Isaiah. “The poor and needy ask for water . . . I, Yahweh, will answer them . . . I will make rivers well up on barren heights, and fountains in the midst of valleys; turn the wilderness into a lake, and dry land into waterspring.” (Is. 36:17). For the prophets of Israel water was a scarce and priceless necessity and it figured largely in their description of the golden age. The messianic times will be characterized by a plentiful supply of water. John the Baptist fulfilled

these prophecies by using water, not to prepare earth for vegetative life, but to prepare mankind for eternal life.

John baptized in the Jordan. The Jordan River is symbolic of regeneration and purification: “. . . So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, as Elisha had told him to do. And his flesh became clean once more like the flesh of a little child.” (2 Kgs. 5:14). John clearly understood that his baptism with water was a preparation and introduction for another baptism: “I baptize you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Lk. 3:16).

### ***John's Doctrinal Background***

To probe further into John's role in the Advent Event and to arrive at a more complete knowledge of John the Baptist as an individual, we must ask ourselves the question of where did John get his doctrine. John was a Jew of the priestly class. Previous to the find of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Judean Desert, scholars attempted to place John within the background of main stream Judaism. And what has been said previously of John, for the most part, fits into this background perspective. John was a prophet who preached repentance in the context of an expectant messiah. These notions have precedents in the religious history of Judaism. But on the question of John baptizing—a baptism that was intimately linked with his message of repentance—this question cannot be reconciled with main stream Judaism.

John's use of a baptismal ritual and several other obscure scriptural passages have remained enigmatic for centuries. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scriptures and the archeological excavations on the site of Qumran have brought forth tantalizing evidence of a probable link between John the Baptist and the community at Qumran. A brief sketch of the historical roots of the Qumran community will render the analysis between John and Qumran more meaningful.

### ***The Hasidim Movement***

At the beginning of the second century before Christ, Palestine came under the rule of the Hellenistic monarchy of Syria, whose rulers resided at Antioch. Previous to this regime, the Jews had been under the yoke of Egypt for nearly two centuries. Religion-wise, the Jews had cordial relations with their Egyptian masters. Conditions took a turn for the worse when the Seleucids, the Syrian adversaries of the Egyptian kings, became masters of the land.

It was at this turbulent period of Judaic history that a group of pious Jews, called *hasidim*, formed a new faction within the Jewish Community. The Law of Moses was for them the expression of God's will; it was to be observed in every detail and as exactly as possible in a spirit of absolute submission to Yahweh. How serious this group was in the exact observance of the Mosaic Law can be seen in their refusal to bear arms to defend themselves on the sabbath. They preferred death rather than violate the Law. (cf. I Mac. 2:37). In fact, it was from the *hasidim* movement that the Maccabees received their most ardent support.

The *hasidim* movement was primarily a religious movement. The followers of this movement reacted to the Hellenistic influence on Judaism and the consequent watering-down of the Covenant between Yahweh and his chosen people. It was by no means well defined or centrally organized. In a short time, splinter groups began to appear.

One important group that came out of the *hasidim* movement were the Pharisees. Other groups that had their origins in this movement were the Essenes, the community of Qumran and the Therapeuts of Egypt. Philo, in his writings, mentions both the Essenes and the Therapeuts. The Essenes represented for him the active life, the Therapeuts represented the contemplative life. In addition to Philo, Josephus and Pliny the Elder have transmitted much information concerning the life of the Essenes:

Also not without noble offspring is Palestinian Syria, which is inhabited by no small part of the very populous race of the Jews. Some among them are called by the name of Essenes, exceeding in the number four thousand . . . the first point to mention is that these men dwell in villages . . . praising their meals in common and that quite extraordinary communal mode of life . . . they have avoided marriage.<sup>1</sup>

When the numerous scrolls were recently discovered at Qumran, the obvious question raised was whether an Essene establishment had been discovered. The Qumran Scrolls offered striking similarities to what is known of the Essenes. There is no textual evidence pointing to a positive link between the two groups. There is no doubt that both the Essenes and the Qumran Community had their sources in the *hasidim* movement, that they flourished during the same period and their writings are for the most part identical. That the Qumran Community was "one of the villages" described by Philo is a probable conjecture. Most scholars would agree with van der Ploeg, at least for putting them into the category of Essenes and a number of them use

the word Essene interchangeably with the community of Qumran.

The formation of groups which held themselves more or less aloof from the rest of the people was not unknown even in Old Testament times. The so-called "sons of the prophet" who appeared under Samuel and Saul, formed a well defined group which had its own way of life. The prophet Jeremiah described the Rechabites, an itinerant clan that drank no wine. (cf. Jer. 35). The priests and the levites also were groups within Judaism. At the time of Christ, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were well entrenched within the main stream of Judaism.

### **The Purpose of Qumran**

Although the Community at Qumran can be viewed as a combination of a return to the pristine Mosaic Law and a radical development of other doctrines, the fact that the men of Qumran were *Jews* is essential.

Their beliefs in general were consequently those of other Jews and were based on the sacred books of the Old Testament . . . What characterized them in this regard was their determination to carry out the prescriptions of the Law with the utmost fidelity and to spare no effort to ensure that they had mastered its meaning and did not even unconsciously violate any of its hidden implications.<sup>2</sup>

Their purpose for coming together is succinctly worded in the set of rules they drew up for themselves. This set of rules, popularly called the *Manual of Discipline*, gives the reason for amalgamation:

Everyone who wishes to join the community must pledge himself to respect God and man; to live according to the communal rule; to seek God . . . to do what is good and upright in His sight, in accordance with what He has commanded through Moses and through His servants the prophets; to love all that He has chosen and hate all that He has rejected; to keep far from all evil and to cling to all good works; to act truthfully and righteously and justly on earth and to walk no more in the stubbornness of a guilty heart and of lustful eyes, doing all manner of evil; to bring into a bond of mutual love all who have declared their willingness to carry out the Statutes of God . . .<sup>3</sup>

All the members took a solemn oath to return to the Law of Moses, manifesting not only the firm purpose to be faithful to it but also the conviction that such observance was not to be found outside the community. Consequently, the Community at Qumran set up the dichotomy between themselves and the rest of Judaism:

Thus far, the spirits of truth and perversity have been struggling in the heart of man. Men have walked both in wisdom and in folly. If a man casts his portion with truth, he does righteously and hates perversity; if he casts it with perversity, he does wickedly and abominates truth.<sup>4</sup>

This dichotomy set up between Qumran and the rest of Judaism was not one of mere physical separation. Qumran underwent radical doctrinal development in its theological reflections. Although there are many aspects to Qumran's Judaic theology, what is germane to this paper is the baptismal aspect found in their writings. Upon examining the Qumran texts, and especially their *Manual of Discipline*, one finds a very sophisticated view of baptism; almost identical to that of the baptism of John and strong similarities to Christian Baptism.

First of all, they had an elaborate rite of purification or baptism as an essential condition for initiation into the community:

Only by a spirit of uprightness and humility can his sin be atoned. Only by the submission of his soul to all the ordinances of God can his flesh be made clean. Only thus can it really be sprinkled with waters of ablution. Only thus can it really be sanctified by waters of purification. And only thus can he really direct his steps to walk blamelessly through all the vicissitudes of his destiny in all the ways of God in the manner which He has commanded, without turning either to the right or to the left and without overstepping any of God's words.<sup>5</sup>

Not only is the postulant to be baptized, but what is significant, is the theme of *metanoia* or repentance that is demanded before the baptism: For men cannot be purified except they repent their evil. God regards as impure all that transgress His word.<sup>6</sup>

### **John the Baptist and Qumran**

It has been historically certified that the monks of Qumran and John the Baptist were contemporaries. There are striking similarities in both their language and liturgical rite. Another significant link is the geographical proximity of the Qumran Community and the place near the Jordan where John baptized. The region in which John baptized was just before the Jordan empties out into the Dead Sea. The Qumran Community is situated a little less than two miles from John's location. St. Luke tells us "The word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zachary, in the desert." (Lk. 3:2). Textual evidence shows that the word "desert" is not a generic, descriptive noun, rather it is a proper noun: the name of a place:

It would seem that here the word "desert" designates a specific place for this is the very word used by the hermits of Qumran to designate the region where they dwelt. Here then, "desert" does not designate just any wild or desolate spot but a precise location which, as Pliny the Elder has noted (Hist. at. V, 17), was planted with palm trees and watered by springs.<sup>7</sup>

The four Evangelists employ the words of Isaias in describing John: "The voice of one crying in the desert . . ." The Community of Qumran likewise applied this text to themselves. "When such things come to pass in the community of Israel, the men of Israel should remove themselves from the society of wicked men in order to go into the Desert and there prepare the way."<sup>8</sup>

Even John's parents, Zachary and Elizabeth, offer additional links with the Qumran community. John came from a priestly family: "In the days of King Herod of Judea there lived a priest called Zechariah who belonged to the Abijah section of the priesthood, and he had a wife, Elizabeth by name, who was a descendant of Aaron." (Lk. 1:5). The monks of Qumran were also descendants of priests. They referred to themselves in their writings as the "Son of Zadok". This priestly character of the monks of Qumran and John would partially explain their hostile feelings with the Pharisees.

It is therefore quite probable that a contact was established between the family of John and the men of Qumran. It will be noted that the *Benedictus*, the hymn sung by Zachary at the birth of his son, being in conformity with the Essenian custom of composing hymns, also contains characteristic expression of the Qumran schools . . .<sup>9</sup>

The contact of John with the Qumran community explains several passages of the scriptures which were somewhat unintelligible previous to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. "Meanwhile the child grew up and his spirit matured. And he lived out in the wilderness until the day he appeared openly to Israel." (Lk. 1:80). For a child to live out in the wilderness alone would not make much sense unless the wilderness is none other than the region occupied by the Qumran Community. Brownlee, basing his evidence on the archeological excavations at Qumran, notes that the monks of Qumran more than likely ran a boarding school for young boys.

The Evangelists also described John as subsisting on locust and wild honey (Mt. 3:4), refraining from wine and being a celibate throughout his life. All three of these features are to be found in the ascetical life of the Qumran Community. Danielou sums up his research on

John the Baptist and the Qumran Community with the following observation: "It is possible that he may have been an Essene. But it is more probable that he was only deeply influenced by Essenism."<sup>10</sup>

Even if we chose Danielou's more probable conclusion that John was only deeply influenced by Essenism (Qumran), we would have to put Qumran very much in the context of the Advent Event. For just as the Advent Event, looking forward, includes the entire Paschal Mystery, so, looking backwards, the Advent Event encompasses John the Baptist and the Qumran Community.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> van der Ploeg, *The Excavations at Qumran* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958) pp. 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond Sutcliffe, *The Monks of Qumran* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1960) p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1964) M (Manual of Discipline) 1:1-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, M 4: 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, M 3: 1-12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, M 5: 12.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Danielou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity* (New York: New American Library, 1962) p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.