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THE BAPTISM OF JOHN AND THE QUMRAN SECT

by

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SO many writers have voiced the suggestion that it was from the Qumran sect that John the Baptist derived the rite of baptism that some examination of the question seems to be called for.¹ Few writers define what they mean by baptism, and many are content with the merest shadow of evidence, with the result that much confusion has been allowed to surround the question. The argument appears to run somewhat as follows:

(1) There are cisterns for the storage of water at Qumran, with steps running down into them; therefore these 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 antedated the baptism of John. (4) John lived in the desert in the neighbourhood of Qumran; therefore he could have derived his practice from the sect, and therefore he did. (5) Josephus tells us that some of the Essenes adopted children;² therefore John could have been adopted, and therefore he was.

So far as the first of these arguments is concerned, it is as fatuous as it would be to argue that in every modern house which has a bathroom 'baptism' is practised. So far as the second is concerned, it rests on a similar equation of 'ablutions' with 'baptism', which requires to be established. So far as the third is concerned, it is not universally agreed, but the present writer does agree, though this does not mean that the one is the source of the other. So far as the fourth is concerned, it is wholly without cogency, since it tacitly equates the baptism of John with the ablutions of Qumran, when such evidence as we have suggests that they were totally different in subjects and significance. So far as the fifth is concerned, it is

entirely without cogency. If conjecture were evidence, any theory could claim to be established.

As for the cisterns of Qumran, it has to be remembered that the large community which had its centre there must have required a good deal of water, and may be presumed to have stored water for various purposes. The steps down into the cisterns do not necessarily prove that they were used for the immersion of the person, though they would be quite consistent with this. Neither the cisterns nor the steps can give us any evidence as to the occasion or occasions when such immersions may have taken place, or who the persons were who were so immersed, or what significance was attached to the immersion. These are the vital questions when we are discussing baptism.

When we turn to the texts of the Qumran community, we find no clear reference to anything comparable with what the word 'baptism' signifies to us. In the *Manual of Discipline*, in the rules for the admission of new members, it is laid down that a candidate is to be examined first by the Inspector, or Superintendent, and, if he is satisfied, is to be instructed as to the rules of the community. Then, after an unspecified period, his case is considered by the members of the sect in a general meeting. If they vote his admission he enters on a further probationary period of two years. Not until the first of those two years has passed is he allowed to share the 'purity' of the community.³ This is the only possible reference to 'baptism' as an initiatory rite in the *Manual of Discipline*, and it is not agreed as to what it means. Lieberman maintains that the reference is to the solid foodstuffs of the community.⁴ This is because we are told below that after a further year's probation, the candidate is admitted to the 'drink' of the community. But the word rendered 'drink' is commonly used for a 'feast', and hence others think the meaning is that at the end of the second stage of his probation the candidate enters the waters of purification, and at the end of the third stage he is admitted to the meals of the sect.⁵ This latter view seems to the present writer more probable.

This, however, brings us at once to the vexed question of the relation of the sect of the Scrolls to the Essenes, as described by Philo, Josephus, and Pliny, all writers of the first Christian century. That question cannot be examined here, but to the present writer it seems likely that the sect of the Scrolls is to be identified with

the sect of the Essenes, but with the recognition that in the Scrolls we see them at an earlier stage of their history than in the first century writers, and that therefore their practice was not in all points the same in the two periods. So far as the admission of new members is concerned, there is a large measure of agreement between the *Manual of Discipline* and the account of Josephus. For Josephus tells us that after a first year of probation a candidate was allowed to share 'the purer kind of holy water', but that he could not touch 'the common food' for a further period.⁶ This would clearly suggest that the 'purity' of the *Manual of Discipline* is the purifying water, while the 'drink' is the communal meal of the sect.

Before we leap to equate this with an initiatory rite of baptism, however, we have to observe that Josephus tells us that the Essenes daily bathed their bodies in cold water before their midday meal, and even implies that they did the same again in the evening before their evening meal.⁷ Here we are reminded of the various ritual ablutions laid down in the Pentateuch for states of ceremonial uncleanness, arising from a whole series of voluntary or involuntary experiences. The Essenes appear to have gone far beyond the requirements of the Pentateuch in their determination to maintain complete ritual purity. Indeed, Josephus says that if a senior in the sect were so much as touched by a junior he had to take a bath, as though he had been in contact with an alien.⁸ But this cannot be thought of as 'baptism', and it is a confusing of the whole issue to use this word in this connection. What Josephus tells us of the Essenes is more naturally understood to mean that a candidate for membership was not allowed to share in the daily ritual bath in the water used by the members of the sect until after he had passed through a year of probation. Since he was given a loincloth at the beginning of this year,⁹ and since we are told by Josephus elsewhere that the loincloth was used in the bath,¹⁰ it would seem that the probationer was expected to bathe—probably daily—but he was not allowed to do this in 'the purer kind of water', which was the water reserved for the members of the sect.

In the *Zadokite Work*, which comes, by almost universal agreement, from the same sect as the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is a reference to ritual ablutions. Here it is said that the members of the sect are not to bathe in dirty water, or in a vessel or shallow pool, and that if an unclean person touches the water it thereby becomes un-

clean.¹¹ It is to be noted that bathing in a vessel is here forbidden. This does not rule out the possibility that the cisterns of Qumran were used for ablutions, however. For it is likely that the *Zadokite Work* reflects a stage in the history of the sect before the Qumran centre was used.¹² Once they lived together in communal settlements, where the water in such cisterns as those of Qumran could be preserved from all contact with unclean persons, the reason for objection to ablution in a vessel would vanish. More germane to our immediate purpose is it to suggest that the 'unclean person' of the *Zadokite Work* in the passage mentioned is probably anyone who was not a full member of the sect. There is nothing, however, to suggest that an initiatory rite was intended, and the passage is more naturally read in association with the provision for daily ablutions discussed above.

There are certain other passages in the *Manual of Discipline* that need to be considered. There is provision for an annual review of all the members, when some may be advanced to a higher position in the order of seniority of the sect, and others relegated to a lower position.¹³ Here it is laid down that those who have failed to accept the discipline of the community and to conform their conduct to the high standard set before them may be excluded from the sect.¹⁴ For them no atoning offerings or cleansing waters can have any validity. Only they of humble and upright spirit, who submit their life to the statutes of God can be cleansed by being sprinkled with the purifying water.¹⁵ It is hard to suppose that here there can be any reference to an initiatory rite of baptism, since the passage is dealing with those who have already passed into full membership of the sect, whose life and conduct are under review. The reference to sprinkling makes it doubtful whether this passage has any relevance to the question of ritual immersion at all. What does emerge here is the recognition that the ritual act is meaningless without the spirit to validate it.

Elsewhere in the *Manual* it is said that if a member of the sect should waver in his loyalty and then repent, he is to be punished for two years, during the first of which he is to be excluded from the 'purity' of the sect, and during the second from the 'drink'.¹⁶ Here, as in the passage already examined, it is likely that the meaning is that for two years he shall be excluded from the common meals of the members, and for the first of these years he shall be forbidden to share in the daily lustrations. The reference could not

possibly be to an initiatory rite here, since the passage deals with one who has attained full membership of the sect and is subject to discipline.

In the Scrolls, therefore, there is no certain reference to an initiatory rite corresponding to what we mean by baptism. There is the passage just mentioned, where 'purity' *cannot* have this meaning, and this would seem to strengthen the likelihood that in the other passage, dealing with the admission of new members, it does not have this meaning, and that what is stated is simply that during the first stage of probation a candidate does not share the regular ritual ablutions of the members. There is nothing inconsistent with this in the passage in the *Zadokite Work*, and this is the most natural interpretation of the account given by Josephus.

Yet, having said this, the present writer is willing to concede the likelihood that for the new member his first admission to the ablutions of the sect in the water reserved for the members would have a special character. It would still not be comparable with what we mean by baptism, which is an unrepeatable rite of admission, but it would have a special character as the first of a series of ablutions, to which he was admitted only after solemn inquiry and examination. Moreover, there is not the slightest evidence that it differed in form from the ablutions that would follow. It was not, therefore, an administered rite, but a bath.

It is clear already that the link with the baptism of John is tenuous in the extreme. For the baptism of John was a rite of initiation and only a rite of initiation. In the case of the sect of the Scrolls or the Essenes an initiatory rite is not recorded, and can at best be an assumption. In the case of John an initiatory rite rests on evidence, and subsequent ritual ablutions are not recorded, and if they were would be entirely different in character. For the baptism of John was not the first of a series, but an unrepeatable rite of commitment. Moreover, it was an administered rite. Whether John plunged the person beneath the water, or whether he plunged himself is of no moment. It was clearly more than a private act, since the New Testament tells us so clearly that John baptized,¹⁷ or that Jesus was 'baptized by John'.¹⁸

Moreover, the baptism of John was administered to persons under completely different conditions from any possible 'baptism' of the sect of the Scrolls. Even if we could rightly speak of 'baptism' in that sect, it could only be the baptism of those who had

been probationers for a year, and who had been voted on by the members of the sect after a careful discussion in a meeting of the members. There is not the slightest evidence that the people John baptized had passed through a long period of probation, or that John had submitted to anyone the question whether they should be baptized or not, or that their baptism signified admission to a monastic community.

If it is proper to speak of 'baptism' amongst the sect of the Scrolls at all, it was a private rite. There is no reason to suppose that the daily ablutions were performed in public, and certainly if they were performed in the cisterns at Qumran they were not performed in public. Since at the most the 'baptism' of the members was the first of their regular ablutions, there is no reason to suppose that this was performed in public. For there is no reason whatever to suppose that on the occasion when a new member was joining them in their ablutions for the first time they all repaired to a public place. The care that had to be taken to ensure that the water was not touched by one who was 'unclean'—i.e. by a non-member of the sect, most probably—confirms the likelihood that for the sect nothing but a private rite was in mind. But in the case of John, baptism was a public rite. Crowds came out to see him baptize, and judging by the stinging things he is said to have addressed to these crowds,¹⁹ they did not all come to be baptized. Nothing could stand in sharper contrast to any water rite of the sect of the Scrolls or the Essenes of which we have any evidence, or which we can legitimately infer, than the accounts of John's baptism which we read in the New Testament. The only feature it has in common with any ablutions of the sect is that it involved total immersion in water. But this feature is in no way peculiar to John's baptism and the ablutions of the sect. The ritual ablutions of the Jews on occasions of ceremonial uncleanness were also by total immersion. In short, there is not a single feature of John's baptism for which there is the slightest reason to go to Qumran to look for the source, and for every feature but one Qumran could not possibly provide the source, while for that one the common practice of the Jews could provide the more natural source.

It has to be remembered that about the beginning of the Christian era there were various groups of people who practised lustrations far beyond those required by the Law. About the middle of

the first century A.D. Josephus was for a time the disciple of one Banus,²⁰ who lived an ascetic life and who bathed in cold water several times a day. Josephus makes it clear that Banus was not an Essene, and it is also clear that he had disciples. Whether Banus himself had predecessors in this practice, or whether he was the originator of a movement which died with him, cannot be known.

Epiphanius²¹ and the author of the *Apostolic Constitutions*²² tell us of a sect of Hemerobaptists, who practised daily lustrations, and in the Pseudo-Clementines John is said to have been a Hemerobaptist.²³ These Hemerobaptists would appear to be more akin to the Essenes than to John the Baptist, for they are said to have bathed daily before food, and to have purified with water their table utensils and even their seats.²⁴ Their baptism would not appear to have been the symbol of death to the age that was passing and rebirth to the new age, as John's baptism was, and this alone renders it improbable that he was a Hemerobaptist. In their case we have no record of baptism as a rite of initiation, but only of ablutions of those who belonged to the sect; in his we have no record of ablutions after the rite of initiation, but only of this. Neither in subjects nor in significance, therefore, is there anything in common between the two.

Other groups who practised water lustrations have left some trace, and it would appear that it was a common idea about the beginning of the Christian era that frequent washing was of the essence of godliness.²⁵ It may well be that it was from the Essenes that this idea spread, since they seem to be the earliest of the groups that practised lustrations far beyond the requirements of the Law. Josephus tells us that the Essenes attached a value to their lustrations above that of animal sacrifices.²⁶ This distinguishes them at once from the Pharisees, who with all their insistence on ritual cleanliness were far from going to such a point.

Granting, then, that the Essenes or the sect of the Scrolls, assuming that a historical line of development links these two, were the first to extend the lustrations so largely, and that it was probably from them that the other groups derived the idea, though they may each have given some special turn to their practice, we must allow for the possibility that the idea spread from one group to another and not that all derived it directly and immediately from the Essenes. Hence, even if the baptism of John had more of a common character with that of the sect of the Scrolls we should

not be justified in concluding that it must have been derived directly from them. But when his baptism is so different in its subjects and in its significance, different too in being a publicly administered rite as against a private practice, there can be no case for the assumption that he must have derived it from them, or even that he *could* have derived it from them. The sect of the Scrolls cannot be supposed to have supplied John with a rite which they did not practise themselves. For it must be repeated that from no source whatever have we any evidence, or even suggestion, that the sect of the Scrolls or the Essenes had any special rite of initiation by immersion in water.

Some elements of the rite of John seem to be closer to Jewish proselyte baptism than to anything which is recorded of the sect of the Scrolls or the Essenes. For Jewish proselyte baptism was a lustration like the ordinary ritual lustrations of the Jews in form, save that it was an administered rite, but unlike the other lustrations in that it was a rite of initiation and therefore not a rite to be repeated. Our information about the character of the rite of proselyte baptism is all post-Christian, and it was formerly believed that the rite itself was of post-Christian origin.²⁷ It is now widely agreed that it was probably of pre-Christian origin,²⁸ though the evidence for this is not strong enough to amount to a demonstration.²⁹ There is evidence which establishes with reasonable assurance that it antedated the destruction of the Temple,³⁰ and it is unlikely that Judaism first established this rite during the early days of the Church, and borrowed it from a body to which it was so strongly opposed.³¹ It is plain from the New Testament that there were large numbers of proselytes to Judaism wherever Jews were to be found, and it is much more likely that proselyte baptism came into being to meet the situation created by these proselytes, than that it was hastily borrowed by the Jews, either from John or from the Church.

Proselyte baptism was in its essence a rite of initiation. It symbolized a man's death to his old life and faith, and rebirth into the faith of Judaism. From now on he would be expected to practice all the lustrations of the Law when he incurred ceremonial uncleanness for any cause. But he would not be expected to undergo proselyte baptism again.³² It was certainly not something he would have to repeat daily. It was therefore unlike the lustrations of the sect of the Scrolls or of the Essenes, but like the baptism of John

in this respect. For proselyte baptism was more than a lustration.

Our later sources tell us that proselyte baptism was an administered rite. This does not mean that the candidate was plunged beneath the water by another. It is probable that the actual immersion was his own act. But it was an administered rite in the sense that it was witnessed, and in that an essential part of it was the assurance that the candidate understood the significance of what he was doing. The witnesses warned him of the meaning of his act, and made sure that his motives were pure, and while he was in the act of immersion they repeated to him passages from the law of his new faith.³³ While all this is found only in post-Christian sources, there is no reason to doubt that in essence they go back to an earlier time. For from the time that Judaism made baptism one of the requirements of the candidate for admission to its faith, it must have asked for some evidence that the requirement had been met. And this could only be ensured by a witnessed rite. It is antecedently likely, therefore, that the witnesses would be given some responsibility in the matter, and that this could best be met by requiring them to satisfy themselves in some way that the candidate understood the significance of what he was doing. For Judaism was not interested in empty rites alone, and it is unlikely that at any time it was content with evidence that a man had immersed himself, without asking for assurances that with this immersion there went a complete renunciation of his old life and a commitment of himself to the way of the Law. In the ordinary lustrations, which dealt with ceremonial uncleanness, often involuntarily and necessarily incurred, no moral issues were involved. But proselyte baptism had a moral and spiritual significance, and was concerned with more than technical uncleanness. In such cases Judaism always demanded that the spirit should match the act.

Here is something far closer to the baptism of John than anything we can find in any of the sects that practised frequent ablutions in the first century of our era. At the same time it is something quite different from John's baptism. Proselyte baptism was something required of a non-Jew when he was converted to Judaism, but not of one who was born into a Jewish home. John's baptism was demanded of Jew and non-Jew who accepted his message. His baptism was not coupled with the demand for circumcision and a sacrifice in the Temple, as proselyte baptism was,

but appears to have been the sole rite in which he was interested. It symbolized not so much death to the old life and rebirth to a new, as death to the age that was passing, and birth into the new age that was on the point of dawning. It was not so much the rite of admission to an organization as a preparation for a kingdom which was soon to be established by divine initiative in the world. Unlike proselyte baptism it was administered in public, and it was the response to a vigorous summons to men to forsake the world that was passing. There was a prophetic quality about John that is not associated with proselyte baptism, and that was certainly not characteristic of the sect of Qumran or the Essenes. Hence, if the baptism of John had features in common with proselyte baptism, it cannot for a moment be equated with it. The form of the rite John may have taken over, but he transformed its administration and still more its significance, as he also transformed its subjects. The fundamental originality of his baptism is not affected by the recognition that its background was probably proselyte baptism.

Still less can the originality of John's baptism be affected by anything that has come to light in the Dead Sea Scrolls or by anything we learn about the Essenes from the first century writers. The sole feature it had in common with their 'baptism' was that it involved the immersion of the body, but this feature it had in common also with the ordinary Jewish lustrations, with Jewish proselyte baptism, and with the lustrations of the other Jewish groups of which we have knowledge. In being solely a rite of initiation, publicly administered on the responsibility of John alone, and apparently without any long period of probation, it differed *toto coelo* from any rite that can reasonably be presumed to have been practised by the Essenes and certainly from any of which we have the slightest evidence. There is no evidence that the baptism of John entailed the entry into a monastic sect, as the assumed 'baptism' of the sect of the Scrolls did. When John called on soldiers to be baptized, he could scarcely have meant that they should spend one night in three studying the Scriptures, or that they should enter into a communal organization and take their meals daily with a religious brotherhood, as the members of the sect of the Scrolls or the Essenes did. There is, indeed, no shadow of evidence that the sect had any rite even remotely comparable with John's baptism, and the whole structure is built on an assumed, but nowhere recorded, initiatory rite that must have been entirely

different in character from the recorded rites if it had provided John with any relevant precedent. Such an assumption is not evidence in favour of what is assumed, and until the discussion of the Scrolls is more rigidly controlled by evidence we are not likely to reach secure conclusions. All that we can justifiably say is that the sect of the Scrolls almost certainly existed in pre-Christian days, and that like other Jews they practised ablutions, but more frequently than the Law demanded. These ablutions may have taken place in the cisterns of Khirbet Qumran. John the Baptist may well have known something about the sect, but there is no evidence that he ever belonged to them. If he did, he must have left them and would have been repudiated by them, since his baptism was utterly unlike their lustrations in publicity, in subjects, and in significance. His baptism had far more in common with Jewish proselyte baptism. Yet in all that is most characteristic of John's baptism complete independence of both proselyte baptism and Essene baptism is to be recognized.

NOTES

¹ Cf. e.g., W. H. Brownlee, *Interpretation*, 9 (1955), 71 ff., reprinted in revised form in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. by K. Stendahl), 1957, 33 ff. (p. 52: 'It was John the Essene who proclaimed the coming Messianic Age in the wilderness'); J. M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1956), 163 ff. (p. 164: 'It does appear, however, that John belonged to the Essene movement'); C. T. Fritsch, *The Qumrān Community* (1956), 112 ff. (p. 112: 'There is little doubt that John the Baptist was a key figure through whom many of the practices and teachings of the Qumrān sect found their way into early Christianity'); A. Powell Davies, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1957), 142 f. (p. 142: 'That John was, in the broader sense of the term, an Essene can scarcely be doubted').

² BJ II, viii, 2 (ii, 120).

³ *Manual* vi, 13 ff.

⁴ Cf. JBL 71 (1952), 203.

⁵ So, e.g., T. H. Gaster, *The Scriptures of the Dead Sea Sect* (1957), 60 f. and 107 notes 58, 60.

⁶ BJ II, viii, 7 (ii, 137 ff.).

⁷ BJ II, viii, 5 (ii, 129 ff.).

⁸ BJ II, viii, 10 (ii, 150).

⁹ BJ II, viii, 7 (ii, 137).

¹⁰ BJ II, viii, 13 (ii, 161).

¹¹ *Zadokite Work*, x, 10 ff.

¹² Cf. the present writer's essay 'Some Traces of the History of the Qumran Sect', in TZ, 13 (1957), 530-40.

¹³ *Manual*, ii, 19 ff.

¹⁴ *Manual*, ii, 25 ff.

¹⁵ *Manual*, iii, 4 ff.

¹⁶ *Manual*, vii, 18 ff.

¹⁷ John 1:25 f.

¹⁸ Mark 1:9, Matt. 3:13.

¹⁹ Luke 3:7 ff.

²⁰ *Vita*, 2 (11).

²¹ *Panarion*, xvii (ed. Holl, i (C Ber xxv), 1915, 214).

²² *Const. Apost.* vi, 6 (Migne, PG i, 1857, 917 ff.).

²³ *Hom.* ii, 23 (Migne, PG ii, 1886, 92).

²⁴ *Const. Apost.*, loc. cit.

²⁵ For an account of these various sects cf. J. Thomas, *Le Mouvement Baptiste en Palestine et Syrie* (150 av. J.-C.-300 ap. J.-C.), 1935.

²⁶ *Ant.* XVIII, i, 5 (xviii, 18 ff.).

²⁷ Cf. M. Schneckenburger, *Über das Alter der Jüdischen Proselyten-Taufe und deren Zusammenhang mit dem Johanneischen und christlichen Ritus*, 1828.

²⁸ Cf. M. Dods, in DCG (ed. by J. Hastings), i (1906), 169a; W. Brandt, *Die jüdischen Baptismen* (1910), 58 f.; W. Heitmüller, in RGG¹, v (1913), 1088; E. Stauffer, RGG² v (1931), 1003; J. Coppens, in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* (ed. by L. Pirot), i (1928), 893.

²⁹ The present writer discusses this question in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 15 (1940), 313 ff.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 316 ff.

³¹ Cf. A. Calmet, *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*, vii (1726), 288: 'Quelques-uns ont crû que les Juifs avoient imité cette cérémonie des Païens ... ou des Chrétiens ... Mais et les Païens et les Chrétiens étoient trop odieux aux Juifs, pour croire que ceux-ci ayent voulu les imiter en cela.'

³² Marcel Simon would equate proselyte baptism with the ordinary ablutions of the Jew more closely than does the present writer. He says: 'Il est identique aux ablutions lévitiqes dans sa forme, rite d'immersion, et aussi dans ses effets; il élimine cette impureté rituelle qui, accidentelle chez un Juif, est chez un *goy* congénitale. La pureté qu' il confère aux prosélytes ne leur est pas acquise une fois pour toutes. Il ne les dispense pas de recourir par la suite aux ablutions usuelles' (*Verus Israel* (1948), 333). It is, however, to be noted that witnesses were essential to proselyte baptism, but not to ordinary lustrations. The special character of the former did not lie merely in the fact that it was the first lustration, and it had a specifically initiatory character which belonged to no other.

³³ BT, Yebamoth, 47 ab.