

tists in German "Sheibchen-Schneider". This "Scheibchen-Schneiderei" is the extremely modern knowledge, the "Wicked Priest" in question... It's a pity...

3. Other scientists say - and this is right: The most brutal ruler in Judaea at that time was Alexander Jannai. Therefore: Alexander Jannai must be the "Wicked Priest"! But this argumentation is wrong. The scientists have forgotten the internal policy in the state. The Maccabean Jonatan and Simon were friends of the Pharisees. The chief of the state and the religious-political association unanimously oppressed the Essene sect. It was a hard situation for the "elected of God". But Hyrcan I, the disciple and friend of the Pharisees broke with his former friends, went over to the Sadducees and persecuted the Pharisees. At this moment the Essene sect was freed from the double oppression, from the oppression of the chief of the state and the oppression of the "secte rivale", the Pharisees. The Essenes lived in fully freedom. And in the times of Alexander Jannai the internal and external situation of the Essene sect was the same. Jannai crucified 800 Pharisees. The men of Qumran even defended this brutal action of this brutal highpriest-king in the Temple Scroll (11QT) - perhaps in the Nahum peshet, too. The reign of Alexander Jannai was the high-time in the history of the Essenes. Many many coins of this king have been found in the Qumran area, and the settlement was mightly expanded. It's clear. Jannai was of course not a special friend of the Essene sect. But he was not the "Wicked Priest"! The "Wicked Priest" was Jonatan the Maccabee!

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REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S COMMUNITIES

One of the central questions concerning the relationship between John the Baptist and the Dead Sea Scrolls is whether John was an Essene or had been influenced by the Essenes - and we assume in this context that Essene and Qumran are not mutually exclusive entities.

This moot question is significant both for our knowledge of early Christianity, and the development and message of John the Baptist himself. There are clear and striking similarities, e.g., concerning the baptism especially, but also concerning the message: the baptism of John is a βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, "a baptism in token of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4; NEB, Oxford, 1970).

Anyone familiar with, e.g., IQS (Serekh ha-Yahad), has observed the close similarities between John and Qumran concerning baptismal rites and repentance. The obvious question arising from this evidence is, "Was John an Essene?" The answers usually given are:

- (1) John was an Essene and remained an Essene, or
- (2) John had at one time been an Essene but later left Qumran, viz. the Essene community.

Since all arguments concerning the two theses have been presented elsewhere we will consider them here only briefly.

Ad (1): John was an Essene and remained an Essene. This presupposes that John lived at Qumran but travelled to the Jordan for his preaching and baptizing and, even more important, that he was preaching Qumran doctrines! But are the Qumran doctrines compatible with John's preaching as we know it from the New Testament and Josephus? While those concerning baptism and repentance perhaps have much in common, a glance at the entire set of Qumran doctrines shows that, on the whole, they are not compatible with John's preaching, as in, e.g., John's general call to repentance.

Ad (2): The alternative appears more plausible: John had at one time been an Essene but he left the Essene community.

With the help of this theory we could easily explain the difference between John's message as it is preserved in the Gospels, and that extracted from the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But here we must be cautious: How and from where do we know that John had ever been an Essene? The evidence from Lk. 1:80 is really not sufficient. Nonetheless, the allure of this proposed solution has led to hypothesis built upon hypothesis.

I think we should find a new way to approach the question. I would like to propose a route that does not start at the beginning, but which leads back to the beginning from the end, and from "outside" to "inside". We will examine first the later witnesses to John the Baptist and then follow the trail back to the earlier ones. We seek to answer a single question: Can we discern in the later picture - and moving from there to the earlier - anything historical about John the Baptist and the movement that began with his preaching?

I. A BAPTISMAL TEXT IN BOOK 4 OF THE SYBILLINE ORACLES

Because of Rome's outrages against the Jews during the first Jewish War, 4Sib announces a great destruction by fire in Italy. There is only one possibility of escape (4Sib 161-169):

Ah, wretched mortals, change these things, and do not lead the great God to all sorts of anger, but abandon daggers and groanings, murders and outrages, and wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers. Stretch out your hands to heaven and ask forgiveness for your previous deeds and make propitiation for bitter impiety with words of praise; God will grant repentance and will not destroy. He will stop his wrath again if you all practice honorable piety in your hearts. (Trans., J.J. Collins [in:] The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, ed. J.H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), I:388).

We can date this text with accuracy to ca. 80 since it connects the destruction by fire to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 in which the visionary saw a model for the imminent ekpyrosis. The connection of baptism, forgiveness of sins, atonement and praise in the quoted text is surprising. This is very near to what 1QS 3:1ff and other texts tell us about the daily ablutions in the Qumran community. But one difference stands out sharply: 4Sib speaks of a single act. A comparison of this text - coming presumably from Rome - with John the Baptist's preaching of a βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (Mk. 1:4), as represented in the Gospels, presents the following striking similarities:

- (1) baptism in running water,
- (2) the uniqueness and saving significance of the baptism in view of the coming judgment,

(3) repentance as a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the baptism,

(4) the imminent judgment as a universal judgment of fire.

We will now examine other indications of Baptist communities in Rome.

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN JOSEPHUS

The Antiquities was written in the time of the emperor Domitian in Rome. In Ant 18:116-119 we find the well-known text on John the Baptist. Most striking is that, in Josephus, as in the New Testament, he bears the cognomen ὀβρισιότης (116), which surely indicates that even within a religious milieu containing many ritual washings, John's baptizing was regarded as something out of the ordinary. But it is important to realize that, according to Josephus, the baptism practiced by John was not for the forgiveness of sins but for the cleansing of the body since the soul had already been purified by righteous acts:

They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour (Trans., L.H. Feldman [in:] Josephus, Jewish Antiquities XVIII, 117, Loeb Classical Library (London: Wm. Heinemann Ltd., 1969)).

This differs enormously from what we know from the New Testament. In Josephus John is portrayed not as a preacher in the desert in all the strangeness with which the New Testament surrounds him, but as a "good man", an ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος preaching virtue and a baptism of repentance, whom Herod, fearing a revolution by the masses, murdered. If we compare what we know from the New Testament about the veneration of John the Baptist whose disciples assigned messianic titles to him, then the ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος has a polemical accent: He is here no more than a preacher of virtue issuing the call to repentance. The text then is likely a polemic against a group in Rome toward the end of the 1st century whose doctrines, represented in 4Sib 161-169, had close affinities with John the Baptist.

This means that in Rome and spreading outward from Rome there was a view of John the Baptist differing from the Christian Tradition in the New Testament. Later evidence (2nd and 3rd century) shows that there had been adherents to John's doctrine in Rome. This may seem surprising, but we already have in the New Testament itself mention of a "diaspora" of John's disciples - in Ephesus.

III. THE DISCIPLES OF JOHN IN EPHESUS

In Acts 19:1-7 Paul meets "about" 12 disciples (μαθηταί) in Ephesus. He asks them, "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" (Trans.,

NEB passim). Their answer is very strange: "No ... we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit". Asked into which baptism they were baptized, they say, "John's baptism" (εἰς τὸ Ἰωάννου βάπτισμα). Paul replies, "The baptism that John gave was a baptism in token of repentance, and he told the people to put their trust in one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus". They are baptized immediately "into the name of the Lord Jesus (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ)" and receive the Holy Spirit.

The mention of these enigmatic disciples of John, who became Christians through a new baptism, shows us that there existed in Asia Minor in Ephesus a community of disciples of John the Baptist, either in the time of Paul or at the time of the writing of Acts. The diaspora of John's communities is further confirmed by the Gospel of John which also comes from Asia Minor and from approximately the same time as Acts.

IV. JOHN THE BAPTIST AND HIS COMMUNITY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

In no other book of the New Testament is the polemic against John the Baptist sharper than in John's Gospel. John must say of himself in 1:20, "I am not the Messiah". Neither is he Elijah nor the Prophet (like Moses); he is not the Light, but a witness to the Light; he must decrease, while the other, Jesus, must increase (John 3:30).

All this reflects a vivid competition and struggle between the Christian community and the community of John the Baptist. We learn that the community of John's disciples revered their teacher as Messiah or Elijah, while the Gospel of John expressly denies these claims.

V. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

When we come to the earlier Gospels the tone is less polemical. It belongs to the best historical traditions we have in early Christianity that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and he must have belonged for some time to this followers, the disciples of John. According to the synoptic Gospels Jesus began his preaching at the time of John's imprisonment. Jesus continued the preaching of John without perhaps the baptism (but cf. John 3:26 and 4:2). Historically it is quite possible that there had been an overlapping period in which they were preaching at the same time.

The Gospels clearly show that the disciples of John remained together as a group even after the imprisonment and execution of their teacher. They revered

him in a similar way and with similar titles as did the disciples of Jesus their own Master after the resurrection. Christian tradition contested the messianic view of John held among his followers. John is therefore subordinated to Jesus, but still called Elijah (Mt. 11:10), Prophet (John 1:25), Messiah (John 1:25; Lk. 3:15) in his communities. The Gospels of Luke and John address this "Christology" and contest it. In Matthew the tone is not nearly so polemical, and in Q Jesus gives John the highest praise "among those born of women" (Mt. 11:11, par).

This is the reverse of what one would expect: the polemic increases in the later gospels. The communities of John the Baptist reached their greatest importance and expansion at the end of the 1st century. They experienced a "christological" development parallel to that in the Jesus communities. It was necessary for the Christian communities to meet this challenge. We see here an example of two minorities, closely related to each other, and which therefore vied vigorously with one another for preeminence in the proclamation of the true Messiah. The location of this polemic was not only the Jordan valley, but, as we have seen, where other communities of John existed, presumably in Rome, and with certainty in Asia Minor.

My reflections on the history of John the Baptist and his communities began with the question whether John was an Essene (and his disciples therefore Essenes). In this paper I have tried to show that the history of the communities of John can only be understood in relationship to the early Christian communities. Concurrent with the veneration of Jesus by Christians, was the veneration of John by his followers. They assigned "messianic" titles to him intended to place him beside Jesus. Early Christian theology therefore sought a subordination of John, and thereby of his communities, of which we still have traces in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The theology of the communities of John the Baptist was not Essene, but developed from its Jewish, "pseudo-Christian" origins¹.

¹ A more detailed treatment of Sections I-V of this paper with notes and literature can be found in H. Lichtenberger, Täufergemeinden und frühchristliche Täuferpolemik im letzten Drittel des 1. Jahrhunderts, Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 84 (1987), pp. 36-57. I am grateful to my co-worker, Mr. Paul Cathey, for his improvement of the English in the summary presented here.