

## ***What Was John the Baptist Doing?***

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*The activity of John the Baptist continues to be a focus of lively, revisionary discussion. Some scholars have questioned the Synoptic accounts of the Jordan as a locale for mass purificatory rites on grounds of practicality, and have sought to identify places named in the Fourth Gospel with sites in Samaria and springs east of the Jordan as more suitable locations. Others have wondered whether the accounts of John's activity have any precedents at all in Jewish purificatory rites. This paper acknowledges difficulties in making the accounts of John's baptism in the Jordan fit the profile of traditional purificatory rites. At the same time it draws attention to problems in trying to assimilate John's baptism to such rites. A counter-proposal is offered which suggests that the key to understanding John's baptism lies in seeing the Jordan as the boundary and point of entry into the land promised by Yahweh to Israel. John was calling for a morally purified Israel that was fit to dwell in the holy land. In emulation of the original entry depicted in the Book of Joshua, John's baptism called on Israelites to exit the land, and return across the Jordan under the leadership of John in order to repossess the land as a consecrated people. The crossing of the Jordan holds the key to what John was doing.*

*Key Words: baptism, John the Baptist, Jordan, purificatory rites*

A long tradition of Christian art depicts John the Baptist standing waist-deep in the clear waters of the Jordan pouring water over the heads of converts (or perhaps immersing them), watched by crowds of onlookers. However, no such scene can be found in the Gospels, or in Josephus for that matter. Nothing is said about *how* John baptized. A little reflection indicates that such a scene is a pious fiction

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unconsciously modelled on centuries of Christian practice.<sup>1</sup> What was John the Baptist doing?

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<sup>1</sup> On the issue of neither "Christianizing" nor "degrading" John see the recent discussion from a reader-oriented perspective by Hubert Frankemölle, "Johannes der Täufer und Jesus im Matthäusevangelium: Jesus als Nachfolger des Täufers," *NTS* 42 (1996) 196-218.

## I. PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL PICTURE

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has drawn attention to "an obvious question that is never asked." "Why would the Baptist have chosen a place that was difficult for individuals, impossible for mass baptisms, and virtually inaccessible during the one season in the year when he could expect people to come to him, namely the relatively cool winter months?"<sup>2</sup>

There are other questions that are rarely, if ever, asked. Is there not something odd about the expression that John "appeared in the wilderness, *proclaiming* a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; cf. Matt 3:1; Luke 3:3; Acts 10:37).<sup>3</sup> One might have thought that baptism was a rite to be administered rather than preached. Why the stress on *proclaiming*?

Odder still is the choice of the Jordan for a rite of *purification*. Ritual purification was widely practiced and took various forms, but use of the Jordan for such purposes appears to be virtually unprecedented.<sup>4</sup> Ritual baths (מִקְוֹת, *miquaot*) dating from the Second Temple period have been discovered at numerous places including Qumran, Jericho, Masada, Sepphoris, and the Ophel and Essene quarters of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> The use of the cleansing "waters of purification" is well

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attested by the Qumran writings,<sup>6</sup> Philo,<sup>7</sup> Josephus,<sup>8</sup> biblical and post-biblical literature,<sup>9</sup> and the Mishnah tractate *Miqwa'ot*, which is devoted to the topic.

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<sup>2</sup> "John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypotheses," *NTS* 36 (1990) 359-74, esp. 359. See also nn. 20 and 22. For further discussion and a comprehensive review of current literature see Robert L. Webb, "John the Baptist and his Relationship to Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTTS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 179-230.

<sup>3</sup> Scriptural quotations are from NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> See n. 9 for possible instances. On Naaman's bathing in the Jordan (2 Kgs 5:10-14) see n. 25. None of the instances conform to the typical pattern of purificatory rites.

<sup>5</sup> Details and literature in John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav, "Ritual Baths (*miquvaot*)," *Jesus and his World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 236-40. Philip R. Davies notes a bath near the northwest entrance to the Qumran settlement and possibly another in the southeast corner. He thinks that the pool of Feska may also have been used by Essenes for ritual bathing, but sees no evidence that they ever bathed in the Jordan (*Qumran* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 102).

Otto Betz and Rainer Riesner note the large number of baths in the Essene quarter of Jerusalem located in the vicinity of the Church of the Dormition (*Jesus, Qumran and the Vatican: Clarifications* [New York: Crossroad, 1994] 141-56; Riesner, "Das Jerusalemer Essenerviertel und die Urgemeinde. Josephus, Bellum Judaicum V 145; 11Q Miqdasch 46, 12-16; Apostelgeschichte 1-6 und die Archaeologie," *ANRW* 226.2 [1995] 1775-1992, esp. 1811-16). They speculate that the baths may have been used to baptize the large number of penitents at Pentecost.

<sup>6</sup> 1QS 3:4-9; 5:13-14; 11QTemple 45:8-18; 50:5-16; 51:1-5. The prescriptions in the *Temple Scroll* for impurity caused by sexual acts and contact with human or animal corpses include the washing of clothes as well as bathing. Impurity remained for prescribed periods until sundown.

1QS 4:20-23 looked forward to an eschatological act of purification perhaps comparable to that envisaged by John's prophecy in Mark 1:8 par. Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33: "Then God will purify for himself all the works of man and purge for himself the sons of man. He will utterly destroy the spirit of deceit from the veins of his flesh. He will purify him by the Holy Spirit from all ungodly acts and sprinkle upon him the Spirit of Truth like waters of purification, (to purify him) from all the abominations of falsehood and from being polluted by a spirit of impurity, so that upright ones may have insight into the knowledge of the Most High and the wisdom of the sons of heaven, and the perfect in the Way may receive understanding. For those God has chosen for an

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In addition, John 2:6 mentions large "stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification," and numerous archaeological finds of such jars testify to widespread concern for purity through ritual washing.<sup>10</sup> The purification of hands and vessels is attested in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:2-5; Luke 11:38-39). Mark even uses baptismal vocabulary in his account: "and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they purify themselves [ἐάν μὴ βαπτίσθῃνται]; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing [βαπτισμούς] of cups, pots, and bronze kettles" (Mark 7:4).<sup>11</sup> The extent of such practices continues to be the subject of debate.<sup>12</sup>

It is now becoming increasingly clear that the purity systems of the Essenes and rabbis sought to implement mandates of the Torah.<sup>13</sup> The Torah mandated bathing and, in certain

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eternal covenant, and all the glory of Adam shall be theirs without deceit. All false works will be put to shame" (*The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, vol. 1: *Rule of the Community and Related Documents* [ed. James H. Charlesworth; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994] 19).

For a review of ritual ablution in the OT and the Second Temple period see Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study* (JSNTSup 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 95-162. Webb notes two related forms of purificatory immersion in 1QS: the first changed the candidate's status from an impure Israelite to a pure Israelite; subsequent immersions changed the member's state from impurity to purity. Later on immersion came to be part of the process of conversion to Judaism, though opinions differed as to whether it was required in addition to or instead of circumcision (*Yebain*. 46a).

<sup>7</sup> Water purifies the body "with ablutions and sprinklings," so that the one "who has bathed himself" may be prepared (after a waiting period) to offer sacrifice (*Spec. Leg.* 1.261-66, where Philo gives his explanation of cleansing with ashes and water).

<sup>8</sup> In his account of the Essenes Josephus noted how, after laboring until the fifth hour they bathed their bodies in cold water, and thus "purified καθαροί]" they repaired to the refectory, "as to some sacred shrine" (J.W. 2.129). In *Ant.* 18.19 he noted that the Essenes employed "a different ritual of purification," and for that reason were barred from the temple. In his youth Josephus became a follower of Bannus in the wilderness, "and using frequent ablutions of cold water, by day and night, for purity's sake, I became his devoted disciple" (*Life* 11).

<sup>9</sup> Use of running water is mentioned in connection with cleansing from leprosy (Lev 14:5-6, 50-52) and the discovery of corpses in open country (Deut 21:4). Eschatological cleansing and abundance of water feature in prophecy (Isa 4:4; Ezek 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; Zech 13:1; 14:8). On 2 Kgs 5:10 see 11. 25.

In the *Life of Adam and Eve* Adam stood penitently in the Jordan and Eve in the Tigris (Vita 6-11; Apocalypse 29). *Sib. Or.* 3:591-92 describes pious Jews as "always sanctifying their flesh with water." *Sib. Or.* 4:165-67 exhorts hearers to "wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers" seeking forgiveness and making propitiation. This passage, together with Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.9.20-21, is thought to refer to Jewish proselyte baptism towards the end of the first century CE (G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* [London: Macmillan, 1962] 23). A late variant manuscript of *T Levi* 2:3 (B 1-2) mentions washing clothes and bathing in pure water.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Deines, *Jüdische Steingefäße und pharisäische Frömmigkeit. Ein archäologisch-historischer Belt rag zum Verständnis von Joh 2, 6 und der jüdischen Reinheitshalacha zur Zeit Jesu* (WUNT 52; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> NRSV mg reading in italics. It may be noted that this translation follows the preferred reading in NA<sup>27</sup> 110. βαπτίζω is rare in the LXX. It translates כִּבֵּץ ("dip") in 2 [4] Kgs 5:14; Judith 12:7; Sir 31[34]:25; Isa 21:4. βάπτισμα is found only in Christian writers.

<sup>12</sup> Roger P. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity: Tradition History and Legal History in Mark* (JSNTSup 13, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986); subsequent literature reviewed by R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 357-71.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah K. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis: Biblical Foundations* (SBLDS 143; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

cases, the washing of clothes in connection with such matters as male and female bodily discharges, sexual acts (Leviticus 15), contact with corpses (Numbers 19), and before approaching the altar (Exod 29:4; 30:17-21; Lev 8:6; 16:24-28; Num 19:6-10, 19-21; cf. Pss 24:3-4; 26:6; Isa 1:15-16). Contact with what was unclean resulted in contamination which required ritual purification (Lev 11:24-40). But the need to purify oneself and the need to repent did not necessarily coincide. For example, one needed to purify oneself after coming into contact with a corpse, or after experiencing a discharge, or having sexual intercourse with one's spouse. But the Torah did not call for repentance after such acts.

With all the purificatory rites available, why would John want to add to them by bringing people out to the Jordan to receive his own version of such a rite? When we compare ritual purification with the

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Gospel accounts of what John was doing, major differences begin to appear. In cases of contamination, *impurity remained for prescribed periods*, and was not deemed removed until sundown, but John's baptism evidently required no such waiting period.<sup>14</sup> Ritual bathing *had to be repeated*, in some cases more than once a day, but John's baptism apparently required no repetition. In the case of ritual purification *individuals generally bathed and purified themselves*, but John's baptism, whatever its form, was administered corporately by John the baptizer (Mark 1:5, 8 and par.). Ritual purification in the Torah is directed towards the removal of contamination caused by *specific physical conditions*; John's baptism was non-specific and was directed towards sin and its remission. Whereas ritual purification *did not necessarily involve repentance*, the call for repentance for the remission of sin was *the* characteristic feature of John's baptism. Finally we may note a difference of vocabulary. The verb βαπτίζω is rare in the LXX, and only at Sir. 34:25 does it allude to purificatory rites; the noun βάπτισμα is used only by Christian authors to denote either John's activity or Christian baptism.<sup>15</sup> Dissimilarities between rites of purification (even when accompanied by repentance) and John's activity have prompted Morna D. Hooker to conclude that, "No real parallel to John's baptism has been discovered in contemporary Jewish practice."<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps after all John did not intend to invent a purificatory rite similar to those that we have noted. But there is yet another difficulty. If one fell into the southern part of the Jordan where John is traditionally believed to have baptized,<sup>17</sup> the first thing that one would

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<sup>14</sup> There would seem to be no similar prolongation of impurity in John's baptism. In the case of Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descended upon Jesus immediately "as he was coming up out of the water" (Mark 1:8; cf. J. D. M. Derrett, *The Making of Mark: The Scriptural Bases of the Earliest Gospel* [Shipston-on-Stour: Drinkwater, 1985] 1.49).

<sup>15</sup> See nn. 11 and 25.

<sup>16</sup> *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Black's NT Commentaries; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 39.

<sup>17</sup> It seems unlikely that John would have baptized in the northern part of the Jordan, where the water was deeper and purer. The observation that people came from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside (Matt 3:5; Mark 1:5) and that in coming *from Galilee* (Matt 3:13; Mark 1:9) Jesus was a notable exception indicate that John baptized somewhere in that part of the Jordan which formed the eastern boundary of Judea. John would hardly have addressed a mission to the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea which would have required them to cross Samaria or take a detour through Perea in order to be baptized in the northern stretches of the Jordan.

Bethabara at the fords near Jericho has been suggested as a likely site (Johanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* [3rd ed. rev. Anson F. Rainey and Ze'ev Safraïl; [New York: Macmillan, 1993] 229; Rousseau and Arav, *Jesus and his World*, 14-15). It seems unlikely that the condition of the river has

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want would be a shower to rinse off the dirt from the sediment. Apart from times when swollen by the winter rains, those southern stretches of the Jordan that are accessible are often shallow and sluggish. While religious bathing in unclean water is not unknown and intention counts more than the quality of the water (as is evident from bathing in the Ganges), insistence on purity of the water is well attested in Jewish literature. If ritual purification were the prime consideration in John's baptism, the lower Jordan would seem to be precluded. The Damascus Document appears to rule it out on two counts: "Concerning one who purifies himself in water: Let no man bathe in water which is dirty or insufficient to cover a man" (CD 10:11).<sup>18</sup> Likewise *Miqw.* 2:1-2 reflects concern over the necessary quantity and purity of the water. Rabbis explicitly precluded the Jordan from purificatory use on grounds that its waters were "mixed," i.e. fed by polluted or unreliable tributaries (*Para* 8:10).

Moreover, just as pure water serves to remove impurity, impure water may convey impurity.<sup>19</sup> Water in a shallow pool which is "touched by an unclean person... becomes unclean" (CD 10:13). *Miqw.* 1:4 extends this point to ponds, cisterns, and immersion pools that are rendered unclean by the passing by of large numbers of persons. If the Jordan could be rendered unfit for purification by its polluted and unreliable tributaries, the problem would seem to be compounded by the numbers attracted by John's preaching which surely would have included people with discharges, menstruants, and others who were ritually unclean.

Geographical difficulties in making the Jordan fit the profile required for a rite of purification have prompted Murphy-O'Connor<sup>20</sup>

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changed much over the centuries. Josephus attests to the presence of fords in this region which were occasionally swollen, making them unfordable with tragic results (*J.W.* 4.431-37).

If the site identified as Aenon near Salim (John 3:23) was the place of that name located in Samaria, Jews from Judea and Jerusalem seeking baptism would have had to cross Samaria or make a detour through Perea, after crossing the fords at Bethabara!

Josephus' information that John was executed by Herod Antipas at Machaerus in Perea (*Ant.* 18.119), and not for example at Tiberius in Galilee, further supports the contention that John was active in Judean wilderness, and that he baptized in the southern stretches of the Jordan, which formed the boundary between Judea and Perea. As long as he remained on the west bank out of the reach of Herod's soldiers he was relatively safe, but in crossing over to the east bank he entered Herod's jurisdiction at his peril.

<sup>18</sup> *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, vol. 2: *Damascus Document, War Scroll, and Related Documents*, (1995) 45-47.

<sup>19</sup> See the extensive discussion in the Mishnah tractate *Para*.

<sup>20</sup> *NTS* 36 [1990] 359-74. See also his more recent article "Why Jesus Went Back to Galilee," *BibRev* 12.1 (1996) 20-29, 42, where he develops his argument that Jesus initially served alongside John in Perea. Subsequently Jesus carried on the ministry of baptism in Judea (John 3:22), while John moved his ministry to Samaria to carry out a Samaritan mission (John 3:23). After John's death Jesus went to Galilee to carry on John's mission there. While in Galilee Jesus' outlook underwent a change. His message was no longer "Repent," but "Follow me."

John 1:28 mentions Bethany which some scholars identify with Bethabara. The Byzantine identification of Aenon in the Jordan Valley as the location noted in John 3:23 has little to commend it (Murphy-O'Connor, *NTS* 36 [1990] 363-64). Murphy-O'Connor's alternative suggestion requires some modification of location, since Aenon and Salim were separated by two mountains. It also assumes that John's ministry was now relocated in Samaria and was directed to the Samaritans.

and Bruce Chilton<sup>21</sup> to forsake the Synoptic tradition and opt for the Fourth Gospel, on the assumption that the sites mentioned in John 1:28; 3:23; 10:40 were springs located in Samaria or in Perea some way from the Jordan. However, John's emphasis falls on the fact that the original location of John's baptism was *across* (though not necessarily distant from) the Jordan, and no certain identification of the sites has been made.<sup>22</sup> Such a solution does not ease the problem of accessibility for inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judea noted by

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Murphy-O'Connor at the beginning of this paper. Moreover, this solution does not deal with the fact that the Synoptic tradition firmly identifies John's baptism with the Jordan: "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5; cf. Matt 3:5).<sup>23</sup> Nor does it address the political implications in Josephus' account of John's activity which prompted Herod Antipas to make a preemptive strike, lest those who were "united" by John's baptism and moved by his eloquence should join in an uprising.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "John the Purifier," *Judaic Approaches to the Gospels* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994) 1-37. Comparing John's activity with "ordinary practices of purification" (28) Chilton suggests that John's baptism was not an initiatory rite but "generic purification" (30). In keeping with this view, Chilton questions the assumption that John's baptism was not to be repeated. In response, it may be asked if there is any evidence that it was repeated other than the assumption that it conformed to the pattern of purificatory rites. Further, in view of the fact that the purificatory rites that we have noted were directed at the removal of *specific impurities* or administered at *specific times or occasions*, one may ask how meaningful is it to speak of "generic purification." In view of its divergence from "ordinary practices of purification," John's activity looks increasingly like a different kind of purification altogether.

<sup>22</sup> Earlier scholars who have considered the possibility of a ministry of John in Samaria have remained cautiously skeptical or seen little of particular significance. C. K. Barrett observes that Salim cannot be identified with certainty and Aenon cannot be identified at all. Aenon may be linked with טַלְעַ, a spring, and Salim with שְׁלוֹמִי, peace. Both names may be figurative. The reason given by the Fourth Evangelist for John's presence was not that John had turned to the Samaritans, but that ὄδατα πολλὰ ἦν ἐκεῖ (John 3:23) (*The Gospel according to St. John* [2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 220). J. A. T. Robinson saw in the allusion to Aenon near Salim a reference to a brief Samaritan ministry towards the end of John's career, but attributed it to the changing seasons. By mid-May the Jordan valley would have been unbearably hot, therefore John moved to "a Samaritan holiday center" (*The Priority of John* [Bampton Lectures 1984; London: SCM Press, 1985] 136).

The reference to "the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified" (John 3:26) implies that John's *previous activity was on the east bank*. If Murphy-O'Connor is correct in saying that John was active among the Samaritans, he may have succeeded in making sense out of the discrepancies between John and the Synoptics. If John baptized Samaritans in streams (and not the Jordan itself in the manner proposed below), it may indicate that he judged that a different form of baptism was appropriate for the Samaritans. On the other hand, John's perspective which tells the story of Jesus in the retrospective light of the breach between church and synagogue may well have preempted interest in the Baptist's concern for the restoration of Israel. In the Fourth Gospel the Baptist figures primarily as a witness to Jesus (John 1:6-9, 19-28; 3:25-30; 5:35). Even the citation of Isa 40:3 in John 1:23 is taken as an announcement of the Messiah's coming, rather than a call to national repentance as a precondition of national restoration.

<sup>23</sup> Matt and Mark expressly locate Jesus' baptism in the Jordan: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him" (Matt 3:13); "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (Mark 1:9). Luke states that John "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). He does not identify the site of John's baptism, but implies that it took place in the Jordan (Luke 4:1), "when all the people were baptized" (Luke 3:21).

<sup>24</sup> Josephus describes John as "a good man" who "exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, and to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to *unite by baptism* [βαπτισμῶ συνιέναι]. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to

## II. A COUNTER-PROPOSAL

Whereas Murphy-O'Connor and Chilton suggest changing the scene of John's activity in order to find a location more suitable for purificatory rites, I wish to propose that we rethink the significance of his activity. The key lies not in purificatory rites but in boundaries, and in particular the Jordan as the boundary and point of entry to the promised land.

The Jordan marked the original boundary of the holy land. In the Hebrew Scriptures Israel's formal act of entry in order to take possession of it was marked by the solemn crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 3 and 4). God's presence went with his people in the form of the ark

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of the covenant. When the feet of those who bore the ark were dipped into the edge of the water (Josh 3:15), the river parted. The people crossed over on dry ground while the ark stood in the middle of the river while the people crossed over. The event was marked by the erection of stones as "a memorial for ever" (Josh 4:7). The crossing was followed by the circumcision of "all the nation" (Josh 5:8), which led to the Lord's declaration to Joshua: "Today I have rolled away the disgrace of Egypt" (Josh 5:9). Subsequently the Jordan played an important part in the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. In particular, the crossing and recrossing of the Jordan in the consecration and empowerment of Elisha as Elijah's successor<sup>25</sup> appears to contain echoes of the earlier Joshua story. In both cases the waters parted and the crossing was effected on dry ground. Although John was no miracle worker, the story may be of some significance in view of the Baptist's reputation as an Elijah *redivivus*.<sup>26</sup>

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gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already cleansed by right behavior" (*Ant.* 18.117; LCL translation modified at the italicized words). Josephus goes on to say that Herod became alarmed by the following that John attracted. Fearing sedition, he made a preemptive strike before John could instigate an uprising (*Ant.* 18.118-19).

In the above quotation I have adopted the rendering of C. K. Barrett who sees the significance of John's baptism "as a means of entry into the true Israel" (*The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* [London: SPCK, 1947] 32). Barrett notes that this point agrees with Luke's depiction of John as an *Elijah redivivus* whose mission was to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). The political implications of John's activity which are latent in the Gospels are made explicit by Josephus. If the people were united as the true Israel by the prophetic symbolism of John's baptism, Herod Antipas had every reason to fear the consequences.

<sup>25</sup> Elijah found refuge east of the Jordan by the Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs 17:3, 5). The transfer of prophetic authority from Elijah to Elisha was effected by crossing and recrossing the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:6-13).

The Syrian commander Naaman was instructed by Elisha to wash himself in the Jordan seven times in order to be cleansed of his leprosy (2 Kgs 5:10). Protesting that the waters of Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, were better, he finally relented and "immersed himself [ἐβαπτίσατο LXX] in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God" (5:14). The incident appears to involve more than a rite of purification which could conceivably have been effected by water other than the Jordan's. It would seem to be a form of initiation into Judaism linked expressly with the Jordan, and related to the request to take two mule-loads of Jewish earth on which to offer sacrifice to the Lord (5:17).

<sup>26</sup> The messenger of Mal 3:1 is identified as Elijah in Mal 4:5. This theme is picked up in Mark 1:2; Luke 1:17 (cf. Sir 48:1, 10); 7:27, and expanded and applied to John in Matt 11:7-15; 17:10-13; Mark 6:14-16. John's leather belt (Matt 3:4; Mark 1:6) was evocative of that worn by Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8).

What was John doing? I suggest that John's baptism did not purify in the manner of existing rites of purification. Nor was it, in my opinion, intended as a substitute for them. Rather, John was organizing a symbolic exodus from Jerusalem and Judea as a preliminary to recrossing the Jordan as a penitent, consecrated Israel in order to reclaim the land in a quasi-reenactment of the return from the Babylonian exile. Whereas the waters had parted for Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha, John had no option but to go through them. In short, John waded across, and baptism was effected by heeding John's call to leave the land and follow him in penitence into the Jordan and return as consecrated members of a renewed Israel.<sup>27</sup> The action was

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a symbolic, penitential act of sanctification by which the baptized sought national renewal as they turned back on the sins of the past which kept Israel in bondage, and returned consecrated to the land which Yahweh had promised their forebears.<sup>28</sup> As such the act was a rite of passage in more than a metaphorical sense. It was a prerequisite to ending the nation's disgrace and bondage to foreign power.

This explanation may help to explain why John *proclaimed* a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What he proclaimed amounted to a call to become a morally renewed Israel.<sup>29</sup> John may well have traveled extensively preaching his message. But the response that it called for required a journey to the Jordan. The response was to be symbolically acted out in the tradition of prophetic signs by exiting the land and joining the Baptist as he recrossed the Jordan from east to west while the people confessed their sins. On this view the purity and quantity of the water were of less significance than the historic, symbolic significance of the Jordan itself as the boundary and point of entry.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps John's call to repentance may even be seen as a symbolic expression of the Jewish notion of repentance as turning back and returning. The Hebrew verb commonly

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<sup>27</sup> The language of Mark in describing the baptism of Jesus suggests movement into the Jordan and out of it: καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην [literally "he was baptized into the Jordan"] ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου, καὶ εὐθὺς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος (Mark 1:9b-10a; ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος, Matt 3:16). Whereas the other evangelists remain neutral in this regard, Mark's use of εἰς appears to emphasize the significance of the Jordan. Elsewhere εἰς is used in baptismal language to denote that to which baptism effects consecration: the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38); repentance (Matt 3:11); the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19); the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16; 19:5); the baptism of John (Acts 19:3); Christ Jesus and his death (Rom. 6:3-4); Moses (1 Cor 10:2).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Josh 3:5, 9-12. One might also note a correspondence between baptism and circumcision (Josh 5:2-7), and the fact that both events lead up to an epiphany (Josh 5:13-15; cf. Matt 3:16-17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34). The reference to "these stones" (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:8) may be an intertextual allusion to the stones erected as "a memorial for ever" of the crossing (Josh 4:7).

<sup>29</sup> Moral renewal not only characterizes the Synoptic accounts but also of Josephus (Ant. 18.117; see above, n. 24).

<sup>30</sup> In this regard, the less water the better! A shallow ford would facilitate the double crossing of the river. However, there may also be the element of an ordeal to be faced in response to a call to cross the wilderness and the Jordan twice - once to get to the east bank and then to return. This interpretation may also be congruent with the Fourth Gospel's location of John's activities on the far side of the Jordan. It was necessary to exit the land in order to re-enter.

The existence of disciples of John at Ephesus (Acts 18:25; 19:3) does not necessarily imply the existence of a Baptist sect which continued to practice John's form of baptism. They may have been surviving adherents of John who had been baptized by him in the manner suggested by this paper.

translated as "to repent" is the verb which literally means to turn back, to return. Thus the act of going through the wilderness to the Jordan in order to return was a public demonstration of turning back from their past lives and re-

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turning as consecrated Israelites. It was an acted sign of their repentance and their desire to return to the holy land as a consecrated people.<sup>31</sup>

If, as we noted with Murphy-O'Connor at the beginning of this paper, geography and climate imposed formidable obstacles on the execution of a plan to baptize in the Jordan, a reply might be offered along the following lines. For one thing, my proposal does not envisage "mass baptisms" carried out in the manner of later Christian practice or ritual ablutions as practiced in Second-Temple Judaism. The essential feature was for penitents to exit the land, enter the Jordan under John's aegis, and return. For those who were serious, the rigors of a double crossing of the wilderness and the river, whether in summer heat or winter cold and rain, were part of the price to be paid for membership in a reconsecrated Israel. Such rigors were no different from those encountered by the pilgrim people of God in the exodus from Egypt and the return from exile in Babylon. In John's preaching the ordeal of John's baptism with water paled in comparison with the coming one's baptism with God's holy wind and fire.<sup>32</sup>

### III. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Four further considerations point in the same direction as my proposal. First, there was a sense in Second-Temple Judaism that, although Israel was physically in the promised land and the temple in

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<sup>31</sup> The noun *μετάνοια* is rare in the LXX. The NT uses the verbs *μετάνοέω* and *ἐπιστρέφω* rather than just the preferred LXX *ἑπιστρέφω* or *ἑπιστρέφω* to express what in the Hebrew Bible was expressed by *שׁוּב* (J. Behm, *TDNT* 4.989-91).

The use of *שׁוּב* in contexts involving repentance and turning to the law and to the covenant is attested by the Qumran writings (1QS 5:1 ["to turn away from all evil"], 8 ["to return to the Torah of Moses"], 14 ["unless they turn away from their wickedness"]; 10:20 ["turn away from the men of deceit"]; CD 4:2 ["the priests are the penitents of Israel"]; 19:16 ["a covenant of repentance"]; see *The Dead Sea Scrolls* 1.18, 20, 22, 46; 2.18, 32). Further references to returning in the scrolls are given by Webb (*John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 210). Murphy-O'Connor sees the expression *שׁוּבֵי אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה* (CD 4:2) to be analogous to similar expressions in Neh 8:17 and Ezra 6:21 with both literal and typological significance: "the returnees of Israel who went out from the land of Judah" ("An Essene Missionary Document? CD) II, 14-VT, 1," *RB* 77 [1970] 201-29, especially, 211-13). *הוֹרֵב*, the Aramaic counterpart to *שׁוּב*, is found in Ezra 6:5 in connection with the restoration to the temple of vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon.

<sup>32</sup> Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16; cf. J. Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology: Its Origins and Early Development* (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Veegt, 1962) 59-60 for possible interpretations. Mark 1:8 has "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit?" It would seem that Mark deliberately omits reference to fire in view of the way that he sees fulfillment of John's oracle in the activity of Jesus. This point will be discussed more fully in the published version of my 1993 Hensley Henson Lectures in the University of Oxford on *The Question of Miracles and the Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Jerusalem had been rebuilt, conditions were such that it was tantamount to living in exile.<sup>33</sup> Mark gives some indication of this state of affairs in his description of John<sup>34</sup> and the intertextual echoes of return from exile in the opening of his Gospel (Mark 1:2-3; cf. Mal 3:1 and Isa 4:3).<sup>35</sup> John is the messenger sent ahead who will prepare the way of the Lord. If the Lord's way needs to be prepared, it implies that *the Lord is no longer or not yet in the land*. But return and restoration are at hand, and John calls upon the people to come out and return with the Lord.

Secondly, we might note that the idea of emulating Joshua did in fact occur to others - the ill-fated Theudas and the Egyptian whom Josephus lists among the "deceivers and imposters" who pretended to divine inspiration. The former persuaded the masses to follow him to the Jordan which would part at his command. He was captured and beheaded by Fadus (procurator ca. 44-46 CE) before he could implement his plan.<sup>36</sup> After him came "the Egyptian" who led some thirty thousand persons into the wilderness in order to lead them back to the Mount of Olives from where he proposed to take Jerusalem after the manner in which Joshua captured Jericho.<sup>37</sup> He was captured before his plan could be put into effect, but escaped and disappeared from history.

Thirdly, similar conclusions have been reached by the structuralist analysis of John Drury who sees the wilderness in Mark 1 in terms of the wilderness of the exodus where Israel tarried for forty years before entering the land by crossing the Jordan.<sup>38</sup> The refer-

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ence to all Judea and Jerusalem coming to the Jordan leaves the land empty in order to return and repossess it. There is a warp and weft to the text supplied respectively by the scripture of Isaiah, the figure of John, the people, and Jesus on the one hand and indications of movement (movement of the people, Jesus' entering the water and coming up from it, the descent of the Spirit, and the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness) on the other. To Drury, all this is a product of literary composition. To Robert L. Webb, the account is historical symbolism

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 272-79; M. A. Knibb, "The Exile in the Literature of the Intertestamental Period," *HeyJ* 17 (1976) 253-72.

<sup>34</sup> John himself was living the life of an exile, existing on food provided by nature (Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4) untainted by the impurities of the city or by unclean beasts or birds.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also Matt 3:3; Luke 3:3-6; 7:27. The Qumran community had separated from the men of deceit in order to depart into the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord (1QS 8:12-14; 9:19). There may also be an allusion to Exod 23:20: "I am going to send an angel in front of you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared." If so, the text also contains an intertextual allusion to the earlier deliverance from bondage in Egypt, which also entailed the crossing of water boundaries - the Red Sea and the Jordan - before the promised land could be entered.

<sup>36</sup> *Ant.* 20.97. Richard A. Horsley sees the proposed action either as a "reverse conquest" involving retreat as a precondition of re-entry or as a new exodus/entry ("Like One of the Prophets of Old': Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus," *CBQ* 47 [1985] 435-63; cf. Horsley, "Popular Prophetic Movements at the Time of Jesus: Their Principal Features and Social Origins," *JSNT* 26 [1986] 3-27).

<sup>37</sup> *Ant.* 20.170; *J.W.* 2.261; cf. Joshua 6. Following his arrest in Jerusalem the apostle Paul was suspected of being the notorious Egyptian (Acts 21:38).

<sup>38</sup> "Mark 1:1-15: An Interpretation," in A. E. Harvey, ed., *Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study* (London: SPCK, 1985) 25-36.

Colin Brown, "What Was John the Baptist Doing?," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 37-50.

reminiscent of the people under Joshua's leadership, perhaps also recalling the return from exile.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, there is Paul's curious remark that our ancestors "were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor 10:1-2).<sup>40</sup> If the crossing of the Red Sea could count as a baptism - even though in the tradition no water actually touched the Israelites (Exod 14:22) - may it not also serve as a precedent for thinking of John's baptism as the crossing of the Jordan?

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<sup>39</sup> *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 364. However, Webb takes the more conventional view questioned in this paper that John was baptizing by immersion or effusion by analogy with ritual ablution (179-83).

<sup>40</sup> I take the expression "baptized into Moses [εις τὸν Μωϋσῆν ἐβαπτίσθησαν]" to refer not simply to Moses personally but to consecration of the ancestors to the Mosaic law and religion. The following of Moses through the sea effected the consecration. The similar expression describing those who were "baptized . . . into the baptism of John [ἐβαπτίσθητε . . . εἰς τὸ Ἰωάννου βάπτισμα]" (Acts 19:3; cf. 18:25) suggests consecration to John and to the consecration effected by his baptism.