

**Part II**  
**THE MESSAGE OF THE**  
**TRUE PROPHET**



# 3

## A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

### *JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE JEWISH CHRISTIAN MESSAGE*

**T**HE WILDERNESS EXERTS A ROMANTIC APPEAL FOR US today and probably had a similar appeal in the first century. The children of Israel were in the wilderness when they were between Egypt and the promised land; the wilderness was also a place where one could free oneself from the contaminations of the world and perhaps get closer to God. Jesus in the gospels is said to have fasted for forty days in the wilderness before he began his ministry.

There are two groups from the “wilderness” that may have exerted a decisive influence on Jesus: the Essenes and John the Baptist and his followers. Both existed on the fringes of the social order; both testify to the surprisingly turbulent and diverse nature of first-century Judaism; and both had elements which were picked up by Jewish Christianity but dropped by gentile Christianity.

#### **The Essenes**

The Essenes are a popular topic in discussions of early Christianity. The Essenes exert this fascination because they resembled the early Christians in a number of interesting ways. Like some early Christians, the Essenes lived communally; like some early Christians, they scorned wealth; like some early Christians, the Essenes did not swear oaths; like some early Christians, they were pacifists.

The Essenes are mentioned by several ancient writers, including Josephus, Philo, Pliny, and Porphyry. Philo mentions another group, the Therapeutae, who seem to be very similar to the Essenes. The basic ideas of the Essenes in this literature, while sometimes described in contradictory ways, are generally fairly clear. Philo states that the Essenes rejected animal sacrifices, despised wealth and lived communally, did not make oaths, and rejected slavery (*Every Good Man is Free* 12), saying “there is not a single slave among them.” Josephus agrees on all of these points (*Antiquities* 18.1.5, *Wars* 2.8.3, 2.8.6). Porphyry and Jerome go further and say that the Essenes were vegetarian (*De Abstinencia* 4.3, *Against Jovinianus* 2.14). Philo describes the Essene opposition to war in simple and moving terms: the Essenes refused to attend to “any employment whatever connected with war.”

Many scholars try to go considerably beyond the “classical” sources at this point and tie the Essenes to the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls, constituting a number of ancient manuscripts discovered in the mid-twentieth century near Qumran on the Dead Sea, are a very important archeological find, but almost certainly have very little to do with the Essenes as described by Josephus, Pliny, Philo, and Porphyry. The beliefs of the Dead Sea Scrolls stand in stark contrast to those of the Essenes of Josephus and Philo on these and other points.<sup>1</sup>

The Dead Sea Scroll community clearly supports animal sacrifice, as the most significant scroll (the “Temple Scroll”) attests repeatedly, in passages that parallel the instructions on animal sacrifice in Deuteronomy (*Temple Scroll* 52.13–18). The Dead Sea Scroll community is not pacifist at all and hopes to achieve its aims through violence and warfare (*Temple Scroll* 52:5–11). The Dead Sea Scroll community accepts and indeed seems to encourage slavery (*Damascus Rule* 11.12, 12.10). The Dead Sea Scroll community accepts the making and keeping of oaths (*Temple Scroll* 53:14–16). The Essenes were not only pacifist but generally celibate, though evidently one group of Essenes did marry (Josephus, *Wars* 2.8); the *Temple Scroll* allows a warrior to take for a wife a beautiful woman who is a captive—a text denying celibacy and

affirming war and slavery in a single breath (*Temple Scroll* 53:10–15, roughly paralleling Deuteronomy 21:10–13).

Indeed, the Dead Sea Scrolls are ambiguous even on the question of communalism, the one significant similarity between the Essenes and the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes had no private property at all. But some of the Dead Sea scrolls imply that only the earnings of two days of the month need be given to the community (*Damascus Rule* 14); other scrolls state that if community members cause property damage through negligence, they must reimburse the community out of their own pocket—implying that individuals must have financial resources from which to reimburse the community (*Community Rule* 7).

Instead of this search for the Essenes in the Dead Sea Scrolls, we should look at the Pythagoreans. While the similarities between the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls community seem to be nebulous and tenuous at best, the similarities between the Essenes and the Pythagoreans are obvious and striking. The followers of Pythagoras, a Greek philosopher of the 6th century BCE, are an easy choice for comparison with the Essenes for two reasons: first, they had so much in common with the Essenes and the Therapeutae that it would be correct to speak of these latter groups as Jewish Pythagoreans; and secondly, because Josephus states flatly that the Essene lifestyle and the Pythagorean lifestyle were the same (*Antiquities* 15.10.4).

We don't have to look far to find similarities between the Pythagoras described by Iamblichus and the Essenes described by Josephus, Pliny, Porphyry, and Philo—as well with the Jewish Christians. The neo-Pythagorean Iamblichus in his book *On the Pythagorean Way of Life* states that: Pythagoras was an opponent of slavery (33); he taught his disciples to avoid oaths, “that their language should be such as to render them worthy of belief even without oaths” (47, 144, 150); he was an opponent of the materialism or the pursuit of wealth and luxury (56–57, 69, 171); he counseled against seeking revenge or doing harm to one's enemies (155); he also did not wear wool, wearing a white robe of linen instead (149). Most importantly, he was a vegetarian and condemned animal sacrifices (54, 108, 150); he ordered his closest disciples to abstain from

all animal food (168, 187, 225) and from wine (69, 188). This sounds enough like both the Essenes and the Jewish Christians that it is hard to resist the conclusion that there is an ideological or organizational connection somewhere between these groups. The Qumran group resembles the Essenes (as known from the “classical” sources) at most only on the question of communalism; the Pythagoreans resemble the Essenes on numerous points.

The problem for us is that (barring some startling new archeological discovery) there is no *direct* evidence linking the Essenes to any Christian group. There is no mention of the Essenes by name in the New Testament; and no ancient writer makes any explicit connection of the Essenes to other groups, *unless* one interprets the reference to the “Ossaean” by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 19) to be in fact a reference to the Essenes—in which case the Essenes actually merged with Jewish Christianity.

The indirect evidence, however, is substantial. The Jewish Christians did not drink wine, did not eat meat, despised wealth, were pacifists, and opposed animal sacrifices. The Jewish Christians probably did not make oaths; there is no specific evidence on this, but this prohibition is in the Sermon on the Mount. It is significant, also, that Eusebius quotes Philo’s description of the Therapeutae, a group similar to the Essenes which lived communally and abstained from meat and wine, and assumes that this is a Christian group (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.16–17)! While Eusebius may be incorrect, it is significant that he would make this assumption without batting an eyelash.

There are two differences that should be pointed out, though. The Essenes, according to Philo, chose to interpret scripture allegorically when it came to confronting difficult passages; the Jewish Christians chose to deny the passages altogether. The Essenes chose to remain apart from society, in isolated communities; the Jewish Christians set out to spread their message far and wide. Jewish Christianity may not be a *direct* offspring of the Essenes—in the sense that Jesus was an Essene, or that the Essenes commissioned Jesus or other Jewish Christians to go

and spread their beliefs—but Jesus or the Jewish Christians may have been heavily influenced by their ideas.

## The Mission of John the Baptist

We lack any direct testimony linking the Essenes to Jesus. For John the Baptist, however, the connection to Jesus is direct and concrete: John the Baptist stands at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus began his work only after John baptized him, and thus—at least at first—Jesus was one of John's followers.

John's baptism of Jesus sets the stage on which Jesus preached, and John also resembles the Jewish Christian ideal; but John also differs from the sages who were to be later immortalized in the Talmud. These similarities and differences were a matter of style as well as substance. He did not calmly instruct the people based on his years of study of the law; rather, he exhorted them to repentance with apocalyptic images and a simple and blunt morality. He did not come from the great centers of learning or study with respected teachers; rather, he was an isolated voice that called from the outside of society, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Matthew 3:3).

"Rabbinic Judaism"—a Judaism based not only on the Jewish scriptures (the "Old Testament") but also on the sayings of the sages who had received the "oral law"—was still not dominant at this time. This form of Judaism, the ancestor of the major forms of modern Judaism, would not fully crystallize until several centuries after Jesus. When John baptized Jesus, the path that Judaism would ultimately take was still uncertain. Jewish Christianity, while an improbable option, was not yet an impossible option for Judaism to choose.

Josephus, the Jewish Christians, and the New Testament all paint a picture of John that is remarkably similar: John lived exceedingly simply, John lived in "the wilderness" away from the cities, John's initiation of Jesus was a baptism, and John's baptism was the starting point of Jesus' life work. In these basic facts we see several themes that were prominent in Jewish Christianity.

John puts forward a slogan that Jesus also adopts: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). John’s images are moralistic and apocalyptic. He calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers,” and uses the celebrated image of separating the wheat from the chaff to dramatize the importance of purifying the corruption of society (Matthew 3:7–12). Both the New Testament and Josephus give a similar account of John’s death: Herod had him killed after John objected repeatedly and forthrightly to Herod’s sexual immorality. John the Baptist, we can safely say, did not stand on ceremony.

The Jewish Christians saw John the Baptist in much the same way. The Jewish Christian gospels have disappeared from history, but that arch-nemesis of Jewish Christianity, Epiphanius, quoted from the Jewish Christian Ebionites in order to refute them. From Epiphanius we have quotations from the Ebionite gospel account of John the Baptist that are remarkably similar to that in the New Testament (*Panarion* 30.13.4, paralleling Matthew 3:4–6). However, Epiphanius notes (with considerable indignation) that the Ebionites changed the part about John eating “locusts and wild honey” to “wild honey . . . as a cake made with oil.” The Ebionites did not think that John ate insects! The Ebionites were vegetarians and, therefore, denied that John the Baptist, a favorite Christian hero, ate locusts.

Who is right about John eating locusts—Epiphanius or the Ebionites? Before trying to answer this question, we should note a significant point of agreement between Epiphanius and the Jewish Christians: John may have eaten insects, but he did not eat any *other* animal flesh, or any alcoholic beverages: “John did not partake of flesh and wine, but partook only of locusts and honey, and certainly also of water” (*Panarion* 30.19.3). It is significant, also, that both Epiphanius and the Ebionites agree with Luke (1:15) that John did not drink alcoholic beverages; the Ebionites disapproved of alcohol.

The statement in the gospels that John the Baptist ate insects has puzzled many, and some think that something may have gotten lost in the translation process at an early stage. It has been suggested, for example, that the term translated as “locusts” should be translated as

“locust beans,” i. e. carob. Also, the Greek word for tree fruits (*akrodrua*) is very close to the word for locusts (*akrides*), suggesting the possibility of an accidental or malicious scribal error. The tradition of the Greek church was that John did *not* in fact eat insects, the text of the gospel being said to refer to the “shoots” of certain plants.<sup>2</sup>

There is another testimony that John the Baptist was a vegetarian, and this comes from Josephus. The standard text of Josephus contains no reference to John the Baptist’s diet; but one of the non-standard texts, called the “Slavonic Josephus,” has quite a bit to say. In the “Slavonic” edition of Josephus’ book *The Wars of the Jews*, Josephus describes a “wild man,” a man “savage” in appearance, with a message that almost exactly matches that of the John the Baptist we become acquainted with in the New Testament. Josephus does not specifically name the person he is describing as “John the Baptist,” but in context it is hard not to reach the conclusion that this is who in fact it is. Josephus describes this person (in his Slavonic edition of *The Wars of the Jews*) as follows:

- He has animals’ hair as his clothing, and his countenance was like a savage.
- He baptizes those who come to him in the Jordan, warning them to renounce their evil deeds.
- He is the only one to denounce Herod for marrying his brothers’ wife, and is killed by Herod.
- He does not eat bread, even the unleavened bread at Passover; nor does he drink wine, or eat any animal food.
- When brought before Archelaus, he describes his diet as “bulrushes, roots, and wood-shavings”—a strict, though rather unappetizing, vegetarian diet.<sup>3</sup>

These details of the “wild man” match the description of John the Baptist in Mark and in the accepted text of Josephus almost exactly. Both Mark and the standard text of Josephus explicitly name John the Baptist and describe how John denounces Herod Antipas, who retaliates by having John executed after an initial period of tolerance (*Antiquities* 18.5.2, Mark 6:17–29). The “wild man” in the Slavonic Josephus has to

be none other than John the Baptist; and the Slavonic Josephus, who does not appear to have an axe to grind one way or the other, does not think that John ate insects, but ate a strict (and rather dull) vegetarian diet.

Everyone agrees that John's lifestyle even apart from diet is quite simple. Josephus speaks of him as like a "fleshless spirit," so unconnected is he to the world of material things. Jesus alludes to the roughness of John's clothing when asking the crowd why they came to see John the Baptist:

Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment?  
Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses.  
(Matthew 11:8)

In all of this we see a precursor of both Jesus' own admonitions against wealth, and the Ebionites' own manner of designating themselves as "the poor." Those who have left behind meat, wine, fancy clothes, and king's houses, are probably not living a life of conspicuous consumption.

### **Baptism as a Ritual**

Most modern Christians associate baptism with joining the Christian community, so the real significance of Jesus' baptism can easily be lost. For John the Baptist, *baptism was an alternative to animal sacrifice*. Both the New Testament and Josephus present baptism in this way, rather than as a rite of initiation into a community. In Mark, John preaches "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Josephus puts it slightly differently, saying of John the Baptist that he baptized not simply for the forgiveness of sins, but for purification following sin (*Antiquities* 18.5.2). Baptism, therefore, had a function similar to some of the animal sacrifices described in the Old Testament (Leviticus 4:2, 6:6, etc.). It *may* have also had social significance as a sign of joining the community of John the Baptist; but the texts nowhere suggest this, and in fact seem to imply that many admirers *outside* John's community came to be baptized ("there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem," Mark 1:5). However, the only immediate

religious significance described in Josephus or the New Testament had nothing to do with that, but rather with the purification for forgiveness of sins—one of the functions of animal sacrifice.

The Jewish Christians were acutely aware of this function of baptism, and made explicit that baptism was a substitute for animal sacrifice. According to Jewish Christianity, when God decided to do away with animal sacrifices, he instituted baptism to replace it (*Recognitions* 1.39).

The Jewish Christians persisted in believing it was *baptism* that symbolized or conferred forgiveness of sins. It became a ritual to be practiced daily (*Panarion* 30.15.3), rather than a once-only sign of identification with the Christian community. While the *Recognitions* and *Homilies* contain no specific reference to daily baptism, it is interesting that there are frequent references to Peter bathing (e. g. *Recognitions* 4.3, 8.1; *Homilies* 8.2, 11.1). This contrasts with the later church's doctrine of the atonement, in which it is Jesus' *death* that achieves forgiveness of sins, much as animal sacrifices were supposed to do in the Old Testament. Later in the New Testament, the shedding of Jesus' blood atones for sin as a replacement for animal sacrifice: "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood," says Ephesians 1:7.

Yet if we accept the accounts of Jesus' baptism, then there was already in place an alternative method for purification from or forgiveness of sin *before* Jesus even approached his death on the cross. The rejection of animal sacrifice, or at the very least an alternative to animal sacrifice, *must* have existed before Jesus' death, rendering the whole concept of the atonement superfluous. What Jesus' death is supposed to have replaced, was *already* replaced when John baptized Jesus.

### **John's Baptism of Jesus**

In all of the synoptic gospels, as well as the Ebionite gospel, John baptizes Jesus before Jesus begins preaching. This baptism is also the occasion on which the divine inspiration for Jesus' ministry begins, as is

evident both from the accounts of the baptism itself and from the depiction of the spirit of God descending upon Jesus.

Epiphanius provides us with the Jewish Christian account of this event when he quotes the *Gospel of the Hebrews* to show the Jewish Christian idea of how Jesus became God's son. The *Gospel of the Hebrews* differs in a single but crucial respect from the other New Testament accounts: "And a voice from heaven said, 'You are my beloved son; I am pleased with you,' and again; 'This day I have begotten you' " (Panarion 30.13.7; emphasis added).

This account is close to Matthew 3:13–17 and its parallels in Mark and Luke, with one key difference—the addition of the phrase, "This day I have begotten you." The Ebionites chose the moment of Jesus' baptism by John as the key moment in which Jesus became God's son, rather than the moment of Jesus' birth. Jesus became God's son by being "adopted" by him (a "spiritual birth," so to speak) rather than by being literally fathered by God and born of a virgin. This idea is called *adoptionism*.

Was this critical phrase part of the original story? There are two strong reasons for thinking so. First of all, this phrase is a direct quote from Psalm 2:7 ("You are my son, today I have begotten you"). Matthew is fond of quoting the Old Testament and it is quite believable that the original version of the story in Matthew had precisely this citation from the Old Testament. Justin Martyr, in the second century, twice gives an account of Jesus' baptism that *also* directly quotes Psalm 2:7 and thus agrees with the Ebionite version (*Dialogues With Trypho* 88.8, 103.6).

But secondly, the whole thrust of the story of the baptism by John—the image of the spirit descending from above—is an adoptionist metaphor that completely contradicts the virgin birth story. The spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, one of the most celebrated of all Christian images, in both the canonical account and the Ebionite account. If Jesus were *already* the son of God since the beginning of the world, and *already* fully divine, this image would be completely superfluous.

The most obvious explanation of the image of the spirit descending on Jesus is that, at this moment, the holy spirit entered Jesus, even though

this contradicts the orthodox idea that Jesus was fully God even prior to his birth. The original Ebionites rejected the idea of the virgin birth and thought that Jesus was the human offspring of Joseph and Mary (*Panarion* 30.3.1). It is more than conceivable that some editor of Matthew eliminated the phrase “This day I have begotten you” in order to attempt to preserve the orthodox idea of divine incarnation through the virgin birth—not discerning that the story of the spirit descending upon Jesus, which was left intact, has a straightforwardly adoptionist intent.

This text also shows how different the concept of being “God’s son” was for Jewish Christianity and modern Christianity. The saying in the Psalms, “You are my son, today I have begotten you” was originally addressed to David; but it hardly indicates that David was God incarnate, but rather that David had some special relationship to God as his messenger or agent. The Jewish Christian gospel is making a parallel claim for Jesus. For Jewish Christianity, Jesus never claimed to be God (*Homilies* 16.15, *Panarion* 30.20.5), and the same oil that anoints Jesus is poured out for all believers (*Recognitions* 1.45). This is precisely what is affirmed in the “Lord’s Prayer” (Matthew 6:9–13), in which Jesus urges us to pray to “our Father in heaven”—that *all* believers are in some sense God’s children.

## Conclusions

Even if we disregard the suggestive evidence relating the Essenes to Christianity, Jesus’ beginnings already indicate a strong affinity with the later development of Jewish Christianity. John the Baptist is a vegetarian who lives with very few possessions. He substitutes the water of baptism for the fire of animal sacrifice. At the moment of Jesus’ baptism, the spirit of God descends on Jesus and God declares Jesus to be his son. All of this resonates very closely with a Jesus who was, according to the Ebionites, a very human prophet who preached simplicity and nonviolence. From the accounts of his life and the company in which he traveled, we can conclude that John the Baptist was much more in harmony with the Jewish Christian teachings than the later orthodox Christian churches for which he is thought to have cleared a straight path.

