



QUEST 52

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Was John the Baptist an Essene?

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Stegemann and Betz advance six arguments in favor of John's connection with the Essenes; cf. Harmut Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998) 211–12 and Otto Betz, "Was John the Baptist an Essene?" *BRev* (December 1990): 18–25. Most of their arguments, however, have substantial flaws:

(1) John **immersed** as did the Essenes. However, John's baptism was initiatory (and most likely a one-time event) for (scandalous) outsiders not insiders (Luke 7:29). Unlike Essene baptism it was performed by another and promised forgiveness of sins. If John borrowed baptism from the Essenes he altered it so significantly that it retained little of its original meaning. "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," (H. H. Rowley, "The Baptism of John and the Qumran Sect" in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of Thomas Walter Manson* [ed. A. J. B. Higgins. Manchester, 1959], 219, contra Bo Reicke, "Die jüdischen Baptisten und Johannes der Täufer," in *Jesus in der Verkündigung der Kirche* [ed. Albert Fuchs, Freistadt: Plöchl, 1976], 76–88).

(2) John's **dress** (Essenes wore white) and **diet** (Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4) could indicate that he was an expelled Essene who was forbidden to eat anything prepared by outsiders (Josephus, *War* 2.143), cf. Stevan Davies, "John the Baptist and Essene Kashruth," *NTS* 29 (1983): 569–71. However, this does not indicate that he was an Essene during his ministry but only that he might formerly have been one. In addition, the communal meal was bread and wine (1QS 6:4–6; cf. 1QSa 2:17–21) which John expressly did *not* eat or drink (Matt 11:18/Luke 7:33–34; cf. Luke 1:15). Furthermore, his constant contact with large crowds of people, especially the unclean sorts who responded to his baptism, was expressly forbidden by the Essenes.

(3) One would expect John's aged parents to die soon after he was born. Since the Essenes **adopted** orphans, it would explain why John was raised in the desert (Luke 1:80).

(4) Qumran texts appeal to **Isaiah 40:3**, a highway in the desert, to explain their presence in the wilderness (1QS 8:12–16; cf. Mark 1:2–3; Matt 3:3; Luke 1:76; 3:4–6; John 1:23). However, John was on the East bank of the Jordan in a different political territory. The Essenes deliberately located themselves inside the historic bounds of Israel.

(5) Both John and the Essenes called for **conversion away from the Temple** (though John is never openly critical of the Temple or its worship, perhaps because his own father was a priest). However, the Essenes sought righteousness through study of the Torah; John, rather, advocates social justice (Luke 3:10–14). Furthermore, John's preaching of the immediate coming of the kingdom was unprecedented among the Essenes.

(6) Both held an **eschatological expectation** of imminent judgment of God on the wayward nation.

All one can assert with certainty in light of this data is that had John once been an Essene, he was not a very good one and got kicked out; by the time he developed his own ministry he had so significantly altered their ideas that he would have been considered an apostate to the Essene way of life.