

GNOSTIC JOHN THE BAPTIZER

G. R. S. MEAD

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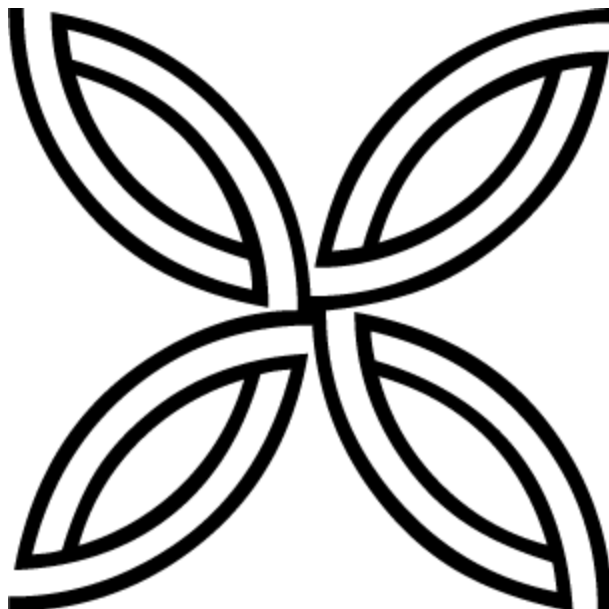
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FOREWORD.

THE main materials contained in these pages will certainly be new for the vast majority of readers. Moreover the Mandæan narratives, legends and discourses are not only interesting because of their own distinctive matter and manner, but they are also arresting; for they raise a number of problems, some of which are far-reaching and one is fraught with implications of immense importance. The definite solutions of these problems, however, lie in the future, and the most important of them will perhaps never be reached; for, in the absence of straightforward historical information, general agreement on any subject that concerns Christian origins immediately or even indirectly is now well-nigh a psychological impossibility.

The writer's intention in publishing these selections is not to speculate about the problems, for we are not yet in a position to state them with sufficient accuracy, but the very modest undertaking of making accessible for English readers some specimens of narrative and doctrine from one collection only of the traditional gnostic material which the Mandæan scribes have preserved to our own day through centuries of copying, and which hands on an early literature purporting at least in part to go back to times contemporaneous with Christian origins. For I think it will be of service for them, as a beginning, to read for themselves what the Mandæans have conserved from the past of the now legendary story of their great prophet, John the Baptizer, and some of the most characteristic notions and doctrines ascribed directly to him,—and that too in their full native setting and not in the form of brief summaries or isolated sentences, which is practically all

they will meet with in the very few articles on the subject which have yet appeared in English,—and in articles only, for of books there are none.

Moreover it has been impossible to do even this previously; p. vi for it is only quite recently that we have had put into our hands a reliable and complete version in German of two of the three main collections preserved to us; and we are still awaiting the translation of the most important deposit, without which it is impossible to survey the whole field thoroughly and so make really reliable inferences. All prior attempts at partial translation have been tentative at best and for the most part erroneous. But though we are still without a scientific version of the Treasury, it is nevertheless already possible to give almost a complete setting forth of one topic; for the selections from the John-Book here presented include practically all the matter that refers directly to the prophet, seeing that the Treasury makes only one brief reference immediately to him.

In this material a figure is depicted which in many ways differs greatly from the familiar picture sketched in the gospels and briefly referred to in the classical Josephus. The interest of the Gnostics has never been in external history, so that for the most part we are either in complete ignorance of, or lamentably uninformed about, the persons of their great teachers and writers. Their interest was rather in inner or psychic story and the imaginative history of ideas. Consequently the Mandæan picture of John is the prophetic and intimate aspect it presented to those within the mystic atmosphere of the community and to the fond memory of an esoteric tradition. No external view is preserved. I have deliberately brought out this contrast as strongly as possible by setting the Mandæan story in the

midst between two studies of traditions which make much of John's wild appearance and strange dress, a popular external element which would at first sight suggest an equally primitive quality of his thought and action. This has been done to enable the reader to realize as strongly as possible the difficulties surrounding the fundamental problem of historicity, though the sharpness of the contrast is already somewhat modified by the doctrinal considerations brought out in the first study, which may theoretically help to bridge over to some extent the gap between the crudest features of the popular external tradition and what claims to be an internal tradition, no matter how it may have been sublimated in the form in which it has reached us. The second study, on the Slavonic Josephus' account of the Baptist and Jesus, though throwing no, or scarcely any, light on doctrine, p. vii is, in my opinion, of importance from the point of view of possible external popular tradition, and in any case will be a novelty for most readers.

It is a remarkable and somewhat saddening reflection that now, when after long years of waiting we are at last obtaining adequate versions of these so faithfully preserved Mandæan gnostic scriptures, their handers-on themselves are dying out, and those of them who remain do not seem to be sufficiently instructed or to possess the general education to throw light on the problems which their documents present to scholars. They do not seem to have any notion of the history of religion or the critical power in any way to analyze their own scriptures and compare them with parallel developments in the past. What I do not quite understand, however, is why, with regard to the philological side of the subject, no attempt, as far as I can ascertain, has been made by any European Semitic scholar scientifically to study Mandæan with the Mandæans

themselves, and so collaborate with them in translation. They all speak Arabic as well as their native tongue; and it is somewhat puzzling that neither Brandt nor Lidzbarski, who have, after the pioneer work of Nöldeke on the language, busied themselves so sedulously with the documents, should not have visited them. They are accessible; and indeed do not seem in any way to be averse from giving information, as is seen from Siouffi's informant in the eighties of last century and quite recently from the account of Miss E. S. Stephens (now Mrs. Drower). The latter has made great friends with the Amara community and gives an entertaining chapter about them, under the heading 'A Peculiar People,' in her brightly-written travel-book, *By Tigris and Euphrates*.¹ It is the description of an intelligent and deeply interested observer, but of one unacquainted with the literature of the subject, and therefore not in a position to press for information on points of importance, if perchance it could be obtained. The account deals with externals, but it may be of interest to our readers to reproduce what Mrs. Drower was told about the shalmono and the masseqtā-ceremony, or rite of the making of a 'perfect' in this connection.

"There is a way . . . in which a Subba may reach a state p. viii of holiness akin to that of the dweller in Mshuni-Koshto [the M. Abode of the Blessed], and this strange and unworldly people often resort to it. To achieve this state a man must renounce worldly desires and the delights of the flesh, but his path is harder than that of the Catholic monk in that he continues to live among men, a layman, and amongst his family without being able to partake of the joys of family life. In fact, after the ceremony of renunciation has taken place, the funeral service is read over him and he is, henceforth, no more than a living ghost.

"He may carry on his trade of farmer, boat-builder, or silversmith as before; but his personal life is one of renunciation, deprivation and self-mortification. He may not smoke, drink wine, coffee, tea, or any drug. He may not give an order, or express a desire. Should he need anything, he must procure it himself, or do without. His detachment from worldly things must be so complete that if a fire were to burn his house, destroy his goods and suffocate his wife and children he must show or feel no trace of emotion. . . . 'A permanent gaiety must be shown in his face.'

"The ceremony which separates the 'shalmono' from the world of the living is called the 'Massakhto.' The applicant goes to the bishop, who questions him closely as to the seriousness of his intentions, and impresses upon him the irrevocable nature of the step he wishes to take. After seven days' preparation with the bishop, if the applicant's desire is unshaken, he spends seven days and seven nights in a church [?] or place apart.

"Every day the bishop and priests come to him, and for food the postulant eats three tiny flat loaves of sacramental bread, about as large as an Osborne biscuit, daily; also part of the flesh of a dove. . . .

"At the end of the week a feast is prepared to which the new 'shalmono' is invited, usually in the house of the bishop. At the end of the feast all the priests who have eaten arise, with a last mouthful of food in their hands. Solemnly, then, the Prayer for the Dead is recited for the 'shalmono,' and, just as for a dead man, the last mouthful is

eaten, the last mouthful which is supposed to stay the departed soul on its journey through purgatory. . . .

"The life of a 'shalmono' is harder than that of a priest, for priests and priestesses may marry; indeed, marriage is obligatory."

The last sentence suggests that the shalmono is a celibate from the start, but Mrs. Drower has already spoken of his wife and children and quotes Siouffi to the same effect, and the documents lay it down expressly that celibacy in no case whatever was approved, not even in that of a prophet.

It is evident that we have in this indication of a present-day class of 'perfect' separated out from the mass of the faithful, a subject for sympathetic enquiry, with the object of ascertaining whether among them there are any who enjoy mystic experience, and if so what is its nature, and whether it throws any light on the spiritual phases of the tradition.

Mrs. Drower is happy in choosing for the heading of her account 'A Peculiar People' and not 'A Strange Sect' or some such title. For one of the great points of interest is that the Mandæans show all the signs of being a race distinct from their neighbours. They make no converts and seem for many centuries to have kept themselves to themselves. They are not Arabs or Jews in type, but (?) 'Babylonians,' 'Chaldeans,'—a problem for the ethnologist to decide.

Footnotes

1 London, Hurst & Blackett, 1923, pp. 204-219.

I. JOHN THE BAPTIZER AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS.

A RECENT STUDY ON JOHN'S SYMBOLISM.

A DISTINCT ray of light has been cast on the obscure background of Christian origins by Dr. Robert Eisler in a series of detailed studies on the movement and doctrines of John the Baptizer. These studies, with other cognate essays, appeared originally in the pages of *The Quest* (1909-14), and are now available in book-form in an arresting volume, called *Orpheus—the Fisher: Comparative Studies in Orphic and Christian Cult Symbolism*.¹

By way of introduction and as the most complete contrast to the Mandæan tradition of the Gnostic John, I will set forth in my own way the chief points of these detailed and fully-documented essays in summary fashion. Eisler's main point of view is that John based his doctrines and practices largely, if not entirely, on the Hebrew scriptures—the Law and the Prophets—of which, he contends, he was a profound knower. The John-movement is thus regarded as a characteristic Jewish prophetic reform founded on absolute faith in the present fulfilment of prior prophecy. Hereby is brought out in the strongest possible manner the Jewish conditioning of John's preaching and teaching, and this stands in the sharpest contradiction to the p. 2 Mandæan tradition which claims that John was a Gnostic and not a Torah-man, and declares that the Jews could by no means understand him, but on the contrary rejected his revelation and drove out his community.

In Eisler we have a ripe scholar in whom the heredity of Rabbinical lore is so to say innate. He has almost an uncanny flair for biblical texts; it is not too much to say that his knowledge of the religious literature of his people is profound, his acquaintance with oriental sources very extensive and his linguistic accomplishments are enviable. Few are thus better able to enter with sympathy and understanding into the idiosyncrasies and depths of the Jewish mind in the various periods of its development, and thus for the time to live in the prophetic, apocalyptic and rabbinical thought-world of the days of the Baptist and share in its old-time beliefs and hopes and fears. Our exponent is thus an excellent advocate of the theme he sets forth. If his wide-flung net has not caught all the fish of the literary and archæological ocean, he has fished most carefully the stream of John the Baptist tradition, apart from the Mandæan, landed a rich catch and shown others how most fruitfully to set about bringing to the surface things about John which have long been hidden in the depths of a buried past.

THE JOHN-PASSAGE IN 'THE ANTIQUITIES' OF JOSEPHUS.

In all reason, apart from Christian testimony, John the Baptizer is a historic character, witnessed to by the Jewish historian Josephus, the courtly Flavian chronicler who flourished in the last quarter of the p. 3 1st century A.D. The famous passage in his Antiquities (XVIII. v. 2, ed.

Niese, iv. 161, 162) referring to John is undoubtedly genuine, and has been assailed only by the very extreme doctrinaire non-historical school, who find it a very inconvenient thorn in their flesh. A Christian forger would have dotted the i's and crossed the t's with the pen of his tradition, or at any rate betrayed himself in some way by the prejudice of his thought; but this we do not find. The passage runs as follows as nearly as I can render it:

Some of the Jews thought that Herod's army had been destroyed, and indeed by the very just vengeance of God, in return for [his putting to death of] John the Baptizer. For in fact Herod put the latter to death [though he was] a good man, nay even one who bade the Jews cultivate virtue and, by the practice of righteousness in their dealings with one another and of piety to God, gather together for baptism. For thus in sooth [John thought] the dipping (in water) would seem acceptable to him (God), not if they used it as a begging-off in respect to certain sins, but for purity of body, in as much as indeed the soul had already been purified by righteousness.

Now since the others¹ were gathering themselves together (or becoming organized),—for indeed they were delighted beyond measure at the hearing of his (John's) 'sayings' (logoi),—Herod, fearing that his extraordinary power of persuading men might lead to a revolt, for they seemed likely in all things to act according to his advice, judged it better, before anything of a revolutionary nature should eventuate from him, to arrest him first and make away with him, rather than when the change came, he should regret being faced with it.

Accordingly, on Herod's suspicion, he was sent in bonds to Machærus,² the above-mentioned fortress, and put to death there. The Jews, however, believed that destruction befell the army to avenge him, God willing to afflict Herod.

This statement of Flavius Josephus is sufficiently categorical. It states clearly that John the Baptizer was a very remarkable prophetic reformer of the day and that his following was very considerable. John's 'sayings,' Josephus tells us, had an astonishingly persuasive power over the Jewish populace. Herod fears John's influence and is convinced that he could do anything he pleases with the people. But what interests us most in this unfortunately too short statement is the reference to the nature of John's practice and teaching. His proclamation to the Jews, like that of all the prophets before him, was a strenuous call to righteousness,—they were to practise righteous dealings with one another (love of neighbour) and piety to God (love of God). There was also an external rite of baptism; but it had to be preceded by a cleansing of the soul through the fulfilling of this duty to neighbour and to God. Josephus particularly points out that the public washing or dipping was by no means intended as a magical rite, which so many believed in those days capable of washing away sins. The baptism was not a daily practice, Josephus seems to imply, as among the Essenes and other sects, but a public corporate act; and therefore the historian is clearly in error in regarding it as simply for the purifying of the body. On the contrary, it distinctly conveys the impression of being designed as an outer testimony to some belief—an act of faith.

THE N.T. ACCOUNT: THE DRESS AND FOOD OF REPENTANCE.

And now let us pass to our New Testament information. Without laying stress on the details of the story of John's infancy as given in the third gospel, reminiscent as they may be of the Old Testament birth-stories of the old-time national heroes Isaac, Samson and Samuel, not to mention the coincidence that the two heroines of the gospel birth-narratives bear the names of Miriam and Elisheba, the sister and wife respectively of Aaron, the first priest, we may very reasonably believe, as it is stated, that John was of priestly descent; and therefore in every probability he was well versed, if not highly trained, in the scriptures.

Vowed from his birth to God by his parents, his strange dress and peculiar ascetic mode of life are quite in keeping with prophetic traditions, and thus of the schools of the prophets and of the Nazirs. As the prophets of old, notably Elijah, he wore a skin robe. But in keeping with the spiritual significance of his whole teaching, which will be more fully brought out in the sequel, such an outer sign in high probability had an inner meaning for this great proclaimer of repentance, of the turning back of Israel in contrition unto God.

Now there were certain Palestinian pre-Christian allegorists or exponents of the scriptures on quasi-mystical lines called Dorshē Reshumōth. According to a Rabbinic legend, going back along this line of interpretation, the ancient myth of Gen. 3:21 was conceived more spiritually. After the fall, the first falling away from God, Yahveh-

Elohīm clothed Adam and Eve in coats of skin ('ōr), not because of their nakedness, but in exchange for their lost paradisaical garments of light ('ōr).

John lived at a time when such mystical interpretations, with a host of prophetic and apocalyptic notions, were in the air. It might very well then be that he himself in wearing a skin-robe intended something more than a simple copying of the fashion of the ancient prophets. In keeping with his ruling idea he may have thought it a most appropriate outer sign of repentance, a return to the first garments of fallen man, the proper robe of penitent sinners, and therefore especially of a leader who would show the people a whole-hearted example of turning again to God, thus retracing in a contrary direction the way of the fall.

So too with regard to food, there must be a return to the primitive law laid down for primal fallen man (Gen. 1:29): "Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." It was only after the Deluge that men were permitted to eat animal food, according to the Noahic covenant as it is called. Imbued with ideas of penitence and repentance, John would desire to return to the strictest food-regulations of the earliest days of the fall, in keeping with his symbolic manner of clothing. Not only so, but seemingly with a refinement of self-discipline as a means of contrition, John chose from out the many 'fruits from a tree yielding seed' that of the carob or locust-tree, which was considered by the Jewish allegorists the most appropriate food of repentance. For we have preserved from this line of tradition an ancient proverb: "Israel needs carob-pods to

make him repent," said to be based on a prophecy in Isaiah (1:20) which the Midrash (Wayikra Rabba, 35) quotes as: "If ye be willing and obedient, the good of the land shall ye eat; but if ye refuse and resist, carob-pods shall ye eat"—where the last clause differs considerably from the R.V., which reads: "ye shall be devoured by the sword." Perhaps the 'husks' eaten by the Prodigal in the gospel-parable may in the original Aramaic have been carob-pods (Lk. 15:16). Much controversy has raged round the 'locusts' eaten by John, and early versions are various.

As for drink,—in addition to water for general purposes, John is said to have in particular sipped the honey of the wild bees. Why is this brought into so great prominence? Again perhaps this custom was determined for John by the same circle of ideas. He probably bethought him of Deut. 32:13: "He made him to suck honey out of the rock," and also of Ps. 81:16: "And with honey out of the rock shall I satisfy thee." From such considerations it may plausibly be believed that John adopted an asceticism of repentance with regard to clothing and food as completely in accordance with the scriptures as possible, and this in addition to the customary discipline of a vowed Nazir, 'consecrated' or 'made holy' as such from birth. The technical term for a Nazir is a Nazirite unto God, or holy unto God, as of Samson (LXX. Judges, 13:7, 16:9),—in brief God's 'holy one.'

POPULAR MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS.

According to Josephus the great fear of Herod was that the reformatory movement of John would develop into a dangerous political Messianic revolt. The populace was on the tip-toe of expectation; many rumours were afloat as to the nature of the long-expected God's Anointed. Some thought he was to be a Nazir who would free Israel from their present foes, even as in days of old the Nazir Samson had freed them from the yoke of the Philistines. Moreover the well-known prophecy (Is. 11:1) about the 'sprout' from the root or stem of Jesse gave rise to much speculation, helped out by that word-play which exercised so powerful a fascination over the imaginative minds of the Jews of that day, and long before and after over other minds in many other lands. Now 'sprout' in Hebrew is neṣer or nezer; and this neṣer was to be the longed-for 'saviour' (again neṣer)—sounding so well together with nazir. Indeed, as was thought, he must needs be a Nazarai-an (Heb. noṣeri, Gk. nazōrai-os). Or again, as others expected, he was to be a carpenter (Aram. bar nasar), this being, according to a Samaritan Midrash, as we shall see in the sequel, in association with the expectation that the coming Redeemer was to be a second Noah, spiritually hewing and preparing the timber for a new ark of salvation.

All this was in the air and widespread; it is then quite believable, whether John himself made any such claims or no, that there were many rumours current of a Messianic purport concerning the strange appearance and powerful appeal of the renowned Baptizer. His Nazarite vow, his garb and diet of repentance, his confident proclamation of the very near approach of the catastrophic end of this æon or age or world,—all would conspire to make some, if not many, think that he himself was the great Nazir-Neṣer, the expected 'holy one' of God. By others he was thought to be Elijah returned, as the prophet Malachi (the Book of the