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## John the Baptist in Memory, Judaism, and Historical Materialism

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**Abstract:** Joel Marcus' *John the Baptist in History and Theology* argues that John would have seen himself not as forerunner to Jesus but rather that he, and not Jesus, was the proclaimer and inaugurator of God's apocalyptic kingdom. The historical Baptist, originally part of the Qumran community, broke away from this group due to his belief that he himself was the prophet Elijah and that his own ministry was central to God's purposes. This article raises three methodological and historiographical questions concerning where Marcus might reconsider and/or expand the results of his study. First, can we really get at John's self-understanding beyond the subjective memory impressions left in our extant sources? Second, does Marcus' connection of John to the Qumran community rely on (mis)characterizations of the community as a marginal sect? Third, what social and economic forces prompted John's 'individual decision' to relocate to the wilderness?

**Keywords:** John the Baptist; social memory; historical materialism; Qumran community; Joel Marcus

### Introduction

Joel Marcus' *John the Baptist in History and Theology* is an important contribution to the study of the historical John which has consequences for the study of both the historical Jesus and Jewish religious and social movements in and around first-century Palestine. As Bart D. Ehrman puts it in his endorsement of the book: 'No one can understand the historical Jesus without first coming to grips with John the Baptist.'<sup>1</sup> Given the relative abundance of surviving evidence for John's, and indeed Jesus', impact compared to other mostly non-elite movements from the Second Temple period, the study of John the Baptist also provides another rare opportunity for detecting the influence and unpacking the lives of so-called 'ordinary' people in history. Marcus' book, however, is less concerned with the impression John left on his contemporaries than in seeking to uncover an authentic portrait of the individual person of John.

In this article I want to push back on several historiographical and methodological concerns that have implications for the study not only of John but also of Jesus and other individuals from the past. In responding to Marcus' book, I will raise three fundamental questions regarding where Marcus might want to reconsider and/or expand the results of his study. My response is divided into three sections corresponding to these questions. First, can we really get at John's self-understanding beyond the subjective memory impressions left in our extant sources? Second, does Marcus' connection of John to the Qumran community rely

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018).

on a selective reconstruction of the community as a marginal sect rather than a conventional participant within Second Temple Judaism? Third, what social and economic forces lay behind John's 'individual decision' to relocate to the Judean wilderness?

Just briefly, what are the main thrusts of the book? Against the theological characterization by the Gospels, Marcus posits that the historical John was not secondary to Jesus – merely pointing away from himself – but functioned rather as a rival figure for Jesus' early followers. Marcus argues that the Baptist would have seen himself, and not Jesus, as the proclaimer and initiator of God's apocalyptic kingdom. And so, a competition between adherents of Jesus and adherents of the Baptist accounts for the polemic we encounter within the extant 'Christian' sources, such as when the Fourth Gospel proclaims Jesus rather than John as the 'true light, which enlightens everyone, [that] was coming into the world' (1:6-9).

According to Marcus, the historical Baptist was originally part of the Qumran sect which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls and it is here that his early thinking and practice was shaped. John later broke away from the group, due in part to his firmly held belief that he himself was the prophet Elijah and that his own individual ministry and ambitions were central to the fulfilment of God's salvific purposes. In the rest of the book, Marcus expounds the significance and meaning of John's self-conscious identification with Elijah, and the distinctive aspects of John's baptismal practice, before turning to consider John's encounters with Jesus and Herod Antipas. The book concludes with several appendices (eleven to be precise!) which allow for brief excursions into secondary discussions not dealt with by the main body of text, such as John's priestly background, considerations of the reliability and character of Josephus' account of John, and various exegetical issues.

### **Memory and the subjectivity of historical sources**

The first question I want to ask is: can we really get at John the Baptist's self-understanding beyond the subjective memory impressions left in our extant sources? Put differently, what are the implications of social memory theory for an historical account of John? This is a question concerning basic historiographical method as the scholarly discussion has evolved in Jesus research over the past two or so decades.

Marcus begins his book with a simple and to-the-point question: who was John the Baptist? The stated goal of his study is to separate the historical Baptist from later Christian embellishment, both within and beyond the New Testament canon. As Marcus cautions, scholars before him have likewise expressed hesitations about relying on the Gospel portraits of John as the Messiah's predecessor, 'partly because it is so obvious that it serves Christian interests'.<sup>2</sup> Marcus clarifies that he seeks to discover John *as he would have understood himself* and not through the lens of Christian theology. I include here a quote from Marcus so the reader can appreciate the nuance with which he outlines this undertaking, and his appreciation for *some* of its limitations. He explains that he will attempt to 'strip away' the Christian influence of our primary sources

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 1.

to the extent possible and ask what John thought his own ministry was about. Admittedly, this separation is somewhat artificial [as] almost all of our early sources about John are Christian, so (except for Josephus's brief notice) there is no access to 'the Jewish John' that does not pass through a Christian checkpoint. Still, it is useful to try to start from the ground up, and that means starting with John's background and role within first-century Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

Leaving aside the complex issue of whether the (equally artificial) distinction between 'Jewish' and 'Christian' sources is helpful to an historical understanding of the Gospels,<sup>4</sup> I am still left wondering whether such a goal, of finding what John thought of his own ministry, is even possible given we cannot ask him directly, nor do we have access to primary sources—whether literary or archaeological—that come from the Baptist himself.

Marcus attempts to achieve his aim by employing the criteria of authenticity including embarrassment and contextual plausibility. However, such an approach is at odds with burgeoning approaches to historical Jesus research such as social memory theory. In his introduction, Marcus advises that he holds steadfast to the criteria, despite their much-rumoured demise. Noting in passing the current moves against them,<sup>5</sup> he suggests he employs them not so much as a 'hard' method, but more as 'softer' guidelines, observing that 'We should be suspicious of features of the Christian picture of John that seem to serve Christian interests, such as ... the Synoptic identification of him as the returned Elijah, clearing a path for the Messiah Jesus.'<sup>6</sup> This is all reasonably agreeable – although one need not retain the criteria of authenticity (specifically here embarrassment) in order to exercise a *hermeneutics of suspicion* over our primary sources.

A central criticism levelled against the criteria, and one I do not see Marcus grappling with, is that any attempt to 'authenticate' Jesus traditions, *separated from the subjectivity of the memory impressions left in our sources*, assumes the existence of an 'objective reality' of the past, beyond the subjectivity of those people who experienced such events. A search for evidence alone is heuristically flawed, since it does not understand memory processes that result in much being reshaped or lost. One commendable aspect of his study is that by adhering to the 'competition hypothesis' between Jesus and John's followers, it takes seriously the basic idea (that social memory also affirms) that present social conditions

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Marcus cites Anthony Le Donne and Chris Keith, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). Re-evaluations of the criteria also appear in other works by the above authors, as well as Dale C. Allison, 'How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity', in *The Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmen and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2009), vol. 1 pp. 3-30; Rafael Rodríguez, 'Authenticating Criteria: The Use and Misuse of a Critical Method', *JSHJ* 7, no. 1 (2009): pp. 152–67; James G. Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 35–63. Schüssler Fiorenza contended earlier that the 'historical positivism' of Jesus research, as typified by the criterion of authenticity, 'corresponds to political conservatism.... Its universalizing discourses obfuscate that historians select and interpret archaeological artifacts and textual evidence as well as incorporate them into a scientific model and narrative framework of meaning'. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, pp. 3–4.

influence articulations of the past. But Marcus' approach also problematically erects a false dichotomy wherein 'authenticity' is defined in the first instance in contradistinction to subsequent (Christian) interpretation. Although Marcus is clear that his goal is to reconstruct John the Baptist *as he would have understood himself*, given our sources come not from John, but from his contemporaries who clearly had their own reasons for remembering him in certain ways, we simply cannot reconstruct a portrait of John devoid of their interpretations, and the memory impressions contained therein. As Chris Keith explains, 'The authentic/inauthentic dichotomy is false precisely because, in memory, the past is always packaged in interpretive frameworks borrowed from the present... The notion that there is a past entity—a personal memory, unit of gospel tradition, historical figure, etc.—that one can detach from the interpretations that gave it meaning to a person or group is simply erroneous.'<sup>7</sup>

No object, person, or figure of the past survives into the present without interpretation. Put another way: is there really an historical John waiting to be found *apart from* the subjective impressions he left on his contemporaries?

### **John's relationship to the Qumran community**

The second question I have is whether Marcus' connection of the historical Baptist to the Qumran community relies on a selective reconstruction of the community as a marginal sect, rather than as a conventional participant within the broader make-up of Second Temple Judaism?

Marcus' theory, that John was originally a member of the Qumran community but later ventured out on his own is certainly one explanation for both the conspicuous similarities, and the subtle differences, between the Baptist as he is remembered in the Gospel tradition and what we know of the Qumran community from the Dead Sea Scrolls and archaeological discovery. For example, practicing an eschatologically-oriented rite of water immersion *explicitly tied to* repentance and forgiveness of sins, location in the wilderness of Judea, ascetism, the use of Isaiah 40:3 ('A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way"') in the DSS (1QS 8:12-14; 9:18-20) and Gospel descriptions of John's ministry (Mk 1:3-4//Mt. 3:1-13//Lk. 3:2-4), and so on. Since, as Marcus reasons, 'we know that John and the Qumran sect were operating in the same general area ... and ... that [John] may have been from the sort of priestly background that was especially important in the sect, it seems more probable than not that he started out as a member of the group'.<sup>8</sup> I will return to John's priestly background in the next section. For now, I want to suggest that an alternative, perhaps more plausible, explanation is that these similarities and differences simply place both John and the evidence from Qumran within the broader context of Second Temple Judaism.

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<sup>7</sup> Chris Keith, 'The Indebtedness of the Criteria Approach to Form Criticism and Recent Attempts to Rehabilitate the Search for an Authentic Jesus', in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 25-48 (39).

<sup>8</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 33.

Marcus contends that the minority of differences between the DSS and traditions about John are not significant enough to ‘efface the genealogical relation that can be posited on the basis of the shared traits of the two movements’ and he asserts that these traits are often unique ‘as far as we know’ within Second Temple Judaism.<sup>9</sup> For instance, he suggests ‘we do not have evidence for any other Second Temple Jewish group that practiced a water immersion oriented to the eschaton and linked with forgiveness of sins and the eschatological impartation of the spirit’ and that this is enough to establish a genetic relationship.<sup>10</sup> However, this inference rests on *an argument from silence*. Following basic historiographical logic, the evidence cited suggests that there were at least two or three groups in Second Temple Judaism doing this (John’s movement and/or the ‘Christians’, plus the Qumran community), and *not* that this was an exclusive or distinctive practice. In fact, having two or three groups practicing a specific form of ritual immersion gives quite the opposite impression, namely, that such practices were widespread. The partial nature of our evidence does not mean other Judeans were not capable of doing broadly similar things.

Water immersions aside, the special status attributed to the wilderness, which features again and again as a formative Hebrew memory, was also hardly unique to John or the Qumran community. Likewise, ascetic practices and movements were not exactly uncommon, although they were less likely to leave an imprint on the archaeological record for obvious reasons which is why the Qumran site is an important exception. When political or religious conditions became unbearable during the Second Temple period, pious Judeans would often withdraw into the wilderness. Such a practice is modelled by the ‘many who were seeking righteousness and justice’ and who sought refuge, along with their families and livestock, in the desert during the infamous reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 BCE, only to be hunted down and killed by the king’s loyalists (1 Macc. 2:29-38).

During the Herodian period, alongside his discussion of the Essenes (who may or may not be responsible for producing the Qumran scrolls)<sup>11</sup> Philo also mentions the Therapeutae, a Jewish ascetic movement located in the Egyptian desert (*Contempl.* 3ff).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the first century apocalypse the *Testament of Moses* refers to a Levite priest named Taxo who, along with his seven sons, fasted three days before taking up residence in a cave in the desert (9:1-7). Another pseudepigraphic text, the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, depicts Isaiah retreating to a mountain in the desert. When his disciples arrive, ‘All of them were clothed in sackcloth ... were destitute, and they all lamented bitterly over the going astray of Israel. And they had nothing to eat except wild herbs which they gathered from the mountains’ (2:10-11). These intertextual resonances to John’s ‘ascetic’ characterization in the Gospels are not explored by Marcus’ book, but they do once again illustrate that John and the Qumran community were not the only ones capable of living ascetically in the wilderness. Put

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 32, cf. pp. 74–76.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus does not appear to commit either way. See Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, pp. 27-28, 134.

<sup>12</sup> It’s unclear whether the Therapeutae and the Essenes were related. While the Therapeutae did not drink wine, the Essenes presumably did. Yet see Lk. 1:15; 7:33 which indicates that John abstained.

differently, it is perhaps an exaggeration to suppose their asceticism was enough of a distinctive feature to establish a genetic link.

Another argument Marcus puts forward to infer a link between the Baptist and the Qumran community is parallels in Scriptural interpretation, such as the use of Isa. 40:3. In defending this position, Marcus claims that Joan E. Taylor, in her book *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism*,<sup>13</sup> exaggerates the differences between the Baptist movement and Qumran community to conclude the two groups were not related.<sup>14</sup> In one instance, he suggests Taylor utilizes differences between the usage of Isa. 40:3 in the DSS and the Gospel portrayal of John to amplify ‘the significance of these differences’ when she says that they have ‘a completely different hermeneutical emphasis’ in the two bodies of literature. According to Marcus, Taylor uses this assertion to conclude the two groups were *not* related.

What Taylor writes is perhaps a little more nuanced. She begins her statement with the conditional clause that ‘*If* the same text was used, *but* with a completely different hermeneutical emphasis, this shows that the two groups were not related’ [emphasis mine]. Crucially, however, she also reasons that the mere use of the same text proves nothing in terms of relationship either way; the evidence of a genetic link is at best inconclusive. What we can determine is that a parallel use of Isa. 40:3 would once again situate the Qumran community and John within the broader world of Judaism. As Taylor writes, ‘the Hebrew Scriptures were the property of all groups’ in Second Temple Judaism, and so it would not be surprising to find different groups quoting them. Moreover, it cannot be ‘assumed that John himself made use of Isa. 40:3 in relation to his purposes [as] The evidence for his employment of this verse is to be found in Christian material, and Christians may have had their own’ reasons for using it.<sup>15</sup>

In her more recent book on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Taylor argues that the Essenes (who she regards as responsible for the scrolls) were not a small, marginal sect, but rather were numerous, influential, involved in Temple practices, and had legal autonomy. The Hasmoneans opposed the Essenes, whereas the Herodian dynasty honoured and protected them. In fact, for Taylor, the Herodians in the Gospels are the Essenes! This idea would have been especially fascinating for Marcus to engage with given the conflict between John and Herod Antipas. If John really was, as Marcus hypothesizes, initially part of the Qumran community, and the community was in some sense ‘sponsored’ by the Herods, then the conflict between John and Herod Antipas becomes all-the-more interesting, and obviously should be interpreted within this milieu.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, the association between the Baptist and the Qumran community posited by Marcus appears to be overstated. The idea that the Qumran community’s ideas and

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<sup>13</sup> Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *The Immerser*, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Joan E. Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls, and the Dead Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

practices were distinctive may rest on the popular view that the community was a ‘marginal sect’ out of step with ‘mainstream’ Judaism. However, I would insist that the similarities between John and the Qumran community were reflective of many ‘mainstream’ aspects of Second Temple Judaism, and so locate John within the broader Judaism of his time. Historical inferences based on ‘uniqueness’ are fraught with difficulty as nothing is ever completely unique, or everything is, depending on how you understand the term. The incomplete nature of our data also needs to be considered when making claims about the supposed distinctiveness of a particular group in relation to others.

Do similarities between John and the Qumran community specifically link him to this group, or do they simply gesture towards both groups’ participation within the broader range of ideas, interests, and practices of Second Temple Judaism?

### **John the Baptist and the Great Man view of history**

A final question I have concerns John’s agency and the material dynamics of historical change. Crudely put, what social, political, or economic forces may have prompted John’s ‘individual decision’ to relocate to the Judean wilderness? Intertextually, as noted above, the escape by ‘many who were seeking righteousness and justice’ into the Judean desert in 1 Macc. 2:29-38 is a strong contender for the possibility of broader social and political forces at play behind John’s sudden ‘appearance’ (ἐγένετο, Mk 1:4) in the wilderness (cf. Lk. 1:80 which places John in the wilderness from childhood). However, Marcus presents John as someone who did things largely in fulfilment of his own personal ambitions and identifications, which John himself believed were ordained by God. Is it historically plausible, or indeed helpful, to ascribe such actions to the self-conscious level of individual decision-making? We have already seen the difficulty with trying to authenticate John’s self-understanding from the perspective of social memory theory. I turn now to a related concern frequently raised by proponents of the materialist conception of history.

Because Marcus seeks to discover the Baptist *as he would have understood himself* this inevitably leads to inferences that may overestimate the Baptist’s ability to self-actualize individual choices and desires. For example, John’s decision to leave the Qumran community due to doctrinal differences and a self-conscious intention to evoke Elijah. ‘Reasoned guesses’ rooted in natural psychology are regularly assumed without considering broader social or political explanations or acknowledging that the causes behind some phenomena may remain ultimately unanswerable from an historical perspective. Although Marcus acknowledges that ‘it is difficult to know exactly what was the cause and effect’ of John’s departure, the possibilities he nonetheless considers all place John’s personal ideas and beliefs at centre-stage: ‘whether John departed from the Sect (or was kicked out) because he disagreed with them, or whether he developed different ideas after he left them, or whether both factors were involved’.<sup>17</sup> Marcus suggests the last hypothesis seems most likely, and proceeds with it as a major platform of his overall argument.

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<sup>17</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, p. 35.

Perhaps this approach to historiography is symptomatic of the series in which Marcus' book appears: the title 'Studies on Personalities of the New Testament' frames its subject in psycho-biographical terms. As much as the concept may appear natural to us, the modern sense of personality is the result of massive shifts in culture through the renaissance and capitalism.<sup>18</sup> The delineation of atomized individual personalities in pre-liberal or pre-capitalist societies, especially among the non-elite, is fraught with anachronism. It entices the historian to fall into the liberal trap of reconstructing a unique personality as charismatic individuals, heroes or anti-heroes, and unique and innovative geniuses, in ways that buttress the modern bourgeois conception of self and selfhood.<sup>19</sup>

Halvor Moxnes has made a similar assessment of historical Jesus research in the nineteenth century – the so-called 'liberal' lives – which appropriated the model of the 'Great Man' view of history. According to Moxnes, 'This was a model with its roots in biographies from Antiquity; but the concept of the "great man" or "hero" was central to nineteenth-century ideas of progress and the role of significant individuals in shaping history.'<sup>20</sup> Such an approach zeroes in on how individuals were 'exceptional' human beings and can be plotted against the backdrop of a social context. The Great Man approach arguably persists into the 'neoliberal' age of Jesus research, as I and others have suggested.<sup>21</sup> Moxnes himself remarks that Jesus scholars today 'rarely present their own views regarding, for example, the self, human agency, and the relations between an individual and his or her community. As a result, current scholars' presuppositions about human life and society remain unexamined, and many studies of Jesus are historiographically and hermeneutically naïve'.<sup>22</sup>

Taking similar insights on board, in my previous work I have consistently argued that Jesus' itinerancy needs to be understood as a consequence of broader social and economic forces, and not explained away as an arbitrary and individual 'choice' or 'lifestyle', as it is frequently assumed in biblical scholarship.<sup>23</sup> The same applies to John. There is a persistent class dimension here: only the elite could really make 'lifestyle choices', as Josephus does, as attested in his *Life*. Was John the Baptist elite like Josephus? Surprisingly, despite John's

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<sup>18</sup> Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Or as Schüssler Fiorenza has suggested, 'the understanding of Jesus as a powerful religious genius who transgressed all normal boundaries is the product of an elite masculinist Eurocentric liberal imagination. Jesus the extraordinary and heroic man becomes the paradigm of true (Western male) humanity and individuality'. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth-Century Historical Jesus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Robert J. Myles, 'Crowds and Power in the Early Palestinian Tradition', *JSHJ* 18 (2020): pp. 124–40; James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), pp. 68–84; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, pp. 30–55.

<sup>22</sup> Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, *Social World of Biblical Antiquity* 2/10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), pp. 83–86; Robert J. Myles, 'Homelessness, Neoliberalism, and Jesus' "Decision" to Go Rogue: An Analysis of Matt. 4:13–25', in *Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis*, ed. Bruce Worthington (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), pp. 217–43.



social location being elusive, discussion of class does not feature heavily in the scholarly literature,<sup>24</sup> nor does Marcus engage with the issue head on.

In one of the book's appendices, he does, however, refer to Luke's account of the Baptist's priestly descent, through the parentage of Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:5-80; 3:2). While Luke's claim of priestly descent is not enough on its own<sup>25</sup> there is, according to Marcus, corroborating 'circumstantial evidence' to authenticate it such as John's possible membership of the Qumran community which was priestly in origin, as well as the 'priestly associations' of water baptism.<sup>26</sup> In any case, it is important to note that *priestly descent does not in itself entail elite class*. Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann, for example, locate the Baptist within the 'retainer class', beneath the elite upper-stratum of the ruling Sadducees, Pharisees, the 'teacher of righteousness', and so on, but above non-elite/lower-stratum Essenes, social bandits, and the majority of followers of Jesus' and John's respective ministries.<sup>27</sup> Sarah E. Rollens has recently cautioned that the retainer category itself lumps together a vast range of priests, bureaucrats, and officials who experienced varied and conflicting social perspectives and socio-economic levels.<sup>28</sup> So the priestly account of John's origins does not in itself sufficiently answer the question of John's social location.

Any discussion of John's class will, of course, need to equally consider those curious 'ascetic' details about his extremely modest living conditions. The description of the Baptist as an itinerant and existing off a meagre diet and dressed in poor-quality clothing (e.g., Mt. 3:1-4; 11:7-9; cf. 2 Kgs 1:8) allude not only to the prophet Elijah but also to material deprivation, as occasionally noted by Gospel commentaries.<sup>29</sup> Did John renounce his wealth and privilege for philosophical reasons, like the educated Greco-Roman cynics, was he destitute to begin with, or was he pushed to the geographical margins by extenuating circumstances similar to those crises that precipitated withdrawal in 1 Macc. 2:29-38, the *Testament of Moses*, and the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*?

While the case for John's class location is far from settled, and John's connection to Qumran remains inconclusive (at least in my estimation), he was obviously not alone in the

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<sup>24</sup> Two exceptions, the former arguing for lower-class and the latter arguing for upper-class, are John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), pp. 36–38; Johan Strijdom, 'The Social Class of the Baptist: Dissident Retainer or Peasant Millennialist?', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 60, no. 1/2 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v60i1/2.506>.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew and Luke offer dubious accounts of Jesus' own parentage and claims to noble lineage for theological reasons, and so they cannot be taken at face value on such matters. E.g., Matthew's genealogy exaggerates Jesus' 'royal' connections through King David (1:1-17).

<sup>26</sup> Marcus, *John the Baptist in History and Theology*, pp. 133–34.

<sup>27</sup> Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p. 185.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah E. Rollens, 'Troubling the Retainer Class in Antiquity', in *Class Struggle in the New Testament*, ed. Robert J. Myles (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), pp. 169–90.

<sup>29</sup> Warren Carter, for instance, suggests that John's 'food denotes poverty, as well as his commitment to and trust in God'. Further, on Mt. 11:7-9, John's 'clothing is not conventional [and] Jesus' comment mocks any thought of John's alliance with the elite: those who wear soft robes live in royal palaces, places of power and luxury, not the wilderness, which John frequents'. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), pp. 95, 251.

wilderness. Despite Mark's use of Isa. 40:3 referring to 'a voice' – he is soon accompanied by an (exaggerated) mass of people 'from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem' (Mk 1:2, 5). What of this social movement? Individual charisma alone is not enough of an historical explanation for the impression he and his movement left in the Gospels. What were the underlying economic dynamics, the political and social upheavals, that ultimately pushed his movement into the wilderness? As we know, apocalypticism thrived in times of crisis, and religious workers and peasants in agrarian societies typically do not take such drastic actions like abandoning traditional patterns of life unless conditions are perceived as inimical to survival.

Did John the Baptist *really* see himself as a Great Man of history, as a great individual? And even if he did, *so what?* So-called Great Men are but the products of their societies, and their individual actions would be impossible without the social conditions built before and during their lifetimes.