SHORT NOTES

THE YOUTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A DEDUCTION FROM THE BREAK IN THE PARALLEL ACCOUNT OF THE LUCAN INFANCY STORY

The Third Gospel’s account of John the Baptist’s youth closes with a summary statement (i 80) reminiscent in form of Judges xiii 24 and i Sam. ii 26 to the effect that the boy grew up and became strong in the spirit and that he lived in the desert up to the time of his being shown to Israel.

This summary notice leaves the student unsatisfied for a number of reasons. Firstly the question arises how and why John, born from priestly parents who lived in a place called Judah in the mountainous country east of Jerusalem, came to grow up in the judean desert. Secondly, why did John, who normally would have become a priest, appear on the fringes of the desert scathingly inimical to the representatives of the priesthood who came as observers to his baptism? Why did he wear clothes which, while resembling those of Elijah, were nevertheless wholly unpriestly? Why did he eat locusts and honey instead of cultured foods? Furthermore, instead of sending penitents to sacrifice for their sins according to the priestly rule of Lev. xiv 16, he baptizes them in the Jordan, and commands them to practise brotherly love, not to covet, not to steal and to share what they have with those that do not have. John, instead of indulging in practical politics as did the priestly class of his day, speaks of a new era, the reign of God which is at hand. The driving force of his words and actions, the imminent coming of Messiah, was just as foreign to the official priesthood of the Temple as John’s other doctrine, the expectation of a new life for man.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have opened up an unforeseen possibility towards an answer as to the formative influences upon the Baptist during his stay in the desert. It is now commonly held that the Habakkuk Commentary, the so called Manual of Discipline, The Battle of the Sons of Light, the Psalms of Thanksgiving, the Sado-kite Fragments are so many parts of the same parcel — an Essene parcel 1). W. H. Brownlee has convincingly brought these discoveries into focus with what we know about John the Baptist from

the New Testament and Josephus 1). Judging by his peculiar traits recounted above, we can now assume with comparative certainty that John was brought up by Essenes of the non-marrying type, who, according to Josephus, supplemented their numbers by adopting the children of others and forming them to their doctrines while they were still pliable 2). From the Commentary on Hab. ii 5, 8; Damascus Fragment A. IV, 19-20; VIII, 12-13; Thanksgiving Psalm A, 6 ff; B, 4, we know that these Essenes or Covenanters were fanatically opposed to the official priesthood of the Temple; from The Manual of Discipline III, 6-9; V, 13-14; X, 20 that they practised ritual baptisms and that a neophyte was only accepted after he confessed his sins. With a direct appeal to Is. xl 30, they believed that they were called to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness, i.e. promoting the coming of Messiah by the study and application of the Law (Manual of Discipline VIII, 13-15). They believe that when Messiah comes he will baptize the believers with Holy Spirit (Manual of Discipline IV, 21). The Covenanters were forbidden to eat anything from the hands of non-members or to take anything of theirs (Manual of Discipline V, 17-19; cf. Joseph., Bell II, 143) which involuntarily reminds one of John’s garb of camel skin (Mrk. i 6 D) and his abstinence from prepared foods. John’s universalism coincides with theirs (Sadokite Fragment A, XIV, 3-5; VI, 14 ff.; Comm. on Hab., I, 12) They did not sacrifice in the Temple according to Joseph., Ant. XVIII. I. 5 and Philo, Quod Omn. Prob. Lib., 75.

Their resemblance to John is so striking that further comment seems superfluous. When John appeared on the outskirts of the Judean desert round about the year 26 A.D. (Luke iii I), his outward appearance, words and acts betray the fact that he has been formed by one or another of the Essene sects inhabiting that very region between Khirbet-Qumran and Massada 3).

On account of this similarity and the fact that the Essenes supplemented their numbers by adopting young children, BROWNLEE posed the question: “Was John so adopted as a mere boy?” 4).

I think we can venture a positive answer to the question from


