

# The social class of the Baptist: Dissident retainer or peasant millennialist?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In this article the Baptist is compared with the upper-class/literate millennialists behind the Psalms of Solomon, the Testament of Moses, the Similitudes of 1 Enoch, and the Qumran scrolls on the one hand, and with the lower-class/illiterate millennialist movements in Josephus on the other hand. The argument is developed in constant dialogue with the analyses of John Dominic Crossan. After an initial statement of historical facts about the Baptist, these are compared with the named groups in terms of each one's (1) criticism of the social-political and religious status quo, (2) depiction of the imagined mediator through whom God was expected to intervene, (3) portrayal of the violent/non-violent intervention of God and the group respectively, and (4) social ethics. It is concluded that John shows closer resemblance to the literate than illiterate millennialists, and should therefore rather be considered as a dissident retainer.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent discussions two opposite characterizations of the Baptist's social class are discernible. On the one hand are those who typify the Baptist as *peasant* millennialist, comparable to the *peasant* millennialist groups described in Josephus. On the other hand are those who classify the Baptist as *literate* millennialist, comparable to the *literate* millennialists at Qumran.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lichtenberger (1992) demonstrates how Josephus, by using the term ἀγνεία and understanding the water ritual(s) as a purification of the body in both cases, portrayed the Baptist in Essenic terms. Charlesworth (1999:355) notes that "scholarship ... has polarized into two mutually exclusive conclusions: either he (i.e. John the Baptist – JS) was an Essene or profoundly influenced by them ... or he had no significant contact with Qumran."

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Exponents of the former view tend to stress *similarities* between John and peasant millennialists, while emphasizing *differences* between him and Qumran. I take John Dominic Crossan as one example of this tendency,<sup>3</sup> and will develop my argument primarily in dialogue with his views. Although the Baptist is not central in his work on the historical Jesus, I for two reasons consider him an appropriate partner with whom a well-focused discussion on this theme may be developed. First, on the micro level, he employs a sophisticated use of primary sources on the Baptist. As a matter of methodological procedure, his construct starts with those complexes for which he can find multiple independent attestation in the earliest strata. Second, on the mesolevel, he proposes to understand this authentic material in relationship to its Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts.

The result of his analysis is a Baptist who criticized a corrupt Temple cult and oppressive Herodian-Roman regime. He was a man who proclaimed God's imminent intervention to punish the unrepentant and save those who had been purified by his magical rite of baptism. According to Crossan's (1996:49) view, the Baptist was the first of a series of *peasant* millennialists who appeared in Palestine in the decades preceding the fall of Jerusalem, and should not be related to the Essenic *literate* millennialists, whom he typifies as "dissident priests who had broken with the official Temple priesthood about a century and a half before the time of Jesus". Crossan (1996:49-50) summarizes:

Those Essenes had withdrawn into the desert, but west of the Jordan, unlike John to the east; and they awaited the arrival of twin Messiahs, one priestly and one lay, unlike John who awaited the arrival of God without any mention of a preceding Messiah .... John's once-and-for-all baptism, by crossing from the desert through the Jordan River into the Promised Land, is totally different from the daily purification rituals at Qumran. I see John's movement, therefore, as quite distinct from that of Qumran, oriented toward the general populace rather than an educated group living in isolated community.

In this article I will, against Crossan's thesis, argue that John's baptismal practice and millennialist ideology are closer to comparable structures amongst *literate* than *peasant* millennialist groups. My argument will be developed in three steps: first, authentic Baptist complexes relevant to the debate will be identified; second, this material will be compared with

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<sup>3</sup> Stegemann (1993) represents another example of this view.

contemporary ablution practices; third, the identified authentic data will be compared with concurrent literate and peasant millennialist groups.

## 2. AUTHENTIC BAPTIST MATERIAL

The following statements about the Baptist can be accepted as authentic, I will argue, on the basis of multiple independent attestations in Christian sources and the Josephan text on the Baptist (Ant 18:116-119) as well as reasonable inference:<sup>4</sup>

- John urged his audience to *repent* that is to change their attitude and behaviour towards one another, before God would intervene through a *mediator* to punish the unrepentant.
- Only after this psychological and moral change, John held emphatically, could they come to be *immersed* by him in the Jordan. This immersion was to serve as a visible sign of the mental and behavioural change that they had undergone.
- The Baptist was arrested in the late 20's CE on Antipas' orders in Perea, the district East of the Jordan over which Antipas ruled as client king for the Romans. John was imprisoned and *beheaded* at Machaerus,<sup>5</sup> a fortress of Antipas in Perea, not far from the Nabatean border. Antipas had at least two interrelated reasons to act against John: first, he disliked the moral criticism that John levelled against his marriage with Herodias, whom he had married while his half-brother was still alive; second, he feared a possible coalition between the Baptist and the Nabateans, who had been humiliated by his rejection of their princess in favour of Herodias. It thus seems reasonable to surmise that John's *moral* criticism of Antipas' impure marriage arrangement simultaneously undermined the tetrarch *politically*.

My proposal of authentic Baptist material differs in three important respects from Crossan's:

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<sup>4</sup> For fuller argumentation, see Strijdom (1998). I accept as *working hypothesis* Crossan's stratigraphy of sources on the Baptist.

<sup>5</sup> Although Machaerus (in southern Perea) appears only in Josephus as the location of John's execution, I accept it as historical. I find Theissen's (1991:86) explanation that Mark created the impression that the decapitation happened in Galilee convincing: "This 'northward displacement' corresponds to the historical events. The territory of Agrippa I, as it existed at the time of the writing of Mark's Gospel, had, in relation to Antipas' realm, transferred its center northward. Only a small part of Perea was under Agrippa's rule, but in return he possessed Abilene, that is, the territory north of Palestine that had belonged to Lysanias (Ant 20:138; cf 19.275), and Chalcis with its capital at Arcea (War 7:97)."

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- Crossan holds that John awaited God's direct intervention *without any mediator*. However, both Q 3:16 and Mk 1:7 attest independently that *the Baptist expected someone else, someone greater/stronger (ἰσχυρότερος) than himself, who would come after him and would baptize with the Holy Spirit*. Crossan's thesis that ὁ ἰσχυρότερος originally referred to God can not be accepted, since the independent reference to John being unworthy of loosening the strap of the mightier one's sandals would present an unprecedented anthropomorphism if it were to refer to God.<sup>6</sup>
- Crossan maintains that John offered his water ritual as a *magical* way to obtain God's forgiveness of sins, in order to be protected from the imminent apocalyptic catastrophe. He thinks that Josephus protests too strongly against such a magical understanding of John's baptism, and therefore instead accepts the magical interpretation as historically more probable. However, my comparative reading of Josephus and the Christian texts convinces me otherwise:

First, I accept as historical fact that *John linked his baptism in some way with μετάνοια* ("repentance"), since the connection appears in several independent Christian complexes (cf Mk 1:4; Mt 3:11, Acts 13:24, Acts 19:4). The connection is in my view also present in Ant 18:117, where John's baptism is closely linked to a change of mind ("purification of the soul") and the practising of ἀρετή (ie right behaviour towards each other and pious behaviour towards God).<sup>7</sup> The authenticity and meaning of the concept μετάνοια can thus be argued on the basis of independent attestation. Crossan, however, does not focus on this important moral aspect of the Baptist at all.

Secondly, I am convinced that we can be more specific about *the way in which the historical John related his baptism to this μετάνοια-call*. He did not understand his baptism as a *magical* rite that would automatically effect the removal of sins, as Crossan maintains; instead,

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<sup>6</sup> Meier (1994:34) aptly remarks: "The interpretation of the stronger one as God threatens to border on the nonsensical when the sentence continues with the affirmation that John is not unworthy to untie the strap on the sandals of the stronger one. ... A metaphor presenting John untying God's shoelaces seems to go beyond the bounds of any OT example."

<sup>7</sup> I relate these two moments in Josephus in the following way to the Christian sources:  
(1) As to the Baptist's call for a *change of the heart*. In Mk 1:5 John's baptism is explicitly linked with the *confession of sins* (ἐβαπτίζοντο ... ἑξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἀμαρτίας). This last phrase is clearly synonomous with Josephus' *purification of the soul* (τῆς ψυχῆς δικαιοσύνη προεκεκαθαμένης), which in the Josephan text is also related to *forgiveness of sins* (ἀμαρτᾶδων παραίτησι).

(2) As to the Baptist's call for a *change of behaviour*. In Q 3:8 μετάνοια is linked with good works (καρπὸς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας), which is paralleled by Josephus' practising of ἀρετή.

according to my reading, John *presupposed* repentance (ie a change of heart and behaviour) as a necessary prerequisite for his water ritual, which would have served as an outward sign of the μετάνοια already undergone. Josephus explicitly opposed a magical understanding of John's baptism in Ant 18:117b: it was "not for the begging-off of certain sins" (μὴ ἐπὶ τινῶν ἁμαρτῶν παραιτήσῃ), but was rather intended as a purificatory rite of the body that followed *after* and on precondition of an already purified soul (ἐφ' ἀγνείᾳ τοῦ σώματος, ἅτε δὴ καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς δικαιοσύνη προεκεκαθαρμένης). This need not be seen as in contradiction with Mk 1:4 which states that John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). According to the semantic analysis of Nida & Taber (1974:51-52), the four *nomina actionis* in this clause may first be transformed into four kernel sentences, before the relationships between them are explicated. The first two events may then be rendered as "repent and be baptized", in which case the repentance would precede the baptism (in Acts 2:38 the corresponding but much less ambiguous verbal construction is found: Μετανοήσατε καὶ βαπτισθήτω). Furthermore, as Bratcher & Nida (1961:11) correctly observes, the εἰς should be taken as equivalent to "the English preposition *for* with its various shades of meanings." It does not form part of an explicit argument on the effectiveness of John's baptism as does the ἐπί in Josephus, but is rather used in a less defined way. My reading supposes no contradiction between the Christian and Josephan evidence, but is essentially in accordance with that of Webb (1991:190) and Taylor (1997:97). Both of them think that μετάνοια in Mk 1:4 results in the forgiveness of sins (ie remission of sins follows from repentance/changed behaviour), and that immersion was to follow only after such a fundamental change.

My third point of difference from Crossan concerns the *reasons why Antipas decided to execute the Baptist*.<sup>8</sup> I agree with Crossan that the Baptist posed a real social-political threat to stability in Antipas' realm, and that the client-king therefore had reason to move against him. But whereas Crossan proposes a correlation between the social-political threat posed by the Baptist on the one hand and contemporary peasant millennialists on the other (about which I will have more to say below), I argue for a *connection between John's moral criticism of Antipas' marital*

<sup>8</sup> Of this fact we have, as Crossan (1991:232; 1994:35) points out, independent attestation in the Christian tradition (Mk 6:27 ἀπεκεφάλισεν αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ) and Josephus (Ant 18:117a κτείνει ... τοῦτον Ἡρώδης).

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arrangements (as part of John's concern for purity laws)<sup>9</sup> and the political subversiveness of such criticism (a connection which I do not find in Crossan's work). John's condemnation of Antipas' marriage with the wife of his still-living half-brother received agreement from pious Jews;<sup>10</sup> his message would also simultaneously have received sympathy from the neighbouring Nabateans who had been humiliated by Antipas' rejection of their princess in favour of Herodias and who actually considered the divorce a cancellation of an agreement about territorial claims.<sup>11</sup> Josephus links the Baptist's death with Aretas' defeat of the Herodian army, by noting that some Jews considered Aretas' conquest to have been God's righteous revenge on Antipas who had killed John unfairly.<sup>12</sup> This reading is in line with that of Theissen & Merz (1996:186): "Wahrscheinlich bilden *Gebietstreitigkeiten mit den Nabatäischen Nachbarn* (Ant 18:113) den politischen Kontext der Hinrichtung des

<sup>9</sup> According to the levirate requirements in Dt 25:5-6 it was obligatory for a man to marry his brother's wife, should his brother have died childless. However, in the case of Antipas' marriage to Herodias, the marriage was immoral/unclean in terms of Lev 20:21, since Herodias' husband was still alive. Webb (1991:366-367) correctly observes: "in the light of *John's concern for purity*, his (ie John's - JS) rebuke of Antipas most probably had a second implication: *Antipas was in a condition of impurity*. ... John was charging a ruler, a major portion of whose subjects were Jews, with being both a *Torah-breaker* and *impure*" (my emphasis).

<sup>10</sup> Both Mark and Josephus independently attest to the facts that (1) Antipas married Herodias (Mk 6:17 αὐτήν [ie Ἡρωδιάδα – JS] ἐγάμησε; Ant 18:136 Ἡρωδιάς Ἡρώδη γαμείται), and that (2) the marriage was denounced as immoral (at least by some) (in Mk 6.18 the Baptist bluntly tells Antipas: Οὐκ ἔξεστίν σοι ἔχειν τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου; and in Ant 18:136 Josephus makes it clear that Herodias was violating the ancestral laws: Ἡρωδιάς ἐπὶ συγχύσει φρονήσασα τῶν πατρίων Ἡρώδη γαμείται τοῦ ἀνδρός τῷ ὁμοπατριῷ ἀδελφῷ διαστᾶσα ζῶντος "Herodias, taking it into her head to flout the way of our fathers, married Herod, her husband's brother by the same father ...; to do this she parted from a living husband").

<sup>11</sup> It can be accepted as historically certain that *Antipas feared the growing crowd assembling around the Baptist*, since it is attested independently in Mt 14:5 (καὶ θέλων αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνειν ἐφοβήθη τὸν ὄχλον) and Ant 18:117-118 (the Baptist urged Jews "to assemble/come together" [συνιέναι], and when others were later joining that crowd [καὶ τῶν ἄλλων συστρεφόμενων], Antipas feared that John's persuasive influence on them would cause a sedition [δείσας Ἡρώδης τὸ ἐπὶ τοσόνδε πῖθανον αὐτοῦ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μὴ ἐπὶ στάσει τίνοι φέροι]). Theissen (1991:83) considers it quite possible that those "others" who joined the Baptist's audience might have included not only Jews, but also some Nabateans.

<sup>12</sup> The Josephan passage on the Baptist is actually framed by this judgment: Ant 18:116 begins τισὶ δὲ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐδόκει ὀλωλέναι τὸν Ἡρώδου στρατὸν ὑπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ μάλα δικαίως τινυμένον κατὰ ποιητὴν Ἰωάννου τοῦ ἐπικαλουμένου Βαπτιστοῦ ("Now to some of the Jews it seemed that the army of Herod had been destroyed by God, who indeed quite justly was punishing [Herod] as vengeance for what he had done to John who was called the Baptist/Immerser"), and Ant 18:119 concludes τοῖς δὲ Ἰουδαίοις δόξα ἐπὶ τιμωρίᾳ τῆ ἐκείνου τὸν ὄλεθρον ἐπὶ τῷ στρατεύματι γενέσθαι τοῦ θεοῦ κακῶσαι Ἡρώδην θέλοντος ("Now the opinion of the Jews was that the destruction of the army [of Antipas by Aretas – JS] happened to avenge that man [i.e. John – JS], since God wished to harm Herod").

Täufers. ... Die Ehekritik des Johannes ... stellte Antipas und Herodias nicht nur als Gesetzesbrecher bloss und untergrub ihr Ansehen beim Volk, sondern konnte auch als Parteinahme für die feindlichen Nachbarn und ihre Gebietsansprüche verstanden werden.”

### 3. THE BAPTIST IN COMPARISON WITH CONCURRENT ABLUTION PRACTICES

The most immediate temporal and geographical analogies for John's immersion are found in the ritual ablutions performed by the Qumran Essenes<sup>13</sup> and Bannus. What exactly are the similarities and the differences?

As far as the *form* of the rite(s) is concerned, it is quite true that Bannus and the Qumran Essenes (1) washed/immersed themselves, and (2) did so repeatedly,<sup>14</sup> whereas John (1) administered his rite himself (he himself “dipped”/immersed people in the water), and (2) probably did so only once.<sup>15</sup> These differences of form (especially the first one, of which we can be certain) account sufficiently for the fact that John came to be known as “the Baptist”.

However, the more important similarity that Crossan overlooks/negates concerns the *meaning* that these water rite(s) had for both John and the Qumran Essenes:<sup>16</sup> in both cases it was emphasized that true repentance (purifying one's soul and changing one's behaviour) was a prerequisite *before* the water ritual(s) could be meaningful. This shared view is not an invention of Josephus, but can be substantiated from the Qumran writings themselves on

<sup>13</sup> I accept VanderKam's (1994:98) conclusion that “the Essenes who lived at Qumran were just a small part of a larger Essene movement in Palestine.”

<sup>14</sup> In Vita 11-12 Josephus tells us that Bannus “frequently washed himself day and night with cold water for purity's sake (ψυχρῶ δὲ ὕδατι τὴν ἡμέραν καὶ τὴν νύκτα πολλάκις λουόμενον πρὸς ἀγνείαν). Both Josephus and the Scrolls attest to similar practices amongst the Essenes: War 2:129 notes that the Qumranites washed themselves with cold water (ἀπολούονται τὸ σῶμα ψυχροῖς ὕδασι) and CD 10:11 prescribes that “no one should wash himself in water that is dirty or too little to cover one” (אל ירחץ איש במים צואים ומעוטים מדי מרעיל איש). Vermes (1981:180) notes that the Mishna, which contains a similar rule, provides a practical reason that “in them men may immerse themselves” (Mikwaoth 7:1).

<sup>15</sup> Q 3:16 and Mk 1:8 independently attest to the fact that John administered his baptism himself: he (subject of βαπτίζω) immersed others (direct object ὑμᾶς). Unfortunately we do not have independent attestation for the fact that he did so only once. Meier (1994:51) correctly notes that “the unrepeatability of John's baptism” can not be based directly on any text from Josephus or the New Testament, but nevertheless suggests that this conclusion is “a legitimate inference from the data.” He argues not only that John's self-administration of his rite would have rendered repeated baptisms problematic, but also that John's expectation of imminent judgment probably would not have allowed for recurring repentances and baptisms.

<sup>16</sup> The evidence on Bannus is too meagre to allow for a precise comparison here.

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the one hand, and from independently attested and therefore authentic material on the Baptist on the other hand. Thus the *Community Rule* proclaims, in clear correlation to Josephus' Baptist, that a change in attitude and lifestyle (i.e. repentance) in accordance with the sect's understanding of Torah must precede ritual washings at Qumran. True purification (= atonement/forgiveness of sins) is achieved only after and by virtue of righteous behaviour in accordance with God's laws (i.e. as interpreted by the sect):

1QS 3:6-9

כִּי־אֵל בְּרוּחַ עֶצֶת אֱמֶת אֵל דְּרָכֵי אִישׁ יִכּוּפְרוּ כּוֹל עוֹנוֹתָו לְהַבִּיט בְּאוֹר הַחַיִּים  
וּבְרוּחַ קְדוּשָׁה לִיחַד בְּאֱמֶתוֹ

וּבְרוּחַ יוֹשֵׁר וְעֲנוּהַ תְּכּוּפֵר חַטָּאתוֹ  
וּבְעֲנוּת נַפְשׁוֹ לְכוֹל חוֹקֵי אֵל יִטְהַר בְּשָׂרוֹ לְהִזּוֹת בְּמִי נָדָה וּלְהִתְקַדֵּשׁ בְּמִי דּוֹכֵי

For it is by the spirit of the true counsel of God that the ways of man – all his iniquities – are atoned, so that he can behold the light of life.

It is by the Holy Spirit of the Community in his [= God's] truth that he can be cleansed from all his iniquities.

It is by an upright and humble spirit that his sin can be atoned.

It is by humbling his soul to all God's statutes, that his flesh can be cleansed,

by sprinkling with waters of purification,  
and by sanctifying himself with waters of purity.<sup>17</sup>

1QS 5:13-14

אֵל יְבוֹא בְּמִים ... כִּי־אֵל לֹא יִטְהָרוּ כִּי אִם שָׁבוּ מִרְעֵתָם

The wicked shall not enter the water ... for they shall not be cleansed unless they turn away [= "repent"]<sup>18</sup> from their wickedness.

<sup>17</sup> For text and translation, see Charlesworth (1994:12-15). Webb (1991:146-152) offers a precise analysis of this passage. Four statements are introduced by ב, which indicates the instrument (a defined "spiritual virtue") by which *atonement/purification of sins* can be accomplished. He considers the meaning of the first and third statements as essentially identical: "by means of spiritual virtues given by God, a person's sins are atoned" (:149). He furthermore notes that the explicit virtue in the fourth statement by which the cleansing is effected, "is the candidate's *submission to the Torah as interpreted by the community*" (:149; my emphasis). Immersions are thus considered effective only when they are "accompanied by spiritual virtues," by which should be understood "a commitment to obey the community's sectarian interpretation of the Torah" (:150).

<sup>18</sup> The meaning clearly is that they should turn away ("repent") from their sinful behaviour and start to live according to God's Torah as interpreted by the Essenes. Webb (1991:155) summarizes the issue well: "Here once again [as in the previous passage – JS] ... we find the belief that moral failure renders a person impure. Since it is moral failure which defiles, purification cannot take place simply by an immersion; it must be preceded and accompanied by the corresponding moral or spiritual dispositions of repentance and obedience."



#### 4. THE BAPTIST IN COMPARISON WITH CONTEMPORARY LITERATE AND PEASANT MILLENNIALIST GROUPS

According to Crossan's proposal, the Baptist movement was not an upper-class/literate phenomenon, but rather a peasant/illiterate undertaking. The most appropriate comparative material is therefore, in his view, not to be found in *literate* apocalyptic texts like the *Psalms of Solomon*, *Testament of Moses*, *Similitudes of 1 Enoch*, or the Qumran writings. Rather, he maintains, we should locate John's movement within the trajectory of *peasant* millennialist movements, which are mentioned primarily by Josephus. I will argue, however, that a comparison between John and each of these cases, reveals that the Baptist's mentality is closer to that of the upper-class than that of the lower-class millennialists.

First, compare John with the mentioned educated millennialists with reference to the following four points: (1) criticism of the social-political and religious status quo, (2) the envisaged divine intervention through a mediator, (3) the violent character of God's intervention, but non-violent strategy of the group itself, and (4) the concern for a pure/righteous lifestyle before the awaited divine intervention:

- As far as the social-political and religious status quo is concerned, a consistent criticism is detectable in all four examples of upper-class millennialists. Not one of those literate groups condoned the status quo, but each one denounced the system as corrupt. *Psalms of Solomon*, in its final form of ca 50 BCE, criticized the Hasmonean king-priests for their abuse of political and religious power.<sup>19</sup> I have argued above that the Baptist too was critical of the royal elite, in that he despised the moral decadence of Antipas. TestMos, in its earliest form, was directed against Antiochus IV Epiphanes, later against the

<sup>19</sup> This group behind the PsSol criticized the Hasmonean king-priests on account of the fact that they combined the functions of king (which was supposed to be of Davidic descent) and High Priest (which was supposed to be of Aaronic descent). In their view the new regime contaminated the Temple and profaned the sacrifices (PsSol 1:8; 2:3; 8:8-12, 22; 17:5-6, 22). The Roman invaders too are condemned, in their case for their violent plundering of the country (2:24) and their defilement of the Temple sacrifices (2:2). The gentile introduction of foreign religious customs was perceived as an immense danger (17:13-15).

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Hasmonean king-priests,<sup>20</sup> and eventually against Herod.<sup>21</sup> In TestMos 7 the ruling elite is specifically criticized for their lavish banquets.<sup>22</sup> The Baptist's ascetic behaviour too can be understood as a criticism of royal gluttony (Jesus contrasted the lifestyle of Antipas and his court with that of the Baptist - an authentic *logion* that is found independently in Q 7:24-27 and GosThom 78). The *Similitudes of 1 Enoch*, probably early in the first century CE, also strongly disapproved of the social-political system of its time. The rulers are here explicitly accused of unjust oppression and of accumulating wealth by exploitation of the oppressed (cf 46:7; 53:2, 7; 62:11)<sup>23</sup> - a contempt which the Baptist would surely have shared. The Qumran sect opposed the military and exploitative roles of the Hasmonean king-priests since its very inception in the latter half of the second century,<sup>24</sup> which is again comparable to the Baptist's social-economic criticism of the Herodian court in the 20's CE. Both rejected a luxurious lifestyle and opted instead for an ascetic one in the desert - the literate Qumranites in their enclave West of the Dead Sea, and John on the Eastern side of the Jordan.

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<sup>20</sup> In TestMos 6 the Hasmonean king-priests are denounced for acting "most impiously (*impietatem*) against the Holy of Holies." In Chapter 5 they are considered corrupt on account of the fact that they "favour persons that please them and accept gifts," and are condemned for their injustice (*iniquitatem*) and for defiling the Temple (*contaminabunt ... domum servitutis*).

<sup>21</sup> In TestMos 6 Herod is typified as "an insolent king (*rex petulans*)," "an impetuous (*temerarius*) and perverse (*improbus*) man," who would kill not only Jewish leaders (*principales*) but old and young indiscriminately. His cruelty is indeed compared to that of Egyptian oppression.

<sup>22</sup> In TestMos 7 the rulers are criticized for their "love to have banquets at any hour of the day" (*omni hora diei amantes convivia*). They are labelled "devourers" (*devoratores*) and "gluttons" (*gulae*), who are reported to say: "Let us have extravagant banquets, let us eat and drink. And let us act as if we are princes" (*Habebimus discubitiones et luxuriam, edentes et bibentes. Et putavimus nos tamquam principes erimus*).

<sup>23</sup> Although this criticism is directed against Roman imperialism in the first place (the accusation of the opponents' worshipping idols made by human hands in 46:7 and the references to world-wide dominion in 48:8 are not applicable to Jewish rulers), it is nevertheless not farfetched to assume that the Herodian collaborators of Rome were included for censure as well (cf Collins 1984:153).

<sup>24</sup> I accept the thesis that the Qumran community was established when Essenes under the leadership of a Zadokite priest (the "Teacher of righteousness") ca 150 BCE separated themselves from the new Hasmonean "wicked priest" in Jerusalem (either Jonathan or Simon Maccabaeus). The latter was accused of defiling Jerusalem and the Temple, of not keeping the law and of being corrupted by power and wealth (cf the analysis of 1QpHab in Vermes 1995:28-29). Although it is certainly true that differences in the interpretation of the Torah (specifically concerning matters of ritual purity) and conflicting calendars played an important part in causing the schism, it also seems justified to accept that political and economic factors played a decisive role in the original separation: in 1QpHab 8-9 the "wicked priest" is accused of betraying "the precepts for the sake of riches" and his successors are said to have continued amassing "money and wealth by plundering the peoples."

- All four examples of educated millennialists, as well as the Baptist, expected God to intervene through a mediator. In *Psalms of Solomon* it was hoped that God would wage war against and conquer the Hasmonean enemies through a *human messiah, an idealized king of Davidic descent*.<sup>25</sup> In *Testament of Moses* the expectation was that God would exact vengeance against the group's enemies through an *angelic intermediary*.<sup>26</sup> *Similitudes*, similarly, hoped that God would intervene through a *heavenly agent* (the angelic Son of Man).<sup>27</sup> In the Qumran sect, four types of future mediators were imagined, through whom God would intervene to reward the group for their holy life: the royal messiah of Davidic descent,<sup>28</sup> who would be subordinate to the priestly messiah of Aaron<sup>29</sup>; the eschatological prophet of Moses;<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf PsSol 17:21-27; 18:5-9. Although an earthly king of Davidic descent was expected by this group, he was clearly endowed with a divine aura. In PsSol 17 and 18 he is not only portrayed as an idealized hero who will be sinless and the very embodiment of the virtues of wisdom and justice, but is also given the honorary titles "Son of David" (υἱὸς Δαυιδ) and "Messiah Lord" (Χριστὸς Κύριος).

<sup>26</sup> Crossan states that TestMos did not envisage any *messianic intermediary* through whom God would, in the near future, bring an end to the miserable condition of the righteous. This is only true in the sense that TestMos foresaw no earthly Davidic king like the one in PsSol. TestMos 10:2 explicitly visualizes an *angelic intermediary* through whom God would exact vengeance on the group's enemies: *Tunc implebuntur manus nuntii qui est in summo constitutus, qui protinus vindicavit illos ab inimicis eorum* ("Then the hands of the messenger, when he will be in heaven, will be filled, and he will then vindicate them against their enemies"). This heavenly messenger is, according to Collins (1985:156), akin to Michael, the guardian angel of Israel in Dan 12:1, and is portrayed as a priestly figure here (the filling of hands is an idiom for consecration).

<sup>27</sup> *Similitudes* envisages that the angelic Son of Man would reverse the present power structures of the world: he would dethrone the Roman/Herodian rulers, and establish the current powerless as new rulers in their stead.

<sup>28</sup> Known as the "messiah of Israel" in 1QS 9:11 and 1QSa 2:20, the "scepter" in CD 7:19, the "branch of David" in 4QpIsa<sup>a</sup>, 4Q285 frag 5, and the "prince of the congregation" in 4 Q285 frag 5, 4QpIsa<sup>a</sup> and 1Qsb 5, he is depicted as an earthly/secular, military king who will defeat the sect's Hasmonean and/or Roman opponents by violent means and restore a utopia of justice for the sect itself.

<sup>29</sup> Known as the "messiah of Aaron" in 1QS 9:11, the "star" in CD 7:19, the "Priest" in 1QSa 2:20, the "High Priest" in 1QM 15:4, 16:13, 18:5, and the "Interpreter of the Law" in CD 6:7, he is portrayed as another eschatological agent of salvation who will be superior to the lay, royal messiah: he will take precedence at the messianic banquet and will instruct the warrior king of the last days, who will be expected to fully obey him. The sect's expectation of two separate messiahs in the ideal age should probably be understood not only as a reflection of the hierarchical structure of the sect itself, but also as a reflection of their disapproval of the Hasmoneans' combination of the two offices in one person (cf Collins 1995:95).

<sup>30</sup> This figure is mentioned only once, together with the previous two messiahs, in 1QS 9:11, and was probably envisaged as fulfilling an important teaching function in the final days. Vermes (1995:61) thinks it possible that "at some point of the sect's history the coming of the Prophet was no longer expected," since "he was believed to have already appeared in the person of the Teacher of Righteousness."

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and an angelic figure.<sup>31</sup> The Baptist also expected God to intervene through a mediator. He envisaged a human mediator, but did not conceive of him as a Davidic king. Instead, he expected a charismatic man stronger than himself who would condemn impenitent sinners. He appealed to his audience to repent (ie to change their behaviour and their attitude) and then be baptized by him, before the day of judgment would arrive.

- The third point of comparison concerns strategies of violence or nonviolence. The four examples of literate millennialism - with the possible exception of *Psalms of Solomon* - consistently envisaged a *violent* intervention by God through the pertinent mediator, but a *non-violent* strategy on the part of the group itself. *Psalms of Solomon* represents a possible exception, since the Davidic king through whom God would establish the utopia of justice for this group, was first of all idealized as a non-violent scribe.<sup>32</sup> Military language is used only once in connection with this figure, and can clearly be understood as a traditional motif from Ps 2:9. TestMos is, however, much clearer: it never propagates militant revolt against Seleucids, Hasmoneans or Herod. Instead it explicitly propagates non-violent resistance to the unjust system, by offering the *passive martyrdom* of Taxo and his sons as model of protest against Antiochan persecution - a strategy that would still have been clear to those who reinterpreted this text in their opposition to Herod.<sup>33</sup> The final reckoning is here left to God and his angelic messenger. It seems that the Baptist too presented his divine agent as a threatening figure who would judge the impenitent fiercely, but without exhorting his audience to any militant actions against the regime (Antipas could, of course, have feared that such an uprising might occur, as Josephus reports). John's proclamation of imminent judgment through a fiery figure served as a device to exhort his audience to change their moral attitude and behaviour. *Similitudes of 1*

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<sup>31</sup> This transcendental figure shows obvious similarities with the apocalyptic Son of Man in Daniel, TestMos and *Similitudes*. In 11QMelch 2:9,13 God will save the sect and condemn the foe (Belial and his army) through the agency of this angelic figure, where he is called Melchizedek (ie the archangel Michael). In 1QM 13:10; 17:6 he is again portrayed as God's instrument for saving the sect and defeating the earthly and heavenly army.

<sup>32</sup> In PsSol 17:24, 33, 35, 36, 43 he is expected to eventually subjugate the gentiles to Israel not by relying "on horse and rider and bow," nor by collecting "gold and silver for war," but by "the word of his mouth."

<sup>33</sup> In TestMos 9:5-7 Taxo tells his sons: "And this we shall do: Let us fast for three days, and on the fourth day let us enter the cave which is in the field, and let us die rather than transgress the commandments of the Lords of lords, the God of our fathers. For if we do this and die, our blood will be vindicated before the Lord."

*Enoch* used the most violent images to portray the destruction of the group's enemies<sup>34</sup> - inter alia the metaphor of "burning chaff", which was also used by the Baptist to envisage the doomed fate of the unrepentant.<sup>35</sup> At Qumran as well the divine intervention was expected to be of a violent nature, at least through its military Davidic messiah,<sup>36</sup> the sect itself, however, probably abstained from violence before the imagined final battle.<sup>37</sup> It is thus most likely that in all these cases of literate protest against the status quo, just like in the case of the Baptist, the violence resided in the apocalyptic imagery, but was not part of the actual strategy of the respective groups.

- As fourth and last point of comparison I take the concern for a *pure/righteous lifestyle* as a common concern amongst those literate millennialist groups and the Baptist. *Psalms of Solomon* exhorted its audience to repentance and a moral life. Exactly like John, PsSol 9:6-7 promised God's forgiveness to the repentant sinner who confessed his sins. TestMos similarly represents a group of pietists for whom loyalty

<sup>34</sup> *Similitudes* foresees the most dreadful punishment for their opponents: "darkness shall be their dwelling, and worms shall be their bed, and they shall have no hope of rising from their beds" (46:6), they will perish completely from the earth after the final judgment (45:2, 5), their teeth will be broken (46:4; cf Ps 3:7; 58:6), they will burn like straw in fire and sink like lead in water and be totally annihilated before the righteous sectarians (48:9; cf Ex 15:7, 10 and Mal 4:1 for this imagery). The gruesome picture of God's "sword (being) drunk with their blood" (62:12) is used to portray the punishment vividly, while the righteous sectarians visualise themselves to participate in the apocalyptic castigation of their oppressors (38:5; 48:9; 62:12). It is, however, most likely that this violent retribution was only reserved for the projected apocalyptic finale, and did not motivate the literate sect itself to take up arms against its opponents.

<sup>35</sup> Though we do not have independent attestation of this metaphor for the Baptist (it only occurs in Q 3:17), I suspect that it is authentic (cf Strijdom 1998:14-16).

<sup>36</sup> Cf 4QpIsa<sup>a</sup>, 1QSb 5, and 4Q285 frag 5 for the imagined *violent* intervention of the Davidic messiah: he will kill the sect's opponents "by his sword" and "gore (them) like a bull" and "trample the peoples (ie the Romans) like mud of wheels" (for a discussion of these texts, cf García Martínez & Treballe Barrera [1995:164-167]). In 4QpPs<sup>a</sup> 2 the sectarians imagine that their Hasmonean opponents will "perish by the sword and famine and plague," and in 1QM 19 they portray themselves as invoking God to act with the utmost brutality against their enemies in the final battle: "Lay Thy hand on the neck of Thine enemies // and Thy feet on the pile of the slain! // Smite the nations, Thine adversaries, // and devour flesh with Thy sword!" (Vermes 1995:59, 144, 348).

<sup>37</sup> The tone of 4QMMT, possibly a letter from the Teacher of Righteousness to the Hasmonean king-priest in Jerusalem, sounds remarkably irenic (cf VanderKam 1994:102). The sect probably only thought that it would be necessary for them to take up arms in the final battle, when God would intervene through his angels and human intermediaries. VanderKam (:105) thinks it quite possible that they did defend themselves in 68 CE, presuming that the final war had come.

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to the law and purity were of the utmost importance.<sup>38</sup> Although *Similitudes* does not explicitly refer to the Mosaic law, a concern for a pious life in accordance with the Torah is probably presupposed. Amongst the Qumranites we find a definite fusion of apocalyptic vision and moral/legal obligation,<sup>39</sup> which is clearly in accordance with John's mentality. Crossan's view that apocalyptic vision and social program are incompatible is certainly highly debatable. The point again is that the Baptist's concern for a pure/moral lifestyle is similar to that of the mentioned groups of literate millennialists, and is certainly not in opposition to an apocalyptic worldview. Both insisted that a pure/moral life should be led in anticipation of God's final reckoning through his agent(s).

Now, after this comparison between John and upper-class dissident retainers of the millennialist type, I ask you to consider three points in the comparison of John with *peasant* protest movements, which are pertinent to my conclusion on the Baptist's social class:

- Of all those many undeniably lower-class protest movements in Josephus,<sup>40</sup> there are a few cases in which it is clear that their *leaders* came from the educated, upper-classes. Josephus, for example, is an aristocratic Jew from high priestly descent, who leads a peasant-cum-bandit army in Galilee. Menahem is a teacher (σοφιστής) from the "retainer" class with a peasant following, who fiercely opposes Roman oppression and Temple aristocracy. On entering Jerusalem the Zealots form a coalition with rebel priests, amongst whom is Eleazar son of Simon. These examples of interaction between upper- and lower classes, with the former acting as leaders of the latter, present in my view an apt parallel for the Baptist. The possibility should be given

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<sup>38</sup> Nickelsburg (1972:45) notes that Taxo's Levite origin and the centrality of the Temple and sacrifices may indicate "that the book originated in a priestly wing of the Hasidic movement." It is also significant that Taxo's zeal for the law is connected with fasting (9:6), a ritual that accompanies repentance/confession of sins in 3:4-9.

<sup>39</sup> In CD 1:12 the mission of the Teacher of Righteousness is defined precisely in terms of both (1) the fervent apocalyptic hope of God's intervention and (2) a pious life in strict accordance with the Torah and community rules.

<sup>40</sup> Cf Strijdom (1998:80-81) for a survey of the evidence.

serious attention that *John was a dissident retainer whose followers included like-minded dissident retainers and peasants.*<sup>41</sup>

- The criticism of the lower-class protesters was indeed, just like that of the literate millennialists which I discussed above, also directed against the social-political and religious oppressors of their day.<sup>42</sup> But whereas *non-violent* tactics seem to be the norm amongst the literate millennialists, we find examples of violent resistance amongst the peasant millennialists: Josephus reports an armed following for both the Samaritan<sup>43</sup> and Egyptian “sign prophets”. For the latter we have independent attestation of the violent aspect in Acts 21:38,26<sup>44</sup> and have therefore no reason to doubt its authenticity as Crossan does.<sup>45</sup> It thus seems that the Baptist is in this respect closer to the literate than peasant millennialists.
- As sign prophets the peasant millennialists symbolically reenacted the ancient actions of Moses and Joshua, hoping that God would intervene to liberate them too from their political oppressors.<sup>46</sup> According to Crossan, John understood his water ritual in the same way: the Baptist conducted his ministry in the Perea desert and his water ritual in the Jordan river, because those two places carried political connotations of

<sup>41</sup> Crossan (1998) acknowledges the insight of cultural anthropologists that it is usually leaders from dissident “retainer” or aristocratic classes who serve as leaders of movements of peasant resistance, but nowhere applies it to the Baptist. He says: “Dissident priests or scribes may become leaders for dissident peasants or artisans” (:167), since the former not only have the verbal proficiency to formulate the ideology of resistance (often “in the name of the divinity itself” [:171]), but also have the skills to organize the group of protesters effectively – capabilities that are usually not found amongst peasants themselves. Cf also Fiensy (1999:3-27).

<sup>42</sup> Cf Strijdom (1998:82-86) for a discussion of the evidence.

<sup>43</sup> Cf Ant 18:86 (ἐν ὄπλοις).

<sup>44</sup> Cf Acts 21:38: the Egyptian “started a revolt” (ἀναστατώσας), and War 2:262: the Egyptian “was ready to force (βιάζεσθαι) an entry into Jerusalem, overwhelm the Roman garrison, and seize supreme power (τυραννεῖν) with his fellow-raiders as bodyguard.”

<sup>45</sup> Crossan’s argument for non-violence in the case of the Samaritan is more convincing than for the Egyptian. He maintains that Pilate could not have been dismissed for his violent attack on the Samaritan’s followers, if the latter had indeed been armed (Crossan 1991:161). As far as the Egyptian is concerned, he holds that Luke ascribed violence to this prophet since he conflated him with the *sicarii*, and that Josephus portrayed him as violent on account of his general bias against “Jewish tyrants” (:165). The major reason for Crossan’s doubt, however, is derived from the cross-cultural thesis that millennialists do not act violently - an assumption that is, of course, in tension with his own modern example of apocalypticism in “David Koresh of Waco, Texas” (Crossan 1995:47).

<sup>46</sup> Cf Strijdom (1998:90-92) for a discussion of the textual evidence, and a more detailed evaluation of Crossan.

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divine liberation from systemic oppression.<sup>47</sup> To understand the Baptist's intention correctly, Crossan holds that one should not so much emphasize that he *baptized*, but rather that he baptized precisely in the *Jordan*. I am, however, not convinced that one may emphasize Jordan at the expense of baptism,<sup>48</sup> and instead prefer the more controllable comparison based on the explicit textual evidence that I have presented above.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

My comparison has then, on the basis of the textual evidence, shown John's understanding of his baptism to be closer to Qumran's understanding of its *ablution practices* than to the symbolic actions of the sign prophets.

Furthermore, it was shown that the apocalyptic hope of divine intervention through a *mediator* is found amongst all four examples of literate millennialists as well as the Baptist; on the other hand no such figure appears amongst the peasant millennialists as far as the textual evidence let us see. The same holds for the *pious lifestyle according to the Torah*, which was so important amongst the educated millennialists and John: no comparable concern is explicitly discernable in our texts for the illiterate millennialists. Also as far as *non-violent strategy* is concerned, the Baptist seems closer to the consistent

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<sup>47</sup> According to Crossan (1994:42) the peasant millennialists led "large crowds into the wilderness so that they could recross the Jordan into the Promised Land, which God would then restore to them as of old under Moses and Joshua." Just like those peasant prophets, Crossan (:45-46) holds, "John went ... out into the Transjordanian Desert and submitted himself to the Jewish God and Jewish history in a ritual re-enactment of the Moses and Joshua conquest of the Promised Land. ... Presumably, God would do what human strength could not do – destroy Roman power – once an adequate critical mass of purified people were ready for such a cataclysmic event." The only difference that Crossan proposes between the peasant millennialists and the Baptist concerns strategy: whereas the former led masses into the Perea desert to re-enact the reconquest of Palestine from there, John instead kept sending his followers back to the Promised Land where they were supposed to await the imminent coming of God. John was thus creating a diffused "network of ticking time bombs all over the Jewish homeland" (:43). I do not find this proposal persuasive, but instead accept as historical fact that a growing number of people were assembling around John in the desert (both Mt 14:5 and Ant 18:117-118 independently attest to this fact).

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, who in *The Immerser* (1997) emphasizes the fact that John *immersed* people rather than the fact that he did it in the *Jordan* (she thinks it possible that he did it elsewhere as well), asks the same question as I do and expresses the same discontent with the rash identification of the Baptist with contemporary "sign prophets": "We may be justified in asking ... whether John really was like the men who led people out to the wilderness with expectation of signs and who hoped for the deliverance of Jerusalem from the hands of the Romans. ... Is it in the context of these popular prophets ... that John should be understood? Clearly, the focus of these leaders was the overthrow of Gentile rule. Yet, whatever political agenda may be found in John's teaching, he did not call upon those he assembled to witness a sign founded on an incident in the Bible. ... John's immersion itself was not (such – JS) a sign" (Taylor 1997:218).



tactics of the upper-class millennialists than the more ambiguous tactics of the lower-class millennialists.

A final point to support my argument on the Baptist's social class concerns *the manner of his death and the respectful way in which he is presented by Josephus*. Antipas moved cautiously against the Baptist, by first having him alone arrested and imprisoned at Machaerus, and then having him beheaded - a procedure that probably reveals the fact that the Baptist was no mere peasant who could be easily disposed of by Antipas. Josephus' respectful treatment of the Baptist, which is comparable to his respect for the Essenes, can similarly be explained by assigning John a higher social class.

The outcome of this study, then, is to propose that we see John as a dissident retainer, who influenced both peasants and other like-minded dissidents. Externally, he criticized the decadent Herodian court, and probably won the support of the Nabatean neighbours. Internally, he exhorted his audience to a pious lifestyle in accordance with the Torah, before God would intervene through a charismatic man to punish those who had not listened to his moral message of repentance. The immersion he administered would then serve as a symbol of the radical change that the repentants had undergone.

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