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the Dead Sea Scrolls

Volume Three

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EDITED BY
JAMES H. CHARLESWORTH

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JUDAISM AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

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CHAPTER ONE

JOHN THE BAPTIZER AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

James H. Charlesworth

One fascinating question has preoccupied experts since the beginning of the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were first discovered in the winter of 1947. It is the relationship between John the Baptizer (or the Baptist) and the community of religious men who lived at Qumran, not far from where the Baptizer was active. The purpose of this paper is to present a hypothesis that appeared to me as I was preparing a critical edition of the twelve manuscripts of the *Rule of the Community*. I am persuaded that this document, the quintessential composition by the Qumranites, helps us understand the most likely relation between John the Baptizer and the Qumranites.¹

INTRODUCTION

Since 1956 I have been reading the speculations on how John the Baptizer must have been an Essene or could not have been related in any way to the Qumran Community. I am not interested here in providing a report of published research on this question. If one were contemplated, it might begin with the excessive claim by H. Graetz in 1893 that the first Jews who announced that the Messiah is coming were the Essenes. Graetz claimed that the Essene who sent forth this call to the Israelites was John the Baptist (whose name doubtless meant the Essene), he who daily bathed and cleansed both body and soul in spring water. Graetz contended that John appears fully to have entertained the belief that if only the whole Judean nation would bathe in the river

1. The present paper is a revision and expansion of one that was published in Donald W. Parry and Eugene C. Ulrich, eds., *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Technological Innovations, New Texts and Reformulated Issues* (New York: Brill, 1999). I am grateful to the editors and publisher for permission to publish this revised version.