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Wadi el-Yabis and the Elijah “Wadi Cherith” traditions
in Relationship to John and Jesus in the Gospel of John

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Critical historical Jesus studies over the past decade, as showcased by the ongoing work of this SBL group and in an abundant body of published literature, have paid increasing attention to the various unique elements in the gospel of John, particularly in contrast to the relatively sparse content of the Saying Source Q and the core narrative of Mark. Such features as chronology and geography, references to Jewish customs and traditions, and specific details regarding the political contexts, particularly surrounding the circumstances of Jesus’ execution by the Roman authorities, have provided a rich trove of materials for both the historian, and more particularly the archaeologist. Several of these new avenues of inquiry are highlighted in today’s session with its fascinating set of papers.

My focus today is on John’s intriguing geographical references to the baptismal activities of both John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth. My thesis is that these references offer a possible geographical and chronological window into the movements and activities of both John and Jesus that can actually be tested “on the ground.” Not only do these references shed new light on the last winter of Jesus’ life, including Mark’s rather sparse geographical account of Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem (Mark 8-10), but they offer a new positive spin on the tradition that Jesus’ Jerusalem followers fled to the Hellenistic city of Pella in the Decapolis in the face of the siege of Jerusalem following the outbreak of the first Jewish revolt in 66 CE.

According to the gospel of Mark “John appeared baptizing in the *wilderness* (sic. “desert” ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ), “and all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins (Mark 1:4-5). Mark’s reference to the general term ἐρημός is prompted by his coupling of two references from the Hebrew prophets, associated together in a Qumran *peshet*-like style: Malachi’s prediction of a “messenger” who will *prepare the way* and Isaiah 40:3—“A voice cries: ‘*In the wilderness prepare the way* of the Yahweh; make straight in the *desert* a highway for our God.” In Isaiah the words מְבַרְכֵן and מְבַרְכֵן are used respectively, both carried in the LXX by the singular term ἐρημός. This specific reference to the *Aravah* in Isaiah, whether noted by Mark or not, seems to have been significant for the priestly *Yachad* of the Dead Sea Scrolls community that based itself, quite literally, in the *Aravah*—that is the Jordan rift valley around Jericho and north of the Dead Sea. This specific area is associated in the Torah with Moses’s mysterious death and burial in the “plains of Moab,” which might have proven relevant to expectations of “a Prophet like Moses,” *redividus* (see 1QS8:14; 4Q176 f1_2i:7; Deuteronomy 4:49; 34:6-8; 4Q175 *Testimonia*). According to Mark, “Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9). Most have assumed, based on Mark’s reference to the crowds flocking from Jerusalem and Judea out to the Jordan river, as well as Jesus coming *from* Galilee down to the Jordan, that the likely geographical focus of John’s initial baptizing activity was in the Jericho area north of the Dead Sea, whether on the east or the west banks of the Jordan River. Indeed, this has been the dominant view, reinforced by Byzantine tradition, for the past 1700 years as well as Matthew’s reading of his source Mark.

Matthew drops Mark’s reference to the Malachi messenger, perhaps because Mark rather loosely associated the reference with the book of Isaiah, and he specifically locates the “preparation of the way” as in the “wilderness of Judea” (Matthew 3:1-3). Luke’s version is less specific. His extended

treatment of the birth and prophetic destiny of John concludes with the summary verse: “And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the *deserts* (ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις) until the day of his public appearance to Israel.” This verse, clearly intended to parallel a similar statement regarding the child Jesus (Luke 2:52), implies solitude and isolation rather than anything specific about geographical location. The work and role of John the Baptist are introduced and located in John with a similar generic description: “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah *in the wilderness* (ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ). And he went into all the region around the Jordan (περίχωρον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου), proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:2-3). Like Matthew he drops Mark’s reference to the “messenger” from Malachi but quotes Isaiah 40:3. Luke adds a significant pericope of Q material related to John that offers a sample of John’s teaching addressing the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers on ethical living (Luke 3:10-14). More importantly, he relates that John is shut up in prison by Herod Antipas *before* relating Jesus’ experience of the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven (Luke 3:19-22). Luke’s generic location of John’s call and his baptismal activities and teaching plus his reference to the arrest by Herod of Galilee, can be understood as locating the primary focus of John’s activity in the deserted areas up and down the Jordan opposite the Decapolis just south of Herod’s territory—thus directly drawing the ire and attention of Herod. This is reinforced by Josephus’ account in *Antiquities* 18. 118 that Herod had John killed out of fear he might incite the crowds to revolt—obviously again focused on Galilee not Judea. This attention and focus on the part of Herod Antipas towards both John the Baptizer and later Jesus is an emphasis found subsequently in Luke’s narrative (Luke 9:7-9; 13:31-32; 23:7-12). According to Luke, John and Jesus are associated in Herod’s mind with carrying out a similar work and thus posing a singular threat—that of revolt.

Although the gospel of John, like Mark, puts Isaiah 40:3 on the lips of John who says he is the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” the force of the identification is different (John 1:20-23). John the Baptizer, when questioned about his identity or prophetic role, denies that he is either the Davidic Messiah, Elijah the Prophet returned as per the Malachi 4:4-6 (LXX/English 3:22-23), or the Prophet like Moses (Deut 15:15-18). In other words, according to the gospel of John, the Baptizer’s reference to being a “voice in the wilderness,” seems to lack any explicit connection to the area of the Jordan opposite Jericho associated with the disappearances of Moses or Elijah.

This seems to be confirmed by the much more specific reference in the gospel of John, namely that “these things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing (ταῦτα ἐν *Βηθανία ἐγένετο πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, ὅπου ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης βαπτίζων” (John 1:28). The reference to *Bethany*, despite its attested variants *Bethabara* (βηθαβαρα; ΠΨ 33 αραβα **Σ**²) seems solid from a textual perspective (P⁶⁶ P⁷⁵ **Σ**), as the *lectio difficilior*, as noted even by Origen, who prefers nonetheless *Bethabara*.¹ Bethabara is most often taken to refer to the area associated with Jesus’ baptism in the lower Jordan in the Byzantine period, that is the “house of crossing” referenced in Joshua 2:7 where the Israelites crossed the Jordan following the death of Moses. This same area is associated with the disappearance of Elijah the Prophet in the fiery heaven-bound chariot on the east bank of the Jordan River near Jericho (2 Kings 2: 6-15). This general area of Bethabara, east of Jericho and on both sides of the Jordan River is well attested in our sources (Josephus, Eusebius, Origen) and was remembered as the traditional place of Jesus’ baptism as witnessed by a thick cluster of Byzantine sites (Qasr el-Yehud or the Monastery of St John; the nearby Monastery of St Gerasimus, Ain Bassat el-Kharrar, the

¹ See Bruce M. Metzger, “ἐν *Βηθανία ἐγένετο πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου {C},” in *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd, ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1994), p. 171.

“Bethabara” Chapel of St. John, and various caves and hillocks along Wadi Kharrar).² The area is mentioned by the Bordeaux Pilgrim (333 CE) where it is associated with both the baptism of Jesus and the disappearance of Elijah, as well as in other late Byzantine accounts. “Bethabara of John the Baptist appears on the Madaba map just north of the Dead Sea on the west side of the Jordan River. This area is further associated with with the Wadi Kerith, “east of the Jordan,” where Elijah was fed by the ravens and drank from the brook when he fled from Ahab and Jezebel during the three years of drought and resulting famine (1 Kings 17:1-8).

Although I am not convinced that “Bethany beyond the Jordan” is located in the southwest section of Batanea in Transjordan as recently argued by Rainer Riesner, echoing the older views of John Lightfoot and C. R. Conder, I nonetheless commend his extensive arguments that locate “Bethany beyond the Jordan” to the north.³ Its precise location remains unknown to us but I think it was most likely in the region just south of Galilee known loosely as the “Decapolis” but outside the direct jurisdiction of Herod Antipas or Philip, rather than in Perea to the south. It should be noted that John seems to take pains to point out that the Bethany in Judea was two miles from Jerusalem, thus distinguishing it regionally from “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (John 11:18).

Most important for my argument in this paper is John’s subsequent reference to the baptismal activities of both John and Jesus: “After this, Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at *Aenon near Salim*, (Αἰνὼν ἐγγυὸς τοῦ Σαλείμ) because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being

² See the rich and helpful discussion of the area by Shimon Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 217-237.

³ Rainer Riesner, “Bethany Beyond the Jordan (John 1:28). Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987): 29-64, also sv. “Bethany Beyond the Jordan,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:703-705. Compare Michele Piccirillo, “The Sanctuaries of the Baptism on the East Bank of the Jordan River,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 433-443.

baptized (John 3:22-23). I take the location of Aenon near Salim to be relatively secure, located a few miles south of Bet-Shean and so located by Eusebius and on the Madaba map (*Onomasticon* 40:3).

Pilgrims in the Byzantine period identified it as Tel Abu Sus, five miles south of Bet Shean.

I consider this reference in the gospel of John to be of enormous value. The tradition that Jesus carried on his own Judean based baptismal activities, apparently with great success, whether in direct co-operation with John or in tension therewith, is not something one can easily dismiss. It is wholly unknown to the Synoptic traditions. That Jesus is associated with activities in the south, in Judea, whereas John is in the north, in the areas to the south of the Sea of Galilee and along the Jordan River is invaluable. According to John, long before Jesus sets up his strategic headquarters in Capernaum and moves his mother and brothers there, following the wedding at Cana, Jesus has already begun to carry out a highly successful preaching and baptismal thrust in Judea (John 2:12).

What I find most intriguing is the cryptic reference in the gospel of John to Jesus' retreat across the Jordan the last winter of his life. He has left Jerusalem after Hanukah and John reports:

Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. And many came to him. And they said, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." And many believed in him there (John 10:39-42).

Surprisingly, Mark seems to know something of a similar retreat of Jesus to the other side of the Jordan toward the last months of his life. Jesus has begun to make his way south to Jerusalem following the revelation of his Messianic identification at Caesarea Philippi when he is on the road passing through Galilee (Mark 9:30). Mark simply notes, without expansion or comment, that he went to the other side of the Jordan (Mark 10:1).

Directly across the Jordan River from the Aenon/Salim area is the rugged Wadi el-Yabis, which I take to be fairly securely identified with the famed “brook Cherith” associated with Elijah’s flight to escape death during the reign of King Ahab (1 Kings 17:1-8). Most significantly, just to the north of Wadi el-Yabis, less than two miles distant, is the Hellenistic Decapolis city of Pella. Pella became a center of Hellenistic culture under Alexander Jannaeus (Josephus, *Ant.* 13. 397). Pompey passed through, freed it, and made it a city of the Decapolis (*Ant* 14. 49; *War* 1. 156). It was presumably defeated by Jewish rebels in 66 CE in revenge for murder of Jews at Caesarea. Eusebius is our main source for the tradition that the followers of Jesus fled Jerusalem prior to the outbreak of the war. He says they were commanded by a “revelation”: to leave the city and dwell “in a certain town of Perea called Pella” (*HE* 3.5.3). Mark’s “Apocalypse” seems to provide further background on this tradition of a flight from Jerusalem: “But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Mark 13:14). Unless one takes the reference to the “mountains” as to the north, in Samaria, which makes little sense, the most likely location would be the rugged mountainous area beyond the Jordan in the Decapolis area just north of Perea. The book of Revelation also seems to reflect something quite similar where God’s remnant people, in escaping the persecution by the Dragon, similarly take flight: “But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent *into the wilderness*, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time” (Revelation 12:14). The chronological references to three and a half years further correlates with the references in Daniel to the desolating sacrilege (Daniel 9:27).

I argue that the physical location of Wadi el-Yabis and its general features, as well as the historic tradition of flight associated with Elijah, offers a good geographical and archaeological fit with the reference in the gospel of John to Jesus’ flight the last winter of his life, as well as that of the Pella tradition as related to the Jerusalem community of Jesus’ followers.

