

THE SYMBOLOGY OF αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ IN JOHN 19,34 : A REAPPRAISAL

INTRODUCTION

The symbolic meaning of the blood and water coming out from the side of Christ in the Cross has been very important for the catholic Tradition, to the theology itself, and to the Jesus Holy Heart's spirituality from Middle Ages until now¹. In this work we intend to see the different interpretations given throughout history to this verse of the gospel of John, and how the correspondent textual critical survey played an important role in the reading of this verse. We cannot, and intend not, to be exhaustive, by no means. We will only make reference to the more important and more common interpretations. In a third moment, we will try to analyse how nowadays the exegesis presents and comprehends this passage of the fourth gospel, mainly through the helping comparison of O.T and johannine texts, so that at the final conclusion we may reach to a global view, eventually critical of the previous ones.

1. What does the textual critical survey says?

Textually speaking this passage is not very problematic. However, some doubts may arise if we go in detail to see the verb that describes the piercing strike of the lance (ενυξεν), and the order of the words *blood* and *water* (αιμα και υδωρ).

The verb ενυξεν is the aorist of the verb νυσσειν (to pierce, to prick)² which is attested by almost all greek manuscripts, and the best ones. Therefore, this is the *lectio* to be retained³. But some ancient authors throughout the Tradition have understood that here was playing the verb ενοιξεν (the aorist of ανοιγειν : to open). In fact, they are very similar, and

¹ See I.DE LA POTTERIE, *Le symbolisme du sang et de l'eau en Jn. 19,34*, in *Didaskalia* 14 (1984) 201.

² See M.ZERWICK-M.GROSVENOR, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, Rome: PIB 1993, 343.

³ See *Évangile selon Saint Jean*. Traduit et commenté par F.-M. BRAUN. In L. PIROT; A. CLAMER – *La Sainte Bible*, Tome X, Paris 1950, 472; Raymond E. BROWN – *The Epistles of John* [= AB 30],

the confusion could even be explained on the basis of itacism and phonetic resemblance, a sort of homophony⁴. This reading took its course and drew the attention of many latin Fathers, among which St. Augustine, and St. Jerome with his latin version of the Vulgate (Vg), where we can find the translation "*aperuit*"⁵. This doubts and hesitations have their background in the Old Testament text of Zech.12,10. There the hebrew states the root "*dqr*" (to trespass, to pierce), what led to the good translation of Teodocio (εξεκεντησαν). In fact, these verbs are synonymous. The Septuagint, instead, saw wrongly the root "*rqd*" (to insult; or to dance, in itacised greek) in its translation to *κατωρχήσαντο* seeming that way to have mixed the hebrew letters *resh* and *daleth*.

In what concerns the order of the words "blood" and "water" also here some doubts may induce to adopt the inverse order: water and blood. However, to support this choice we have very weak textual arguments. In reality, the greek manuscript 579 and a few others⁶ adopt this reading, which was preferred by A.Vaccari for a theological reading reason and by M. E. Boismard based on medical motives, with which such a death would be explained through these last signs coming out of a corpse⁷! Moreover, A.Vaccari explains his choice arguing that it would respect more the normal ecclesial procedure of baptising first and allowing to participate in the Eucharist later⁸!

Nevertheless, these arguments are in no way decisive to adopt this secondary reading, and they deviate the attention from the main interest of this johannine text, that is, its symbolic meaning. Therefore, the text which is

Garden City, New York : Doubleday 1982, 572-578; IDEM – *The Gospel according to John II*, New York 1970, 936.949-950.

⁴ See A.VACCARI, "*Exivit sanguis et aqua*", in *Verbum Domini* 17 (1937) 198.

⁵ See *ibidem*; E. NESTLE-K. ALAND, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, Stuttgart : Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1991, 26. Auflage, 314.

⁶ A Vetus Latina manuscript; the Palatinus; the bohairic version; some from the sahidic version; the greek Fathers Appolinare of Hierapolis, Tatiano, Eusebeus of Cesarea, Epiphan, Chrysostom, and Theodoret; the Latin Fathers Tertullian, Ambrose, Jerome, Rufino, and Avito of Viena; and some alessandrian manuscripts : see M.E.BOISMARD, *Problèmes de critique textuelle concernant le quatrième évangile*, in *Revue Biblique* 60 (1953) 348-350.

⁷ See IDEM, *ibidem*. Also A.SAVA, *The wounds of Christ*, in *CBQ* 16 (1954) 438-443; M. von HERMANN, *Die Todesursache bei der Kreuzigung*, in *Stimmen der Zeit* 144 (1949) 50-60; S. A. PANIMOLLE – *Lettura pastorale del Vangelo di Giovanni II*, Bologna 1981, 412.

⁸ See A.VACCARI, "*Exivit sanguis et aqua*", 195; ORIGENES, *Contra Celsum* 2,36: PG. 11,857; GCS II, 162.5; SC 132,373.

attested by the majority of the most reliable manuscripts (among them P⁶⁶, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) is the one to be adopted and chosen:

v. 34 ἀλλ' εἰς τῶν στρατιωτῶν λόγχῃ αὐτοῦ τὴν πλευρὰν ἔνυξεν, καὶ ἐξῆλθεν εὐθὺς αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ.

(And one of the soldiers, with his spear, *pierced* His side, and immediately it came out blood and water).

2. Some different interpretations

From the birth times of the Church many proposals have been offered to unveil the meaning of the blood and water coming out from the side (the πλευρὰν) of Christ.

St. Irenaeus has seen on the two elements an evident proof of the real death of the incarnated Verb of God. With this the saint of Lyon managed to speak apologetically against the docetists⁹, to whom Jesus' death on the cross was just apparent, an illusion¹⁰.

The syriac exegesis, by his side, has made a "typological reading"¹¹ that looks back (retrospectively) to the Genesis paradise narrative, and forward (prospectively) to the new paradise symbolised in the sacramental life of the Church¹² that would be to come.

Tertullian too approached the text in a sacramental perspective. He presented the blood and the water as two different baptisms: the first as a baptism of blood (martyrdom), and the second as a sign of the more usual baptism of water (the sacramental one)¹³.

Augustine interprets the blood and the water according to the biblical typology relating Adam to Christ and Eve to the Church¹⁴. This typology became the *basis* of a more mystical reading of the two elements as the

⁹ Leon MORRIS – *The Gospel according to John. Revised edition*, [= NICNT], Michigan : Eerdmans 1995, 723.

¹⁰ St. IRENEUS, *Adv. Haer.* III, 22,2: SC 211,434; *Adv. Haer.* IV, 33,2: SC 100, 806.

¹¹ See I.DE LA POTTERIE, *Le symbolisme du sang et de l'eau*, 202.

¹² See IDEM, *ibidem*; also S.P.BROCK, *The mysteries hidden in the side of Christ*, in *Sobornost* 7/6 (1978) 462-472.

¹³ *De Baptismo*, XVI, 2: SC 35,39; see S.TROMP, *De Nativitatae Ecclesiae a Corde Iesu in Croce*, in *Gregorianum* 13 (1932) 488-527.

¹⁴ See *Tract. in Ioh.* 120,2: PL.35,1953; CCh.SL. XXXVI, 661.

saving sacraments of the Church, these ones being the only access to the true life¹⁵. This sacramental interpretation was very common in Middle Ages, and it became even more spread through the spirituality and devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart¹⁶. To see the blood and the water as the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism became more or less an accepted tradition datum, an element of our common devotional heritage until today¹⁷. Even in later Middle Age, in the Council of Vienna in 1311, on the basis of an ecclesiological and sacramental hermeneutic, our text served Pope Clement V to reaffirm the truth of the real Verb's incarnation against those who denied it, specially Peter John Olivi¹⁸.

To Rudolph Bultmann the blood and the water of 19,34 are not but simple revealing signs¹⁹, most probably due to a further interpolation²⁰. To the theologian of Marburg the blood has no soteriological power or meaning. Blood and water are just and not else than the beginning and the end of Jesus' own work: his Baptism and his Death²¹. Bultmann reaches this interpretation using the other fundamental johannine texts of 1 Jn 1,7 and Jn 6,53-56, what, in itself, must be in fact done²². However, we think that with the same method and process, a different conclusion ought to be unveiled, for John does not deprive the crucified death of Jesus from its sacrificial and priestly meaning. In his exegesis Bultmann empties the person of Jesus from his real and self mystery.

The very well known american commentator of the gospel of John, Raymond E. Brown, sees in the whole of the two elements coming out from

¹⁵ See GUILLAUME ST. THIERRY, *Meditativae Orationes*: PL 180,225-226.

¹⁶ See B.F. WESTCOTT – *The Gospel according to St. John*, London : John Murray 1882, 284-286.

¹⁷ See A. LOISY, *Le Quatrième Évangile*, Paris: Alphonse Picard 1903, 888; M.ZERWICK-M.GROSVENOR, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 732-733; also the oecumenical translation of the bible in french TOB; J.GNILKA, *Johannesevangelium*, Wurzburg: Echter Verlag 1983, 147; L.GOPPELT, *ὕδωρ*, in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento VIII*, Brescia: Paideia 1984, 94.

¹⁸ “...sed etiam emisso iam spiritu perforari lancea sustinuit latus suum, ut exinde profluentibus undis aquae et sanguinis formaretur única et immaculata ac virgo sancta mater Ecclesia, coniux Christi, sicut de latere primi hominis soporati Eva sibi in coniugium est formata.....sed unus militum lancea latus eius *aperuit*, et continuo exivit sanguis et aqua” : see Heinrich DENZINGER; Peter HÜNERMANN – *El Magisterio de la Iglesia. Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, Barcelona : Herder 1999, par. 901.

¹⁹ See R.BULTMANN, *Theologie des Neuen Testament*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1953, 400-403.

²⁰ See IDEM, *ibidem*.

²¹ See IDEM, *ibidem*, 401.

²² See IDEM, *ibidem*, 141.

the side of Christ the Spirit Himself²³. The same can be said of John P. Meier²⁴. R. Brown, however, sacrifices in his interpretation the symbolic meaning of the blood when he tries to separate them in order to interpret them isolating one another. To this author the blood must be understood originally and primarily as a real sign of death, and only the water, on its turn, may allow us to draw out the presence and the significance of the Spirit²⁵, the One that Jesus had already given in v.30. But to reach this interpretation R. Brown thinks that we must *wait* until Jn 20,22, for only there the Spirit will be really poured out over the disciples, and see the narration of Jn 18-21 in its wholeness²⁶. In fact, this wide reading enables R. Brown to read the water element as "another proleptic symbol of the giving of the Spirit, carrying on the theme in v.30"²⁷. To him, 19,34 is another stage in between Jn 19,30 and Jn 20,22. Does R. Brown understand, thus, that the Spirit kept being poured out little by little, drop by drop (if we may say so)? No. This proleptic nature of the water element is presented by R. Brown as a step of a more global and unified process: the Passion and the Glorifying resurrection of Jesus. According to R. Brown the water evokes, making it explicit, the *hour* of 12,23. The *now* of the cross is the *hour* (ωρα) to the fourth evangelist. But R. Brown reaches out correctly this hour in its theological valence. He does not reduce it to sixty minutes. In reality, the johannine hour is the whole redeeming Easter of the Lord, in its dimensions of Passion and Glory. The fruit of Easter will be the Spirit, the gift of the Spirit. This *whole hour* makes the Spirit flow: "while only the risen Jesus gives the Spirit, that gift flows from the *whole process* of glorification in the *hour* of the passion, death, resurrection and ascension"²⁸. In synthesis, R. Brown presents mainly a pneumatological reading of this v.34.

Recently, I. De La Potterie, on his turn, rebuked the sacramental and typological interpretation made during the Middle Ages, as well as the

²³ See Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 950; in the same direction see as well P. PERKINS, *The Gospel according to John*. In *NJBC*, London : Geoffrey Chapman 1997, 982.

²⁴ See John P. MEIER – *Un Judío Marginal. Nueva visión del Jesús histórico* Tomo II/1, *Juan y Jesús. El reino de Dios*, Navarra : Verbo Divino 1999, 144.252.

²⁵ See Raymond E. BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah II*, New York: Anchor Bible, Doubleday 1993, 1181.

²⁶ See IDEM, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York : Doubleday 1997, 358.

²⁷ IDEM, *The Gospel According to John*, 950.

theological-symbolic attempt to see the blood and the water as mere signs of the love and mercy of God towards us, and from Jesus Himself during His life time²⁹. This author tries to find the christological reading which would illuminate (tell) the "profound life" of Christ³⁰. To him the blood element evokes Jesus' acceptance of death till the very end obeying the Father and loving his brothers³¹. The blood would be, so, a visible sign of Jesus' conscience, the figure of Jesus' death³². Consequently, to I. De La Potterie the blood should not be read in the expressive sense of a sacrificial and expiatory meaning. To this french author the immediate textual context does not favour the establishment of a literary relationship between Jn 19,34 and Ex 12,13, for in this verse from the Exodus narrative the blood is sprinkled as a sign of preventive, precautionary defence at the passage of the devouring angel of the Lord³³. Nevertheless, through the element of the water he establishes a literary link with the O.T. Here, I. De La Potterie sends us back to Ez.47,1, Zech.14,8, and Lv.17,11-14, to the water of life coming out from Jerusalem, and to the blood as the centre of life³⁴.

I. De La Potterie, as we can see, develops his study around two distinct axes: a christological theme based on the blood (Jn.19,28.30.34), and the pneumatological perspective, which centre is the Spirit symbolised by the water element³⁵. To him, the linking bond between these two axes is the τετελεσται verb of v.30, on which we can discover the above mentioned self consciousness of Jesus. I. De La Potterie understands Jesus self consciousness expressed in this verb in two directions: one retrospective (backwards), and the other prospective (forwards), so that in the blood and in

²⁸ IDEM, *ibidem*, 951.

²⁹ See I.DE LA POTTERIE, *Le symbolisme du sang et de l'eau*, 205.

³⁰ See IDEM, *ibidem*, 207.

³¹ See IDEM, *ibidem*, 221.

³² See J.MATEOS-J.BARRETO, *El Evangelio de Juan*, Madrid: Cristiandad 1979, 828-829; I. DE LA POTTERIE, *ibidem*, 215. I.de la Potterie devices this self conscience of Jesus expressed in the εἶδος of Jn.13,1; 18,4. We also agree with this. But it seems very doubtful to us the literary approach he presents between this εἶδος and the αἷμα και υδωρ of Jn.19,34, since on the cross Jesus *passively* saw the lance piercing His side. He had already delivered the Spirit in v.30!

³³ In fact, we estimate that here I.de la Potterie is right, for, indeed the context of Ex.12, 11-14 is different from the context of Jn. 19, 28-42. The blood in Ex.12,13 has other purposes.

³⁴ See I.DE LA POTTERIE, *ibidem*, 214. This literary link will be considered in the next section.

³⁵ See IDEM, *La Passion de Jésus selon l'Évangile de Jean*, Paris: Cerf 1986, 188; IDEM – *Il simbolismo del sangue e dell'acqua del costato trafitto (Gv 19,34)*. In IDEM – *Studi di cristologia giovannea*, Genova 1986, 172-173.178.

the water Jesus simultaneously reveals that He himself is aware of his own life (retrospectively) and of that of the times of the Church and of the Spirit He now inaugurates³⁶ (prospectively). This simultaneity is to him the union sign of Christ and the Spirit. In reality, I. De La Potterie tries not to see them separately. Therefore, he speaks of the *Spirit of Jesus*³⁷ expressed in the water element, making present and real in the Church the blood of Jesus, his inner life³⁸. This scheme enables I. De La Potterie to translate, through the elements of the blood and the water, the trinitarian communion between Christ and the Spirit, and to articulate theologically the indivisible relation between christology and pneumatology.

But, and just to sum up, at least it can be recognized that I. De La Potterie presents and underlines a pneumatological reading of Jn.19,34. Even when he grounds back this verse in the O.T. texts of Zech.12,10; 13,1, the analysis remains in the world of ecclesiology and pneumatology. His interpretation of these two texts, which are undoubtedly fundamental, as the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies³⁹, sets us in the path of the Pentecost. In his exegesis the reference to the dimension of compassion and mercy is very weak and swift⁴⁰. Yet, he does not focus enough on the text of Jn 6,53-56.

3. Symbolic analysis of John 19,34.

The author of the fourth gospel must have had a further intention in mind when he wrote about the piercing of the side of Jesus. The evangelist normally departs from an historical event to evoke through it another redeeming consequence. It is reasonable to believe, and one can try to see it through the comparison of other johannine and O.T. texts, that here it happened the same. It was not by chance that the evangelist narrated,

³⁶ See IDEM, *La Passion de Jesus*, 189-190.

³⁷ IDEM, *ibidem*, 193.

³⁸ See IDEM, *ibidem*.

³⁹ See F.M.BRAUN, *L'eau et l'Esprit*, in *Revue Thomiste* 49 (1949) 13.

⁴⁰ See I.DE LA POTTERIE, *La Passion de Jésus selon l'Évangile de Jean*, Paris: Cerf 1986, 195.

revealed to us the fact that after Jesus had already died blood and water came out from Him. Indeed, we cannot deny that the evangelist used 19,34 as a proof in 19,35 and in 20,20 to testify the real historical and spatial event of Jesus' Passion⁴¹. In Jn.20,20 Jesus Himself made shown (εδειξεν!) His side. It is very significant the use of the verb δείκνυμι. This verb in the fourth gospel has an intense revelatory weight. Therefore, we can already begin to guess another purpose of the author himself (*intentio auctoris*). The opened pricked side of Jesus goes, indeed, beyond the wound caused by the stab of the soldier. In it the evangelist revealed (εδειξεν) something else, not only that the Son of Man died. This is the *leitmotiv* which motivates the study of this passage, this was the reason of Peter's act of faith in Jn.21,21: Κυριε, (=Lord), and that of Thomas in Jn.21,28: Κυριος μου, Θεος μου! The pierced side of Jesus, the elements of the blood and the water, are σημεία εποίησεν ο Ιησους ενωπιον των μαθητων αυτου (20,30; see 12,37), they are the *signs* Jesus made, offered to his owns, so that they may reach the level, the state of faith. In reality, we stand here at the level of true theological-symbolic reading. Depth of faith is the main purpose⁴². So, what do those elements mean, what did the evangelist intended, why did he used and narrated them? We too have seen (εωρακαμεν) those signs of the Lord (20,25). How far can the reflection of faith, of those who believe (πιστευοντες : 20,31), go? This reflection, first of all, has to be made within the inter-textuality of the Scripture itself⁴³ in its entirety.

In the O.T. these two elements (*blood* and *water*) are very common. Blood is used when life or death are at stake (Lv.17, 11-14; Gen.4,1-16), and is one of the main requisites for the cult liturgy. No wonder that such an important element would have been used by Moses, instructed by IHWH, to seal the covenant between God and the people of Israel (Ex.24,8), working as a sign of faithfulness. The N.T. presents the blood with a priestly and cultic

⁴¹ See SIMON LÉGASSE, *Le procès de Jésus La Passion dans les Quatre Évangiles* [= Lectio Divina: Commentaires 3] Paris: Cerf 1995, 569.

⁴² See R.E.BROWN, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1180; IDEM, *The Gospel According to John*, 947.

⁴³ See Horacio SIMIAN-YOFRE, (a cura di), *Metodologia dell'Antico Testamento*, Bologna: EDB 1995, 177; IDEM, *Testi Isaiani dell'Avvento*, Bologna: EDB 1996, 9.

meaning, for instance, in Heb.9,12.20⁴⁴: "He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (v.12). But not only. The blood of Jesus is also a sign of peace and reconciliation (Col.1,20), the place of atonement on behalf of the people (ἱλαστηριον: Rom 3,25), our own justification (Rom 5,9), the way to live in communion with the Body of Christ (1 Cor 10,16) and the forgiveness of our sins (Eph.1,7; 1 Jn.1,7). The blood of Jesus is the blood of the new and everlasting covenant (Mt 26,28; Lk 22,20; 1 Cor 11,23-27), the new real nourishment that opens the way to the final resurrection (Jn 6,54), the true drink (Jn 6,55). The blood of the Lamb has freed us from our sins (Rev 1,5), to the final victory of those who have washed their lives in the same blood of martyrdom in the name of a faithful love to God and to the Lamb (Rev 12,11).

Consequently, one can begin here to see that through all these forms blood is mainly seen in the semitic symbology as the principle of life. This symbology is somehow assumed in the N.T., specially in the johaninne writings (Jn 6,53-56; 1 Jn.1,7; Rev 1,5; 7,14; 12,11), what might induce one to interpret the blood coming out of Christ on the cross as His loving mercy, as the salvific gift of His Easter: "my blood is the true drink" (Jn 6,55), "whoever drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn 6,54). The vast majority of researchers read Jn 19,34 as a fulfilment of Jn 6,53-56. This passage from the so called and known Bread of life discourse is in itself the background of an eucharistic meal. Yet, in Jn 19,34 it lacks the *σάρκα* element. In Jn 19,34 the author focus not on the Bread but in life, attained through an act of grace, through undeserved mercy and compassion.

The water imagery pervades the entire O.T. revelation. It belongs to the promises of salvation, and many times the water itself is the way God uses to show mercy to the people. Whenever the people complain IHWH solves their thirst making water gushing out from a rock⁴⁵: "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come

⁴⁴ See A.FEUILLET, *L'Exode de Jésus et le déroulement du mystère rédempteur d'après S.Luc et S.Jean*, in *Revue Thomiste* 77 (1977) 198.

⁴⁵ See F.M.BRAUN, *L'eau et l'Esprit*, in *Revue Thomiste* 49 (1949) 9.

out of it, so that the people may drink" (Ex.17,6⁴⁶), and be not thirsty again (Is.29,10). Springs and fountains, well, pits, brooks and rivers are signs of God's loving kindness, they will be the proof that God is and will be faithful to His promise. Therefore, He will stand up to show grace and mercy (Is.30,18) by making the mountains of Jerusalem flow out brooks of water (v.25). This way the people can feel and touch the compassion of his God, not only now in the present moment, but in its continuation in the future. In fact, in the desert water is the oasis of hope, for its presence means survival, life: "they did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; He made water flow for them from the rock; He split open the rock and the water gushed out" (Is.48,21). Truly, God's faithfulness is steady: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In green pastures He makes me lie down" (Ps.23,2). His love is like a "garden fountain, a well of living water and flowing streams from Lebanon" (Song of Songs 4,15).

So one is already able to isolate an important image related to the water: *the rock*. It might seem that the thirst of the people is only of water, a natural element for survival. But, the O.T., on the basis of this human need, reads deeper and discovers the anxiety for the Spirit (*ruah*) of the Lord, the need of the thirsty Israel longing for this true drink. This link between the water and the Spirit is made within the prophetic traditions in Israel in times when God seemed *absent, away*. These prophetic texts are preferred by the exegetes to interpret our verse of Jn.19,34. In reality, the johannine texts know very well the O.T and they too relate the water to the Spirit of the Lord, placing themselves in the line of these prophetic traditions, seeing in the future promises of fountains of water the expression of God's loving Spirit, of God's eternal compassion. Through the prophets God continues to speak to the people of Israel, so that as result the people has no excuse of forgetting the promise of redemption. And even when Israel has stubbornly forgotten the real fountain source of life, the Lord remains faithful to His promises and to Himself up to the point of consoling the rebellious sons, like a father always waiting with his arms opened for the prodigal one (Lk.15,11-32): "for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of

⁴⁶ See Num.20,8.10; Ps.105,4.

living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer.2,13); "with weeping they shall come and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water" (31,9). And then God expands this promise, universalises His compassion: "everyone who thirsts, may he come to the waters" (Is.55,1), so that "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (12,3).

Some other important O.T. texts help us to read the body of Jesus on the cross either as the *rock* from which gushes out living waters of life and compassion, either as the new temple of the renewed Jerusalem from which one can drink from the source of life, represented in the *river* that flows from it : "and the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water, a fountain shall come forth from the *house* of the Lord" (Joel 3,18), she "will be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Zech.13,1); "the Lord will sprinkle clean water upon you.....a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ez 36,25-26). This promise, however, is personified in the person of the messianic king, the pierced one, to whom the entire people shall look as liberator (Rom 11,26) and upon whom they shall bitterly weep: "and I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn" (Zech. 12,10).

Inevitably we can not help regarding Jn.19,37 as the fulfilment on the cross of the zecharian prophecy: "they will look to the one they have pierced"! On the cross the rest of Israel stabbed the *rock* to satisfy his thirst, to receive the blessing of living waters sprinkling out from the Crucified, the new temple out of which the *river* of God's compassion continues to flow for ever as source of salvation and regeneration. The N.T. reads these O.T. prophecies in the same way it has assumed the significance of the blood in the O.T., as we have seen. Water is, thereafter, like blood, a sign of life and salvation. No wonder that the johannine writings make the water element very important

and frequent⁴⁷. It is presented either as a sign of life, either a sign of the Spirit of life, but always as a result of a first and originary compassion. The water continues to be the translation of God's loving kindness promised by the O.T. prophecies. It means a re-birth, a new beginning: "no one, unless it is born of water and spirit, will enter the kingdom of God" (Jn.3,5). The rest of Israel still longs for the true fountains of life: "Lord, give me of that water, in order that I may no longer thirst" (Jn 4,15). And, if the achievement occurs only in Jn.19,34, the announcement was already made to the samaritan woman in Jn 4,14 by Jesus Himself: "whoever drinks from the water I *will give* him will never thirst again". There Jesus presented Himself as the Lamb who will guide us to fountains of living waters (Rev 7,17) and sate in those rivers our thirst (22,1), allowing us to drink from them gratuitously, for those springs will be his own *gift* to us (22,17). The promise achieved on the cross expands itself after till eternity. His gift has no end. Consequently, the invitation remains: "whoever thirsts may he come to Me and drink" (Jn 7,37b).

Also very important to understand better Jn 19,34 is the text of 1 Jn 5,6-8: "he came by water and by blood, not only in water, but with water and blood.....the Spirit, the water and the blood are turned to one witness". Can we, therefore, due to this literary connection, acknowledge the water as equivalent to the Spirit, the *ruah* of the Lord ? Is it the water of Jn 19,34 the Holy Spirit? It is better to find the answer with the help from the Book of Revelation, so that as to scanner the whole of the johannine writings. Indeed, if one takes into account that the gift of the Spirit already occurred in Jn 19,30, and the fact that the Apocalypse reshapes again eschatologically the promises of living waters coming out from the temple of the new Jerusalem where the Lamb stands (Rev 22,17), we do not need to identify the water with the Spirit. This does not cut the Spirit from its significance as the most excellent fruit of the resurrection. In fact, the gift of life is made in the pneumatological mediation. It is decisive this literary link, which we have not seen so much developed or appreciated. The water, the love, will continue to be poured.

⁴⁷ See A.FEUILLET, *L'Exode" de Jésus et le déroulement du mystère*, 201.

Despite what one has analysed so far, we ask ourselves if we cannot go further in the interpretation of Jn 19,34: is it possible to read a sacramental meaning in the water element of Jn 19,34, as a sign of baptism? Is this reasoning valid? Does it sustain itself out of the literary links and context? One could argue in favour of this interpretation making use of the reinforcement of Mk 10,38 and Lk 12,50: the baptism of Jesus in the Spirit only took place through his glorious death on the cross, a thesis supported by Jn 7,39: "for there was yet no Spirit, since Jesus had not yet been glorified". However, the difficulty in this reading is that no johannine text speaks about baptism in reference to the death of Jesus! A link could very swiftly at the most be suggested between water and Spirit due to the correspondent eschatological hope deeply rooted in the Jewish thought, as can be seen in Ez 36,25-27 and in apocalyptic writings⁴⁸. The Qumran community too tried to unite the cleansing through water with the gift of the Spirit in the immersions rituals⁴⁹. This demand of purification in the expectation of the renewal of the Spirit was not totally unknown at the initial times of the Church⁵⁰. Yet, it remains impossible to prove a literary basis link.

In 1 Jn 5,6-8 the problem in the sacramental interpretation of these verses is the role of the Spirit in the whole process⁵¹, since it seems that the author makes the Spirit, the water, and the blood stand at the same level, as three similar and permanent witnesses. Moreover, 1 Jn 5,6 uses the present tense for the three of them. So, one may argue that here the author of the johannine epistles would be giving us a symbolic description of the *ongoing* power of Jesus who conquered the world by his death (Jn 16,33), a power which vivifies in the Spirit (6,63), cleanses through the water (Jn 13,10), and atones by his blood (1 Jn 1,7; 2,2). But, it seems that the context implies a more objective set of *witnesses*⁵².

Nevertheless, the principal datum that comes out of this discussion is the fact that one can find very important for the logic of the whole verse of 1

⁴⁸ *Jub.* 1,23; *Ps.Sol.* 18,6; *Test.Judah* 24,3.

⁴⁹ 1 QS 3,6-9; 1 QH11,12.

⁵⁰ See G.R.BEASLEY-MURRAY, *Gospel of life Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Massachusetts: Hendrickson 1991, 94.

⁵¹ Raymond E.BROWN, *The Epistles of John*, 583.

⁵² See IDEM, *ibidem*, 597.

Jn 5,6 the use of a present tense, for through it the author seems to develop a continuity beginning in the past testimony given at the cross⁵³, and probably even earlier in Jn 7,36-38. With this it can be considered reasonable that a connection might be established between the gospel of John, the Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation within the context of the johannines school and community, a continuity from Jn 7,36-38, passing through Jn 19,34, until 1 Jn 5,6-8, and finally reopening itself again in the eschatology of the Apocalypse. As for the sacramental reading of Jn 19,34 and 1 Jn 5,6-8 it looks that the argumentation lies too strictly on the faith of the johannine christian community which recognizes the life-giving powers of the Spirit, of baptism, and of eucharist, all three of them symbolised in the outpouring of the Spirit, water and blood on the cross (Jn 19,30-35).

In the grammatical analysis of the text of Jn 19,34 one can see that the adverb *ευθως* leans upon the verb *εξηλθεν*. The whole verse has its centre on the two verbs *ενυξεν* and *εξηλθεν*. They are not neuter in the gospel. The spear enters on the side of Jesus so that blood and water may come out⁵⁴. Once again we may have here an invitation to the reader to recall the Exodus⁵⁵! Once more one can see the permanent johannine dynamic of entering and coming out. This process began in the Prologue where Jesus came from the Father⁵⁶. It continued during the whole process before Pilate, entering and leaving the *Pretorium* (Jn 19,4.5.9.13). There, these movements have shown little by little the priestly royalty of Jesus. Now Jesus lets blood and water to leave out from Him in order that we may enter Him, and through Him in the heart (side) of God. He leaves our presence to enter again in the presence of the Father. In reality, we stand here before the patristic so called *Admirabile Commercium*⁵⁷: Jesus left, came out from the presence of the Father, to leave us now in His moment of the Cross, and enter the intimacy of God. He left to enter again in His own promised Land, in the glory of the Father: "now the son of man has been glorified and God glorified in him" (13,31). But not alone. He gave the blood and the water so that we may enter

⁵³ See IDEM, *ibidem*.

⁵⁴ See 19,27; 18,1.4; 13,3; 16,27.28.30; 17,8; 13,30-31 where it appears with adverb. But not in 8,42.

⁵⁵ See Ex.15,2-21; 24,8.

⁵⁶ Jn.1,1-2; 13,3; cf: 16,27.28.30; 17,8.

⁵⁷ See ST.LEO MAGNUS, Pope, *Sermo* 1,1-3: PL 54, 190-193.

like Him in the glory of the Father. This is the reason of His own being, which the elements of the blood and the water evoke: "the symbolism of this scene shows that the death of Jesus was *life-giving*"⁵⁸. The shed of blood and water is the shed of a love poured out in sign of redemption. And they are undoubtedly the face of a redeeming death generated in the womb of the Spirit⁵⁹ (1 Jn 1,7; 4,14; 7,38). But it is always a love, a saving mercy. In this context it seems very difficult to recognise some value, even through a very indirect interpretation of 19,34, to the ecclesiological meaning of the blood and the water. Textually and literarily speaking, this patristic significance ought not to be completely withdrawn, but in this view it is not the primary one, due to the fact already mentioned above that no johannine text speaks about baptism in reference to the crucified death of Jesus. This, however, does not deny the fact that the Church is fruit of this saving love and compassion, which the sacraments of baptism and eucharist recall.

In Jn 19,34 the verb ἐξηλθεν is in the singular, and one would expect it to be in the plural, since the immediate direct object are the *two* elements: blood and water. But the και makes them as one. Thereafter, it allows the reader to detect a close and indissoluble unity between the two elements, signifying a whole. On the other hand, one must take into consideration the fact that the only other occurrences of αἷμα in the singular in the gospel of John appear at the end of the discourse of the Bread of Life (6,53-56). Blood and water appear too in the singular in the first johannine letter (1 Jn 5,6-8). But there the context is somewhat diverse, and it does not offer us any other element concerning any rebuke of the sacramental interpretation. Instead, is the absence of it. For if it was so, it would be at least valid to ask why "the author would be choosing a remarkably obscure way of referring to sacraments, so that one would have posit that this was well-known inner-community language"⁶⁰. Thereby, it might at least retained as very difficult to device an immediate eucharistic connotation to the blood or a baptismal one to the water of 19,34⁶¹, exegetically speaking.

⁵⁸ Raymond E. BROWN, *The Epistles of John*, 597.

⁵⁹ See R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium* III [= HTKNT 4], Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1975, 344-345.

⁶⁰ Raymond E. BROWN, 575.

⁶¹ See THOMAS, *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, Rome 1992, 5/3, n°2458, p.361-362.

As for the literary structure of the context in which this verse 34 develops itself, the reader has the impression that the whole process of Jesus' death is only ended after the burial. Until then many important events had to take place and to be narrated. Even if Jesus had already rendered His Spirit in v. 30⁶², the end was not yet *ended*, achieved. The final and central scene of Jesus death does not finishes to end. Death already happened, but now we have some sort of *another dying*, if one may thus speak. So it is valid to ask: where is this end? And more: does it exist? Why the burial in v.42? What will remain? The burial, and the blood and the water, testify in first place that Jesus really died. But in what way? Following the symbolic meaning of the johannine language (which is always based in reality), He died as the Suffering Servant of God (Is 53,2-54,3), as the new paschal lamb⁶³, He died to a previous life to pass through death and again through the water of the exodus to a new oasis of intimacy with the Father. The blood and the water are the new *link* between Jn 18-19 and Jn 20-21, between death and life. This is the new *bridge* beyond the tomb to the resurrection. The compassion and the loving mercy of God in the mediation of His Son helped to fulfil the Scriptures until vv.28.30. Nevertheless, this fulfilment was not *definitely fulfilled*, if one may say so. After the deliverance of the Spirit in v.30 another fulfilment had to be achieved according to the Scriptures: the gift of blood and water, the whole life of Jesus Himself⁶⁴. The end, this fulfilment, had already been achieved in vv.28.30.34. But not yet totally until the resurrection (Jn 20-21). The blood and the water are the vehicle with which the fulfilment pervades the Scriptures and the whole life of Jesus in a continuity from His passion to resurrection⁶⁵. The exaltation and the glorification proceed⁶⁶. This end is itself a sign, the beginning of a new advent. The eschatological tension

⁶² See IRENAEUS, *Adv.Haer.* IV, 14.2: SC 100,544; *Adv.Haer.* III, 24.1: SC 34,400.

⁶³ See Rudolf BULTMANN, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1985 (the original is from 1957) 524-526.

⁶⁴ As we have seen this is the proposal of Ignace De la Potterie, who follows the suggestion of B.F.Westcott: see B.F.Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 284-285; I.DE LA POTTERIE, *La Passion de Jésus selon l'Évangile de Jean*, 189.

⁶⁵ We find very valid here the perspective of Raymond E.Brown, who presents Easter as the process of a wholeness, from Passion to Ascension, scattered for us in different moments of an evangelical narrative: see Raymond E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, 951.

⁶⁶ See W.THUESING, *Erhöhung und Verherrlichung Jesu Johannesevangelium*, Münster 1960.

between the "already" of salvation and the "not yet" of the salvific *καιρος*⁶⁷ continues to jump out from the text itself. Only this blood and this water, expression of His loving mercy and compassionated love for us till the end (Jn.13,1), will allow the Church to sustain herself in the truth and the prophetic promises of God to continue. God, Who was defined in the O.T. has merciful and graceful⁶⁸, will continue to act likewise, to submit the Son and the Church to an exodal experience. He will continue to show on His mercy and His grace from the pouring of the blood and water, through the christological mediation of His own Son. The pierced side of Jesus is, for that, salvation to the world, because only the love and the mercy of God given after the stab of the soldier sustain mankind, redeem men. The blood and the water are thus "a rich source of grace"⁶⁹. In them the O.T. promises are achieved and *re-promised* in the context of the N.T. faith and eschatology. Exodus is redrawn once again.

Therefore, the blood and the water that came out from Jesus' side are the blood and the water of the new an everlasting alliance⁷⁰, shed out⁷¹ for the benefit (*υπερ*) of many⁷², in behalf (*περι*) of the world (Jn 17,9). These gifts can be seen as an expression of the merciful love of Christ to the world, according to the salvific seed of His Father's plan. We stand hereby in the line of thought of S.Bernard of Claraval and S.Catherine of Siena. The blood and water coming out from the side of Jesus are the visible signs of God's piety mystery (1 Tim 3,16: *ευσεβειας μυστηριον*). In the flank of Jesus God could no more and no better expose His gratitude to the world, reveal His own heart of mercy⁷³. The prickled side of the Son is the loving heart of the Father.

CONCLUSION

⁶⁷ See 2 Cor. 6,2.

⁶⁸ "Rahum wehannun": Ex. 34,6; Gen.4,2; Ps.86,15; 103,8; 111,4; 112,4; 116,5; 145,8; Ne.9,17,31; 2 Cr.30,9.

⁶⁹ George M. SOARES-PRABU (Hrsg.), *Wir werden bei ihm wohnen Das Johannesevangelium in indischer Deutung*, Herder-Basel-Wien: Herder 1984, 160.

⁷⁰ See Jn. 6,53-56; Ez. 36,27; Mt.26, 28; 1 Cor.11,23-27

⁷¹ See Lv. 17,11; Dt. 21, 22-23.

⁷² See Jn. 10,1.18; Rom. 3,25; 5,8; Heb. 9,14; 1 Pet. 3,18; 2 Cor. 5,15.

⁷³ See S.BERNARD, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* III (Michigan: Cistercian 1979) 143-145: translated by Kilian Walsh and Irene M.Edmonds.

It seems that the whole scene of Jn 19,34 happens between the opening of Jesus side and the closing in the tomb, in the bridge that joins exteriority and interiority, between the Redeemer's salvific gift and the earth receiving it in the grave and in His last friends and disciples. In fact, in the text there is a clear opposition between v.34 and vv.38a-41. The Sower has taken from his seeds to sow now the land. He has scattered blood and water for the world, He has strewn around to his disciples His love and mercy. The Good Shepherd has made Himself nourishment in exchange for the life of the flock itself (Jn 10,15), so that the sheep may not be injured. The Shepherd died for the sake of the entire flock, pouring out the whole blood as a sign of obedience in hope to the Father⁷⁴.

We have seen as the majority of the interpreters explain this verse of the fourth gospel mainly in three perspectives : sacramental (ecclesiological), christological, and pneumatological⁷⁵. Even though one can not deny value to these lines of thought, it might be considered, on the basis of lexical and literary prospect, that the blood and the water could be read as the loving and merciful signs of the Good Shepherd towards his own flock, on the analogy of the Exodus event repeated and offered over and over again along the history of salvation. In fact, it can be suggested that it is possible to go a little bit further than, for instance, R. Brown, R. Schnackenburg, S. Légasse, and I. De La Potterie have gone. The O.T. literary connections of Zech.12,10; 13,1; Ez. 36,25-27; 47,1 and the blood and the water of Jn 19,34 evoke once again the continuing salvific love of IHWH (the Good Shepherd of Israel, of the Church), which pervades the entire history of redemption since Moses, etiologically since Adam. The evangelist chose two elements very well known by everybody, and attested throughout the whole history of Israel. This way, the author of the fourth gospel offers a wide symbolic interpretation, very opened, but deep and rich. The evangelist himself makes an internal reading of the blood and water elements, his gospel is an O.T. exegesis at the light of the events of Exodus-Easter by those who have inherited the promises made by

⁷⁴ See Giorgio ZEVINI – *Evangelio según San Juan*, Salamanca : Sígueme 1995, 467.

⁷⁵ See Pierre BENOÎT – *Passion et Ressurrection du Seigneur*, Paris : Cerf 1969, 253; Jacques GOETTMANN – *Saint Jean. Évangile de la nouvelle Genèse*, Paris : Cerf 1982, 249.

God to Israel and are now believing members of the first christian communities.

This terminological research focused more on the word υδωρ. As for the blood element the O.T. relates it more to all the priestly sacrificial environment and to the preservation of life. In fact, blood in the O.T. is synonymous of life (Lv 17,11-14; Gen.4,1-16) in a first anthropological moment, but also of death. Only after it is read theologically as the bonding sign of the new covenant between IHWH and His people, which the act of sprinkling by Moses established (Ex 24,8). Comparatively, the N.T. is more emphatic on the element of the blood than the O.T., and, as we saw, it is almost exclusively the johannine tradition (the gospel, the epistles, and the Book of Revelation) that reflects on water element. Consequently, the exegesis of R. Brown looks accurate and well funded. In reality, αιμα signifies either that Jesus died as man, as well as His redemptive life. Indeed the shed blood "signals a loss"⁷⁶. υδωρ could evoke the Spirit. Notwithstanding, it seems decisive to take the entire johannine tradition, and not just the linking continuity between Jn 7,36-38, Jn 19,34 and 1 Jn 5,6-8 (which is acceptable in itself) like R. Brown does, where the presence and the interpretation of the Spirit is omnipresent. Before the Festival of Easter Jesus *loved* his ones till the very end (Jn 13,1), He decided to live His life that way till the cross. The blood and the water after His death enable the victory of those who have martyrially washed their lives in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 12,11), and show the gratuitousness of the fountain of living waters (Rev 22,17). This is what the Shepherd gave to his Bride : the possibility of becoming Wife in the joy of a parity reciprocal passion, so that in the Spirit she may cry to her Beloved : "Come" (Rev 22,17), love me mercifully with your kisses, your touch and your presence (Song 1,2). So the blood and water elements say in first place the christological mediation, but in the fundamental intention they evoke a *theological* reading. The sacramental and ecclesiological reading look later in time and in purpose, as Beasley-Murray well noted⁷⁷. The trespassed side of Jesus retells the origin of the salvation project : God loving and merciful, in

⁷⁶ See Thomas L. BRODIE – *The Gospel according to John. A literary and theological commentary*, New York – Oxford : Univ. Press 1993, 552.

⁷⁷ See G.R. BEASLEY-MURRAY – *John* [= WBC 36], Waco : Word Books 1987, 357-358.

the same line of continuity coming from the entire group of promises in the O.T. The Son dead leaves the Father alone in His mission of seduction (see Lc 15), in the sigh of someone ran out of resources and means!

José Carlos Carvalho

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