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**THE SACRAMENTAL SYMBOLISM OF “THE  
BOOK OF SIGNS” FROM THE FOURTH  
GOSPEL**

**- PhD thesis -**

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# **SUMMARY**

# I. AUTHORITY AND PARTICULAR FEATURES OF THE GOSPEL

My PhD thesis aims at delineating a framework of the sacramental theology of the fourth Gospel by means of analyzing “the signs” and the symbols that are present especially in the first part of the Gospel: “*The Book of Signs*” (chapters 2-12). To this purpose I have approached in the first place the problem of the symbol within the larger context of a “symbolology” outlined by the researches made in the major fields of “man’s sciences”, then I have tried to identify the place and the role the symbol plays especially in the biblical language. In the context given by the object of the present analysis, namely that of John’s Gospel, I have selected in the first part of my thesis three categories of symbols which I have tried to illustrate with the adequate examples, that is: the “axial” symbols (the light), the sacramental symbols (water, wine, bread) and the numerical symbols. Then, I have analyzed the theme of the metaphor, a privileged vehicle of the Johannine symbolism, which follows naturally the symbol. The metaphor, the true “vector” of the Johannine symbolology, fulfills in the economy of the Gospel an essential role in its double quality of revealing the truth and of being an instrument of the relation between the subject and the object of faith.

As regarding the author of the Gospel, we must say that it has been proposed in time different hypotheses concerning his identity. Starting with Irenaeus of Lyons, the quasi-unanimous tradition of the Church has identified the author with John, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles, who died in Ephesus during the reign of Nerva or Trajan, towards the end of the first century. This tradition was taken over by St. Clement of Alexandria and by the anti-marcionite Prologue to the Gospel of John, while the Muratori Canon (about 180 AD) confirms the fact that the author is John, the Apostle. The Johannine authorship of the Gospel is strongly asserted today by K.J. Vanhoozer, according to whom its ethos depends in a large proportion on the identification of the author with the “beloved disciple”. Against the thesis of “the author’s death”, promoted by a certain “hermeneutics of suspicion”, Vanhoozer pleads for the reliability of the quality of an eye-witness, assumed by the author of the Gospel, and opts in favour of a

“hermeneutics of faith”, which has also the advantage of an illustrious interpretative tradition.<sup>1</sup> St. Irenaeus is the first to explicitly assert the canonicity of the Gospel, considering it with the other three. At the beginning of the third century this canonicity seemed already a fact accepted by the Christian communities, and an evidence for this is the massive use of John’s Gospel by Tertullian in the refutation of Sabellianism, which identified the Father to the Son (*Adversus Praxeam*). Moreover, towards the end of the same century, Clement of Alexandria calls the fourth Gospel “the spiritual Gospel”, that is a gospel of a very high theological level, considering it the complement of the synoptic gospels which present “the material deeds” of Jesus. Origen<sup>2</sup> will follow Clement, calling it “the Gospel of the Gospels”.<sup>3</sup> Anyway, the most of the present exegetes consider very likely that the ideas from the Gospel of John belong to the Judaic framework of reference. Although there are relatively few quotations, the key terms – the word, the light, the shepherd, the bread, the vine, love, testimony etc. – which are present in the Gospel are taken over from the Old Testament.

The Gospel of John refers to the same events as the synoptic Gospels, but does this from another perspective, that of a profound meditation on the central events of the history of salvation. His intention is that of pointing out the identity between the historical person of Jesus and the Christ preached by the Church, of underlining the connections between each event of Jesus and the manifestation of the glory of Christ, the Lord, celebrated by the Church.<sup>4</sup>

In our opinion, there are some characteristic features of the Gospel which impose themselves to any analysis lacking of “exegetical preconceptions”. These are:

1. the liturgical background;
2. “the semeiology” of the miracles;

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 2002, pp. 257-274.

<sup>2</sup> “The commentary of Origen to the Gospel of John is contemporaneous with the famous and controversial treatise *De principiis*. Both belong to the Alexandrine period, that is, the period of Origen’s youth. Read and re-read, sometimes wrongly read, interpreted from different perspectives and in different contexts, adulated and especially condemned starting with 543, during the reign of Justinian, Origen continues to incite not so theology as its auxiliary disciplines, hermeneutics and the philosophy of interpretation.” (Cristian Bădiliță in Origen, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Ioan, Cartea I*, translated with notes and studies by Cristian Bădiliță, Institutul European, Iași, 1995, p.100).

<sup>3</sup> Cristian Bădiliță, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Noul Testament*, translated by Cristian Preda, Humanitas, București, 1993, p. 60.

3. the narrative dynamics;
4. the epiphanic dialogue;
5. the time of fulfilling;
6. the calling of testimony;
7. the exigency of love.

## II. THE SYMBOLICAL LANGUAGE OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The symbol plays a major role in the Gospel's text. The essential function of the symbol was always that of uniting and allowing the objective passing, the communication between the different levels of the being, between different grades of reality, and to the extreme, between all levels of being.<sup>5</sup> A symbol is always in a relation of affiliation and even of communion of essence with the reality it symbolizes.<sup>6</sup> The role of the symbol is that of revealing a total reality, inaccessible to other means of knowledge. In a natural way, the symbol has "an ecumenical calling". Only the symbol can allow us, beyond religions, philosophies and ideologies, to unite inside us all that has been divided by time or history. The ancient Greeks understood *symbolon* as a secret and conventional sign through which friends, husband and wife, the members of a group or association or the signers of a contract could recognize themselves.<sup>7</sup> Any symbolism is a type of "gnosis" too, that is, a method of mediation through a complete and experimental knowledge. The symbol is a beatifying and redeeming knowledge which requires a social environment, that is, a sacramental and an ecclesial one.<sup>8</sup>

As it is shown by Maurice Cocagnac, in the Bible the symbol is "the flesh of the language" and since the Hebraic language is very suitable to this embodiment, the word of God can be uttered on all tones. In the biblical environment, the symbol has image as a support most of the times. The constitutive symbolism of the image is founded on the homogeneity of the significant with the signified within the framework of an organizing dynamism. In the biblical environment, the multitude of the significances of a symbol articulates itself and gather together always as a system.

Therefore, the symbol remains the main comprehensive vehicle of the biblical language, whose correct interpretation facilitates the understanding of the spiritual

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Scrima, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, translated by Dr. Irineu Ioan Popa, Arhiepiscop vicar, EIBMBOR, București, 1996, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Vossler, *Modul de gândire simbolic*, in the volume *Din lumea romanică*, translated and notes by H.R. Radian, foreword and selection by Mihai Pop, Univers, București, 1986, p. 223.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Aventurile imaginii*, p. 38.

meanings. An anagogical reading of the symbol is also the essential premise of **the sacramental interpretation**. The sacramental interpretation of the Gospel is required by the symbolisms itself used by its language. The language of the Scripture is not only an accidental and exterior vestment<sup>9</sup> from which a certain eternal truth will be drawn out, but especially the eternal vehicle of the divine message shared once for all.<sup>10</sup>

By using a declared and honest sacramental reading of the Gospel, we must also reject and attempt to objectivize the Sacraments through a definite identification of the biblical text that “institutes” them, because when a sacred text is interpreted there is always meaning beyond meaning, beyond the immediate meaning.<sup>11</sup>

The symbolism of the Gospel of John is developed on three levels: the first one, that of the “axial” symbols, is illustrated in the present thesis by the theme of light; the second one, that of the sacramental metaphors – water, wine, bread, true “original symbols” that allude to the Eucharistic Sacrament; the third one, that on the numbers used in the Gospel, whose symbolic valences are indubitable.

## **1. Johannine symbols**

### **a. The light**

The theme of light is present in the entire biblical revelation. The separation of the light from darkness was the first act of the Creator: “*And God said: Let there be light! And there was light*” (Gen. 1, 13). When the history of redemption will be fulfilled, the new creation will have God Himself as light: “*The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp*” (Rev. 21, 23).

The history that develops meanwhile is in itself in the form of a conflict between the light and the darkness, a conflict identical with that between life and death<sup>12</sup>: “*In Him*

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<sup>9</sup> Stilianou G. Papadopoulou, a contemporary Greek theologian, has another opinion, which we suspect of symbolical “nominalism”. He tries to demonstrate that language and, implicitly, theology cannot be “symbolic”, they can be only “semantic-indicative” (Stilianou G. Papadopoulou, *Teologie și limbă. Teologie experimentală, limbă convențională*, translated from Greek by Pr. Conf. Dr. Constantin Băjău, Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2007, p. 49).

<sup>10</sup> George Florovski, *Biserica, Scriptura, Tradiția. Trupul viu al lui Hristos*, translated from English by Florin Caragi și Gabriel Mândrilă, Platytera, București, 2005, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> André Scrima, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> In the theology of the Essene community from Qumran, for instance in the Book of the war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, there is a distinction made between the chosen ones, those who from immemorial times are destined to belong to the divine city, and the others, whose real city is the darkness.

*was life and that life was the light of all mankind*” (John 1, 4). What is at stake is always man. His final destiny is characterized in terms of light and darkness, of life and death. The theme of light will have, therefore, a central place in the framework of the symbols the Scripture makes use of.<sup>13</sup>

The theme of light is one of the constants of all Johannine writings. The fourth Gospel offers us from the very beginning an identification of the Word with the Light, thus provoking the meditation on the numerous Old Testament texts that allude to this recurrent symbol of divinity in the great biblical tradition: *“In Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [...] The Word was the true Light that gives light to everyone...”* (John 1, 4-5.9).

The Johannine theology of the light is inspired by significant Old Testament references: *“Lord my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and majesty. The Lord wraps Himself in light as with a garment”* (Ps. 103, 1-2). *“His glory covered the heavens and His praise filled the earth. His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand! [...] There His power was hidden”* (Hab. 3, 3-4). *“... and the light dwells in Him”* (Dan. 2, 22).

The light which is mentioned here is an eternal light, an “attribute” of divinity. The light is not only a shining perceived by sight it is also the infinite and tempestuous energy of the divine nature, his being generous par excellence.<sup>14</sup>

The light of theophanies has an existential meaning as well. Its symbolism reaches here a level of development which will be fully used by the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> Humans can share in the divine light and, through this, they can hope for a life full of happiness, of understanding and wisdom: *“For with You is the fountain of life, in your light we will see light”* (Ps. 35, 9).

The first declaration of Jesus, made during His meeting with Nicodemus, the correct Pharisee, is: *“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved*

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From that moment on, the whole history of the world and of human beings is seen as a battleground where the armies of those two supreme leaders confront: God, the leader of light, and Satan (Belial or Mastema), the prince of darkness (cf. Jean Chevalier și Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. 3, Artemis, București, 1994 p. 241).

<sup>13</sup> Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Vocabular de Teologie biblică*, pp. 379-380.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Cocagnac, *Simbolurile biblice. Lexic teologic*, p.14.

<sup>15</sup> Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Vocabular de Teologie biblică*, p. 380.



*darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God”* (John 3, 19-21).

The light given to the world by Jesus has numerous characteristics: it shows the way to the Father, it explains the prophecies, the meaning of the miracles, but can also reveal the secrets of the hearts. He is the Light and His bare presence demonstrates or makes manifest what happens with a man. In the Johannine Gospel Jesus announces Himself for the first time as “the Light of the world” in a context of a feast in which the Temple was representing the light of Jerusalem. Additional elements of the framework in which these words of Jesus are uttered come from the identification of Torah with the light which was to be given to the world, according to the traditions of the Judaic wisdom. The fact that light guides man’s works is obvious in the healing of the invalid from the pool of Bethesda: “*My Father works to this very day, and I too am working*” (John 5, 17). The day of the Lord is endless. For Him, rest and the Sabbath have no meaning. Jesus works in the light of the Father’s day: the work of his word and of His charity is continual.<sup>16</sup> In the light that Jesus brings, men can recognize and analyze themselves, can discover one another and can find that they are saved.<sup>17</sup> Thus, men can understand that the refusal of this light leads to death: “*He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them*” (John 12, 40).

His testimony is formulated in an apodictic manner: “*I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness*” (John 12, 46-47). The double Johannine theme of light and testimony is found today in the practice of the liturgical and sacramental life.

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice Cocagnac, *Simbolurile biblice. Lexic teologic*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Cocagnac, *Simbolurile biblice. Lexic teologic*, p. 22.

### **b. Water, wine, bread.**

The religious fundamental symbolism of water, rooted in its obvious “natural” properties, crosses the whole biblical history of creation, fall and redemption.<sup>18</sup> Water is a universal symbol of life and purity. First of all, water is required to have an active and, at the same time, substantial purity. Through the purification brought by water, man participates to a fecund and polyvalent force. Having an intimate force, water can purify the inner being,<sup>19</sup> can make the sinful soul white as snow: “*Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow*” (Ps. 50, 8).

In the fourth Gospel, John’s baptism has as specificity both the moral purification, achieved by immersing into water, and the eschatological orientation to the coming of Messiah, with the hope of total purification and the forgiveness of sins by God. The baptism of John can be compared to the baptism of proselytes, but it has an eschatological perspective, not a ceremonial and ritualistic one; moreover, it is addressed to the Jews, not to pagans.

The metaphor of “the living water”, used by Jesus in the discussion with the Samaritan woman, must be understood as expressing the self-revelation of Jesus, of His own Person, who gives Himself for the redemption of man.<sup>20</sup> He answers to woman’s question in the same manner as with Nicodemus, by lifting her up to a higher level, although He is in the presence of a woman, not of a teacher of Law. He clarifies and makes distinction between what is earthly and bodily, on one side, and what is heavenly and spiritual, on the other. The water in itself, which is material, does not fulfill its purpose, because it does not quench definitively man’s thirst. But “*the water I give*” is another thing, the real water which quenches the thirst, that is, the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

The theme of water occupies an important place in the seventh chapter of the Gospel, too, where the longest period of teaching spent by Jesus in the Temple is narrated. The Lord arrives at Jerusalem during the fest of tents, *Sukkot*. Besides sacrifices and processions, this feast implied also a ritual of the water. Every day the priests went to

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Din apă și din Duh. Un studiu liturgic al botezului*, translated from English and foreword by Alexandru Mihăilă, Sofia, București, 2009, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Apa și visele*, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> Stelian Tofană, „Itinerariul revelației lui Iisus, în dialogul cu femeia samarineancă, din perspectiva ioaneică (In. 4, 1-42)”, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 58.

the pool of Siloe and took water in a golden pot, then brought it to the temple. Water was poured on the edge of the altar. The initiating rituals from all times and places are essentially a “symbolotherapy” aimed at restoring the being and making it harmonious again.<sup>22</sup> This baptismal virtuality of the water is underlined both in the dialogue with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman. These dialogues are on two levels: the visible, direct, material level, and the unseen, indirect and supernatural level, the “sacramental” level.<sup>23</sup> By virtue of narrative juxtaposition, water is also a symbol of the Spirit, since especially in an eschatological context the overflowing of waters symbolizes the benefic and transfiguring effluvium of the Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding wine, it is in the Bible, since the time of Noah, a symbol of the covenant and joy, for it is said that God made a covenant with Noah and Noah planted vine and drank wine (Gen. 9, 11-21). Wine is like blood by its colour: it is “the vine’s blood” and the symbol of life in man. Therefore, wine is an image of the opulent life, of the scent and the force that enlarges and transfigures all.<sup>25</sup> Christ Himself became for us bread and wine, food and drink. Thus, we have the permission of eating Him and drinking Him. The first of His “signs”, the transformation of water into wine, points out the *sacramental potential* of wine and its rich symbolism.

Beside wine, bread has strong symbolic connotations, too. If the wine signifies extension and dedication without limits, joy that goes beyond and earthly measure, bread suggests especially fidelity and resolute steadiness.<sup>26</sup> In the Gospel of John, the theme of

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<sup>22</sup> Annick de Souzaelle, *Simbolismul corpului uman*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> “Can’t you see, o, John, the madness of those who serve the idols and the immorality that governs the world? Baptize Me today and I will cleanse them all! I wish to fulfill what the prophets said! O, John, the One who is cleansed is the One Who will cleanse the world! As for Me, the cleaning starts from Me! I wish to descend to these waters and to be baptized, for the one who will be baptized with the water of Baptism shall be cleansed from all sins! You are the rhetor (ρητωρ) who speaks for defending (απολογία) the whole creation: “There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1, 29). Why are you hindering (κατεχε) me now, o, John? Fulfill now your work, in order that the plan (οικονομια) may be fulfilled and grace (χαρις) may be sent! This is the day when kings clapped their hands, when their water transformed and became pure wine (ακρατορ)! Truly, until now and until to generations to come, water will be transformed and will become wine in this night, according to the voice (φωνη) of God: “their hearts will be glad (εγφρανε) as with wine” (Zech. 10, 7). And I will take a cithern (κιθαρα) which sounds wonderful and I will play with David, the holy psalmist (μεδιογραφο): “You visited the world and it got drunk” (Ps. 64, 9)” (Sfântul Epifanie al Salaminei, *Omilie la Botezul Domnului*, translated from Coptic and with an introductory study by Ionuț Daniel Băncilă, in *Studii Teologice* nr. 1/2011, pp. 251-252).

<sup>24</sup> Cristian Bădiliță, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> Romano Guardini, *Despre semnele sacre*, p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Romano Guardini, *Despre semnele sacre*, p. 74.

bread orientates the paschal and liturgical structure of the redeeming events: “*The bread I give is My body for the life of the world*” sounds exactly like “*Take, eat: this is My body*”.<sup>27</sup>

In order to answer the sacramental signification of bread, as it follows from the fourth Gospel, two texts must be juxtaposed: the first one is from the discourse about the bread of life: “*For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him Who sent Me. And this is the will of Him Who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all those He has given to Me, but raise them up at the last day*” (John 6, 38-39).

The other text appears in the teaching of Christ, after His meeting with the Samaritan woman. It is the time of harvest and the disciples have in front of their eyes fields of white wheat, reached to maturity. In this context, Jesus says to them: “*I have food to eat that you know nothing about. Then the disciples said to each other: “Could someone have brought him food? Jesus said: My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me and to finish His work”* (John 4, 32-34).

### **c. Symbolical numbers**

The number juxtaposes in the same symbolical “horizon” all the great biblical authors, and the author of the fourth Gospel is no exception. The numbers with present symbolical valences from his book are, in our opinion, the following: **2** (the two fishes from the episode of bread’s multiplication, the two angels from the empty tomb, the two apostles, Peter and John, who runs to the tomb), **4** (the four parts in which the clothes of Jesus were divided), **5** (the five men of the Samaritan woman, the five breads which were multiplied, the five covered colonnades, the five thousands men fed in the wilderness), **6** (the six vessels of stone from Cana, the sixth hour, when Jesus met the Samaritan woman), **7** (the seven signs-miracles, the seven assertions “I am”) and **12** (the number of the Apostles, the number of baskets with leftovers).

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<sup>27</sup> The respective episodes clearly evoke His passions, his Crucifixion and His Resurrection (André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, pp. 88-89).

## 2. The Johannine metaphor

The metaphor usually appears as a discourse strategy of defending and developing the creative power of language and at the same time defending and developing the heuristic power unfolded by a fiction.<sup>28</sup> The metaphor has the role of opening those connections which are limited and fixed by definitions: it has the power of enriching reality with new possibilities.

The presence of metaphorical images in the evangelical language is a pledge of the abundance of the significant potentiality present in the person of Jesus. To diminish Christology to an abstract analysis of some concepts means to render it arid and lacking of incision.<sup>29</sup> In this way the exegesis must have recourse to the means that offers a literary analysis. Jean Baptiste Metz says: “We must ask ourselves what is the contribution only literature can bring; we must seek what no conceptual theology could say and what only literature expresses, in its way, with strength”.<sup>30</sup>

In the Gospel of John we have, on one side, the proper or “explicit” metaphors, that is, those words or collocations which cannot be understood but in a purely metaphoric way, and on the other, we have the “implicit” metaphors, that is, terms which have a literal reference in a given context, but which can sometimes and are really used by Christ Himself in a figurative way, from the standpoint of a Christological and sacramental symbolism. Without having the pretention of exhausting the arsenal of the Johannine metaphors, we have analyzed only ten of these: five obvious metaphors – the shepherd, the lamb, the snake, the fish and the vine – and five potential metaphors – the temple, the fountain, the mountain, the tree and the oil.

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Metafora vie*, translated from French and with a foreword by Irina Mavrodin, Univers, București, 1984, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Antonio Spadaro S.J., *La ce „folosește” literatura?*, translated by Ioan Milea, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006, p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Baptiste Metz, „Teologia e letteratura”, in *Concilium*, XII, nr. 5/1976, p. 14.

### III. THE SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM IN THE LIGHT OF THE JOHANNINE SYMBOLISM. THE SACRAMENTAL DIMENSION OF THE RELATED EPISODES

#### 1. The Johannine “sign” and its characteristics

In the New Testament, the term σημεία often defines miracles as exceptional works which render visible the divine power of Jesus. The other New Testament term for “miracles” is δύνάμεις, that is, “powers” (cf. Mt. 7, 22; 11, 20; 13, 58; Lc. 19, 37; Acts 2, 22), but this word does not appear even once in the Gospel of John.

The first part of the Gospel of John was designated by the exegetes as “The book of signs”<sup>31</sup>, because Jesus renders visible, by a row of signs-miracles, His divinity and glory. The significance of the signs from the Gospel of John joins an accolade which connects creation to redemption. It is not by chance the fact that the first sign is the miracle from Cana, and the last one is the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection. At a first level of reading the sign from Cana, Christ manifests Himself especially as Creator. The miracle of changing water into wine shows Christ as Master of creation or Creator, while the sign of Lazarus’ resurrection shows Christ as Saviour, as life-giver. If the first route the Apostles make with Christ is the one to Cana, the last one, to Jerusalem, passes through Betania of Lazarus. Thus, the parable of Christ’s itinerary may be observed: from creation to redemption.<sup>32</sup>

All the “signs” presented in the Gospel of John can be perceived as **relays** of the sacramental symbolism explicitly asserted or only suggested in the Johannine narrative. The sacramental symbolism is *disseminated* in the whole Gospel. All those seven signs are **circumscribed** by the total Sign, that is, the Resurrection.

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<sup>31</sup> Some researchers consider that this section of the Gospel (1, 19 – 12, 50) is based on a preexistent collection of Jesus’ miracles (Scott M. Lewis S.J., *The Gospel according to John and the Johannine letters*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2005, p. 11).

<sup>32</sup> Marko Ivan Rupnik, *La ospățul din Betania: credința, mormântul și prietenia*, p. 16.

## 2. The miracle from Cana – a Eucharistic sign

This initial sign is placed by the Evangelist at the very beginning of the public life of Jesus. The text says: “*On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding*” (John 2, 1-2). Its correspondence in the synoptic Gospels is the announcement of the Kingdom’s coming: “*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near*”, thus being the sign of annunciation.<sup>33</sup> The structure of the evangelic narrative develops in this way: 2, 1-2 describes the framework; 2, 3-5 reveals the necessity of interference; 2, 6-8 presents this sign; 2, 9-10 confirms the sign; and 2, 11 offers us the conclusion. John enumerates another sign from later on as “*the second sign*” which Jesus made in Cana (4, 54). This ends the first cycle of Jesus’ ministry, contained in the second chapter of the Gospel.

In the Jewish tradition, wine was the symbol of joy and celebration. The running out of wine at the wedding can be a suggestion of the sterility of Judaism. The prophetic expectation considered the Messianic era as a time when wine will end no more.<sup>34</sup> To run out of wine was considered to be a great mistake from a social and ceremonial point of view, since the host was supposed to give to the wedding guests all the necessary wine for seven days.

The narrative pattern “request – reproach – help” appears in other places of the New Testament as well (Mt. 15, 21-28; John 4, 46-54), although this special form: “suggestion – negative response – positive action” seems to be unique and specific to the Gospel of John, but every time conjugated with a wrong understanding of “*the coming of the hour*” of Jesus, either by His mother, brothers or close friends (cf. 7, 2-14; 11, 1-44).<sup>35</sup> The request of Mary does not necessarily suggest that she expected Her son to make a miracle. She does not ask for a miracle, but simply points out an embarrassing situation, a joy that was about to turn into sorrow.<sup>36</sup> The filling of jars with water (“*to the brim*”) demonstrates the impossibility of deceit or fraud.<sup>37</sup> Apparently, the jars were at least partially empty, a fact that can be significant in terms of the “subliminal” Johannine

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<sup>33</sup> André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> In the biblical universe, wine, as a symbol of love, is regarded also as a great gift of God, and its lack could signify the lack of love, communion and grace (Paola Bignardi, *Evanghelia cotidianului*, p. 19).

<sup>35</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> Paola Bignardi, *Evanghelia cotidianului*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 161.

message referring to contemporary Judaism. On the other side, Jesus must have known that the using of the jars with other purpose than the ritualistic one could lead to their temporary desecration, but He sets in the first place the fulfilling of the moment's necessity.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from the great quantity of wine, the evangelic narrative points out its special quality. As A. Scrima observes, it is not only the abundance of God's generosity, it is also the **quality** of His gift, for the godfather said to the bridegroom with astonishment and perplexity: "*Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now*" (John 2, 10). The godfather or even the bridegroom was supposed to provide the wine, but in this case Jesus replaced them and He Himself gave the wine.<sup>39</sup>

"*The first*" (ἀρχή) can be also rendered with "*from the beginning*" or "*primordial*"<sup>40</sup>, and the expression "*revealed His glory*" brings us back to the Prologue (1, 14.18). Of course, it is significant the fact that this revelation of God's glory through Jesus does not consist in a spectacular display of power, but in a quiet work, discretely done, which remained unobserved by most of the wedding guests. As it is related in the fourth Gospel, the whole range of the symbolism of the acts which reveal the new Messianic economy helps us to appreciate the episode of the wedding from Cana as a real Christological, soteriological, mariological and mysteriological synthesis of the New Testament.<sup>41</sup> We are in the presence of an overture-miracle which, on one side, opens the series of miracles – next "signs", and on the other shows the disciples the glory of Jesus.

### **3. The dialogue with Nicodemus – a baptismal perspective**

Although identified with "one of the Pharisees", Nicodemus obviously represents a more open-minded segment of this group, which demonstrates that not all Pharisees were hostiles to Jesus (cf. John 12, 42 and Acts 5, 34-39). Finally, he won't succeed to save Jesus from punishment, but he will donate his own tomb for the burial of the Lord.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, p. 193.

<sup>41</sup> Stelian Tofană, „Hristologie, sacramentalitate și mariologie în evanghelia a IV-a”, in *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa*, XLIV, 1-2, 1999, p. 104.

<sup>42</sup> Paola Bignardi, *Evanghelia cotidianului*, p. 65.



The opinions of the commentators regarding the progressive understanding of Nicodemus during the narrative of the Gospel differ. Carson concludes that eventually Nicodemus “was on the side of Jesus”.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Morris thinks that Nicodemus, although he was a timid soul, finally “showed himself on Jesus’ side”.<sup>44</sup> Moloney asserts in the same direction, saying that “during the narrative a route of faith”<sup>45</sup> can be observed.

According to R. Brown, Nicodemus represents a group of leading Jews who “came to believe undecidedly in Jesus”.<sup>46</sup> According to Keener, although Nicodemus “hasn’t yet cross the threshold towards the quality of a disciple” and he is “at the most the representative of some open-minded dialogue partners from the Synagogue”, nevertheless later on Nicodemus becomes “a full a real disciple”,<sup>47</sup> as it follows from his concern about the burial of Jesus.

Nicodemus starts the dialogue with a praising word, before setting his case. Regarding the moment he chose for coming to Jesus, we must say that in most of the situations in which John uses the word *νύξ* (night), he refers to the spiritual and moral darkness (cf. 9, 4; 11, 10; 13, 30). Here, the fact that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night can be interpreted in a less negative way. The night, with the discretion afforded by the darkness, protects this Rabbi who takes a risk by engaging himself in a “compromising” dialogue.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, it is possible that, wishing to have a personal dialogue, to have tried to avoid the crowd.<sup>49</sup>

The reference to “*the re-birth/ the birth from above*” (*ἀνωθεν*) as a condition of the access to the “*Kingdom*” is quite surprising, although the idea of a new beginning and of a decisive inner transformation in the personal life may also be found in some Old Testament prophetic passages: “*This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their*

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<sup>43</sup> Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 186.

<sup>44</sup> Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 186.

<sup>45</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. Peabody, Mass. Hendrickson, 2003, p. 533.

<sup>48</sup> Paola Bignardi, *Evangelia cotidianului*, p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that he chooses night in order to meet Jesus probably indicates his desire to conceal his visit and his fear of publicity (cf. John 12, 42; 19, 38-39). The repetition of the reference to the coming of Nicodemus “*during the night*” (19, 39) seems to indicate the hesitating character of this man (cf. Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, p 187).

*hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, "Know the Lord", because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more"* (Jer. 31, 33-34).

During this dialogue, Jesus tries to bring Nicodemus from the strictly literal understanding to a spiritual one of what means "*the re-birth/ the birth from above*". As an answer to Nicodemus' question from 3, 4, Jesus asserts that even it would be possible for man to be born a second time, this "*second birth*" would be of no spiritual value, because it is another physical birth, and there is need for a spiritual birth.

"*The Spirit*" represents "the principle of divine energy and life which operates within the human sphere".<sup>50</sup> Although the Old Testament does not literally refer to the Spirit of God "*Who gives birth*" to spirit (cf. John 6, 63), this offers a vision according to which God, Who is Spirit (cf. 4, 24) will "*give a new spirit*" to His people.

The *baptismal* theme is the one that circumscribes this section of the Gospel, the Baptism being a correlative to the sacrament of spiritual regeneration. The allusion to baptism is as transparent as possible in this Johannine fragment. The baptismal conception of a spiritual re-birth does not differ from that of a "new creation", as it appears in the Pauline formulation: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!*" (2 Cor. 5, 17). The terminology used here can be, likewise, a reminiscence of the practice of baptizing the proselytes in the first century, where the conversion of pagans to Judaism was compared to the birth of a child.<sup>51</sup>

#### **4. The power of the divine word. The water of life.**

The second miraculous episode related by the evangelist that, of the healing of a royal high official's son, is connected to the previous sign through the reference to Cana of Galilee, identified as the place "*where he changed the water into wine*". There can be observed a certain progression from one event to the other. In the second chapter, the

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<sup>50</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, p. 131.

<sup>51</sup> "God shows us that He wants us to be like these (like children) in the way we have been born from the womb of the water. God wants that the birth which follows birth to make us gradually immortals" (Sfântul Clement Alexandrinul, *Stromatele*, in *PSB 5*, translated, with a foreword, notes and indices by Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, EIBMBOR, București, 1982, pp. 304-305).

work of Christ is represented as a simple intensification of life (water becomes wine). In the fourth chapter it is about the salvation from the imminent danger of death and destruction. Matthew and John relate the “faith” of the father to the healing of the son exactly in the moment when Jesus talks. The version from John uses the second scene in order to underline “the word” of Jesus, in which this man believed.<sup>52</sup> This repetition is connected to the conversion of the whole house, a fact that is mentioned only by John.<sup>53</sup>

In the fourth chapter the narrative of the meeting with the Samaritan woman serves as an introduction to the fundamental announcement of Jesus: “*I am*” (4, 26). The dialogue between Him and the Samaritan woman contains in a comprised form the whole history of redemption, that is, the gradual identification of the true God. At first it seems that the woman strives *not* to be redeemed and yet, although she resists the efforts of Christ, the bulwarks of her refusal are gradually conquered, until finally the grace enters into her soul and brings victory.<sup>54</sup> The Lord appeals to her most profound aspiration: “All that the heart wants can be reduced always to the figure of water”, said the great poet Paul Claudel.<sup>55</sup> The declaration of Jesus is that He is “the gift of God” and the source of “the living water” leads us to the first “Christological” conclusion of the fragment: Jesus is greater than Jacob.<sup>56</sup>

If Jesus’ claim of giving the water of life surpassed her power of understanding, a Person who reveals the secrets of her intimate life could attract her attention. The woman shows her first signs of spiritual receptiveness when she confesses: “*Lord, I can see that you are a prophet*” (v. 19). The answer of Jesus to the previous question referring to the proper place of worship: Garizim or Jerusalem, surpasses thus the expectations the

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<sup>52</sup> “The command of the Saviour is one, but heals two souls: it inspires the servant with an unusual faith, and saves the young man from the bodily death. It is hard to say who of the two is healed before the other. I think that illness came to an end in both at the same time, through a co-work of the commands of our Saviour. But the healing of the boy is announced also by the servants, who appear as organs of the fulfillment of the divine commands. And this happens also because of Christ’s obvious economy, Who strengthen the weak faith of the master through his servants, showing to him that his hope was fulfilled”. (Sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, p. 238).

<sup>53</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., *Introducere și comentariu la Sfânta Scriptură*, vol. 9, *Literatura ioaneică*, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> According to the evangelic text, the victory of grace upon sin in the life of this woman is rather presupposed (cf. 4, 34, 36), but in the ulterior tradition of the Church it is explicitly asserted. The proper subject of the episode is not the salvation of this soul or the salvation of more souls from the province of Samaria, but rather the manner in which, through this work, the glory of god in Jesus Christ is manifested. (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to John*, vol 1, p. 158).

<sup>55</sup> Paul Claudel, *Poziții și propoziții II*, p.235, apud Gaston Bachelard, *Apa și visele*, p.137.

<sup>56</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, p. 163.

woman had from a “*prophet*”. The identity of Jesus remains unknown therefore she will try to rely on another of their traditions. Like Nicodemus, she says: “***I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us***” (v. 25). The assertion of the woman regarding the faith in the coming of Messiah and made exactly in His presence represents an exceptional example of Johannine **irony**.<sup>57</sup>

The Johannine community had probably members from the Samaritans as well. Moreover, we must underline the role played by a woman in the conversion of a whole region. This woman has the “privilege” to discuss from equal to equal with Jesus and to become the first messenger of the good news in her region. It may be considered that this episode ends the “baptismal” activity of Jesus; now starts the activity of “a charismatic preacher”.<sup>58</sup> *The theme of “the living water” embraces all the baptismal meanings, which were familiar to the Johannine community.*

The hypostasis of Jesus as a source of living water receives a new contour in the seventh chapter of the Gospel. Here it is presented the third and last journey of Jesus in the capital of the Jews (cf. 2, 13; 5, 1), when he will spend two months in Jerusalem, from the Feast of the Tents to the feast of the renovation of the temple (10, 22). In this stage of His ministry, Jesus corresponds more and more to the Messianic expectations. The presentation of the evangelist is determined by two important finalities: the fulfillment by Jesus of the symbolism of the Tents’ Feast and the crucial questions regarding His identity.<sup>59</sup> The eighth day of the feast, the last one, was like the Sabbath (cf. Lev. 22, 33-43). It was a day of great joy, in which the singings of *Hallel* continued. Nevertheless, the ceremonial using of water and light ended in the seventh day. In each day during the Feast of the Tents<sup>60</sup> the priests marched in a solemn procession from the spring of Siloam to the Temple, and poured the water at the foundation of the altar.<sup>61</sup> The

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<sup>57</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 157.

<sup>58</sup> Cristian Badiliță, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 200.

<sup>59</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 226.

<sup>60</sup> During those seven days of the Feast of the Tents, Jews were living in tents, like some travelers on a trip, by this showing that they are not “sedentary”, but “pilgrims”, waiting for the Messianic time (André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 98).

<sup>61</sup> A passage from the Old Testament which is linked to this feast is that from Isaiah 12, 3: “*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*”. This water ritual, although it is not mentioned in the canonical text, was well established before the first century AD. The feast seems to speak about the restoration full of joy of the dignity of Israel and about the gathering of all nations.

seventh and the last day of the feast (Lev. 23, 24. 41-42) was marked by a special ritual of pouring the water and by a ceremonial of the lights.

In this context the self-revelation as fulfillment of the Mosaic gift of the water determines some to confess that This is the “*Prophet*” (v. 40b) and others to confess that This is the “*Christ*” (v. 41). Thus, they follow the same path as the Samaritan woman.<sup>62</sup>

The next episode is connected to the them of the water, the miraculous healing of the invalid from Bethesda, is one of the most “captivating” evangelic narratives which reveals to us the depth of God’s compassion, Who search the lost and heals the wounded and sick.<sup>63</sup> According to an ecclesial reading, this episode points out the “spiritual and sacramental dimension of the mission of the Church” (Stelian Tofană).

The evangelic narrative specifies in a laconic way that, by finding Himself at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus feels compassion for an invalid and heals him. Bethesda may signify “*the house of compassion*” (a term suitable to the state of despair of the people who said there, hoping for a miraculous healing) or “*the house of the two springs*”.<sup>64</sup> An important number of disabled people used to sit there. Among those disabled were, of course, blind, lame, paralyzed.<sup>65</sup> In the context of a Jewish feast and of a traditional place of healing, Jesus sees a man about whom He “knew” that he was ill from 38 years. This information given by the narrator, which reminds of the meeting with Nathanael (1, 47-48) and especially of the meeting with the Samaritan woman (4, 18), allows the initiation of a *baptismal reference*. The answer of the invalid to the question of Jesus: “*Lord, I have no one to help me into the pool*” (v. 7) shows us that he does not know for sure Who Jesus is. He is searching for another human being who would fulfill a certain physical task, thus helping him to recovery from illness. This answer point out also to the fact that

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<sup>62</sup> Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, p. 253.

<sup>63</sup> Gerhard Maier, *Evangelhia după Ioan*, p. 188.

<sup>64</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, p. 178.

<sup>65</sup> In the last years the archeological researches made more light regarding the location of the healing miracle, by resolving the disagreement of the manuscripts concerning the name of the place in favour of Bethesda, thanks to a reference contained in “the copper scroll” found in the third cave from Qumran: “Close to Bethesdatayn, in the pool where you enter there is a smaller piscine”. The structure found by archeologists had five porticoes with two pools – a smaller one to the north and a bigger one to the south – closed by four porticoes, and the fifth one placed between the two pools. The diggings from the St. Ana Church from Jerusalem confirmed the existence of two pools separated by a long colonnade of six and a half meters, and the whole ensemble was surrounded by four colonnades or porticoes (*stoas*); therefore, what says the evangelist seems to be correct (Cristian Bădiliță, *Evangelhia după Ioan*, p. 217).

the invalid could not see, beyond the water, the agent of his healing.<sup>66</sup> The answer of the Lord is surprising because it avoids any instrumental or human mediation: there is no need any more of a healing pool or of any human assistance, because His Word is sufficient.

Although the dominant themes of this Johannine episode are the identity of Jesus and the Sabbath, the subsidiary theme of the healing and the details referring to the place of the miracle imply the taking into consideration of the implicit, “inter-textual” baptismal reference. The healing performed by Jesus evidently has a more profound signification than the miraculous deeds of the prophets, due to the permanent symbiosis between the Son and the Father. Through this symbiosis the whole splendor of the divine compassion manifests itself, in another order, a **sacramental** one.<sup>67</sup> This is the real fulfillment of the Law.<sup>68</sup> In a beautiful verse from the service of Matins it is said: “*O, Lord, the invalid was healed not by the pool<sup>69</sup>, but Your word made him new. The disease of so many years was no obstacle for him, and the work of Your voice proved more powerful; he threw away the burden which was hard to bear and he picked his bed, giving thus testimony of Your compassion, to Whom be the glory!*”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 269.

<sup>67</sup> “That He might sharpen the man’s attention to the instantaneous character of the miracle, and so to the words and deeds of Christ. From all these He might know with certainty that he was healed, not by the pool, nor by medicine, but by Christ alone, who was superior to all the virtue of the pool, or of medicine, and so might believe in Him as a prophet, and the Messiah, and might in penitence ask and obtain of Him remission of his sins. Wherefore He healed him beside the healing pool, but without touching it, that He might show that it was He who had given its virtue to the pool, and that He therefore, without the aid of the pool, could heal him by His word alone.

(<http://www.catholicapologetics.info/scripture/newtestament/5john.htm>, Cornelius á Lapide, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Ioan*).

<sup>68</sup> Maurice Cocagnac, *Simbolurile biblice. Lexic teologic*, pp. 356-357.

<sup>69</sup> “It is plain that the healing virtue of this pool did not proceed from the victims which were washed in it, nor from wood lying at the bottom, of which the cross of Christ was afterwards made, as some have supposed, but was supernatural and miraculous. For God wished to bestow this benefit upon believing people about the time of Christ’s coming (for there is no mention of it in the Old Testament), in order that Christ thus healing a sick man might show that He was God, who had given this property to the pool, and therefore that He without it could heal the sick. Wherefore it would seem that this gift was taken away from the ungrateful Jews when they killed Christ, for we find no subsequent mention of it”.

(<http://www.catholicapologetics.info/scripture/newtestament/5john.htm>, Cornelius á Lapide, *Comentariu la Evanghelia după Ioan*).

<sup>70</sup> *Penticostar, adică Sfintele Slujbe de la Dumina Paștilor până la Duminica tuturor sfinților*, EIBMBOR, București, 1999, p. 143.

## 5. The Eucharistic dimension of the speech “Jesus – the Bread of life”.

According to the Johannine narrative from the sixth chapter, Jesus will feed in the wilderness five thousand men. The chosen place is not accidental, but has a symbolical valence: it reminds of the manna from the desert during the time of exodus.

The food’s multiplication starts from some leftovers, probably from a previous meal: **five** breads and **two** fishes. Jesus will multiply these leftovers, according to an eternal will of God Who once asked for the preserving of a *rest* from His people in order that Israel may be reborn from it. On the other side, the distribution of bread has also a strong social-communitarian signification. The multiplied bread will become a symbol of the participants’ unity. These two aspects of Jesus’ gesture meet in order to make out of this multiplication a preparation for the Eucharistic sacrament.<sup>71</sup> The distribution of bread and the foundation of a new community of believers are *the sign* and *the anticipation* of the Church.<sup>72</sup> In fact, as observes Bultmann, the unity of the celebrating community is expressed by the unity of bread, only if that “bread” is the body of Christ.<sup>73</sup>

The pattern of the narrative from the sixth chapter is similar to that from the fifth chapter. “The sign” is followed by an elaborated discourse on the significance of the event. The text of the speech surprises by the accent stressed upon the main ideas: God and humanity.<sup>74</sup> At least one part of the text has to do with the intrinsic connection between humanity and God. To carry the seal of God means to carry something belonging to God, to be in a way similar to God, and especially to carry something of the Spirit of God Who shares and testifies.<sup>75</sup> If Jesus is “*the food that remains*” and if He

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<sup>71</sup> “These crowds hungry of the faith in Christ are given with five breads and two fishes, that is, the sacraments that have been given and have been written too, but also the symbols which are only mentioned, but not performed. May Christ receive the five breads and the two fishes and, giving thanks to the Father, Who wanted to feed His believers with symbols and sacraments, may give them to His disciples, to His teachers, to his apostles; and may these distribute them to the crowd. The breads of barley are broken up by the disciples until the mysteries of each of the two Laws are distributed by them in historical facts and in the spiritual meanings of them. The bodily ones are fed with simple history; the saints are fed with the spiritual meanings of this history, as they would collect a kind of leftovers. The leftovers eaten by the bodily ones are historical events: the food eaten by the spiritual ones are the holy meanings of the historical events”. (Ioan Scotus Eriugena, *Comentariu la Evanghelia lui Ioan*, pp. 223-225).

<sup>72</sup> Maurice Cocagnac, *Simbolurile biblice. Lexic teologic*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>73</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 147.

<sup>74</sup> As Schnackenburg asserts, the using of “*God*” as the last word in a Greek sentence is extremely unusual. (Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Crossroad, New York, 1990, vol. 2, p. 38).

<sup>75</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, p.261.

remains for eternity,<sup>76</sup> standing in sharp contrast with the material bread and even with “*the bread received from heaven*” during the peregrination through the wilderness, than the life He grants is an eternal life. From the literary point of view, there is a connection between the previous concern of Jesus of gathering the leftovers, in order to be no wasting, and the reference He makes here, to “*the food that endures to eternal life*”. Three are the elements which connect the present episode with the episode from the book of Exodus:

- (1) the paschal motive;
- (2) the resemblance between Jesus and Moses, the prophet;
- (3) the waiting for God to send manna again, in the Messianic epoch.<sup>77</sup>

“The living bread” (ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζών) or, more exactly, “the bread that lives” is full of life and bestows life. Jesus defines Himself as a concrete spiritual food for people. Those who are destined to death will live if they will eat this living Bread. The Gospel of John contains a long row of metaphors-symbols concerning food (flesh, wine, bread, vine etc.), which underlines the idea of the mystical communion with the person of our Saviour. The expressions “*eternal life*” (6, 40) and “*we will raise up*” (6, 39-40) continues the theme of life announced in 6, 33 and 6, 35, underlining the permanence of the life given in and through Jesus, in contrast with the temporary nature of the manna’s sending by God to the Israelites found in the wilderness. The acquiring of the eternal life may be expressed as it would take place in the present (6, 40), but this thing is in close connection with the frequent references to the resurrection from that final day. Thus, the “future” eschatology is not canceled by the “actual” eschatology. Because the future resurrection of the believers is a certainty, it may be asserted that they already have eternal life, here and now.

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<sup>76</sup> “And He calls Himself «the true bread» not as if the manna would be false, but because it was an image [typos] of the truth. For the real manna is the Son of God, the Only Begotten, Who became man, a thing never to be heard before! The word “**manna**” means “What is this?” (Exodus 16, 15); when the Jews saw the manna before their tents, they were afraid because of this unusual miracle and they were asking one another: “What is this?” Is it possible that the Son of God is also the Son of Man? Is it possible that the two natures, which are contrary to one another, have become a single Face [Person]? What is this mystery?” (Saint Teofilact, the Archbishop of Bulgaria, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Ioan*, (București: Editura Sophia, 2009), 173).

<sup>77</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 226-27.



By referring to “*your*” parents (6, 49-51), Jesus moves off from his Jewish opponents. Then, He develops the significance of His assertions regarding “*the bread of life*”:

- (1) this “*bread*” is the body of Christ;
- (2) He will **give** it for the life of the world.

The fact that the term used here for the body of Christ is “*flesh*”<sup>78</sup> σάρξ, instead of σῶμα, more frequently used in connection to the Eucharist, seems to plead against a sacramental significance of these verses. Probably this term refers to 1, 14: “*And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth*”. The expression “*I will give Him for the life of the world*” has obvious sacrificial connotations. In the wider context of the story, it refers to the body of Christ sacrificed on the cross, for the sins of mankind.<sup>79</sup>

## **6. Baptismal allusions in the miracle of walking on waters**

The episode with Jesus walking on waters is found in other two synoptic Gospels (Mt. 14, 22-33; Mk. 6, 45-52). According to some scholars, this miracle does not represent, in the fourth Gospel, a Johannine “*sign*”.<sup>80</sup>

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel it is said that Jesus comes to the disciples walking on water, as a Lord of creation, reveals Himself with the words “*I am*” and says them not to be afraid.<sup>81</sup> After rowing about six kilometers, the disciples were diverted

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<sup>78</sup> “For the sensibility of the Jews it is a horrible thing to eat raw flesh and even a more horrible to drink blood. They eat cooked and “clean” flesh, prepared by the haham (the animals are killed and the blood flows out etc....). We realize, then, how shocking is the word of God! But He shocks them out of necessity: in order to point out the total difference between the old law and the new law, between the old man and the new man. The food that comes from the earth is necessary to all, and the people receive from it a unique life. But, by the coming of Christ, a new food has appeared. In order to live his real life, man does not eat earthly things any more...” (André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, translated from Arab by Monica Broșteanu, translated from French by Anca Manolescu, (București: Editura Humanitas, 2008), 90).

<sup>79</sup> Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 331.

<sup>80</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 217.

<sup>81</sup> “By these words He dispelled the fear from their souls. But in the other instance His words did not have this effect. That is why Peter then said: “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you”. Why is it then, that in the latter instance they did not at once accept the fact [that it was Christ], while in the other they believed it? Because on that occasion the storm continued rocking their boat, while in this one, at the sound of His voice, there came a calm. Or, if this is not the case, the other explanation which I have just now mentioned holds good; namely, that by performing the same miracles He caused those which occurred later in time to

from their course, at the half of their way to Magdala, where the lake has the maximum width. The seeing of Jesus reminds of 1, 14. The verb περιπατοῦντα (walking) describes the ease with which Jesus walks on the sea.<sup>82</sup> For some exegetes, the walking on the sea represents a particular manifestation of the Messianic glory of Jesus in His private circle, similar to the event of Transfiguration and, accordingly, it hasn't the quality of a Johannine sign.<sup>83</sup> In my opinion it *is*, no matter its addressability, such a sign that certifies the power of Jesus upon the natural elements and in which may be identified a subtle *baptismal reference*, suggested by the analogy to the divine power upon the aquatic element, manifested in the crossing through the Red Sea (Ex. 14) or the miraculous crossing of Jordan (Jos. 3).

### **7. Jesus, the giver of light**

The healing which is related in the ninth occurs probably in the context of the Tents' Feast, in Jerusalem, on Saturday. The scene where this happens is the south area of the Temple, near one of the two gates. The subject of healing is a man who was born blind.<sup>84</sup> The healing scene is not a scene of operative magic, but represents a succession of symbolical acts, which must be deciphered in relation to the idea of healing the ignorance and the idea of baptismal purification through the washing with the water from the pool of Siloam.<sup>85</sup>

The proper healing is related only in two verses, as it is with the healing of the invalid from the pool of Bethesda.<sup>86</sup> The concision is probably a deliberate one; the

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be more readily believed because of the previous ones. Why did He not enter the boat? It was because He wished to make the miracle greater, and at the same time to reveal His Godhead more clearly to them, and to prove that, at the time when He gave thanks, He did so, not because He was in need of assistance, but to condescend to their lowliness. He permitted the storm to take place that they might continue to seek Him out, and He stopped it again suddenly that they might learn His power; He did not get into the boat in order to make the miracle still greater" (Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Comentar la Evanghelia de la Ioan*, p. 209).

<sup>82</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, p. 217.

<sup>83</sup> Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, p.274.

<sup>84</sup> As Brodie asserts, in the Johannine semantics the lack of light is similar to the lack of life (Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John*, 1993, p. 345).

<sup>85</sup> Cristian Bădiliță, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 280.

<sup>86</sup> "In a certain way, in each fragment of the Gospel of John there is the meaning of the whole Gospel. There is a continuous progress and ascension from one fragment to another. The Law prohibited the making of mud, but Jesus acts deliberately in this way, in order to shock the Jews and to make them less hardened, although maybe it would have been sufficient the fact that he broke the Sabbath. By these gestures, He wants to determine them to think spiritually and to open themselves to the novelty which happens in front of their eyes." (André Scrima *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 118).

purpose of the evangelist is not that of presenting the miracle in itself, but that of pointing out its spiritual significations. The **baptismal** signification was, with certainty, obvious to the Johannine readers, especially because in the primary Church the act of baptism implied “the posing of hands” and, therefore, the double action of salving the blind man’s eyes and of washing in the waters of Siloam may constitute a baptismal analogy.<sup>87</sup> Beyond the fact that it is a sign of “the power”, it has an obvious *sacramental reference*.<sup>88</sup> The first Christian called Baptism *photismós*, “enlightment” and it is not by accident the fact that the episode with the resurrection of Lazarus is preceded by the healing of the blind man from birth. As the blind man acquired, by washing in the pool of Siloam, the light of his eyes, so the baptized receives through the water of Baptism *the light* given by Christ, “*The Messenger*” of the heavenly Father.<sup>89</sup>

## 8. Jesus – the word that gives life

The resurrection of Lazarus (11, 1-45) is the seventh “sign”, the last one of the Johannine series and the most impressive one, made by Jesus right before His Passions. Of course, the resurrection must be understood as a reanimation, as a *bringing back to life*, because Lazarus will die a second time and he will rise from the dead at the final Judgment.<sup>90</sup> The narrative concerning the resurrection of Lazarus is found only in the Gospel of John and it is the most impressive pre-paschal event.

In the context of the Gospel as a whole, and especially in the context of His own death and resurrection, this episode represents the last but one step. It reunites some elements of the previous chapters and, at the same time, it helps to prepare the scene for the final drama of the Gospel. It underlines especially the idea of *life*, an idea which, from

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<sup>87</sup> Stelian Tofană, *Simbolism și sacramentalitate în Evanghelia a IV-a. O contribuție la dezvoltarea teologiei ioaneice*, p. 287.

<sup>88</sup> “But the perfection of health remains only in the act of believing? No, it is necessary to come also to “Siloam” (John 9, 7), to the spring of Baptism, and to be baptized in the One who has been sent, that is, “in Christ”, for those who have been baptized spiritually have been baptized “in Christ” (Rom. 6, 3). After someone is baptized, he will be tempted, too; for he will be “taken” (John 9, 13) to emperors and lords for the One Who healed him. Therefore, he must have strength and stay unshakable in his belief and not to deny Christ out of fear, but to endure everything, even to be “put out of the synagogue” (John 9, 22), according to the word that says: “You will be hated because of My name” (Mt. 10, 22) and “they will put you out of the synagogue” (John 16, 2)” (Sfântul Teofilact, Arhiepiscopul Bulgariei, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Ioan*, p. 253).

<sup>89</sup> Stelian Tofană, *Simbolism și sacramentalitate în Evanghelia a IV-a. O contribuție la dezvoltarea teologiei ioaneice*, pp. 286-287.

<sup>90</sup> Cristian Bădiliță, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 297.

the very beginning, is a central theme of the Gospel.<sup>91</sup> The chapters 11 and 12 of the Gospel represent, in a way, a “liturgical” preface of Christ’s sacrifice, because during the Holy Liturgy the gifts are “taken and lifted up”, and this thing signifies the fact that the earthly become heavenly.<sup>92</sup>

By His miracles, Jesus, Who acts in the name of God, always re-establishes the order or the natural sense of the things. To heal a blind man means to give him back the sight which possess all the healthy people; to heal a paralytic means to give him back the possibility of moving, which is natural to human nature; here, in this episode, Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, out of love and for the glory of God, and because in a certain degree death came unexpectedly, against the nature of things.<sup>93</sup>

The details of the story are full of innumerable spiritual significations. Thus, when she finds out that Christ is at the gates of the city, Marta runs to Him, while Mary stays in the house (cf. Luke 10), although she is more thirsty of salvation than her sister. The suggestion made here is the following: the route of faith is always a join of two movements: that of the Lord who comes and that of ours, who run to Him. The first thing Marta says to Christ is: “*Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died*” (v. 21). Marta repeats the words Jesus said to His disciples before His departure (cf. v. 15): if He had been with Lazarus, he would not have been died. But if Lazarus would not have died, the disciples would not have been witnesses to the most extraordinary miracle made by their teacher.

The four days from Lazarus’ death, beside the fact that they are a concrete reference, they have also a symbolic value. The number four is the symbol of the totality of the time past, that is, of the death of the entire humanity from the very beginning, and the grotto-tomb reminds of the cave Macpela, from the book of Genesis, where Sarah and Jacob are buried. Therefore, the tomb is that of the old Israel and of the entire humanity, in which there have been laid since now all and where everybody is destined to go. In front of the tomb, Jesus lifts his eyes to the sky, a typical gesture for a man who prays, but which has also a sacerdotal and prophetic valence (Lamentations 3, 41). Through

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<sup>91</sup> As Schnackenburg asserts, beside the healing of the man born blind, the resurrection of Lazarus expresses the central Christological idea of the fourth Gospel, that Jesus is the light and the life of the world. (Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 2, p. 316).

<sup>92</sup> André Scrima, *Comentariu integral la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 136.

<sup>93</sup> Cristian Bădiliță, *Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 297.

prayer, Jesus asserts once more His authority<sup>94</sup> upon death and resurrects Lazarus (v. 38-44).<sup>95</sup> By bringing thanks (*eucharistia*) in front of Lazarus' tomb, an act which has its correspondent in 6, 11, in the context of bread' multiplication, the episode is placed in a *sacramental framework*. In the episode of bread' multiplication, Christ was thanking for the bread, but this bread expressed and presupposed the fact that Jesus was giving Himself, being the Bread that gives eternal life.

The connection between *the bread of life*, *Eucharist* and *resurrection* is a special characteristic of John's Gospel. Unlike other Evangelists, John does not relates "the institution" of the sacrament which gives us the life of Christ, because this is the theme of his entire Gospel.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> In each of the major sections of the eleventh chapter, there is at first a feeling of Jesus' power upon death, then, by some ways more and more easily to understand, it appears the intuition of a hidden dimension, and finally an increased perception of Jesus' involvement in the full and painful reality of death. In the end (vv. 16, 37, 53) the verses converge: "*that we may die with him*"; "*Could not He... have kept this man from dying?*"; "*they plotted to take His life*". (Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John*, pp. 384-385).

<sup>95</sup> We assist once more to a transition by which He enters the painful reality of death: He is simply called "*this man*" and finally He Himself is condemned to die (vv. 45-53).

<sup>96</sup> The Church itself is constituted around the Eucharistic event in which, through the Pascha of the Lord, made actual again in the Remembrance, the Spirit of God communicates us, through those acts accomplished on the cross, through the resurrection of Christ, and through the whole paschal event, this new calling to life. (Marko Ivan Rupnik, *La ospățul din Betania: credința, mormântul și prietenia*, pp. 92-93).

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## **V. KEYWORDS:**

Eucharistic allusion

sacramental framework

ecclesial exegesis

Patristic hermeneutics

sacramental interpretation

Johannine irony

mysteriological interpretation

Johannine lexic

Biblical metaphor

sacramental order

sign

Johannine symbolism

soteriological meaning

Baptismal suggestion

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