
 CHAPTER EIGHT

The Principal Images of John's Gospel

INTRODUCTION: THE JOHANNINE QUESTION

Thus far, in our attempt to listen to Jesus and thereby to get to know him, we have limited ourselves for the most part to the witness of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), while only occasionally glancing at John. It is therefore time to turn our attention to the image of Jesus presented by the Fourth Evangelist, an image that in many respects seems quite different from that of the other Gospels.

Listening to the Synoptics, we have realized that the mystery of Jesus' oneness with the Father is ever present and determines everything, even though it remains hidden beneath his humanity. On one hand, it was perceived by his sharp-eyed opponents. On the other hand, the disciples, who experienced Jesus at prayer and were privileged to know him intimately from the inside, were beginning—step by step, at key moments with great immediacy, and despite all their mis-

understandings—to recognize this absolutely new reality. In John, Jesus' divinity appears unveiled. His disputes with the Jewish Temple authorities, taken together, could be said to anticipate his trial before the Sanhedrin, which John, unlike the Synoptics, does not mention specifically.

John's Gospel is different: Instead of parables, we hear extended discourses built around images, and the main theater of Jesus' activity shifts from Galilee to Jerusalem. These differences caused modern critical scholarship to deny the historicity of the text—with the exception of the Passion narrative and a few details—and to regard it as a later theological reconstruction. It was said to express a highly developed Christology, but not to constitute a reliable source for knowledge of the historical Jesus. The radically late datings of John's Gospel to which this view gave rise have had to be abandoned because papyri from Egypt dating back to the beginning of the second century have been discovered; this made it clear that the Gospel must have been written in the first century, if only during the closing years. Denial of the Gospel's historical character, however, continued unabated.

Interpretation of John's Gospel in the second half of the twentieth century was largely shaped by Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on John, the first edition of which appeared in 1941. Bultmann is convinced that the main influences on the Gospel of John are to be sought not in the Old Testament and the Judaism of the time, but in Gnosticism. This sentence typifies Bultmann's approach: "That is not to say that the idea of the incarnation of the redeemer has in some way penetrated Gnosticism from Christianity; it is itself originally Gnostic, and was taken over at a very early stage by Christian-

ity, and made fruitful for Christology" (*The Gospel of John*, p. 26). Here is another in the same vein: "Gnosticism is the only possible source of the idea of absolute Logos" (*RGG*, 3rd ed., III, p. 846).

The reader asks: How does Bultmann know that? Bultmann's answer is breathtaking: "Even if the reconstruction of this kind of thinking has to be carried out in the main from sources which are later than John, nevertheless its *greater age* remains firmly established" (*The Gospel of John*, p. 27). On this decisive point Bultmann is wrong. In his inaugural lecture as professor at Tübingen, published in expanded form as *The Son of God* in 1975 (English translation 1976), Martin Hengel characterized "the hypothetical Gnostic myth of the sending of the Son of God into the world" as a "pseudo-scientific development of a myth." He then went on to remark: "In reality there is no Gnostic redeemer myth in the sources which can be demonstrated chronologically to be pre-Christian" (p. 33). "Gnosticism itself is first visible as a spiritual movement at the end of the first century A.D. at the earliest, and only develops fully in the second century" (p. 34).

Johannine scholarship in the generation after Bultmann took a radically different direction; the results have been thoroughly explored and discussed in Martin Hengel's book *The Johannine Question* (1989). If we look back from the vantage point of current scholarship to Bultmann's interpretation of John, we see how little protection the highly scientific approach can offer against fundamental mistakes. But what does today's scholarship tell us?

It has definitively confirmed and elaborated something that even Bultmann basically already knew: The Fourth Gospel

rests on extraordinarily precise knowledge of times and places, and so can only have been produced by someone who had an excellent firsthand knowledge of Palestine at the time of Jesus. A further point that has become clear is that the Gospel thinks and argues entirely in terms of the Old Testament—of the Torah (Rudolf Pesch)—and that its whole way of arguing is deeply rooted in the Judaism of Jesus' time. The language of the Gospel, which Bultmann regarded as "Gnostic," actually bears unmistakable signs of the book's intimate association with this milieu. "The work was written in simple unliterary *koine* Greek, steeped in the language of Jewish piety. This Greek was also spoken by the upper classes in Jerusalem . . . [where] Scripture was read in Hebrew and Greek, and prayer and discussion went on in both languages" (Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, p. 113).

Hengel also points out that "in Herodian times a special Hellenized Jewish upper class with its own culture developed in Jerusalem" (*ibid.*, p. 114) and he accordingly locates the origin of the Gospel in the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem (*ibid.*, pp. 124–35). We can perhaps regard a brief reference in John 18:15f as corroboration for this thesis. There it is recounted that after his arrest Jesus is brought to the high priests for interrogation and that in the meantime Simon Peter and "another disciple" follow Jesus in order to find out what is going to happen next. Regarding this "other disciple," it is then said that "as this disciple was known to the high priest, he entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus." His connections with the household of the high priest were such that he was able to secure Peter's entry, thereby engineering the situation that led to Peter's denial. The circle of the dis-

ciples, then, extended as far as the high-priestly aristocracy, in whose language the Gospel is largely written.

This brings, us, however, to two decisive questions that are ultimately at stake in the "Johannine" question: Who is the author of this Gospel? How reliable is it historically? Let us try to approach the first question. The Gospel itself makes a clear statement about it in the context of the Passion story. It is reported that one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a lance "and at once there came out blood and water" (Jn 19:34). These weighty words immediately follow: "He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe" (Jn 19:35). The Gospel traces its origins to an eyewitness, and it is clear that this eyewitness is none other than the disciple who, as we have just been told, was standing under the Cross and was the disciple whom Jesus loved (cf. Jn 19:26). This disciple is once again named as the author of the Gospel in John 21:24. In addition, we meet this figure in John 13:23, 20:2–10, and 21:7 and probably in Jn 1:35, 40 and 18:15–16 as well.

These statements concerning the external origin of the Gospel take on a deeper dimension in the story of the washing of the feet, which points to its inward source. Here it is said that this disciple reclined at Jesus' side during the meal and that, when he asked who the betrayer was, he "leaned back on Jesus' breast" (Jn 13:25). These words are intended to parallel the end of the prologue of John's Gospel, where it is said apropos of Jesus: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Just as Jesus, the Son, knows about the mystery of the Father from resting in his heart, so too the



Evangelist has gained his intimate knowledge from his inward repose in Jesus' heart.

But who is this disciple? The Gospel never directly identifies him by name. In connection with the calling of Peter, as well as of other disciples, it points toward John, the son of Zebedee, but it never explicitly identifies the two figures. The intention is evidently to leave the matter shrouded in mystery. The Book of Revelation does, admittedly, specify John as its author (cf. Rev 1:1, 4), but despite the close connection between this book and the Gospel and Letters of John, it remains an open question whether the author is one and the same person.

The Lutheran exegete Ulrich Wilckens, in his extensive *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, has recently presented new arguments for the thesis that the "beloved disciple" should be thought of not as a historical figure, but as a symbol for a basic structure of the faith: "Scriptura sola is impossible without the 'living voice' of the Gospel and that is impossible without the personal witness of a Christian in the function and authority of the 'beloved disciple,' in whom office and spirit unite and support each other" (*Theologie*, I, 4, p. 158). However correct this may be as a structural claim, it remains insufficient. If the favorite disciple in the Gospel expressly assumes the function of a witness to the truth of the events he recounts, he is presenting himself as a living person. He intends to vouch for historical events as a witness and he thus claims for himself the status of a historical figure. Otherwise the statements we have examined, which are decisive for the intention and the quality of the entire Gospel, would be emptied of meaning.



Since the time of Irenaeus of Lyon (d. ca. 202), Church tradition has unanimously regarded John, the son of Zebedee, as the beloved disciple and the author of the Gospel. This fits with the identification markers provided by the Gospel, which in any case point toward the hand of an Apostle and companion of Jesus from the time of the Baptism in the Jordan to the Last Supper, Cross, and Resurrection.

In modern times, it is true, increasingly strong doubts have been voiced concerning this identification. Can the fisherman from the Lake of Genesareth have written this sublime Gospel full of visions that peer into the deepest depths of God's mystery? Can he, the Galilean fisherman, have been as closely connected with the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem, its language, and its mentality as the Evangelist evidently is? Can he have been related to the family of the high priest, as the text hints (cf. Jn 18:15)?

Now, the French exegete Henri Cazelles, drawing on studies by J. Colson, J. Winandy, and M.-E. Boismard, has shown in a sociological study of the Temple priesthood before its destruction ("Johannes") that such an identification is actually quite possible. The priests discharged their ministry on a rotating basis twice a year. The ministry itself lasted a week each time. After the completion of the ministry, the priest returned to his home, and it was not at all unusual for him also to exercise a profession to earn his livelihood. Furthermore, the Gospel makes clear that Zebedee was no simple fisherman, but employed several day laborers, which also explains why it was possible for his sons to leave him. "It is thus quite possible that Zebedee is a priest, but that at the same time he has his prop-

erty in Galilee, while the fishing business on the lake helps him make ends meet. He probably has a kind of pied-à-terre in or near the Jerusalem neighborhood where the Essenes lived" ("Johannes," p. 481). "The very meal during which this disciple rested on Jesus' breast took place in a room that in all probability was located in the Essene neighborhood of the city"—in the "pied-à-terre" of the priest Zebedee, who "lent the upper room to Jesus and the Twelve" (ibid., pp. 480, 481). Another observation Cazelles makes in his article is interesting in this connection: According to the Jewish custom, the host or, in his absence, as would have been the case here, "his firstborn son sat to the right of the guest, his head leaning on the latter's chest" (ibid., p. 480).

If in light of current scholarship, then, it is quite possible to see Zebedee's son John as the bystander who solemnly asserts his claim to be an eyewitness (cf. Jn 19:35) and thereby identifies himself as the true author of the Gospel, nevertheless, the complexity of the Gospel's redaction raises further questions.

The Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (d. ca. 338) gives us a piece of information that is important in this context. Eusebius tells us about a five-volume work of the bishop of Hierapolis, Papias, who died around 220. Papias mentions there that he had not known or seen the holy Apostles himself, but that he had received the teaching of the faith from people who had been close to the Apostles. He also speaks of others who were likewise disciples of the Lord, and he mentions the names Aristion and "Presbyter John." Now, the important point is that he distinguishes between the Apostle

and Evangelist John, on one hand, and "Presbyter John," on the other. Although he had not personally known the former, he had met the latter (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 39).

This information is very remarkable indeed: When combined with related pieces of evidence, it suggests that in Ephesus there was something like a Johannine school, which traced its origins to Jesus' favorite disciple himself, but in which a certain "Presbyter John" presided as the ultimate authority. This "presbyter" John appears as the sender and author of the Second and Third Letters of John (in each case in the first verse of the first chapter) simply under the title "the presbyter" (without reference to the name John). He is evidently not the same as the Apostle, which means that here in the canonical text we encounter expressly the mysterious figure of the presbyter. He must have been closely connected with the Apostle; perhaps he had even been acquainted with Jesus himself. After the death of the Apostle, he was identified wholly as the bearer of the latter's heritage, and in the collective memory, the two figures were increasingly fused. At any rate, there seem to be grounds for ascribing to "Presbyter John" an essential role in the definitive shaping of the Gospel, though he must always have regarded himself as the trustee of the tradition he had received from the son of Zebedee.

I entirely concur with the conclusion that Peter Stuhlmacher has drawn from the above data. He holds "that the contents of the Gospel go back to the disciple whom Jesus (especially) loved. The presbyter understood himself as his transmitter and mouthpiece" (*Biblische Theologie*, II, p. 206). In a similar vein Stuhlmacher cites E. Ruckstuhl and P. Dschullnigg to the effect that "the author of the Gospel of John is,



as it were, the literary executor of the favorite disciple" (*ibid.*, p. 207).

With these observations, we have already taken a decisive step toward answering the question of the historical credibility of the Fourth Gospel. This Gospel ultimately goes back to an eyewitness, and even the actual redaction of the text was substantially the work of one of his closest followers within the living circle of his disciples.

Thinking along similar lines, Peter Stuhlmacher writes that there are grounds for the conjecture "that the Johannine school carried on the style of thinking and teaching that before Easter set the tone of Jesus' internal didactic discourses with Peter, James, and John (as well as with the whole group of the Twelve) . . . While the Synoptic tradition reflects the way in which the apostles and their disciples spoke about Jesus as they were teaching on Church missions or in Church communities, the Johannine circle took this instruction as the basis and premise for further thinking about, and discussion of, the mystery of revelation, of God's self-disclosure in 'the Son'" (*Biblische Theologie*, II, p. 207). Against this, though, it could be argued that according to the text of the Gospel itself, what we find are not so much internal didactic discourses but rather Jesus' dispute with the Temple aristocracy, in which we are given a kind of preview of his trial. In this context, the question "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mk 14:61), in its different forms, increasingly adopts center stage in the whole dispute, so that Jesus' claim to Sonship inevitably takes on more and more dramatic forms.

It is surprising that Martin Hengel, from whom we have learned so much about the historical rooting of the Gospel



in the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem—and so in the real context of Jesus' life—nonetheless offers an astonishingly negative, or (to put it more gently) extremely cautious, judgment of the historical character of the text. He says: "The Fourth Gospel is not a completely free 'Jesus poem' . . . Here we must distinguish between those traits which are historically plausible and others which remain chiefly suppositions. An inability to prove the historicity of something does not mean that it is pure unhistorical fiction. Certainly the evangelist is not narrating historical, banal recollections of the past but the rigorously interpretative spirit-paraclete leading into truth, which has the last word throughout the work" (p. 132). This raises an objection: What does this contrast mean? What makes historical recollection banal? Is the truth of what is recollected important or not? And what sort of truth can the Paraclete guide into if he leaves behind the historical because it is too banal?

The diagnosis of the exegete Ingo Broer reveals even more sharply the problem with these sorts of contrasts: "The Gospel of John thus stands before us as a *literary* work that bears witness to faith and is intended to strengthen faith, and not as a historical account" (*Einleitung*, p. 197). What faith does it "testify" to if, so to speak, it has left history behind? How does it strengthen faith if it presents itself as a historical testimony—and does so quite emphatically—but then does not report history? I think that we are dealing here with a false concept of the historical, as well as with a false concept of faith and of the Paraclete. A faith that discards history in this manner really turns into "Gnosticism." It leaves flesh, incarnation—just what true history is—behind.

If "historical" is understood to mean that the discourses of Jesus transmitted to us have to be something like a recorded transcript in order to be acknowledged as "historically" authentic, then the discourses of John's Gospel are not "historical." But the fact that they make no claim to literal accuracy of this sort by no means implies that they are merely "Jesus poems" that the members of the Johannine school gradually put together, claiming to be acting under the guidance of the Paraclete. What the Gospel is really claiming is that it has correctly rendered the substance of the discourses, of Jesus' self-attestation in the great Jerusalem disputes, so that the readers really do encounter the decisive content of this message and, therein, the authentic figure of Jesus.

We can take a further step toward defining more precisely the particular sort of historicity that is present in the Fourth Gospel if we attend to the mutual ordering of the various elements that Hengel regards as decisive for the composition of the text. Hengel begins by naming four of the essential elements of this Gospel: "the theological concern of the author . . . his personal recollections . . . church tradition and with them historical reality." Astonishingly, Hengel says that the Evangelist "altered, indeed we might even say violated" this history. Finally, as we have just seen, it is not "the recollections of the past but the rigorously interpretative spirit-paraclete leading into truth which has the last word" (*The Johannine Question*, p. 132).

Given the way that Hengel juxtaposes, and in a certain respect contraposes, these five elements, they cannot be brought into any meaningful synthesis. For how is the Paraclete supposed to have the last word if the Evangelist has already vio-

lated the actual history? What sort of relation is there between the redactional concern of the Evangelist, his personal message, and Church tradition? Is redactional concern more decisive than recollection, so that in its name reality may be violated? What, then, establishes the legitimacy of this redactional concern? How does it interact with the Paraclete?

I think that the five elements listed by Hengel are indeed the essential forces that shaped the composition of the Gospel, but they have to be seen in a different mutual relation, and the individual elements have to be differently understood.

First of all, the second and fourth elements—personal recollection and historical reality—form a pair. Together they constitute what the Fathers of the Church call the *factum historicum* that determines the literal sense of the text: the exterior side of the event, which the Evangelist knows partly from personal recollection and partly from Church tradition (no doubt he was familiar with the Synoptic Gospels in one or another version). His intention is to act as a “witness” reporting the things that happened. No one has emphasized this particular dimension of what actually happened—the “flesh” of history—to such an extent as John. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us” (1 Jn 1:1f.).

These two factors—historical reality and recollection—lead by their inner dynamic, however, to the third and fifth elements that Hengel lists: Church tradition and the guidance of

the Holy Spirit. For, on one hand, the author of the Fourth Gospel gives a very personal accent to his own remembrance, as we see from his observation at the end of the Crucifixion scene (cf. Jn 19:35); on the other hand, it is never a merely private remembering, but a remembering in and with the “we” of the Church: “that which . . . we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands.” With John, the subject who remembers is always the “we”—he remembers in and with the community of the disciples, in and with the Church. However much the author stands out as an individual witness, the remembering subject that speaks here is always the “we” of the community of disciples, the “we” of the Church. Because the personal recollection that provides the foundation of the Gospel is purified and deepened by being inserted into the memory of the Church, it does indeed transcend the banal recollection of facts.

There are three important passages in his Gospel where John uses the word *remember* and so gives us the key to understanding what he means by “memory.” In John’s account of the cleansing of the Temple, we read: “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for thy house will consume me’ [Ps 69:10]” (Jn 2:17). The event that is taking place calls to mind a passage of Scripture and so the event becomes intelligible at a level beyond the merely factual. Memory sheds light on the sense of the act, which then acquires a deeper meaning. It appears as an act in which Logos is present, an act that comes from the Logos and leads into it. The link connecting Jesus’ acting and suffering with God’s word comes into view, and so the mystery of Jesus himself becomes intelligible.

In the account of the cleansing of the Temple there then

follows Jesus' prophecy that he will raise up the destroyed Temple again in three days. The Evangelist then comments: "When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (Jn 2:22). The Resurrection evokes remembrance, and remembrance in light of the Resurrection brings out the sense of this hitherto puzzling saying and reconnects it to the overall context of Scripture. The unity of Logos and act is the goal at which the Gospel is aiming.

The word *remember* occurs once again, this time in the description of the events of Palm Sunday. John recounts that Jesus found a young ass and sat down on it: "As it is written, 'Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on an ass's colt!'" (Jn 12:14-15; cf. Zach 9:9). The Evangelist then observes: "His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him" (Jn 12:16). Once again an event is reported that at first seems simply factual. And once again the Evangelist tells us that after the Resurrection the disciples' eyes were opened and they were able to understand what had happened. Now they "remember." A scriptural text that had previously meant nothing to them now becomes intelligible, in the sense foreseen by God, which gives the external action its meaning.

The Resurrection teaches us a new way of seeing; it uncovers the connection between the words of the Prophets and the destiny of Jesus. It evokes "remembrance," that is, it makes it possible to enter into the interiority of the events, into the intrinsic coherence of God's speaking and acting.



By means of these texts the Evangelist himself gives us the decisive indications as to how his Gospel is composed and what sort of vision lies behind it. It rests upon the remembering of the disciple, which, however, is a co-remembering in the "we" of the Church. This remembering is an understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; by remembering, the believer enters into the depth of the event and sees what could not be seen on an immediate and merely superficial level. But in so doing he does not move away from the reality; rather, he comes to know it more deeply and thus sees the truth concealed in the outward act. The remembering of the Church is the context where what the Lord prophesied to his followers at the Last Supper actually happens: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (Jn 16:13).

What John says in his Gospel about how remembering becomes understanding and the path "into all the truth" comes very close to what Luke recounts about remembering on the part of Jesus' mother. In three passages of the infancy narrative Luke depicts this process of "remembering" for us. The first passage occurs in the account of the annunciation of Jesus' conception by the Archangel Gabriel. There Luke tells us that Mary took fright at the angel's greeting and entered into an interior "dialogue" about what the greeting might mean. The most important passages figure in the account of the adoration of the shepherds. The Evangelist comments: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). At the conclusion of the narrative of the twelve-year-old Jesus we read once again: "His mother kept



all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:51). Mary's memory is first of all a retention of the events in remembrance, but it is more than that: It is an interior conversation with all that has happened. Thanks to this conversation, she penetrates into the interior dimension, she sees the events in their inter-connect-edness, and she learns to understand them.

It is on just this sort of "recollection" that the Gospel of John is based, even as the Gospel takes the concept of memory to a new depth by conceiving it as the memory of the "we" of the disciples, of the Church. This remembering is no mere psychological or intellectual process; it is a pneumatic event [i.e., an event imbued with the Pnuma, or the Holy Spirit]. The Church's remembering is not merely a private affair; it transcends the sphere of our own human understanding and knowing. It is a being-led by the Holy Spirit, who shows us the connectedness of Scripture, the connection between word and reality, and, in doing that, leads us "into all the truth."

This also has some fundamental implications for the concept of inspiration. The Gospel emerges from human remembering and presupposes the communion of those who remember, in this case very concretely the school of John and, before that, the community of disciples. But because the author thinks and writes with the memory of the Church, the "we" to which he belongs opens beyond the personal and is guided in its depths by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of truth. In this sense, the Gospel itself opens up a path of understanding, which always remains bound to the scriptural word, and yet from generation to generation can lead, and is meant to lead, ever anew into the depth of all the truth.

This means that the Gospel of John, because it is a

"pneumatic Gospel," does not simply transmit a stenographic transcript of Jesus' words and ways; it escorts us, in virtue of understanding-through-remembering, beyond the external into the depth of words and events that come from God and lead back to him. As such, the Gospel is "remembering," which means that it remains faithful to what really happened and is not a "Jesus poem," not a violation of the historical events. Rather, it truly shows us who Jesus was, and thereby it shows us someone who not only was, but is; who can always say "I am" in the present tense. "Before Abraham was, *I am*" (Jn 8:58). It shows us the real Jesus, and we can confidently make use of it as a source of information about him.

Before we turn to the great Johannine figurative discourses, two further general observations about the distinctive character of John's Gospel may be helpful. Whereas Bultmann thought the Fourth Gospel was rooted in Gnosticism and was therefore alien to the soil of the Old Testament and of Judaism, recent scholarship has given us a new and clearer appreciation of the fact that John stands squarely on the foundation of the Old Testament. "Moses . . . wrote of me" (Jn 5:46), Jesus says to his adversaries. But already at the beginning—when John recounts the calling of the disciples—Philip had said to Nathanael: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (Jn 1:45). Providing an explanation and a basis for this claim is ultimately the aim of Jesus' discourses. He does not break the Torah, but brings its whole meaning to light and wholly fulfills it. But the connection between Jesus and Moses appears most prominently, one might say programmatically, at the end of the prologue; this passage gives us the key to under-

standing the Fourth Gospel: "And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:16-18).

We began this book with Moses' prophecy: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed" (Deut 18:15). We saw that the Book of Deuteronomy, which contains this prophecy, ends with the observation: "and there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deut 34:10). Until that hour, the great promise had remained unfulfilled. Now He is here, the one who is truly close to the Father's heart, the only one who has seen him, who sees him and who speaks out of this seeing—the one of whom it is therefore fittingly said: "him you shall heed" (Mk 9:7; Deut 18:15). The promise to Moses is fulfilled superabundantly, in the overflowinglavish way in which God is accustomed to bestow his gifts. The One who has come is more than Moses, more than a prophet. He is the Son. And that is why grace and truth now come to light, not in order to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it.

The second observation concerns the liturgical character of John's Gospel. It has a rhythm dictated by Israel's calendar of religious festivals. The major feasts of the People of God articulate the inner structure of Jesus' path and at the same time display the foundation on which the edifice of his message rises.

Right at the beginning of Jesus' activity we read of the "Passover of the Jews," which suggests the motif of the true

Temple, and thus of the Cross and Resurrection (cf. Jn 2:13-25). The healing of the paralytic, which occasions Jesus' first major public discourse in Jerusalem, is once again connected with a "feast of the Jews" (Jn 5:1)—probably the "Feast of Weeks," Pentecost. The multiplication of the loaves and its interpretation in the "bread of life" discourse, which is the great eucharistic discourse in John's Gospel, occur in the context of Passover (cf. Jn 6:4). Jesus' next major discourse, where he promises "rivers of living water" (Jn 7:38f.), is set at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. Finally, we meet Jesus again in Jerusalem in wintertime at the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple (Hanukkah) (cf. Jn 10:22). Jesus' path is brought to completion during his last Passover (cf. Jn 12:1), when he himself becomes the true Paschal Lamb who pours out his blood on the Cross. We shall see, moreover, that Jesus' high-priestly prayer, which contains a subtle eucharistic theology in the form of a theology of his sacrifice on the Cross, is built up entirely in terms of the theological content of the Feast of the Atonement. This fundamentally important feast of Israel thus also feeds crucially into the crafting of Jesus' words and works. In the next chapter, furthermore, we shall see that the event of Jesus' Transfiguration recounted by the Synoptics is set in the framework of the Feast of the Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles and therefore reflects the same theological background. Only if we constantly keep in mind the liturgical context of Jesus' discourses, indeed of the whole structure of John's Gospel, will we be able to understand its vitality and depth.

All Jewish festivals, as we shall see below in greater detail, have a triple basis. The initial stratum is composed of feasts



of nature religion, which connect with creation and with man's search for God through creation; this then develops into feasts of remembrance, of the recollection and making-present of God's saving deeds; finally, remembering increasingly takes on the form of hope for the coming definitive saving deed that is still awaited. Clearly, then, Jesus' discourses in John's Gospel are not disputes occasioned by metaphysical questions, but they contain the whole dynamic of salvation history and, at the same time, they are rooted in creation. They are ultimately pointers to the One who can simply say of himself: "I am." It is evident that Jesus' discourses direct us toward worship and in this sense toward "sacrament," at the same time embracing the questioning and seeking of all peoples.

After these introductory considerations, it is time to take a somewhat closer look at some of the principal images that we find in the Fourth Gospel.

THE PRINCIPAL JOHANNINE IMAGES

Water

Water is the primordial element of life and is therefore also one of the primordial symbols of humanity. It appears to man in various forms and hence with various meanings.

The first form is the spring, water that bursts forth fresh from the womb of the earth. The spring is origin, beginning, in its as yet unclouded and unspent purity. The spring thus figures as a truly creative element, as well as being a symbol of fruitfulness, of maternity.

A second form is flowing water. The great rivers—the



Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris—are the major, seemingly almost godlike sources of life in the vast lands surrounding Israel. In Israel it is the Jordan River that bestows life on the land. In connection with Jesus' Baptism, though, we saw that river symbolism shows another side as well: A river is deep, and so embodies danger; descent into the deep can therefore signify descent into death, just as ascent from it can signify rebirth.

The final form is the sea. It is a power that evokes admiration; its majesty calls forth amazement. Above all, though, it is feared in its guise as the counterpart to the earth, the domain of human life. The Creator has assigned the sea its limits, which it may not transgress: It is not permitted to swallow up the earth. The crossing of the Red Sea was above all a symbol of salvation for Israel, but of course it also points to the danger that proved to be the destiny of the Egyptians. If Christians consider the crossing of the Red Sea as a prefiguring of Baptism, there in the immediate foreground is the symbolism of death: It becomes an image of the mystery of the Cross. In order to be reborn, man must first enter with Christ into the "Red Sea," plunge with him down into death, in order thus to attain new life with the risen Lord.

But let us now turn from these general remarks about water symbolism in religious history to the Gospel of John. Water symbolism pervades the Gospel from beginning to end. We meet it for the first time in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3. In order to be able to enter the Kingdom of God, man must be made new, he must become another person—he must be born again of water and the Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5). What does this mean?

Baptism, the gateway into communion with Christ, is



being interpreted for us here as rebirth. This rebirth—by analogy with natural birth from the begetting of the man and the conception of the woman—involves a double principle: God's spirit and "water, the 'universal mother' of natural life—which grace raises up in the sacrament to be a sister-image of the virginal Theotokos" (Rech, *Inbild*, II, p. 303).

Rebirth—to put it another way—involves the creative power of God's Spirit, but it also requires the sacrament of the maternal womb of the receiving and welcoming Church. Photina Rech cites Tertullian: Never was Christ without water (Tertullian, *De baptismo*, IX, 4). She then gives this somewhat enigmatic saying of the early Church writer its correct interpretation: "Christ never was, and never is, without the Ekklesia" (Rech, *Inbild*, II, p. 304). Spirit and water, heaven and earth, Christ and the Church, belong together. And that is how "rebirth" happens. In the sacrament, water stands for the maternal earth, the holy Church, which welcomes creation into herself and stands in place of it.

Immediately after the conversation with Nicodemus, we meet Jesus at Jacob's well in chapter 4. The Lord promises the Samaritan woman water that becomes in the one who drinks it a source springing up into eternal life (cf. Jn 4:14), so that whoever drinks it will never be thirsty again. In this scene, the symbolism of the well is associated with Israel's salvation history. Earlier, at the calling of Nathanael, Jesus had already revealed himself as the new and greater Jacob. In a nocturnal vision Jacob had seen the angels of God ascending and descending above the stone he was using for a pillow. Jesus prophesies to Nathanael that his disciples will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending above



him (cf. Jn 1:51). Here, at Jacob's well, we encounter Jacob as the great patriarch who by means of this well had provided water, the basic element of life. But there is a greater thirst in man—it extends beyond the water from the well, because it seeks a life that reaches out beyond the biological sphere.

We will come across this same inner tension in man once more when we come to the section on bread. Moses gave manna, bread from heaven. But it was still just earthly "bread." The manna is a promise: The new Moses is also expected to give bread. Once again, however, something greater than manna has to be given. Once again we see man reaching out into the infinite, toward another "bread" that will truly be "bread from heaven."

The promise of new water and the promise of new bread thus mirror each other. They both reflect the other dimension of life, for which man can only yearn. John distinguishes between *bios* and *zoé*—between biological life (*bios*) and the fullness of life (*zoé*) that is itself a source and so is not subject to the dying and becoming that mark the whole of creation. In the conversation with the Samaritan woman, then, water once again—though now in a different way—functions as the symbol of the Pneuma, the real life-force, which quenches man's deeper thirst and gives him plenitude of life, for which he is waiting without knowing it.

In the next chapter, chapter 5, water appears more or less in passing. It makes its appearance in the story of the man who has lain sick for thirty-eight years. He hopes to be healed by wading into the pool of Bethzatha, but there is no one to help him into the water. Jesus heals the man by his supreme authority; he accomplishes for the sick man the very



thing the man had hoped to receive from the healing water. In chapter 7, which, according to a convincing hypothesis of modern exegesis, in all likelihood originally followed directly after chapter 5, we find Jesus attending the Feast of Tabernacles, which involves a solemn ritual of water libation. We will have to treat this in detail presently.

We come across water symbolism again in chapter 9, where Jesus heals the man born blind. The process of healing involves the sick man, on Jesus' instructions, washing in the Pool of Siloam. In this way he obtains his sight. "Siloam means, being translated: the One Sent" (Jn 9:7), as the Evangelist notes for the reader who knows no Hebrew. But this is more than a philological observation. It is a way of identifying the real cause of the miracle. For "the One Sent" is Jesus. When all is said and done, Jesus is the one through whom and in whom the blind man is cleansed so that he can gain his sight. The whole chapter turns out to be an interpretation of Baptism, which enables us to see. Christ is the giver of light, and he opens our eyes through the mediation of the sacrament.

Water appears with a similar, yet further shade of meaning in chapter 13—at the hour of the Last Supper—in connection with the washing of the feet. Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his upper garment, girds himself with a linen cloth, pours water into a bowl, and begins to wash the feet of the disciples (cf. Jn 13:4f.). The humility of Jesus, in making himself his followers' slave, is the purifying foot washing that renders us fit to take our places at God's table.

Finally, water appears before us again with a mysterious grandeur at the end of the Passion. Since Jesus is dead, his bones are not broken (Jn 19:31), but one of the soldiers "pierced his

side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (Jn 19:34). There is no doubt that John means to refer here to the two main sacraments of the Church—Baptism and the Eucharist—which spring forth from Jesus' opened heart and thus give birth to the Church from his side.

Now, John later goes back to the motif of blood and water in his First Letter and there gives it a new twist: "This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. . . . There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three are one" (1 Jn 5:6–8). Here John very obviously gives the motif a polemical turn against a form of Christianity that acknowledges Jesus' Baptism as a saving event but does not acknowledge his death on the Cross in the same way. He is responding to a form of Christianity that, so to speak, wants only the word, but not flesh and blood. Jesus' body and his death ultimately play no role. So all that is left of Christianity is mere "water"—without Jesus' bodiliness the word loses its power. Christianity becomes mere doctrine, mere moralism, an intellectual affair, but it lacks any flesh and blood. The redemptive character of Jesus' blood is no longer accepted. It disturbs the intellectual harmony.

Who could fail to recognize here certain temptations threatening Christianity in our own times? Water and blood belong together; Incarnation and Cross, Baptism, word, and sacrament are inseparable from one another. Not only that, but the *Pneuma* is needed to complete this triple testimony. Schnackenburg rightly points out that what is intended here is "the witness of the Spirit in the church and through the church, as in John 15:26, 16:10" (*Johannine Epistles*, p. 234).

Let us turn now to Jesus' words of revelation in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles that John transmits to us at 7:37-39. "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water."'" In the background is the ritual of the feast, which prescribed that participants should draw water from the spring at Siloam in order to offer a water libation in the Temple on each of the seven days of the feast. On the seventh day, the priests processed seven times around the altar holding a golden water vessel before ritually pouring out its contents. These water rituals are in the first place indications of the origin of the feast in the nature religions: The feast began as an invocatory petition for rain, which was so vitally necessary in a land chronically threatened by drought. But the ritual was then transformed into a remembrance of a piece of salvation history, of the water from the rock that, in spite of all their doubts and fears, God gave the Jews as they wandered in the desert (cf. Num 20:1-13).

Finally, the gift of water from the rock increasingly became a motif of messianic hope. Moses had given Israel bread from heaven and water from the rock as the people wandered in the desert. On this pattern, the new Moses, the Messiah, was expected to give these two essential gifts of life as well. This messianic interpretation of the gift of water is reflected in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "All ate the same pneumatic food and all drank the same pneumatic drink; for they drank from the pneumatic rock that went with them. But the rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:3f).



In the words that Jesus speaks during the water ritual, he responds to this hope: He is the new Moses. He himself is the life-giving rock. Just as in the bread discourse he reveals himself as the true bread that comes from heaven, he shows himself here—just as he had done with the Samaritan woman—as the living water that is the goal of man's deeper thirst, the thirst for life, for "life in abundance" (Jn 10:10): This life is no longer conditioned by need that must constantly be satisfied, but it springs up from within, from deep inside itself. Jesus also answers the questions as to how one drinks this living water, how one gets to the well and draws from it, by saying, "He who believes in me . . ." Faith in Jesus is the way we drink the living water, the way we drink life that is no longer threatened by death.

But now we must listen more carefully to the text. It continues: "As the Scripture has said, 'Out of his body shall flow rivers of living water'" (Jn 7:38). Out of whose body? Since the earliest times there have been two different answers to this question. The tradition started by Origen, which is associated with Alexandria, though the great Latin Fathers Jerome and Augustine also subscribe to it, reads the text thus: "He who believes . . . out of his body . . ." The believer himself becomes a spring, an oasis out of which bubbles up fresh, uncontaminated water, the life-giving power of the Creator Spirit. Alongside this tradition there is another, albeit much less widespread, from Asia Minor, which is closer to John in its origins. It is documented by Justin (d. 165), Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Cyprian, and Ephraim of Syria. It punctuates the text differently: "He who thirsts, let him come to me, and let him who believes in me drink it. As the Scripture says: out of his body rivers will



flow." "His body" is now applied to Christ: He is the source, the living rock, from which the new water comes.

From the purely linguistic point of view, the first interpretation is more convincing. It has accordingly been adopted by the majority of modern exegetes—along with the great Church Fathers. In terms of the content, though, there is more to be said for the second, "Asia Minor" interpretation, to which Schnackenburg, for example, subscribes, though it need not be considered to exclude the "Alexandrian" reading. An important key to the interpretation of this passage lies in the phrase "as the Scripture says." Jesus attaches great importance to being in continuity with the Scripture, in continuity with God's history with men. The whole Gospel of John, as well as the Synoptic Gospels and the entirety of the New Testament writings, justify faith in Jesus by showing that all the currents of Scripture come together in him, that he is the focal point in terms of which the overall coherence of Scripture comes to light—everything is waiting for him, everything is moving toward him.

But where does Scripture speak of this living spring? John is obviously not thinking of any one particular passage, but precisely of "the Scripture," of a vision that runs through its texts. We have just come across one of the principal clues: The story of the water issuing from the rock, a story that became an image of hope in Israel. Ezekiel 47:1–12 furnishes us with the second major clue, the vision of the new Temple: "And behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the Temple toward the east" (Ezek 47:1). A good fifty years later Zechariah returned to this image: "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants

of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (Zech 13:1), "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem" (Zech 14:8). The final chapter of the Bible reinterprets these images and at the same time manifests their full greatness for the first time: "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1).

Our brief consideration of the cleansing of the Temple has already shown us that John sees the risen Lord, his body, as the new Temple, which is awaited not just by the Old Testament, but by all peoples (cf. Jn 2:21). We thus have good reason to hear a reference to the new Temple echoing through Jesus' words about the streams of living waters: Yes, this Temple exists. The promised river of life that decontaminates the briny soil and allows the fullness of life to ripen and bear fruit really does exist. It is He who, in "loving to the end," endured the Cross and now lives with a life that can never again be threatened by death. It is the living Christ. Accordingly, Jesus' words during the Feast of Tabernacles not only point forward to the new Jerusalem where God himself lives and is the fountain of life, but also point immediately ahead to the body of the Crucified, out of which blood and water flow (cf. Jn 19:34). It shows the body of Jesus to be the real Temple, built not of stone nor by human hands; hence—because it signifies the living indwelling of God in the world—it is, and will remain, the source of life for all ages.

If one looks at history with a keen eye, one can see this river flowing through the ages from Golgotha, from Jesus crucified and risen. One can see that, wherever this river reaches, the earth is decontaminated and fruit-bearing trees

grow up; one can see that life, real life, flows from this spring of love that has given itself and continues to give itself.

The application of this passage primarily to Christ—as we saw earlier—does not have to exclude a secondary interpretation referring to the believer. A saying from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas (108) points in a direction compatible with John's Gospel: "Whoever drinks from my mouth shall become as I am" (Barrett, *Gospel*, p. 328). The believer becomes one with Christ and participates in his fruitfulness. The man who believes and loves with Christ becomes a well that gives life. That, too, is something that is wonderfully illustrated in history: The saints are oases around which life sprouts up and something of the lost paradise returns. And ultimately, Christ himself is always the well-spring who pours himself forth in such abundance.

Vine and Wine

Whereas water is a basic element of life for all creatures on earth, wheat bread, wine, and olive oil are gifts typical of Mediterranean culture. The creation Psalm 104 first of all mentions the grass that God has appointed for the cattle and then goes on to speak of the gifts God gives to men through the earth: the bread that man produces from the earth, the wine that gladdens his heart, and finally the oil that makes his face shine. It then returns to speak of the bread that strengthens man's heart (cf. Ps 104:14f.). Along with water, the three great gifts of the earth subsequently became the basic elements of the Church's sacraments, in which the fruits of creation are transformed into bearers of God's historical action, into "signs," in which he bestows upon us his special closeness.



Each of the three gifts has a special character that sets it apart from the others, so that each one functions as a sign in its own way. Bread, in its simplest form prepared from water and ground wheat—though the element of fire and human work clearly have a part to play—is the basic foodstuff. It belongs to the poor and the rich alike, but especially to the poor. It represents the goodness of creation and of the Creator, even as it stands for the humble simplicity of daily life. Wine, on the other hand, represents feasting. It gives man a taste of the glory of creation. In this sense, it forms part of the rituals of the Sabbath, of Passover, of marriage feasts. And it allows us to glimpse something of the definitive feast God will celebrate with man, the goal of all Israel's expectations: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined" (Is 25:6). Finally, oil gives man strength and beauty; it has the power to heal and nourish. It signifies a higher calling in the anointing of prophets, kings, and priests.

As far as I can see, olive oil does not figure in John's Gospel. The precious "oil of nard" that Mary of Bethany uses to anoint the Lord before he enters upon his Passion (cf. Jn 12:3) was thought to be of Oriental origin. In this scene, it appears, first, as a sign of the sacred extravagance of love and, second, as a reference to death and Resurrection. We come across bread in the scene of the multiplication of the loaves, which the Synoptics also document in great detail, and immediately after that in the great eucharistic discourse in John's Gospel. The gift of new wine occupies a central place in the wedding at Cana (cf. Jn 2:1–12), while in his Farewell



Discourses Jesus presents himself to us as the true vine (cf. Jn 15:1–10).

Let us focus on these two texts. The miracle of Cana seems at first sight to be out of step with the other signs that Jesus performs. What are we supposed to make of the fact that Jesus produces a huge surplus of wine—about 520 liters—for a private party? We need to look more closely to realize that this is not at all about a private luxury, but about something much greater. The first important detail is the timing. “On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee” (Jn 2:1). It is not quite clear what previous date this “third day” is related to—which shows all the more plainly that what matters to the Evangelist is precisely the symbolic time reference, which he gives us as a key to understanding the event.

In the Old Testament, the third day is the time for theophany, as, for example, in the central account of the meeting between God and Israel on Sinai: “On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings. . . . The LORD descended upon it in fire” (Ex 19:16–18). At the same time what we have here is a prefiguring of history’s final and decisive theophany: the Resurrection of Christ on the third day, when God’s former encounters with man become his definitive irruption upon earth, when the earth is torn open once and for all and drawn into God’s own life. What John is hinting at here, then, is that at Cana God first reveals himself in a way that carries forward the events of the Old Testament, all of which have the character of a promise and are now straining toward their definitive fulfillment. The exegetes have reckoned up the number of the preceding days in John’s Gospel that are taken up with the calling of the disciples (e.g.,

Barrett, *Gospel*, p. 190). The conclusion is that this “third day” would be the sixth or seventh day since Jesus began calling the disciples. If it were the seventh day, then it would be, so to speak, the day of God’s feast for humanity, an anticipation of the definitive Sabbath as described, for example, in the prophecy of Isaiah cited above.

There is another basic element of the narrative linked to this timing. Jesus says to Mary that his hour has not yet come. On an immediate level, this means that he does not simply act and decide by his own lights, but always in harmony with the Father’s will and always in terms of the Father’s plan. More particularly, the “hour” designates his “glorification,” which brings together his Cross, his Resurrection, and his presence throughout the world in word and sacrament. Jesus’ hour, the hour of his “glory,” begins at the moment of the Cross, and its historical setting is the moment when the Passover lambs are slaughtered—it is just then that Jesus, the true lamb, pours out his blood. His hour comes from God, but it is solidly situated in a precise historical context tied to a liturgical date—and just so it is the beginning of the new liturgy in “spirit and truth.” When at this juncture Jesus speaks to Mary of his hour, he is connecting the present moment with the mystery of the Cross interpreted as his glorification. This hour is not yet come; that was the first thing that had to be said. And yet Jesus has the power to anticipate this “hour” in a mysterious sign. This stamps the miracle of Cana as an anticipation of the hour, tying the two together intrinsically.

How could we forget that this thrilling mystery of the anticipated hour continues to occur again and again? Just as at his mother’s request Jesus gives a sign that anticipates his

hour, and at the same time directs our gaze toward it, so too he does the same thing ever anew in the Eucharist. Here, in response to the Church's prayer, the Lord anticipates his return; he comes already now; he celebrates the marriage feast with us here and now. In so doing, he lifts us out of our own time toward the coming "hour."

We thus begin to understand the event of Cana. The sign of God is overflowing generosity. We see it in the multiplication of the loaves; we see it again and again—most of all, though, at the center of salvation history, in the fact that he lavishly spends himself for the lowly creature, man. This abundant giving is his "glory." The superabundance of Cana is therefore a sign that God's feast with humanity, his self-giving for men, has begun. The framework of the event, the wedding, thus becomes an image that points beyond itself to the messianic hour: The hour of God's marriage feast with his people has begun in the coming of Jesus. The promise of the last days enters into the Now.

This links the story of Cana with Saint Mark's account of the question posed to Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees: Why don't your disciples fast? Jesus answers: "Can the wedding guests fast so long as the bridegroom is among them?" (Mk 2:18f.). Jesus identifies himself here as the "bridegroom" of God's promised marriage with his people and, by doing so, he mysteriously places his own existence, himself, within the mystery of God. In him, in an unexpected way, God and man become one, become a "marriage," though this marriage—as Jesus subsequently points out—passes through the Cross, through the "taking away" of the bridegroom.



There remain two aspects of the Cana story for us to ponder if we wish in some sense to explore its Christological depth—the self-revelation of Jesus and his "glory" that we encounter in the narrative. Water, set aside for the purpose of ritual purification, is turned into wine, into a sign and a gift of nuptial joy. This brings to light something of the fulfillment of the Law that is accomplished in Jesus' being and doing.

The Law is not denied, it is not thrust aside. Rather, its inner expectation is brought to fulfillment. Ritual purification in the end is just ritual, a gesture of hope. It remains "water," just as everything man does on his own remains "water" before God. Ritual purification is in the end never sufficient to make man capable of God, to make him really "pure" for God. Water becomes wine. Man's own efforts now encounter the gift of God, who gives himself and thereby creates the feast of joy that can only be instituted by the presence of God and his gift.

The historical study of comparative religion likes to claim the myth of Dionysus as a pre-Christian parallel to the story of Cana. Dionysus was the god who was supposed to have discovered the vine and also to have changed water into wine—a mythical event that was also celebrated liturgically. The great Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria (ca. 13 B.C.—A.D. 45/50) gave this story a demythologizing reinterpretation: The true giver of wine, Philo says, is the divine Logos; he is the one who gives us the joy, the sweetness, and the cheerfulness of true wine. Philo then goes on to anchor his Logos theology onto a figure from salvation history, onto Melchisedek, who offered bread and wine. In Melchisedek it is the Logos who is acting and giving us the gifts that are



essential for human living. By the same token, the Logos appears as the priest of a cosmic liturgy (Barrett, *Gospel*, p. 188).

Whether John had such a background in mind is doubtful, to say the least. But since Jesus himself in interpreting his mission referred to Psalm 110, which features the priesthood of Melchisedek (cf. Mk 12:35–37); since the Letter to the Hebrews, which is theologically akin to the Gospel of John, explicitly develops a theology of Melchisedek; since John presents Jesus as the Logos of God and as God himself; since, finally, the Lord gave bread and wine as the bearers of the New Covenant, it is certainly not forbidden to think in terms of such connections and so to see shining through the Cana story the mystery of the Logos and of his cosmic liturgy, which fundamentally transforms the myth of Dionysus, and yet also brings it to its hidden truth.

While the Cana story deals with the *fruit* of the vine and the rich symbolism that goes with it, in chapter 15—in the context of the Farewell Discourses—John takes up once more the ancient traditional image of the vine itself, and brings to fulfillment the vision that is presented there. In order to understand this discourse of Jesus, it is necessary to consider at least *one* foundational Old Testament text based on the vine motif and to ponder briefly a related parable in the Synoptics that takes up and refashions the Old Testament text.

Isaiah 5:1–7 presents us with a song about a vineyard. The Prophet probably sang it in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, in the context of the cheerful atmosphere characteristic of this eight-day feast (cf. Deut 16:14). It is easy to imagine many different sorts of performances going on in the areas

between the booths built of leaves and branches, and the Prophet himself mingling with the celebrating people and announcing a love song about his friend and his vineyard.

Everyone knew that “vineyard” was an image for a bride (cf. Song 2:15, 7:12f.), so they were expecting some entertainment suited to the festive atmosphere. And the song does start off on a good note: The friend had a vineyard on rich soil, planted choice grapes on it, and did everything he could to make them flourish. But then the mood suddenly changes: The vineyard is a disappointment, and instead of choice fruit, it produces nothing but inedible sour grapes, small and hard. The audience understands what that means: The bride was unfaithful, disappointing the trust and hope, disappointing the love that the friend had expected. How will the story continue? The friend hands over his vineyard to be plundered—he repudiates the bride, leaving her in the dishonor for which she has no one but herself to blame.

It suddenly becomes clear that the vineyard, the bride, is Israel—it is the very people who are present. God gave them the way of justice in the Torah, he loved them, he did everything for them, and they have answered him with unjust action and a regime of injustice. The love song has become a threat of judgment. It finishes with a gloomy prospect—that of God’s abandonment of Israel, with no sign at this stage of any further promise. Isaiah points to the situation that the Psalmist later describes in a lament before God in deep anguish at its having come to pass: “Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt; thou didst drive out the nations and plant it. Thou didst clear the ground for it. . . . Why then hast thou broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way plunder its

fruit?" (Ps 80:9-13). In the Psalm, lament leads into petition: "Have regard for this vine, the stock which thy right hand planted. . . . Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! let thy face shine, that we may be saved!" (Ps 80:16-20).

Despite everything that had happened to Israel since the Exile, it found itself again in essentially the same situation at the time when Jesus lived and spoke to the heart of his people. In a late parable, told on the eve of his Passion, he takes up the song of Isaiah in a modified form (cf. Mk 12:1-12). His discourse no longer uses the vine as the image of Israel, however. Rather, Israel is now represented by the tenants of a vineyard whose owner has gone on a journey and from a far country demands the fruits owed him. The history of God's constantly renewed struggle for and with Israel is depicted in a succession of "servants" who come at the owner's behest to collect the rent, the agreed-on portion of the fruits, from the tenants. The history of the Prophets, their sufferings, and the futility of their efforts appear through the narrative, which tells that the servants are manhandled, even killed.

Finally, the owner makes a last-ditch effort: He sends his "beloved son," who, being the heir, can also enforce the owner's claim to the rent in court and for that reason is entitled to hope for respect. Just the opposite happens. The tenants kill the son, precisely because he is the heir; his death, they think, will pave the way for them to take possession of the vineyard once and for all. Jesus continues the parable thus: "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others" (Mk 12:9).

At this point, as in Isaiah's song, the parable that seemed to be just a story about the past crosses over into the situa-

tion of the audience. History suddenly enters the present. The audience knows he is saying to them: Just as the Prophets were abused and killed, so now you want to kill me: I'm talking about *you* and about *me* (cf. verse 12).

The modern interpretation ends at this point. It thus relegates the parable to the past again; the parable, it seems, speaks only of what happened back then, of the rejection of Jesus' message by his contemporaries, of his death on the Cross. But the Lord always speaks in the present and with an eye to the future. He is also speaking with us and about us. If we open our eyes, isn't what is said in the parable actually a description of our present world? Isn't this precisely the logic of the modern age, of our age? Let us declare that God is dead, then we ourselves will be God. At last we no longer belong to anyone else; rather, we are simply the owners of ourselves and of the world. At last we can do what we please. We get rid of God; there is no measuring rod above us; we ourselves are our only measure. The "vineyard" belongs to us. What happens to man and the world next? We are already beginning to see it. . . .

Let us return to the text of the parable. When Isaiah arrived at this point, there was no promise in sight; in the Psalm, just as the threat was being fulfilled, suffering turned to prayer. This, again and again, is the situation of Israel, of the Church, and of humanity. Again and again we find ourselves in the darkness of trial and have no recourse but to call upon God: Raise us up again! But Jesus' words contain a promise—the beginning of an answer to the prayer: "take care of this vineyard." The Kingdom is handed over to other servants—this statement is both a threat of judgment and a promise. It means that the Lord stands by his vineyard, with-



out being bound to its present servants. This threat-promise applies not only to the ruling classes, about whom and with whom Jesus is speaking. It continues to apply among the new People of God as well—not, of course, to the whole Church, but repeatedly to the particular churches, as the Risen Lord's words to the Church at Ephesus show: "Repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev 2:5).

The threat and promise that the vineyard will be handed over to other servants is followed, though, by a promise of a much more fundamental nature. The Lord cites Psalm 118:22f: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The death of the son is not the last word. He is killed, but he does not remain in death, he does not remain "rejected." He becomes a new beginning. Jesus gives his audience to understand that he himself will be the Son who is killed; he foretells his Cross and Resurrection and prophesies that upon him, when he has been killed and has risen, God will erect a new building, a new Temple in the world.

The image of the vine is abandoned and replaced by the image of God's living building. The Cross is not an end, but a new beginning. The song of the vineyard does not end with the killing of the son. It opens the prospect that God will do something new. The affinity with John 2, which speaks of the destruction of the Temple and its reconstruction, is impossible to overlook. God does not fail; we may be unfaithful, but he is always faithful (cf. 2 Tim 2:13). He finds new and greater ways for his love. The indirect Christology of the early parables is transcended here into a fully open Christological statement.



The parable of the vine in Jesus' Farewell Discourses continues the whole history of biblical thought and language on the subject of the vine and discloses its ultimate depth. "I am the true vine," the Lord says (Jn 15:1). The word *true* is the first important thing to notice about this saying. Barrett makes the excellent observation that "fragments of meaning, obscurely hinted at by other vines, are gathered up and made explicit by him. He is the *true* vine" (*Gospel*, p. 473). But the really important thing about this saying is the opening: "I am." The Son identifies himself with the vine; he himself has become the vine. He has let himself be planted in the earth. He has entered into the vine: The mystery of the Incarnation, which John spoke of in the prologue to his Gospel, is taken up again here in a surprising new way. The vine is no longer merely a creature that God looks upon with love, but that he can still uproot and reject. In the Son, he himself has become the vine; he has forever identified himself, his very being, with the vine.

This vine can never again be uprooted or handed over to be plundered. It belongs once and for all to God; through the Son God himself lives in it. The promise has become irrevocable, the unity indestructible. God has taken this great new step within history, and this constitutes the deepest content of the parable. Incarnation, death, and Resurrection come to be seen in their full breadth: "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you . . . was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1:19f.), as Saint Paul puts it.

The idea that through Christ the vine has become the Son himself is a new one, and yet the ground for it has been pre-



pared in biblical tradition. Psalm 80:18 closely associates the "Son of Man" with the vine. Conversely: Although the Son has now himself become the vine, this is precisely his method for remaining one with his own, with all the scattered children of God whom he has come to gather (cf. Jn 11:52). The vine is a Christological title that as such embodies a whole ecclesiology. The vine signifies Jesus' inseparable oneness with his own, who through him and with him are all "vine," and whose calling is to "remain" in the vine. John does not make use of the Pauline image of the "Body of Christ." But the parable of the vine expresses substantially the same idea: the fact that Jesus is inseparable from his own, and that they are one with him and in him. In this sense, the discourse about the vine indicates the irrevocability of the gift God has given, never to take it back again. In becoming incarnate, God has bound himself. At the same time, though, the discourse speaks of the demands that this gift places upon us in ever new ways.

The vine, we said, can no longer be uprooted or handed over to be plundered. It does, however, constantly need purification. Purification, fruit, remaining, commandment, love, unity—these are the key words for this drama of being in and with the Son in the vine that the Lord's words place before our soul. Purification—the Church and the individual need constant purification. Processes of purification, which are as necessary as they are painful, run through the whole of history, the whole life of those who have dedicated themselves to Christ. The mystery of death and resurrection is ever present in these purifications. When man and his institutions climb too high, they need to be cut back; what has become too big must be brought back to the simplicity and poverty of



the Lord himself. It is only by undergoing such processes of dying away that fruitfulness endures and renews itself.

The goal of purification is fruit, the Lord tells us. What sort of fruit is it that he expects? Let us begin by looking at the fruit that he himself has borne by dying and rising. Isaiah and the whole prophetic tradition spoke of how God expected grapes, and thus choice wine, from his vine. This was an image of the righteousness, the rectitude that consists in living within the Word and will of God. The same tradition says that what God finds instead are useless, small, sour grapes that he can only throw away. This was an image of life lived away from God's righteousness amid injustice, corruption, and violence. The vine is meant to bear choice grapes that through the process of picking, pressing, and fermentation will produce excellent wine.

Let us recall that the parable of the vine occurs in the context of Jesus' Last Supper. After the multiplication of the loaves he had spoken of the true bread from heaven that he would give, and thus he left us with a profound interpretation of the eucharistic bread that was to come. It is hard to believe that in his discourse on the vine he is not tacitly alluding to the new wine that had already been prefigured at Cana and which he now gives to us—the wine that would flow from his Passion, from his "love to the end" (Jn 13:1). In this sense, the parable of the vine has a thoroughly eucharistic background. It refers to the fruit that Jesus brings forth: his love, which pours itself out for us on the Cross and which is the choice new wine destined for God's marriage feast with man. Thus we come to understand the full depth and grandeur of the Eucharist, even though it is not explicitly mentioned here. The



Eucharist points us toward the fruit that we, as branches of the vine, can and must bear with Christ and by virtue of Christ. The fruit the Lord expects of us is love—a love that accepts with him the mystery of the Cross, and becomes a participation in his self-giving—and hence the true justice that prepares the world for the Kingdom of God.

Purification and fruit belong together; only by undergoing God's purifications can we bear the fruit that flows into the eucharistic mystery and so leads to the marriage feast that is the goal toward which God directs history. Fruit and love belong together: The true fruit is the love that has passed through the Cross, through God's purifications. "Remaining" is an essential part of all this. In verses 1–10 the word *remain* (in Greek *ménein*) occurs ten times. What the Church Fathers call *perseverantia*—patient steadfastness in communion with the Lord amid all the vicissitudes of life—is placed center stage here. Initial enthusiasm is easy. Afterward, though, it is time to stand firm, even along the monotonous desert paths that we are called upon to traverse in this life—with the patience it takes to tread evenly, a patience in which the romanticism of the initial awakening subsides, so that only the deep, pure Yes of faith remains. This is the way to produce good wine. After the brilliant illuminations of the initial moment of his conversion, Augustine had a profound experience of this toilsome patience, and that is how he learned to love the Lord and to rejoice deeply at having found him.

If the fruit we are to bear is love, its prerequisite is this "remaining," which is profoundly connected with the kind of faith that holds on to the Lord and does not let go. Verse 7 speaks of prayer as an essential element of this remaining:

Those who pray are promised that they will surely be heard. Of course, to pray in the name of Jesus is not to make an ordinary petition, but to ask for the essential gift that Jesus characterizes as "joy" in the Farewell Discourses, while Luke calls it the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 11:13)—the two being ultimately the same. Jesus' words about remaining in his love already point ahead to the last verse of his high-priestly prayer (cf. Jn 17:26) and thus connect the vine discourse with the great theme of unity, for which the Lord prays to the Father at the Last Supper.

Bread

We have already dealt extensively with the bread motif in connection with Jesus' temptations. We have seen that the temptation to turn the desert rocks into bread raises the whole question of the Messiah's mission, and that through the devil's distortion of this mission Jesus' positive answer can already be glimpsed; this answer then becomes explicit once and for all in the gift of his body as bread for the life of the world on the eve of his Passion. We have also encountered the bread motif in our exposition of the fourth petition of the Our Father, where we tried to survey the different dimensions of this petition, and thus to explore the full range of the bread theme. At the end of Jesus' activity in Galilee, he performs the multiplication of the loaves; on one hand, it is an unmistakable sign of Jesus' messianic mission, while on the other, it is also the crossroads of his public ministry, which from this point leads clearly to the Cross. All three Synoptic Gospels tell of a miraculous feeding of five thousand men (cf. Mt 14:13–21; Mk 6:32–44; Lk 9:10b–17); Matthew and

Mark tell of an additional feeding of four thousand (cf. Mt 15:32–38; Mk 8:1–9).

The two stories have a rich theological content that we cannot enter into here. I will restrict myself to John's story of the multiplication of the loaves (cf. Jn 6:1–15), not in order to study it in depth, but rather to focus upon the interpretation that Jesus gives of this event in his great bread of life discourse the following day in the synagogue on the other side of the lake. One more qualification is in order: We cannot consider the details of this discourse, which the exegetes have discussed at length and analyzed thoroughly. I would merely like to draw out its principal message and, above all, to situate it in the context of the whole tradition to which it belongs and in terms of which it has to be understood.

The fundamental context in which the entire chapter belongs is centered upon the contrast between Moses and Jesus. Jesus is the definitive, greater Moses—the “prophet” whom Moses foretold in his discourse at the border of the Holy Land and concerning whom God said, “I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut 18:18). It is no accident, then, that the following statement occurs between the multiplication of the loaves and the attempt to make Jesus king: “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!” (Jn 6:14). In a very similar vein, after the saying about the water of life on the Feast of Tabernacles, the people say: “This is really the prophet” (Jn 7:40). The Mosaic background provides the context for the claim that Jesus makes. Moses struck the rock in the desert and out flowed water; Jesus promises the water of life, as we have seen. The great gift, though, which stood out in the people's



memory, was the manna. Moses gave bread from heaven; God himself fed the wandering people of Israel with heavenly bread. For a people who often went hungry and struggled to earn their daily bread, this was the promise of promises, which somehow said everything there was to say: relief of every want—a gift that satisfied hunger for all and forever.

Before we take up this idea, which is the key to understanding chapter 6 of John's Gospel, we must first complete the picture of Moses, because this is the only way to focus upon John's picture of Jesus. The central point from which we started in this book, and to which we keep returning, is that Moses spoke face-to-face with God, “as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11; cf. Deut 34:10). It was only because he spoke with God himself that Moses could bring God's word to men. But, although this immediate relationship with God is the heart and inner foundation of Moses' mission, a shadow lies over it. For when Moses says, “I pray thee, show me thy glory,” at the very moment when the text affirms that he is God's friend who has direct access to him, he receives this answer: “While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Ex 33:18, 22f.). Even Moses sees only God's back—his face “shall not be seen.” The limits to which even Moses is subject now become clear.

The saying at the end of the prologue is the decisive key to the image of Jesus in John's Gospel: “No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known” (Jn 1:18). Only the one who is God sees God—Jesus. He truly speaks from his vision of the



Father, from unceasing dialogue with the Father, a dialogue that is his life. If Moses only showed us, and could only show us, God's back, Jesus, by contrast, is the Word that comes from God, from a living vision of him, from unity with him. Connected with this are two further gifts to Moses that attain their final form in Christ. First, God communicated his name to Moses, thereby making possible a relationship between himself and human beings; by handing on the name revealed to him, Moses acts as mediator of a real relationship between men and the living God. We have already reflected on this point in our consideration of the first petition of the Our Father. Now, in his high-priestly prayer Jesus stresses that he has revealed God's name, that he has brought to completion this aspect too of the work begun by Moses. When we consider the high-priestly prayer, we will have to investigate this claim more closely: In what sense has Jesus gone beyond Moses in revealing God's "name"?

The other gift to Moses—which is closely connected with the vision of God and the communication of his name, as well as with the manna—is the gift that gives Israel its identity as God's people in the first place: the Torah, the word of God that points out the way and leads to life. Israel realized with increasing clarity that this was Moses' fundamental and enduring gift, that what really set Israel apart was this knowledge of God's will and so of the right path of life. The great Psalm 119 is a single outburst of joy and gratitude for this gift. A one-sided view of the Law, arising from a one-sided interpretation of Pauline theology, prevents us from seeing this joy of Israel: the joy of knowing God's will, and so of being privileged to live in accordance with God's will.

This observation brings us back to the bread of life discourse, surprising as that may seem. For as Jewish thought developed inwardly, it became increasingly plain that the real bread from heaven that fed and feeds Israel is precisely the Law—the word of God. The Wisdom Literature presents the wisdom that is substantially accessible and present in the Law as "bread" (Prov 9:5); the rabbinic literature went on to develop this idea further (Barrett, *Gospel*, p. 290). This is the perspective from which we need to understand Jesus' dispute with the Jews assembled in the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus begins by pointing out that they have failed to understand the multiplication of the loaves as a "sign," which is its true meaning. Rather, what interested them was eating and having their fill (cf. Jn 6:26). They have been looking at salvation in purely material terms, as a matter of universal well-being, and they have therefore reduced man, leaving God out altogether. But if they see the manna only as a means of satisfying their hunger, they need to realize that even the manna was not heavenly bread, but only earthly bread. Even though it came from "heaven," it was earthly food—or rather a food substitute that would necessarily cease when Israel emerged from the desert back into inhabited country.

But man hungers for more. He needs more. The gift that feeds man as man must be greater, must be on a wholly different level. Is the Torah this other food? It is in some sense true that in and through the Torah, man can make God's will his food (cf. Jn 4:34). So the Torah is "bread" from God, then. And yet it shows us only God's back, so to speak. It is a "shadow." "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world" (Jn 6:33). As the

audience still does not understand, Jesus repeats himself even more unambiguously: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (Jn 6:35).

The Law has become a *person*. When we encounter Jesus, we feed on the living God himself, so to speak; we truly eat "bread from heaven." By the same token, Jesus has already made it clear that the only work God demands is the work of believing in him. Jesus' audience had asked him: "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (Jn 6:28). The text uses here the Greek word *ergázesthai*, which means "to perform a work" (Barrett, *Gospel*, p. 287). Jesus' listeners are ready to work, to do something, to perform "works," in order to receive this bread. But it cannot be "earned" by human work, by one's own achievement. It can only come to us as a gift from God, as *God's work*. The whole of Pauline theology is present in this dialogue. The highest things, the things that really matter, we cannot achieve on our own; we have to accept them as gifts and enter into the dynamic of the gift, so to speak. This happens in the context of faith in Jesus, who is dialogue—a living relationship with the Father—and who wants to become Word and love in us as well.

But the question as to how we can "feed" on God, live on God, in such a way that he himself becomes our bread—this question is not yet fully answered by what has just been said. God becomes "bread" for us first of all in the Incarnation of the Logos: The Word takes on flesh. The Logos becomes one of us and so comes down to our level, comes into the sphere of what is accessible to us. Yet a further step

is still needed beyond even the Incarnation of the Word. Jesus names this step in the concluding words of his discourse: His flesh is life "for" the world (Jn 6:51). Beyond the act of the Incarnation, this points to its intrinsic goal and ultimate realization: Jesus' act of giving himself up to death and the mystery of the Cross.

This is made even clearer in verse 53, where the Lord adds that he will give us his blood to "drink." These words are not only a manifest allusion to the Eucharist. Above all they point to what underlies the Eucharist: the sacrifice of Jesus, who sheds his blood for us, and in so doing steps out of himself, so to speak, pours himself out, and gives himself to us.

In this chapter, then, the theology of the Incarnation and the theology of the Cross come together; the two cannot be separated. There are thus no grounds for setting up an opposition between the Easter theology of the Synoptics and Saint Paul, on one hand, and Saint John's supposedly purely incarnational theology, on the other. For the goal of the Word's becoming-flesh spoken of by the prologue is precisely the offering of his body on the Cross, which the sacrament makes accessible to us. John is following here the same line of thinking that the Letter to the Hebrews develops on the basis of Psalm 40:6–8: "Sacrifices and offerings you did refuse—you have prepared a body for me" (Heb 10:5). Jesus becomes man in order to give himself and to take the place of the animal sacrifices, which could only be a gesture of longing, but not an answer.

Jesus' bread discourse, on one hand, points the main movement of the Incarnation and of the Paschal journey

toward the sacrament, in which Incarnation and Easter are permanently present, but conversely, this has the effect of integrating the sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, into the larger context of God's descent to us and for us. On one hand, then, the Eucharist emphatically moves right to the center of Christian existence; here God does indeed give us the manna that humanity is waiting for, the true "bread of heaven"—the nourishment we can most deeply live upon as human beings. At the same time, however, the Eucharist is revealed as man's unceasing great encounter with God, in which the Lord gives himself as "flesh," so that in him, and by participating in his way, we may become "spirit." Just as he was transformed through the Cross into a new manner of bodiliness and of being-human pervaded by God's own being, so too for us this food must become an opening out of our existence, a passing through the Cross, and an anticipation of the new life in God and with God.

This is why at the conclusion of the discourse, which places such emphasis on Jesus' becoming flesh and our eating and drinking the "flesh and blood of the Lord," Jesus says: "it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail" (Jn 6:63). This may remind us of Saint Paul's words: "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45). This in no way diminishes the realism of "becoming-flesh." Yet the Paschal perspective of the sacrament is underlined: Only through the Cross and through the transformation that it effects does this flesh become accessible to us, drawing us up into the process of transformation. Eucharistic piety needs to be constantly learning from this great Christological—indeed, cosmic—dynamism.

In order to understand the full depth of Jesus' bread discourse, we must finally take a brief look at one of the key sayings of John's Gospel. Jesus pronounces it on Palm Sunday as he looks ahead to the universal Church that will embrace Jews and Greeks—all the peoples of the world: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). What we call "bread" contains the mystery of the Passion. Before there can be bread, the seed—the grain of wheat—first has to be placed in the earth, it has to "die," and then the new ear can grow out of this death. Earthly bread can become the bearer of Christ's presence because it contains in itself the mystery of the Passion, because it unites in itself death and resurrection. This is why the world's religions used bread as the basis for myths of death and resurrection of the godhead, in which man expressed his hope for life out of death.

In this connection, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn reminds us of the conversion of the great British writer C. S. Lewis; Lewis, having read a twelve-volume work about these myths, came to the conclusion that this Jesus who took bread in his hands and said, "This is my body," was just "another corn divinity, a corn king who lays down his life for the life of the world." One day, however, he overheard a firm atheist remarking to a colleague that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was actually surprisingly good. The atheist then paused thoughtfully and said: "About the dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it really happened once" (Schönborn, *Weihnacht*, pp. 23f.).

Yes, it really did happen. Jesus is no myth. He is a man of flesh and blood and he stands as a fully real part of his-

tory. We can go to the very places where he himself went. We can hear his words through his witnesses. He died and he is risen. It is as if the mysterious Passion contained in bread had waited for him, had stretched out its arms toward him; it is as if the myths had waited for him, because in him what they long for came to pass. The same is true of wine. It too contains the Passion in itself, for the grape had to be pressed in order to become wine. The Fathers gave this hidden language of the eucharistic gifts an even deeper interpretation. I would like to add just one example here. In the early Christian text called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, also known as the *Didache* (probably composed around the year 100), the following prayer is recited over the bread intended for the Eucharist: "As the bread was scattered on the mountains and brought into unity, so may the Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom" (IX, 4).

The Shepherd

The image of the shepherd, which Jesus uses to explain his mission both in the Synoptics and in the Gospel of John, has a long history behind it. In the ancient Near East, in royal inscriptions from both Sumer and the area of Babylonia and Assyria, the king refers to himself as the shepherd instituted by God. "Pasturing sheep" is an image of his task as a ruler. This image implies that caring for the weak is one of the tasks of the just ruler. One could therefore say that, in view of its origins, this image of Christ the Good Shepherd is a Gospel of Christ the King, an image that sheds light upon the kingship of Christ.



Of course, the immediate precedents for Jesus' use of this image are found in the Old Testament, where God himself appears as the Shepherd of Israel. This image deeply shaped Israel's piety, and it was especially in times of need that Israel found a word of consolation and confidence in it. Probably the most beautiful expression of this trustful devotion is Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me" (Ps 23:1, 4). The image of God as Shepherd is more fully developed in chapters 34-37 of Ezekiel, whose vision is brought into the present and interpreted as a prophecy of Jesus' ministry both in the Synoptic shepherd parables and in the Johannine shepherd discourse. Faced with the self-seeking shepherds of his own day, whom he challenges and accuses, Ezekiel proclaims the promise that God himself will seek out his sheep and care for them. "And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over" (Ezek 34:13, 15-16).

Faced with the murmuring of the Pharisees and scribes over Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, the Lord tells the parable of the ninety-nine sheep who remained in the fold and the one lost sheep. The shepherd goes after the lost sheep, lifts it joyfully upon his shoulders, and brings it home. Jesus puts this parable as a question to his adversaries: Have you



not read God's word in Ezekiel? I am only doing what God, the true Shepherd, foretold: I wish to seek out the sheep that are lost and bring the strayed back home.

At a late stage in Old Testament prophecy, the portrayal of the shepherd image takes yet another surprising and thought-provoking turn that leads directly to the mystery of Jesus Christ. Matthew recounts to us that on the way to the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that the prophecy foretold in Zechariah 13:7 is about to be fulfilled: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Mt 26:31). Zechariah does in fact present in this passage the vision of a Shepherd "who by God's will patiently suffers death and in so doing initiates the final turn of events" (Jeremias, *IDNT*, VI, pp. 500-1).

This surprising vision of the slain Shepherd, who through his death becomes the Savior, is closely linked to another image from the Book of Zechariah: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication. And they will look on him 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. . . . On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. . . . On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (Zech 12:10, 11; 13:1). Hadad-Rimmon was one of the dying and rising vegetation deities whom we encountered earlier when we were explaining that bread presupposes the death and resurrection of the grain. The death of the god, which is



then followed by resurrection, was celebrated with wild ritual laments; these rituals impressed themselves upon those who witnessed them—as the Prophet and his audience evidently did—as the absolute archetype of grief and lamentation. For Zechariah, Hadad-Rimmon is one of the nonexistent divinities that Israel despises and unmasks as mythical dreams. And yet, through the ritual lamentation over him, he mysteriously prefigures someone who really does exist.

An inner connection with the Servant of God in Deutero-Isaiah is discernible here. In the writings of the later Prophets, we see the figure of the suffering and dying Redeemer, the Shepherd who becomes the lamb, even if some of the details are yet to be filled in. K. Elliger comments apropos of this: "On the other hand, however, his [Zechariah's] gaze penetrates with remarkable accuracy into a new distance and circles around the figure of the one who was pierced on the Cross at Golgotha. Admittedly, he does not clearly discern the figure of Christ, although the allusion to Hadad-Rimmon does come remarkably close to the mystery of the Resurrection, albeit no more than close . . . and above all without clearly seeing the real connection between the Cross and the fountain that cleanses sin and impurity" ("Das Buch," *ATD*, 25, p. 172). While in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself cites Zechariah 13:7—the image of the slain Shepherd—at the beginning of the Passion narrative, John, by contrast, concludes his account of the Lord's Crucifixion with an allusion to Zechariah 12:10: "They shall look on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37). Now it becomes clear: the one who is slain and the Savior is Jesus Christ, the crucified one.

John associates this with Zechariah's prophetic vision of



the fountain that purifies from sin and impurity: Blood and water flow forth from Jesus' wounded side (cf. Jn 19:34). Jesus himself, the one pierced on the Cross, is the fountain of purification and healing for the whole world. John connects this further with the image of the Paschal Lamb, whose blood has purifying power: "Not a bone of him shall be broken" (Jn 19:36; cf. Ex 12:46). With that, the circle is closed, joining the end to the beginning of the Gospel, where the Baptist—catching sight of Jesus—said: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The image of the lamb, which in a different way plays a decisive role in the Book of Revelation, thus encompasses the entire Gospel. It also points to the deepest meaning of the shepherd discourse, whose center is precisely Jesus' act of laying down his life.

Surprisingly, the shepherd discourse does not begin with the words: "I am the Good Shepherd" (Jn 10:11), but with another image: "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep" (Jn 10:7). Jesus has already said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheep-fold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep" (Jn 10:1f.). This can only really mean that Jesus is establishing the criterion for those who will shepherd his flock after his ascension to the Father. The proof of a true shepherd is that he enters through Jesus as the door. For in this way it is ultimately Jesus who is the Shepherd—the flock "belongs" to him alone.

In practice, the way to enter through Jesus as the door becomes apparent in the appendix to the Gospel in chapter 21—when Peter is entrusted with Jesus' own office as Shepherd. Three times the Lord says to Peter: "Feed my lambs"



(or sheep—cf. Jn 21:15–17). Peter is very clearly being appointed as the shepherd of Jesus' sheep and established in Jesus' office as shepherd. For this to be possible, however, Peter has to enter through the "door." Jesus speaks of this entry—or, better, this being allowed to enter through the door (cf. Jn 10:3)—when he asks Peter three times: Simon, son of John, do you love me? Notice first the utterly personal aspect of this calling: Simon is called by name—both by his own personal name, Simon, and by a name referring to his ancestry. And he is asked about the love that makes him one with Jesus. This is how he comes to the sheep "through Jesus": He takes them not as his own—Simon Peter's—but as Jesus' "flock." It is because he comes through the "door," Jesus, it is because he comes to them united with Jesus in love, that the sheep listen to his voice, the voice of Jesus himself—they are following not Simon, but Jesus, from whom and through whom Simon comes to them, so that when he leads them it is Jesus himself who leads.

The whole investiture scene closes with Jesus saying to Peter, "Follow me" (Jn 21:19). It recalls the scene after Peter's first confession, where Peter tries to dissuade the Lord from the way of Cross, and the Lord says to him, "Get behind me," and then goes on to invite everyone to take up his cross and "follow him" (cf. Mk 8:33ff.). Even the disciple who now goes ahead of the others as shepherd must "follow" Jesus. And as the Lord declares to Peter after conferring upon him the office of shepherd, this includes accepting the cross, being prepared to give his life. This is what it means in practice when Jesus says: "I am the door." This is how Jesus himself remains the shepherd.



Let us return to the shepherd discourse in chapter 10 of John's Gospel. It is only in the second part that Jesus declares: "I am the Good Shepherd" (Jn 10:11). He takes upon himself all the historical associations of the shepherd image, which he then purifies, and brings to its full meaning. Four essential points receive particular emphasis. First, the thief "comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (Jn 10:10). He regards the sheep as part of his property, which he owns and exploits for himself. All he cares about is himself; he thinks the world revolves around him. The real Shepherd does just the opposite. He does not take life, but gives it: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

This is Jesus' great promise: to give life in abundance. Everyone wants life in abundance. But what is it? What does life consist in? Where do we find it? When and how do we have "life in abundance"? When we live like the prodigal son, squandering the whole portion God has given us? When we live like the thief and the robber, taking everything for ourselves alone? Jesus promises that he will show the sheep where to find "pasture"—something they can live on—and that he will truly lead them to the springs of life. We are right to hear echoes of Psalm 23 in this: "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. . . . Thou preparest a table before me in the presence. . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Ps 23:2, 5f.). There is an even more immediate echo of the shepherd discourse from Ezekiel: "I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain country of Israel shall be their pasture" (Ezek 34:14).

But what does all this mean? We know what sheep live

on, but what does man live on? The Fathers saw Ezekiel's reference to the mountain country of Israel and the shady and well-watered pastures on its uplands as an image of the heights of Holy Scripture, of the life-giving food of God's word. Although this is not the historical sense of the text, in the end the Fathers saw correctly and, above all, they understood Jesus himself correctly. Man lives on truth and on being loved: on being loved by the truth. He needs God, the God who draws close to him, interprets for him the meaning of life, and thus points him toward the path of life. Of course, man needs bread, he needs food for the body, but ultimately what he needs most is the Word, love, God himself. Whoever gives him *that* gives him "life in abundance," and also releases the energies man needs to shape the earth intelligently and to find for himself and for others the goods that we can have only in common with others.

In this sense, there is an inner connection between the bread discourse in chapter 6 and the shepherd discourse: In both cases the issue is what man lives on. Philo, the great Jewish philosopher of religion and contemporary of Jesus, said that God, the true Shepherd of his people, had appointed his "firstborn Son," the Logos, to the office of Shepherd (Barrett, *Gospel*, p. 374). The Johannine shepherd discourse is not immediately connected with the understanding of Jesus as Logos, and yet—in the specific context of the Gospel of John—the point the discourse is making is that Jesus, being the incarnate Word of God himself, is not just the Shepherd, but also the food, the true "pasture." He gives life by giving himself, for he *is* life (cf. Jn 1:4, 3:36, 11:25).

This brings us to the second motif in the shepherd dis-

course. It reveals the novelty that leads us beyond Philo—not by means of new ideas, but by means of a new event, the Incarnation and Passion of the Son: “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). Just as the bread discourse does not merely allude to the word, but goes on to speak of the Word that became flesh and also gift “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51), so too the shepherd discourse revolves completely around the idea of Jesus laying down his life for the “sheep.” The Cross is at the center of the shepherd discourse. And it is portrayed not as an act of violence that takes Jesus unawares and attacks him from the outside, but as a free gift of his very self: “I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn 10:17f.). Here Jesus interprets for us what happens at the institution of the Eucharist: He transforms the outward violence of the act of crucifixion into an act of freely giving his life for others. Jesus does not give *something*, but rather he gives himself. And that is how he gives life. We will have to return to these ideas and explore them more deeply when we speak of the Eucharist and the Paschal event.

A third essential motif of the Shepherd discourse is the idea that the shepherd and his flock know each other: “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . The sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (Jn 10:3f.). “I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn 10:14f.). These verses present two striking sets of interrelated ideas that we need to consider if we are to understand what is meant by “knowing.” First of all, knowing and belonging are interrelated. The



Shepherd knows the sheep because they belong to him, and they know him precisely because they are his. Knowing and belonging (the Greek text speaks of the sheep as the Shepherd’s “own,” *ta ídia*) are actually one and the same thing. The true shepherd does not “possess” the sheep as if they were a thing to be used and consumed; rather, they “belong” to him, in the context of their knowing each other, and this “knowing” is an inner acceptance. It signifies an inner belonging that goes much deeper than the possession of things.

Let us illustrate this with an example from our own lives. No human being “belongs” to another in the way that a thing does. Children are not their parents’ “property”; spouses are not each other’s “property.” Yet they do “belong” to each other in a much deeper way than, for example, a piece of wood or a plot of land, or whatever else we call “property.” Children “belong” to their parents, yet they are free creatures of God in their own right, each with his own calling and his own newness and uniqueness before God. They belong to each other, not as property, but in mutual responsibility. They belong to each other precisely by accepting one another’s freedom and by supporting one another in love and knowledge—and in this communion they are simultaneously free and one for all eternity.

In the same way, the “sheep,” who after all are people created by God, images of God, do not belong to the shepherd as if they were *things*—though that is what the thief and robber thinks when he takes possession of them. Herein lies the distinction between the owner, the true Shepherd, and the robber. For the robber, for the ideologues and the dictators, human beings are merely a thing that they possess. For the



true Shepherd, however, they are free in relation to truth and love; the Shepherd proves that they belong to him precisely by knowing and loving them, by wishing them to be in the freedom of the truth. They belong to him through the oneness of "knowing," through the communion in the truth that the Shepherd himself is. This is why he does not *use* them, but gives his life for them. Just as Logos and Incarnation, Logos and Passion belong together, so too knowing and self-giving are ultimately one.

Let us listen once more to these decisive words: "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep" (Jn 10:14f.). This statement contains a second set of interrelated ideas that we need to consider. The mutual knowing of shepherd and sheep is interwoven with the mutual knowing of Father and Son. The knowing that links Jesus with "his own" exists within the space opened up by his "knowing" oneness with the Father. Jesus' "own" are woven into the Trinitarian dialogue; we will see this again when we consider the high-priestly prayer. This will help us to see that Church and Trinity are mutually interwoven. This interpenetration of two levels of knowing is crucial for understanding the essence of the "knowing" of which John's Gospel speaks.

Applying all of the above to the world in which we live, we can say this: It is only in God and in light of God that we rightly know man. Any "self-knowledge" that restricts man to the empirical and the tangible fails to engage with man's true depth. Man knows himself only when he learns to understand himself in light of God, and he knows others



only when he sees the mystery of God in them. For the shepherd in Jesus' service, this means that he has no right to bind men to himself, to his own little "I." The mutual knowing that binds him to the "sheep" entrusted to his care must have a different goal: It must enable them to lead one another into God, toward God; it must enable them to encounter each other in the communion formed around knowing and loving God. The shepherd in Jesus' service must always lead beyond himself in order to enable others to find their full freedom; and therefore he must always go beyond himself into unity with Jesus and with the Trinitarian God.

Jesus' own "I" is always opened into "being with" the Father; he is never alone, but is forever receiving himself from and giving himself back to the Father. "My teaching is not mine"; his "I" is opened up into the Trinity. Those who come to know him "see" the Father; they enter into this communion of his with the Father. It is precisely this transcendent dialogue, which encounter with Jesus involves, that once more reveals to us the true Shepherd, who does not take possession of us, but leads us to the freedom of our being by leading us into communion with God and by giving his own life.

Let us turn to the last principal motif of the shepherd discourse: the motif of unity. The shepherd discourse in Ezekiel emphasizes this motif: "The word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of Man, take a stick and write on it, "For Judah, and the children of Israel associated with him"; then take another stick and write upon it, "For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him"; and join them together into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. . . . "Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I



will take the people of Israel from the nations . . . and I will make them one nation in the land, upon the mountains of Israel . . . And they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms"" (Ezek 37:15-17, 21f.). God is the Shepherd who reunites divided and scattered Israel into a single people.

Jesus' shepherd discourse takes up this vision, while very decidedly enlarging the scope of the promise: "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one Shepherd" (Jn 10:16). Jesus the Shepherd is sent not only to gather the scattered sheep of the house of Israel, but to gather together all "the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:52). In this sense, Jesus' promise that there will be one Shepherd and one flock is equivalent to the risen Lord's missionary command in Matthew's Gospel: "Go therefore and make all nations my disciples" (Mt 28:19); the same idea appears again in the Acts of the Apostles, where the risen Lord says: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

This brings to light the inner reason for this universal mission: There is only one Shepherd. The Logos who became man in Jesus is the Shepherd of all men, for all have been created through the one Word; however scattered they may be, yet as coming from him and bound toward him they are one. However widely scattered they are, all people can become one through the true Shepherd, the Logos who became man in order to lay down his life and so to give life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).

From very early on—the evidence goes back to the third century—the vision of the shepherd became a typical image of the Christian world. In the surrounding culture, the Christian people encountered the figure of a man carrying a sheep, which to an overstressed urban society expressed the popular dream of the simple life. But the Christian people were immediately able to reinterpret this figure in light of Scripture. Psalm 23 is an example that comes to mind directly: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." They recognized Christ as the Good Shepherd who leads us through life's dark valleys; the Shepherd who himself walked through the valley of the shadow of death; the Shepherd who also knows the way through the night of death and does not abandon me in this final solitude, but leads me out of this valley of death into the green pastures of life, to the place of "light, happiness and peace" (Roman Canon). Clement of Alexandria expressed this trust in the Shepherd's guidance in verses that convey something of the hope and confidence felt by the early Church in the midst of frequent sufferings and constant persecutions: "Lead, holy Shepherd, your spiritual sheep: Lead, king, your pure children. Christ's footsteps are the way to heaven" (*Paedagogus*, III, 12, 101; Van der Meer, *Menschensohn*, p. 23).

But naturally, Christians were also reminded of the parable of the shepherd who follows after the lost sheep, lifts it onto his shoulders, and brings it home, as well as the shep-

herd discourse of John's Gospel. For the Church Fathers, the two texts flowed into each other. The Shepherd who sets off to seek the lost sheep is the eternal Word himself, and the sheep that he lovingly carries home on his shoulders is humanity, the human existence that he took upon himself. In his Incarnation and Cross he brings home the stray sheep, humanity; he brings me home, too. The incarnate Logos is the true "sheep-bearer"—the Shepherd who follows after us through the thorns and deserts of our life. Carried on his shoulders, we come home. He gave his life for us. He himself is life.

Two Milestones on Jesus' Way: Peter's Confession and the Transfiguration

PETER'S CONFESSION

All three Synoptic Gospels present Jesus' question to the disciples about who the people think he is and who they themselves consider him to be (Mk 8:27–30; Mt 16:13–20; Lk 9:18–21) as an important milestone on his way. In all three Gospels, Peter answers in the name of the Twelve with a confession that is markedly different from the opinion of the "people." In all three Gospels, Jesus then foretells his Passion and Resurrection, and continues this announcement of his own destiny with a teaching about the way of discipleship, the way to follow him, the Crucified. In all three Gospels, however, he also interprets this "following" on the way of the Cross from an essentially anthropological standpoint: It is the indispensable way for man to "lose his life," without which it is impossible for him to find it (Mk 8:31–9:1; Mt 16:21–28; Lk 9:22–27). And finally, in all three Gospels there follows the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, which



JESUS
OF NAZARETH

*From the Baptism in the Jordan
to the Transfiguration*

by
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Pope Benedict XVI

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