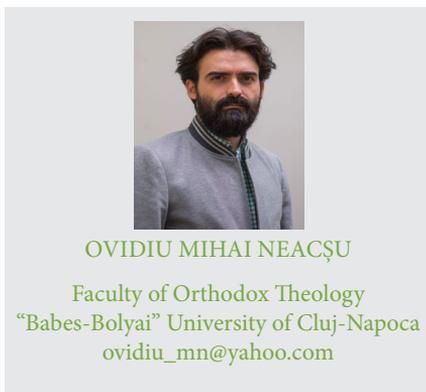


## JESUS CHRIST THE SAVIOUR ON THE CROSS (JN 19:23-37) PECULIARITIES OF THE JOHANNINE NARRATIVE

### Abstract

In his account of the events of the last days of the earthly life of the Incarnate Son of God, St. John the Evangelist records some unique details among the four Gospel accounts. Just as he does in the trial of Jesus, where he renders a much more substantial dialogue than the Synoptics between Jesus and Pilate, and glosses over the encounter with Herod, so too John makes a unique contribution in the crucifixion scene. These details are partly a matter of the author's personality and the truth revealed to him, but to another extent they are also the subject of St John's theological "strategy". Concerned, as is evident from his entire Gospel, with certain theological themes, St John uses this opportunity to emphasise certain details that he alone has retained. This specificity of his account is not at odds with the synoptic versions but represents a unique and extremely valuable imprint of the Church's memory.



### Keywords

Cross, Old Testament, words, Passion, Jesus Christ

### Omissions and accents

Concerned with certain recurring themes of his Gospel, St. John glosses over certain historical details found in the Synoptic Gospels (Michaels 1989, 326). His choice not to record certain events reflects a certain way of looking at history and to focus only on some of the moments which, in his opinion, are more relevant to his readers. The torment of the crucifixion is for the whole world a defeat ("For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18 – ESV), but for Christ, it is a victory. He gives his life; it is not taken from

him: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11 – ESV). This theological perspective specific to St. John makes the historical details, which separate him from the Synoptics, in fact, different options with a specific purpose.

The Evangelist John simplifies this setting of the crucifixion by removing the characters that other evangelists mention. At the Cross, although representatives of the Jews appear to have been present (“So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” – Jn 19:21, ESV), there are not those who blaspheme Him, as the Evangelist Matthew says: “and the bystanders blasphemed Him, shaking their heads” (Mt 27:39). The priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the scribes, including the robbers, who, in Matthew, have a dialogue and who join those who revile him (“In the same way did the robbers who were with him revile him” – Mt 27:44), in the Gospel of John become the collective character, who complete the sordid picture of those who do not leave the reproach even at the foot of the Cross.

In John’s retelling, the characters who “matter” are those who carry on dialogues and who play an important role either in the outcome of the crucifixion or in conveying a message to those who will hear this story and understand some of its mysterious content.

At the same time, the accuracy of the Johannine topometry confirms even more intensely that the evangelist makes a value selection of the subjects treated. Thus, he specifies the exact day and time: “And it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour” (Jn 9:14 – ESV), as well as the place: “And he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha” (Jn 19:17 – ESV). The accuracy of these details also serves the purpose of historically mapping the crucifixion event, and excluding any ambiguity (Michaels 1989, 325).

### History as the Fulfilment of the Scriptures

The mystical element of every act that takes place during the time Christ spends on the Cross is more important than what is seen in the narrative thread. Only in this way can the repeated affirmation *that the Scriptures are fulfilled* (cf. Jn 19:24) take precedence over the reception of certain gestures stripped of symbolism. For example, the breaking of the legs of those crucified on the cross to hasten their end, because

*the day of that Sabbath was great* (Jn 19:31), does not happen with Jesus. The Roman soldiers spared Jesus *if they saw that he had already died* (19:33), not so much because the purpose (hastening death) was redundant, but to fulfil the Scripture, which was poorly written: *The Lord keeps all their bones, not one of them shall be crushed* (Ps 33:19).

This section of John's gospel can be divided into four, according to others (Brown 1994, 908) – five distinct vignettes, most of which have the subsidiary role of marking the fulfilment of the Scriptures.

#### **a. Jesus' clothes being divided by the soldiers (Jn 19:23-24)**

The first scene depicts the Roman soldiers handing out Jesus' clothes. "When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." So the soldiers did these things," (Jn 19:23-24 – ESV)

The sharing of Jesus' clothes was a known custom in the context of executions, with the goods left over from the executed person going to the soldiers as "spoils". The division into four probably indicates 4 items that Jesus would have had, an outer garment, a tunic (shirt), belt, sandals and possibly something to cover his head (Breasley-Murray 2002, 347).

Speaking of Jesus' shirt, which was seamless and on which the soldiers' cast lots, unable to divide it, we understand the fulfilment of another premonition from Scripture. It recalls the old testamentary custom of sacrificing the lamb at the proper time, when those of the household, if they were few, joined with their neighbours: *He shall take, he says, every man his neighbor and his neighbor, and they shall eat the lamb in the same house, and none of its flesh shall be taken out of it* (Ex 12:46). The eating of one lamb by many is a foreshadowing of the Body of Christ woven from above, not from male and female parts but "by the working and power from above of the Spirit" (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2000, 1124).

John gives us a circular perspective of time, a theological perspective in which the past finds its fulfilment in the present, but is also open to the future, in a fragile beginning pulse of the Church's life. The sacrificial lamb is Christ, who from now on will sacrifice Himself ritually, liturgically, bloodlessly, on the altar of the Church, from which all will consume, without Him being shared.

### b. Jesus and His “near ones” (Jn 19, 25-27)

The second scene shows those close to Jesus, whom he also addresses as they stand before the Cross: “But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home” (Jn 19:25-27 – ESV).

John points to the presence of the women and the beloved disciple standing *by the Cross* – *παρὰ τῷ σταυρῷ* (Jn 19:25), in contrast to the Synoptics, where their group is described as standing or watching *ὀρῶσαι* (Lk 23:49) from afar – *ἀπὸ μακρόθεν* (Lk 23:9); *ἀπὸ μακρόθεν θεωροῦσαι* (Mt 27:55, Mk 15:40).

There is also the version that R Brown supports (Brown 1994, 1014), that there is no difference between the Synoptics and John, but that there are two distinct moments: one in which the group of women stayed away from the Cross and another moment in which they approached, and Jesus addressed them. This possibility can be argued by John’s use of two different formulas. In vs. 25, where he lists them, they stand *Εἰστήκεισαν* (vb. *ἵστημι*) next to the Cross (*δὲ παρὰ τῷ σταυρῷ*), and in verse 26, his Mother and the disciple he loved stand next to *παρεστῶτα* (vb. *παρίστημι*).

In the Johannine account, four women can be understood to have stood by the Cross, most likely from a larger group, which Matthew identifies by the expression “many women” *γυναῖκες πολλαὶ* (Mt 27:55). The problem of identifying the group John speaks of remains a difficult one in conjunction with the synoptic accounts. It may even be that St. Luke’s group of women, who remained anonymous around the Cross: *and the women who had followed him from Galilee* (Lk 23:49), only find clarity on the day of the Resurrection, when he refers to the same women in his head. 23: *And these were Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary of James, and the rest with them* (Lk 24:10).

Essential, however, to the “scene” of the Cross is the dialogue that Jesus has with his Mother and the beloved disciple. After the moments of the cruelty of the punishment he received from Pilate, the way of the Cross, the hanging on the wood of the Cross, the mocking and jeering of those present, with the emphasis on the sharing of his clothes as a sign of human cruelty but also of God’s generosity, John now relates a moment of calm.

According to some exegetes (Brodie 1993, 548), it is a moment which, beyond its communitarian character, emphasizes the human side of Jesus, who cares for those

close to him, leaving one in the care of the other. It is particularly interesting to see that, despite an obvious concern for those who are left behind, Christ even in these words shows Himself to be the Fulfiller of the Old Law. The impression that He cares for the flesh is, according to St. Cyril of Alexandria, a “fall into madness”, specific only to “those of unsound mind” (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2000, 1126). The commandment of Ex 20:12, “Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you,” is, according to St. Cyril, Jesus’ main concern, for, even on the Cross, “even in suffering he was fearless” (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2000, 1126). John remains consistent with his idea that runs through the chapter of the Passion and sees in Jesus’ dialogue with his mother and the disciple he loved, i.e., John, the author of the Gospel (Tofană 2001, 149-57), another intersection between the writings of the Old Testament and their fulfilment in the person of Christ.

### *c. Thirsty Jesus (Jn 19:28-29)*

“John 19:28-29 After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” 29 A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth” (ESV).

The next picture, between verses 28-29, depicts the Saviour Christ in the plane of His messianic personality. Although the suffering and anguish of the Cross are the cause of His thirst, which He could have suppressed with His Godly power, Christ asks to drink to fulfil the Scripture (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2000, 1127). The scriptural references of the evangelist John give the impression that Christ’s main concern is to prove His identity as the fulfiller of the prophecies, almost defying the ordeal and agony of the Passion.

The theological plan that St. John weaves in his head. 19 overlaps with the very real, concrete, tragic plan of death on the Cross. The risk of over-emphasizing the Lord’s Passion in its iconic, mystagogical manifestation will not be ignored by St John later, as he is also the author of the account of the image of the pierced rib.

Far from implying that the Savior’s thirst on the Cross was not real, justified, and totally dependent on the torments suffered by Him in those moments, it is at the same time a strongly symbolic gesture. The strong contrast grows between the image of Christ captured by the prophet: “Isaiah 43:20 The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people” (Is 43:20 – ESV), who waters his people in the wilderness, and the one

in which he suffers from thirst in the sight of all. Christ who asks for water is watered with vinegar (Breasley-Murray 2002, 351). Christ, who has placed springs in heaven, does not receive water now of His death, cf. Ps 103:14: “He who waters the mountains from above Thine, of the fruit of Thy works shall the earth be filled”. The words of the Psalmist are most suggestive of the image in which Christ is mocked: “He brought forth water from the rock, and the waters flowed like rivers. But they have yet transgressed before him, they have embittered the Most High in a place without water” (Ps 77:19-20), or in another place it is said, “My strength is dried up like a clay vessel, and my tongue has cleaved to the roof of my mouth, and into the dust of death you have brought me down” (Ps 21:16).

The metaphor of a place without water, which refers to the desert, the wilderness, is here replaced by the lack of water and the presence of vinegar. “And they gave me gall for my food, and in my thirst, they watered me with vinegar” (Ps 68:25).

John uses a different term than Mark and Matthew for the stick, the reed on which they put the sponge dipped in vinegar. Luke glosses over this detail. The Synoptics use the term *κάλαμος*, reed. John mentions hyssop – *ύσσωπος*, which was an aromatic plant. Although there are discussions about the difficulty of binding a sponge soaked with a hyssop branch, which could not support the weight of the sponge, they do, however, draw attention to another aspect (Brodie 1993, 551). Is there, perhaps, a theological underpinning to John’s choice to speak of hyssop instead of reed?

The Evangelist John records at the beginning of the Gospel the statement of St. John the Baptist: *Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ* – *behold the Lamb of God* (Jn 1:29). Is the hyssop in Jn 19:29 a symbolic reference to the lamb sacrificed on the night of the exodus from Egypt? Moses had asked them to dip a bundle of hyssop in the blood of the sacrificed lamb and sprinkle the threshold of the house – *λήμψεσθε δὲ δέσμην ύσώπου καὶ βάψαντες ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος* (Ex 12:22). John now brings hyssop into the narrative, which touches the bloody face of Jesus to take away the sins of the world.

The idea that John identifies hyssop instead of reed as the theological meaning of the gesture can also be explained by the probability that the soldier did not have a bundle of hyssop but a spear *ύσσῶ*. The soldier dipping the sponge in vinegar would not have wanted to offer his cup to drink to the condemned. It is unusual that, after the cruel treatment meted out to Jesus, they would now heed His need and give Him a drink. Hence the hypothesis that the soldier giving Jesus a drink could be the same one who in Mark exclaims: *Truly this Man was the Son of God* (Mk 15:39) seems rather speculative

(Brodie 1993, 552). The drink offered is not to quench thirst, but to humble, forsaking all gentleness, as St Cyril of Alexandria points out (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2000, 1128).

#### *d. Jesus Gives His Spirit (Jn 19:30)*

Although in the Synoptics Jesus did not take the vinegar, but refused it, cf. Mt 27:34, *They gave him to drink wine mixed with gall; and when he tasted it, he would not drink it*, or cf. Mk 15:23, *And they gave him to drink wine mixed with myrrh; but he took it not*, John records Jesus receiving it (“When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” – Jn 19:30, ESV).

The phrase “He gave up his spirit” in John can be seen in agreement with other places in the Synoptics, where Jesus gives himself up cf. Mk 14:41, “Sleep from now on and rest! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man gives himself into the hands of sinners”.

Luke even clearly expresses this reality, in which the Son gives His soul, not takes it from Him (“and crying out with a loud voice, Jesus said: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit; And saying these things, he gave up his spirit” – Lk 23:46) The death of Jesus, seen beyond the historical course of events and the specific manifestation of bodily existence, is an act of goodwill on the part of the Son, who makes himself obedient to the Father even unto death (Phil 2:8), remaining sovereign over it, (“For to this end Christ also died and rose again, and lived, that he might have dominion over the dead and the living” – Rom 14:9).

The word *τετέλεσται* – “I am finished” (Jn 19:30), the last word spoken by the Saviour Christ on the Cross (Tofană 2009, 4-6), is strongly charged with the theological meanings of the Fourth Gospel. The whole Godly plan unfolded before the reader’s eyes. The Son of Man is completing and fulfilling God’s mystical plan and now is the time, the hour, for the Son to glorify Himself (Jn 12:23).

John does not say how Jesus spoke these last words. We can, however, relate this word of Jesus to what the Synoptics mention Jesus did before he died: “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit” (Mt 27:50; Mk 15:37). The Evangelist Luke gives a more developed version of this cry or of the words that followed the cry (“And Jesus cried with a loud voice and said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’; and when he had said this, he gave up his spirit” – Lk 23:46). Luke’s text can also be understood as two distinct moments, one of a cry followed by the words “Father...” but also as a single picture in which these last words of His are cried out.

### *e. Bone of his not to crush! (Jn 19:31-33)*

The crushing of the whistles of the feet is a request on the part of the Jews, as St. John notes: “Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs” (Jn 19:31-33).

The paradox of the Jews’ concern for holiness, who are guilty of killing Jesus, is very carefully rendered by St. John. This contrast between the concern to remain pure and to be able to perform religious rites and the bloody murder they carry out at the hands of the Romans is also a tragic picture of the hardening of God’s people.

John also points out the scrupulousness of the Jews on Jesus’ being brought into the Praetorium, (cf Jn 18:28) “and they did not go into the Praetorium to defile themselves, but to eat the Passover”. Now they want to hasten death also by virtue of religious exigencies cf. “If anyone is found guilty of anything worthy of death and is put to death, let him be hanged on a tree. His body shall not be left hanging on a tree overnight, but you shall bury him that day; for cursed before the Lord is everyone who hangs on a tree, and you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance” (Dt 21:22-23). Since the Sabbath was a high Sabbath, the bodies of the dead could not be left hanging on the wood, thus affecting the holiness of the day. Preferring, cf. Mt 23:24, to swallow the gnat and swallow the camel.

As stated in the introduction to this study, the soldiers did not crush (*κατάγνυμι*) the bones of his legs in doing so, in the theological perspective of St. John – who constantly thickens the theological tuft of historical gestures – the connection with the prohibition to crush any bone of the paschal lamb – *καὶ ὅστων οὐ συντρίψετε ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ* (Ex 12:10). In v. 36 it says For these things were done, that the scripture might be fulfilled, that He should not be crushed by bones (Jn 19:36).

Christ, even dead on the Cross, fulfils the Scriptures to the last word and makes evident through his Sacrifice the Fulfilment verbalized by the word “accomplished”.

### *f. The Body of Christ, the Mystery of the Church*

“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he

knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.” (Jn 19:34-37).

Once the Roman soldiers make sure that the two robbers crucified with Jesus are dead by crushing the whistles of their feet, they come and observe Jesus’ bowed head (v. 30) and, trusting (but not fully) (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2000, 1134) that he is dead, they do not crush his feet. It is paradoxical, however, that although they do not make the decision to crush Jesus’ feet because of the conviction that he is already dead, they nevertheless make a gratuitously cruel gesture, we would say, from the cruel process angle of the crucifixion and pierce the Saviour’s side with a spear (Brown 1994, 1065).

The pricked side of the Saviour, from which blood and water came out, ends the Roman soldiers’ torture of Jesus. I will not dwell on the many analyses, including the opinions of some doctors, as to why or why not blood and water flowed from Jesus’ pierced side (Beasley-Murray 2002, 356; Tofană 2013, 68-80), but on the fixation of this moment in the Johannine narrative. Again, John has Scripture as the primary argument for what is happening now. John fuses these two extremely interesting planes of the historical itinerary that bear the discreet blush of chance and the divine plan that unfolds, disguised, before the viewer’s eyes. Scripture also says: *John 19:37 They will look on him whom they have pierced* (Jn 19:37).

John alludes to the word, “I will pour upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of mercy and of prayer, and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and shall mourn for Him, as for the firstborn son, and shall mourn for Him as for the firstborn” (Zech 12:10).

The theological message of this moment is, of course, above any assumptions about either the underlying medical causes or the connection between the pricked rib and the prophetic references to it. Equally secondary, but still present, is the idea of the Apostle John’s concern for the docheistic slips that permeate the Church. In the foreground is the obvious relationship between the Body of Christ, seen as the Body of the Church, as her Sacrament, and the water and blood flowing from her side. From now on, the Body of Christ will be the source of life through Baptism and union with God through the Eucharist. The Mysteries of the Church cannot be separated from Christ and his Sacrifice on the Cross (St. Cyril of Alexandria, 1134).

The symbolism of the event and the realism of the event are together the basis of a highly developed theology about the Redeeming Sacrifice of the Saviour Christ,

of the Blood that was shed for the sins of men, of Christian Baptism as the mystery of spiritual birth.

### Conclusions

The sacrifice on the Cross of the Saviour Christ, although an end of the earthly life of the Incarnate Son of God, can only be perceived dramatically as an end. It remains a beginning, a dawn of a new age, as St Paul testifies: “But now Christ has risen from the dead, the Lamb of the dead has been raised” (1 Cor 15:20).

The iconic moments of Christ’s crucifixion in the account of John the Evangelist are milestones of a cursive narrative about the Sacrifice of the Incarnate Son of God. Always faithful to the Old Testament Scriptures, attentive to his addressees, and sensitive to the witness that God has given him, Saint John is aware of the truthfulness of his witness: “And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he speaks the truth, so that you too may believe” (Jn 19:35).

Unique in the body of Evangelists, St. John renders those moments of the agony of the Savior Christ on the Cross, because he feels the duty to confess the Truth so that those who hear or read his testimony, believe! The beauty of this account lies, of course, in the reciprocity of the love which on several occasions he confesses as coming from the Saviour Christ: “And before the feast of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come that he should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own in the world, loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1).

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