

PORTRAIT OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE PROLOGUE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Abstract

This article analyses the portrait of John the Baptist in the prologue of the Gospel of John. It explores both the hymnic prologue (Jn 1:6-8.15) which speaks of John as the witness “sent by God” to testify to the coming Light, as well as the narrative prologue (Jn 1:19-34) where John denies being the Messiah but points to the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The study excavates the mission, role, and testimony of the Baptizer in preparing the way for Christ. Though subordinate to Jesus, John is presented as the first and paradigmatic witness who actualizes the prophetic tradition to proclaim the arrival of the long-awaited salvation. His testimony progresses from affirming the unknown presence of the One “standing among you” to explicitly identifying Jesus as the pre-existent Son. While the Johannine prologue features multiple witnesses to Christ, John the Baptist is the foremost herald who fades humbly into the background once the Bridegroom appears. As the study unpacks this rich, multi-layered portrait across the opening chapters of John’s Gospel, it illuminates John’s vital function in revealing the incarnate Logos to the world.



REV. ALEXANDRU MOLDOVAN

Faculty of Orthodox Theology
University „1 Decembrie 1918”, Alba Iulia
pr.alexandru.moldovan@gmail.com

Keywords

John the Baptist, witness, Prologue, Gospel of John, Christ

Preliminaries

The reading and analysis of the Gospel of John has given readers and exegetes of all times great delight and joy, and this has been the case from its very first lines which contain a “Prologue” or solemn hymn, a biblical text that has made history in the

theological literature of Christianity, being one of the most significant literary, biblical and theological reference points (Ravasi 2016, 485).

The Johannine Prologue is rightly considered a “masterpiece of New Testament literature”. In attempting to comment on this Gospel text (sometime around 414 AD), Augustine addressed his audience as follows: “Abandoned to his nature, man will never be able to understand those of the Spirit of God. I feel powerless: how can I tell others what the Spirit inspires in me, or how can I interpret the text I have read? And then, brother, should I be silent? Who would benefit from silence? What joy do you have in listening to this text, and I do not explain it to you?... I am convinced that among you some can understand it, even without my explanations, but I do not want to deprive those who cannot understand it of my word... The Lord and His mercy will accompany us, so that all may understand according to their ability, for he who reads also says what he can. Who can speak as he ought about the works of God? I venture to say, brethren, that not even John was able to do this; he also spoke as much as he could, for he was but a man...” (St. Augustine 1968, 31).

Comparing the exegesis of the Johannine Prologue by Blessed Augustine and St. John Chrysostom, Professor M.A. Aucoin pointed out that both thought it was beyond human possibilities to speak as St. John speaks in the prologue of his Gospel (Aucoin 1963, 123-31). The choice of the eagle as the symbol of John’s evangelism was prompted by the spiritual loftiness of the lines on the first page of his Gospel (Brown 1999, 26).

With this initial theological meditation, St. John was able to present to his readers, in summary, his own Christology which he would develop in the pages of his Gospel. Indeed, the Johannine Prologue contains some 40 terms that are specific to the Fourth Gospel. For this reason, a correct understanding of this pericope is essential for understanding the whole work (Ravasi 2016, 487).

J.A.T. Robinson insists on the impressive amount of themes common to the Prologue and the contents of the Fourth Gospel: the theme of the pre-existence of the Son (1,1 = 17,5); the theme of the Light of men and of the world (1,4.9 = 8,12; 9,5); the antithesis between Light and darkness (1,5 = 3,19); the view of the glory of the Son (1,14 = 12,41); the title of “One-Born” (1,14.18 = 3,16); no one but the Son has ever seen God the Father (1,18 = 6,46), and the two breaks in the hymn that speak of John the Baptist are related to what is said about him in the contents of the Fourth Gospel (1,7 repeated in 1,19; 1,15 = 1,30) (Robinson 1962-1963, 122).

In keeping with the Synoptic tradition, the author of the Fourth Gospel also speaks of a “man sent from God” (1:6) as “the first witness” of the incarnate Logos and the Light that has come into the world (3:19). This witness was “sent by God”, a dignity which in the Fourth Gospel is attributed only to the Saviour Christ and the Holy Spirit, a detail which highlights the greatness of the one who came to fulfil this unique role in salvation history.

Portrait of John the Forerunner in the Hymnic Prologue

The third stanza of the Prologue (1:6-8) brings John the Baptist to the readers' attention: ‘He was a man sent from God, and his name was John.’ The Evangelist John highlights a new aspect of the story of the Logos: a personage of this world, born of flesh and blood, receives from God the mission to proclaim to people the presence of the Light or the Logos so that people will recognize him (Dufour 1990, 96).

This witness is said to have been “sent by God”. This quality of “sent by God” evokes in this text the call of the prophets of old: Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or “the prophet who was to come” (Mt 11:3; Lk 7:20), according to a prophetic text of Malachi (Mal 3:1,23). Not the Logos, but God Himself entrusted John with this special mission in salvation history: “to bear witness to the Light” (In 1:7). The author of the Prologue prefers to use here the noun “witness” (*μαρτυρίαν*) without the article to indicate the mission or ministry that John received from God. It is about the witness par excellence that God Himself will give to the Incarnate Logos through the mouth of John the Forerunner (Dufour 1990, 96).

Like the other evangelists, the author of the Fourth Gospel is keen to present the testimony of Jesus' messiahship from the outset. However, St John the Theologian, like St Luke, and even more so than the evangelists Matthew and Mark, insists on the subordinate role of the Forerunner as one who was not the Light, but only the one sent by God to bear witness to the Light. Some exegetes believe that by mentioning John the Baptist here, the author of the Prologue would like to answer some of John the Baptist's disciples who did not embrace the Christian faith that their teacher was the true Messiah and that Jesus had usurped this title. From the Book of Acts (FAp 19:1) we learn that these disciples of John the Baptist were on a mission of their own in Asia Minor so that St. Paul would find twelve followers of the school of John the Baptist in Ephesus (Mihoc 2003, 50).

The third stanza of the Prologue speaks of the coming of the Light into the world to dispel the darkness of ignorance of God. Between stanza two and stanza three, the editor of the Prologue has placed three verses that speak of the Forerunner's mission to prepare people for the coming of the Word and His light (Brown 1999, 39).

Marie-Émile Boismard, in her work *St. John Prologue*, proposes the hypothesis that verses 6 and 7 originally formed the beginning of the Fourth Gospel (Boismard 1957, 127). The words in verse 6: "There was a man sent from God, his name was John" could be a natural beginning for a historical narrative (cf. Lk 1:5). In the pages of the Old Testament, Samson's story begins the same way: "But there was at that time a man of Zorah, of the tribe of Dan, whose name was Manoah, and his wife was barren and did not bear children" (Jgs 13:2). Moreover, if verses 6 and 7 were, at the beginning, before verses 19-31, we would have a text as flowing and coherent as possible. If verse 7 of the Prologue tells us that John came "to testify about the Light", verses 19-31 recount the content of this testimony and the circumstances in which it was given. Normally and naturally, the Light is seen and there is no need for anyone to come and bear witness to it, but in verse 19ff it is a witness given to the Light before those who stubbornly refused to see it and remained in darkness (Brown 1999, 39).

Verse 8 subordinates John the Baptist to Jesus: 'He (John) was not the Light, but (came) to testify about the Light'. Some exegetes believe that *Benedictus* (from Lk 1:68-79) was originally a hymn in honour of the Forerunner, a hymn that was later adapted by Christians in favour of the Savior Christ. Verses 78 and 79 of *Benedictus* link the mission of John the Baptist to the moment of the Incarnation of the Logos in history, a wonderful event seen and celebrated as a "Rising" (Barret 1978, 161. 170-9).

The testimony that John the Baptist must give to the Light in the poetic Prologue (1:1-18) stands out more clearly if we compare it with that contained in the narrative Prologue (1:19ff). The man John is the witness sent by God to help people recognize the work of the Light. If in the pages of the Prologue it is a "witness" (v. 7) given to the Word, in the narrative Prologue John the Baptist must reveal to his contemporaries the presence of the One who, though present in the world, was not yet known: "In your midst is he whom you do not know" (Jn 1:26).

Before the darkness and the ignorance of God threatens the world, the witness must rise to proclaim legally, on behalf of God, the presence and victory of the Light (Dufour 1990, 97). But what do the words "that all may believe through him" mean? The universalistic context in which the first part of the poetic prologue is presented

leads us to believe that this “all” refers not only to the contemporaries of a historical figure but to all people, beyond any spatial or temporal boundaries. How important this biblical figure is and how much prestige God has given to this man whom he sent into the world to bear witness to the Light!

Although verse 8 of the Prologue may conceal a polemic against John’s disciples, the essence of the text lies elsewhere: the evangelist John has a special esteem for the Lord’s Forerunner, whom he calls “an authorized or accredited intermediary from above” between the Logos and the humanity he came to redeem, a unique dignity that the narrative Prologue also highlights as clearly as possible (Brown 1999, 40).

In the narrative prologue (1:19-28) John calls himself a “prophetic voice”, actualizing the entire prophetic tradition that preceded him in Israel and all the prophecies of the salvation that God has brought to the world in Jesus Christ. In verses 6-8 of the Prologue, the Lord’s Forerunner is the typical figure of all the “witnesses” who in the course of history have been sent by God to testify before men to the presence of the Light (Heb 1:1). The figure of this witness is not confined to a single personage – in our case, John the Baptist – nor is his mission confined to a particular time in history; his message is universal. In the time preceding Christ’s coming into the world, God did not deprive the world of “witnesses” to guide people towards the Light (Heb 12:1). John’s mission and role are in action, we might say, throughout history.

John the Baptist was the “lamp” in whose light people were enlightened “for a moment”, while the Logos or the Word is “the Light that enlightens every man who comes into the world” (v. 9). In chapter 3 of the fourth Gospel, John will call himself “the friend of the bridegroom” (v. 29). When the Bridegroom (Christ) is present, the “friend of the bridegroom” (John) shrinks back, withdraws discreetly, or at most conducts the wedding ceremony. In Eastern practice, the groom’s friend had the role of preparing the groom’s meeting with the bride, looking after the economic and social interests connected with the marriage contract, and being the discreet link of the feelings of the couple entering into a marriage (Ravasi 2016, 499).

The last stanza of the hymnic Prologue (1:15-18) is closely related to the preceding one. The Prologue could not be without a summary or summary of the testimony of John the Baptist, which affirms not only the Messiahship of the Incarnate Word but also his pre-existence (i.e. deity) (Mihoc 2003, 54).

Exegetes and commentators consider that here too, in the last stanza of the Prologue (vv. 15-18), as in Acts 1:6-8, the mention of the Forerunner John, the

privileged witness of the Incarnation of the Word, interrupts the unfolding of the poem and that the four verses could be considered an addition. Some exegetes insist on the slightly polemical meaning of verse 15: “John testified about him (Christ) and cried out, saying: This was the One of whom I said: He who comes after me was before me because he was before me”. According to Jesus’ words (Mt 11:9-11), “There has not risen among those born of women one greater than John the Baptist”. Xavier Léon-Dufour considers that the polemical aspect of the text cannot be entirely excluded, but the Prologue does not include this aspect in the author’s intention. The text had earlier emphasized (in vv. 6-8) that John was not the Light but at the same time elevated John to the high prophetic dignity of “a man sent by God”, “a witness to the Light”, a dignity which made him a special figure in the history of salvation. If the Lord’s forerunner affirms the superiority of the Saviour Christ in 1:15, he does so from this position or quality of “man sent by God” (1:6) and “prophet of the Most High” (Lk 1:76) (Dufour 1990, 124).

The superiority of the Savior Christ, based on His pre-existence, is the content of the words of the Forerunner John. The expression *ἔμπροσθέν* can have two meanings: temporal and spatial. Translators often prefer the first, temporal sense: “He (Christ) was before me” (with the sense of “preceded me in time”), but this translation puts a tautology in the mouth of the Forerunner since John says further “because he was before me”. Xavier Léon-Dufour prefers the spatial sense of the term, which helps us understand the superiority of the incarnate Logos (“He [Christ] is above me”).

This sense of the superiority of the Incarnate Logos over His Forerunner emphasized in the Immaculate Prologue (v. 15), will be confirmed in the narrative Prologue that follows: by proclaiming in this verse “This was he of whom I said...”, John refers to a word, or a testimony spoken the day after the Lord’s Baptism. After recognizing Jesus Christ, the “Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29), John proclaims, “This is the One of whom I said: After me comes a man who is greater than I (or in other translations, *was before me*), for he was before me” (Jn 1:30). Saint Luke, recounting the testimony of the forerunner, will say: “I baptize you with water, but He who is greater than I is coming after me” (Lk 3:16).

These words, in turn, refer to what the Lord’s forerunner had said the day before, speaking of “the One who is coming after me” (Jn 1:27). Before meeting Jesus, John the Baptist knew the superiority of the One who was to come and felt unworthy to do for Him even the service of a servant: “I am not worthy to untie His shoe belt” (Jn 1:27) (Dufour 1990, 125).

In this way, the servant – a man of flesh and blood – is bound to the mystery of the incarnate Logos. If we consider the tense of the verbs that appear in the text, John the Baptist is not simply a witness who speaks to a specific time in history (a specific generation) and who performs an act linked to the past. The testimony of the Forerunner is introduced by a verb in the present tense: “John was testifying about him” and by another verb in the perfect-present tense, a tense specific to prophetic speech “cry out” (κέκραγεν). In Romanian, we have the imperfect tense which belongs to the indicative mood, and which expresses (or indicates) an action begun in the past and which continues at the moment of speaking. Moreover, while the situation of the story in the first chapter is contemporary: “This *is the one* about whom I said...”, in this verse (v. 15) we read instead “This *was* the one about whom I said...”. Since this imperfect refers to a personage from the past, John’s testimony must be framed according to the Savior’s public and earthly activity. It is as if John the Baptist continues to bear witness to the Word of God, his witness being a reality that must always be renewed. The statement in the Prologue has a supra-temporal dimension. John the Baptist is the inspired historical figure – the prophet of God – who had and has the role of affirming and confirming before all that this Man now “among us” (1:14) is the Logos or Word of God, spoken of from the very beginning of the Prologue.

The following verses (vv. 16-18) are probably not a continuation of the testimony of the Forerunner John, but rather pick up the thread of the argument interrupted in verse 15. The phrase “his fullness” refers us back to verse 14, where Christ the Word was said to be “full of grace and truth”. From this fullness of grace and truth, “we all” – that is, all of us born of God through faith in Jesus Christ – “have also received grace upon grace”, an expression that indicates the immeasurable richness of Christ’s grace that believers receive (Mihoc 2003, 54).

Portrait of John the Forerunner in the Narrative Prologue

Beginning in verse 19, the evangelist John seems to start from the beginning. In perfect keeping with the Synoptic tradition, the evangelist begins his story of Jesus of Nazareth with the figure of the Forerunner John and his activity on the banks of the Jordan. According to this (synoptic) tradition, the life or public activity of the Saviour Christ is introduced using a triptych made up of three episodes: ‘the preaching of John the Baptist’, ‘the baptism of Jesus’ and ‘the temptation of the Saviour in the wilderness’. In the Fourth Gospel, the preacher John becomes a witness of Jesus, the Savior’s bap-

tism is only indirectly evoked by a testimony of the Forerunner, and the scene of the temptation in the wilderness is missing, the temptations appearing discreetly throughout the narrative. The triptych specific to the Synoptic tradition is replaced by three tableaux which, in their succession, form a literary unity (Dufour 1990, 147-8).

The text between Ac 1:19 and 2:12 forms a literary unit, which exegetes and commentators have called the “narrative prologue”. The glory of Jesus is revealed progressively before he enters concrete public life. The first panel (Jn 1:19-34) introduces John the Baptist, the “first witness” of the Word made flesh, the witness of whom the Immaculate Prologue spoke twice (Jn 1:6-7,15). John testified before the people of Israel that the Messiah promised by God is present and that the Messiah is “the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:36).

The Fourth Gospel has many “witnesses” who bear witness to the incarnate Logos: John the Baptist is the first of these witnesses (Jn 5:35); the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus (Jn 5:39); God the Father bears witness to His Son (Jn 5:37; 8:18); the deeds (signs/minutes) that Jesus performs bear witness to Him (Jn 5:36; 10:25); the Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ (Jn 15:26); and finally, His disciples (Jn 19:35) (Dufour 1990, 150). The first witness and “witness par excellence” of the Saviour, the man “sent by God” (1:6) “to bear witness to the Light” (1:7) is John the Baptist, the Forerunner of the Lord. His testimony, expressed before a Sanhedrin commission of inquiry, opens the “trial” that will pit Jesus against the spiritual leaders of the Jews (the scribes and Pharisees). The testimony of John the Baptist - first expressed in the negative, then in the positive - is spread over two different days separated by the phrase “and the next day” (Jn 1:29, 35). The two days correspond to the two mentions of John that appear in the hymnic Prologue: the witness of the Word (Jn 1:6-8) affirms, first of all, the presence in the world of the One who is not yet known: “In your midst is the One whom you do not know” (Jn 1:26), and secondly, he identifies in Jesus the One Who is from eternity (Jn 1:27, 30).

From the very beginning, John the Baptist – “the first witness of the Word made flesh” – puts himself in the shadows or the background, claiming to be “Someone” already present in the world whom the Jews do not know (Jn 1:26). On the next day, or “the day after”, he points to Jesus, through whom God will end the dominion of sin and death. Before an official delegation from the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, John the Baptist confesses that he is not the Christ (Messiah), nor the eschatological prophet (whom the

Jews were intensely expecting). John defines himself as “the witness” who came “to bear witness to the Light”, as the words of Is 40:3 (Mihoc 2003, 57) are written about him.

About the Lord’s Forerunner, we have a testimony from the historian Josephus Flavius, who describes him in this way: “John was a chosen man who exhorted his contemporaries to cultivate virtue and to be just to one another, showing their piety to God through baptism [repentance]” (Josephus Flavius 2001, 454). His activity extends from the autumn of 27 AD to the spring of 29 AD, during the second Qumran period, a period dominated by the Zealot Essenes. John’s highly original religious movement resonated deeply with his contemporaries, a fact also noted by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius. Such a movement would later be found in Ephesus (in Asia Minor), according to information in the Book of Acts, long after the death of the Forerunner, and survivors of this movement would be found in Syria towards the end of 300 AD.

The Synoptic tradition records that the Jews of Palestine were divided about John the Baptist: the crowds were attracted by his preaching and baptism of repentance, and many wondered, “Is he not the Christ?” (Lk 3:15), but the Jewish religious authorities did not believe in this hypothesis and sometimes considered John to be possessed by the devil (Mt 11:18) (Dufour 1990, 152).

Of the Logos or Word of God, John clearly and emphatically confesses that he is the “Messiah” or “Christ”, presenting Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Thus, the Lord’s Forerunner announces that Jesus will save people through His sacrifice, and as proof of Jesus’ messiahship, John offers the confirmation that the Holy Spirit Himself gave him when He baptized Him in the Jordan River (Mihoc 2003, 57).

The text of the Fourth Gospel stages a confrontation between the official Sanhedrin delegation and John the Baptist: “Who are you?” he was asked (Acts 1:19). From the Gospel of Luke, we know that John the Baptist came from a priestly family (the priest Zechariah was from the priestly brood of Abijah, and his wife Elizabeth was from the daughters of Aaron), but his ministry or mission was not that of priest (as was that of his father) in the holy place. The space or place of his mission was the desert of Judea where he, invested with a prophetic mandate (Mt 3:1; Lk 3:2), prepared the people for the encounter with the Lord’s Christ, offering the people the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mt 3:1-12; Mk 1:2-8; Lk 3:1-18; Phil 13:24; 19:4).

By saying “I am not the Christ” (1:20), John seems to be answering the question he was asked, but this answer is as pertinent as possible because it immediately reveals

the object of the inquiry he was under, an inquiry that would later continue with Jesus Himself in the pages of the Fourth Gospel (cf. Jn 7:26, 31, 41; 10:24; 12:34).

Two other questions follow about John the Baptist's relationship to "Elijah", or "the Prophet", questions through which the investigators want to know if John attributes any messianic function to himself. According to the beliefs of the time, the coming of the Messiah will be preceded by the coming, first, of the Prophet Elijah or with the coming of the "Prophet" announced in the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 18:15,18) or of the "Angel" announced in the Book of Revelation (Ex 23:20-22, Mal 3:1).

At that time, there was no uniform expectation of a single eschatological figure in Judaism. Most Jews were waiting for the Messiah. However, some of the apocryphal works describe God's intervention at the end of time (at the "fullness of time") without mentioning any descendants of King David. It seems that the Essene group at Qumran expected not one but three eschatological figures: a prophet, a priestly Messiah and a royal Messiah. New Testament texts such as Jn 1:21, Mk 6:15 and Mt 16:14 testify to the diversity of messianic expectations in Israel.

According to the text of 2 Kgs 2:11, Elijah the prophet was taken up to heaven "in a whirlwind" and a "chariot of fire". The idea that he was still alive and active has remained in Israel's collective memory, especially since the text in 2 Cr 21:12-15 mentions a letter the prophet sent to King Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son. In postexilic expectations, the prophet Elijah was to return before the arrival of the day of the Lord (but not necessarily before the Messiah). Mal 3:1 (a text written around 450 B.C.) refers to the "angel" who was to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord, and a later addition to the book [Mal 3:23] identifies this "angel" with Elijah (Brown 1999, 62).

Concerning the figure of Elijah, the narrative prologue of the Fourth Gospel contains a notable difference from the Synoptic tradition. The latter recognized Elijah in John the Baptist, as demonstrated by a saying of the Savior and the behaviour attributed to the Forerunner: "And the disciples asked him (Jesus), saying: For what but do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? And he answered and said, Elijah indeed will come and set all things in order. But I say to you that Elijah has come, but they did not know him but did with him as they pleased; so, the Son of Man will suffer from them. Then the disciples understood that Jesus had spoken to them about John the Baptist" (Mt 17:10-13). In the text of the narrative Prologue, John the Baptist loses this prestigious element of his mission: he is not "Elijah redivivus" as was believed. We have

in our text a slight polemical emphasis, which has the precise purpose of reserving for the Saviour Christ the fulfilment of God's promises (Dufour 1990, 154).

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord, as Isaiah the prophet said" (Jn 1:23). In speaking thus, the Lord's Forerunner links himself directly to Israel's past and expectations. When John is asked to speak about himself, he hides behind prophecy or, more correctly, identifies himself with a prophecy of Isaiah. Our editions of the Holy Scriptures mistranslate the original Greek text with "I am...", an expression which, in the Fourth Gospel, is reserved for the Saviour Christ alone.

A brief comparison of the portrait of John in the Fourth Gospel with that in the Synoptic Gospels will reveal notable differences: in the Fourth Gospel the fiery preacher, the threatening prophet, the baptizer who drew crowds to the Jordan River, the hero who defies the kings and dies a martyr, disappears. Nothing else remains but "a voice" (a voice) from far away, from Israel's distant past, actualizing a prophecy and calling for repentance. If in the Synoptic tradition, the prophetic text of Is 40 appears in the commentary of the narrating evangelist, in the Fourth Gospel the prophecy is quoted by John himself. A Jewish preacher, familiar with the Scriptures, needed only one verse to bring the whole context of the prophecy to the mind of his hearer. Thus, "by means of a voice [of a voice] the Word of God is made present" (in the words of the great Origen). By presenting himself as a "voice" or "voice" – the one who once spoke to the heart of Jerusalem – John the Baptist acquires the impressive dignity of Scripture itself (Dufour 1990, 156). Thus, through the "witness", Scripture itself recognizes Jesus the Messiah. This insight, as evident as can be from the very beginning of the book, will be fundamental to the entire Johannine Gospel.

John's inquiry continues in Ac 1:25: "If you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, why do you baptize?" This question justifies the previous questions: the baptism of repentance that John practised, to be valid, required John to be the protagonist of the end times, of the "fullness of time". It is difficult, however, to say with certainty whether water baptism was considered a messianic gesture at the time. Therefore, exegetes believe, we may have in this case a scenario of the evangelist who wanted to highlight the contrast between the Forerunner John and the Messiah Christ.

John's baptism could refer in the minds of his contemporaries to the purifying water. Mosaic law provided for ablutions or ritual washing of the body for purification before performing a ritual. In certain religious groups – particularly the Essenes – ritual

bathing or washing was of great importance: practised daily and reserved for the initiated, ritual bathing was linked to their desire for inner purification. For the followers of the Qumran sect, it seems that this ritual washing had a similar value to the sacrifices or offerings made at the temple, which the Essenes no longer practised because they considered them to be incompatible with the requirements of the Mosaic Law (Dufour 1990, 157).

However, we can speak of a “spiritual rebirth” about the baptism of repentance that John practised (Gese 1989, 237-41). Water baptism was meant to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. This is why John the Baptist directs the attention of his interlocutors to the figure of the Messiah Christ, whose presence is still hidden: “In your midst is he whom you do not know” (1:26b). However, these words are not necessarily a reproach to the delegation of the Jewish Sanhedrin since he will confess on the second day that he did not know Christ: “and I did not know him” (1:31a). What the first witness of the Incarnate Word is saying here is that the Jews do not even suspect the overwhelming dignity of the One who is already present, even though He has not yet been or has not yet formally presented Himself. It will take a later revelation from Above that will attest to this dignity.

The manifestation of the Messiah does not depend on human speculation, but on God’s initiative; it belongs to divine revelation: “I did not know him [Christ], but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘On whom you will see the Spirit descending and remaining, it is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 1:33). The Messiah’s presence will fulfil Israel’s entire past; all that remains is to identify the One who comes in the name of the Lord, and this will happen on the second day of the narrative Prologue (Dufour 1990, 160).

On the second day, the Messiah Christ was identified by John the Baptist (Acts 1:29-34). The previous day’s investigators had left the scene. This time, we are not told clearly and precisely who John’s hearers are (we only assume that they were those who came to him to receive the baptism of repentance). We believe the evangelist did this intentionally to suggest that John’s “audience” is not only his contemporaries but extends without limit to the end of time to all who will believe in Christ through his witness. We are told in the Immaculate Prologue (1:1-18) that John the Baptist “came to bear witness, that he might testify about the Light so that all might believe through him” (1:7). This “all”, as we have seen, refers not only to the contemporaries of John and his work but to all people who will receive the witness that John will give to the Light.

Verse 29, “The next day John saw Jesus coming to him”, has puzzled biblical exegetes and commentators. Spontaneously, the reader imagines the scene of Jesus coming to John to be baptized, as the Synoptic tradition (cf. Mt 3:13-15; Mk 1:9; Lk 3:21) says, albeit slightly differently. This “second day” indicates a time after Jesus’ baptism. This moment will be evoked retrospectively by John the Baptist in his subsequent statement. Thus, in verse 29, Jesus’ coming already implies that the Holy Spirit has come upon him. When Jesus appears for the first time in the Fourth Gospel, he is presented in the act of coming: „John saw Jesus coming to him’. This is how Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled: For the Lord comes with power and his arm subdues all. Behold, the price of His victory is with Him, and the fruit of His victory goes before Him. He will feed His flock as a Shepherd and with His arm He will gather them. He will carry the lambs to His bosom, and He will care for those who suckle” (Is 40:10-11).

John’s reaction is on a very deep level: “Behold the Lamb of God, the One who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). The voice crying out in the wilderness now points to the One he proclaimed before: “Behold, this is He of whom I have spoken: After me cometh a man, who was before me because he was before me” (Jn 1:30).

We must point out a significant detail in the Forerunner’s words: he is not speaking about the “sins” of men but about the “sin of the world”. In his first Solemn Epistle, St John, after stating that the Lord’s Christ appeared “to take away sins” (1Jn 3:5), makes us aware of this deviation from “sins” to “the sin of the world”: “Whoever commits sin commits iniquity, and sin is iniquity” (*ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνομία*) (1Jn 3:4). Why is this detail important? Because Christ did not come merely to remove or erase personal/individual sins but came to end the dominion of sin (and death). Lawlessness or transgression (*ἀνομία*) indicates the state of the world separated or cut off from God; the state of the world without God (Pottery 1956, 785-97).

The Evangelist John solemnly proclaims that the sin of the world will be taken away by the incarnate Logos called in our text “the Lamb of God”. According to one interpretation, the “Lamb of God” has been identified with Ebed-Yahveh (the Servant or Servant of the Lord) of whom the prophet Isaiah speaks (ch. 53). In a well-known episode in Acts – the one which speaks of the work of the deacon Philip - the place in Scripture where he translates the Ethiopian famine (Ac 8:26-35) is precisely this passage: “As a lamb that is brought to the slaughter, and as a sheep without a voice before him that sheareth it, so He opened not His mouth. In His humility His judgment is

lifted up, and who shall tell His seed? That His life is lifted up from the earth” (Phil 8:32-33; Is 53:7-8) But Isaiah’s prophecy speaks of the lamb “atoning for” or “bearing” Israel’s sin, not lifting it up. Some exegetes, wishing to preserve this interpretation, have assumed a translation error: the Aramaic term *talē ya* can be translated “child”, “servant/servant” or “lamb”. These exegetes believe that the Lord’s forerunner would have said: “Behold the servant of the Lord” and that the evangelist would have translated in Greek: “Behold the Lamb of God”. But even if we assume that the semantic basis is valid, there is no reason to make “Ebed-Iahve” a messianic title.

Charles Harold Dodd has proposed an interesting hypothesis: the Lamb of God spoken of by the Lord’s Forerunner is the equivalent of the conquering Lamb of the Book of Revelation, Whose wrath is terrible (Rv 6:16-17) and Who will overcome the seven kings of the seven-headed beast: “These are of one mind, and their power and dominion they give to the beast. They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them, for he is the Lord of lords and King of kings, and those [who are] with him - the called and the chosen and the faithful” (Rv 17:13-14).

This would indeed be – according to C.H. Dodd – the righteous Messiah that John the Baptist was waiting for, as the Synoptic tradition attests (Mt 3:7-12; Lk 3:7-18). The image of the victorious Lamb has deep roots in biblical tradition, roots that stretch back to the Book of Enoch, a work written sometime between 150 BC and the 3rd century AD. In this work, the history of Israel is compared to a battle fought by a lamb (which grows a horn) to protect the sheep against wolves, according to the mission entrusted to it by its Master or Lord of the sheep. The great figures of the biblical people – Moses, Samuel, the Kings..., and Judas Maccabeus – successively intervened in this battle, showing the characteristics and attributes of the Messiah. The holy war will be led by this lamb who will hold the flock together. Behind this very old tradition, in which a lamb puts the wolves to flight, we glimpse the biblical paradox of weakness overcoming, together with God, the power of evil.

Another interpretation, much more widespread among exegetes, is in the “Lamb of God” of which John the Baptist speaks the true Paschal Lamb. This identification is based on the early Christian preaching about Christ “our Passover, who sacrificed himself for us” (1 Cor 5:7), a preaching which the Apostle Peter, in his First Epistle, exemplified as follows: “Knowing that you were not redeemed with filthy things, with silver or gold, from your vain life, which you were bequeathed from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of an innocent and blameless lamb” (1 Pt 1:18-19).

The term “lamb” itself evokes the sacrifices that the people of Israel offered to the Lord in the holy place, sacrifices in which small animals – lambs, kids or calves – were offered to the Lord as a pledge in the ritual of communion and reconciliation with God. The lamb was the daily sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem (de Vaux 1964, 404-41).

Jesus is indeed the “Lamb of God”, but not in the same sense, and certainly not on the same level as the lambs offered in the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is the ‘Lamb of God’ in that his coming – his incarnation in history – removes the need for sacrifice and gifts from God: “Therefore when he came into the world, he said, “You did not desire sacrifice and gift, but you made me a body. Burnt offerings and sin offerings have not pleased thee. Then I said, ‘Behold, I am coming, in the scroll of the book it is written about me, to do your will, O God’” (Heb 10:5-7).

Isaiah’s prophecy (Is 40:2) announced the end of bondage and the atonement for transgression, and now John the Baptist expresses with a suggestive image that in Christ God has reconciled the world to Himself and offered forgiveness. Jesus is therefore not a new cult victim, but the One through whom God intervenes on man’s behalf, offering him salvation. At a first reading level, it is important to recognize, along with John the Baptist, that the presence of Jesus inaugurates a new stage in God’s relationship with man, or, in theological terminology, a new iconomy of salvation.

As is well known, several important verbs are very dear to the evangelist John; two of them – “*to see*” and “*to believe*” – also appear in the narrative Prologue: “*I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained upon him! [...] but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you will see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, it is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God’*” (1:32-34).

John the Baptist presents himself as an eyewitness: ‘I saw’. What he “saw” immediately sends the reader of the Gospel back to the episode of Jesus’ baptism. In the Fourth Gospel, no reference to the baptism ritual itself has been preserved. As in the Synoptic tradition, the Evangelist John also mentions the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove, which refers to the Baptism of the Lord, and from that event, only the essential has been preserved: the descent of the Spirit (which was also the “sign” that the Lord’s Forerunner had previously received for the recognition of the Incarnate Word).

According to the Synoptic tradition, the proclamation of Jesus’ identity: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:1; Lk 3:22) comes from heaven, or from above, while in the Gospel of John, the proclamation of the divine

sonship of the Saviour is made by “the man sent from God” by a “prophet of the Most High” (Lk 1:76), that is, by the one who, a little earlier, identified himself with the “prophetic voice”.

In the title “Son of God” the Christian reader discovers a meaning that goes beyond the messianic confession to the One-Born One, the One who was proclaimed in the Messianic Prologue (1:14). This is the meaning to which the Johannine text, which was written, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (20:31), is pointing. Does this mean that the evangelist attributed to John the Baptist a full understanding of a mystery whose depth he could not even suspect? The literary arrangement of verses 32-34, all marked by the verb “to see”, reveals a literary unity. Under the eyes and the gaze of the Forerunner, the Saviour Christ receives the investiture from on high, an event which the Apostle Peter will later mention in the house of Cornelius the centurion: “You know the word which was throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached. (That is, about) Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37-38).

Jesus is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33). Jesus Christ is “the One who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). In the Fourth Gospel, the first witness of the Incarnate Logos – John the Baptist – does not call people to repentance by confessing their sins (as in the Synoptic tradition), nor does he present them with special norms or rules to “direct the paths of the One who is coming”, but he goes straight to the deep reason why the Messiah came into the world: sin, which means man’s brokenness from God.

The Johannine text we are dealing with is not at the level of sinful individual existence but at the level of the disorder that affects the humanity of which we are all a part.

Instead of conclusions

In 1933, the French philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel wrote a play entitled *Le Monde cassé*, followed by a philosophical study entitled: *Position et approches concrètes du mystère ontologique* (Marcel 1933, 95-106) in which he stated that “our world is made of pieces”. We can recognise this truth in the catastrophes, in the wars, in the conflicts, in the planetary economic recession, in the intolerable general social

state in which humanity finds itself, in the evil that manifests itself in various forms; finally, in the illnesses, the suffering and the death of loved ones. Is the sin of the world to blame for all this? Modern man and society have lost the notion of sin; modern man is no longer afraid of sinning; people make jokes about it and even TV showbiz, as if sin were something trivial and innocent. Modern man today fears many things: he fears the Sars-Cov-2 virus that has triggered a pandemic, he fears terrorism, he fears global warming, he fears nuclear war and biological weapons, but he no longer fears the war he is waging against God and His commandments.

The human sciences have taught us to consider the determinism of the unconscious and blind, the shortcomings in education, the social pressures, and the fanaticisms and barbarisms that blind people. As for the “sense or feeling of guilt”, to which a morality reduced only to “allowed and not allowed” has contributed, it appears in the eyes of modern man as an obstacle to the full realization of the human being. Christian authors and spiritual writings have long stressed that guilt should not be confused with sincere repentance, which refers to real guilt and is the only valid remedy for man’s re-entry into a living and harmonious relationship with the One who brought him into existence or being.

In this case, if we do not admit the existence of an intimate connection between the present state of the world and the rejection or rejection of God, we will not understand much of either the Prologue or the contents of the Gospel of John. The “sin of the world” in the Johannine text is not attributed to a mistake made at the beginning of the world – a mistake we commonly call “ancestral sin” – but rather it seems to be a power always at work or work, an anonymous power that produces and proliferates the rejection or rejection of God (conscious or unconscious). For the author of the Fourth Gospel “the sin of the world” means the rejection or non-acceptance of the Light that has come into the world and the embrace of darkness (Jn 3:19).

“Now”, says St. John the Baptist, “God has come to you through Him who is the seen sign of His forgiveness”, precisely “to take away” the sin of the world.

The work of the Lamb of God, accomplished, has not been limited to the Middle East and New Testament times; it undoubtedly traverses our sin-wounded world, and the struggle of Light against darkness has traversed and will continue to traverse the ages, through Christ’s disciples, until a new “fullness of time” takes place. To be, in our turn, disciples or disciples, witnesses and confessors, characters, personalities and

heroes of the history of salvation that God has fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we have something to learn from the first witness of the incarnate Logos.

References

- Aucoin, M. A. "Augustine and John Chrysostom: Commentators on St. John's Prologue." *Ecclesiastical Sciences* 15 (1963).
- Barrett, Charles K. *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1978.
- Boismard, Marie Émile. *St. John Prologue*. Westminster: Newman, 1957.
- Brown, Raymond E. *Giovanni. Commento al Vangelo spirituale*. Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1999.
- de Vaux, Roland. *Le Istituzioni dell'Antico Testamento*. Turin: Marietti Editrice, 1964.
- Dufour, Xavier Léon. *Lettura dell'Evangelo secondo Giovanni*. Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni San Paolo, 1990.
- Gese, Hartmut. *Sulla teologia biblica*. Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1989.
- Josephus Flavius, *Antichități iudaice*. Vol. 1. Translated by Ion Acsan. Bucharest: Hasefer, 2001.
- Marcel, Gabriel. "Position and Concrete Approaches to the Ontological Mystery." *Philosophical Studies* 3-4 (1933).
- Mihoc, Vasile. *Sfânta Evanghelie de la Ioan, introducecere și comentariu*. Vol. 1. Sibiu: Teofania, 2003.
- Nagy, Mihai. Isaia 53. "Analiza exegetico-teologică a discursului retoricoprofetic." *Romanian Orthodox Old Testament Studies (ROOTS)* 1 (2009): 81-89.
- Neacșu, Ovidiu-Mihai. "Jesus Christ The Saviour on the Cross (Jn 19:23-37) – peculiarities of the Johannine narrative." *Romanian Orthodox Old Testament Studies (ROOTS)* 2 (2022): 70-80.
- Pottery, Ignatius. "Sin is iniquity (1 In 3:4)." *New Theological Review* 78 (1956): 785-97.
- Ravasi, Gianfranco. *The Gospels*. Bologna: Dehoniane, 2016.
- Robinson, John A. T. "The Relation of the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John." *New Testament Studies* 9 (1962-1963).
- St. Augustine. *Omeliile sul Vangelo di San Giovanni, I, 1 e 7. Opere di sant'Agostino*. Vol. XXIV. Rome: Città Nuova, 1968.