

SACRAMENTAL SYMBOLISM AND PHYSICAL IMAGERY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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I SYMBOLISM IN JOHN

The problem in approaching the Johannine writings in terms of 'sacramental symbolism' can be most vividly seen in E. Schweizer's book, *Ego Eimi*. According to Schweizer, the 'I am' statements in John are not at all to be taken as 'symbolic' phrases, since the essence of a symbol is that it refers to reality, but is not itself that reality. Rather the 'I am' statements of Jesus in John are meant to be taken *literally*, and are therefore not symbolic.¹

The basis for this view lies in the understanding of symbolic language developed in the book. Schweizer discusses language in terms of simile (*Vergleich*), metaphor, parable and allegory. Simile uses comparison on a simple level: one thing is 'like' (*wie*) another. Metaphor, though still based on comparison, is essentially replacement: one thing stands in place of another. As a result, metaphor does not make the comparison clear as simile does. That is, 'Sie macht nicht anschaulich, sondern maskiert das Gemeinte.'²

1. E. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1939) 117. Contrast this with C. H. Dodd's statement, 'The Johannine statements, "I am the Vine", "I am the Bread", are intended to give expression to the mysterious truth uttered in the words of Institution, "Hoc est Corpus Meum: Hic est Sanguis Meus."' (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge University Press, 1953) 138f).
2. E. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi*, 112f. Note that Schweizer is heavily dependent on Jülicher for his understanding of literary symbolism.

Allegory and parable are, in turn, developments of simile and metaphor. Parables are simply extended similes, and allegory is a chain of connected metaphors.³

This mechanical understanding of symbolism examines language strictly in terms of the inter-change between symbols, and excludes any interaction between the reader and the symbols. It is not surprising, therefore, that it leads to a denial of the symbolic nature of the 'I am' statements. For example, given these definitions, one cannot say that the statement, 'I am the true Vine', is a metaphor in that the use of the qualifier 'true' automatically removes the statement from the realm of metaphor: 'Eine metaphor kann nicht in ihren Eigenschaften näher bestimmt und charakterisiert werden'. A metaphor says, 'I am a Vine'. The statement, 'I am the true Vine', cannot be symbolic because it is so specific. In the 'I am' statements, therefore, Jesus is not speaking symbolically, but is taking over a set of concepts and claiming to fulfil these concepts in his own person.⁴

In this view, therefore, symbolism is reduced to indirect language. Anything that is specific is by definition non-symbolic. Yet this obviously overlooks the fact that the Johannine 'I am' statements are rooted in symbolic language. Jesus is taking over and personifying metaphors and images. The personification does not destroy the symbolic nature of these images, but develops them in a new way.

One could argue, perhaps, in the case of the 'Good Shepherd' that Jesus is taking over a role. Yet when Jesus says, 'I am the good Shepherd', it is not the same as saying something like, 'I am the mayor'. The latter is a well defined role, and the former is not. The figure of the 'shepherd' is an OT image used to evoke a picture of how the leaders of Israel should act. Jesus is applying this image to himself, but in doing so he is taking advantage of the evocative nature of the image more than he is claiming to fulfil a specific role. On

3. *Ibid.* 113.

4. *Ibid.* 116, 122f.

the whole the Johannine 'I am' statements, despite the qualifiers, are more evocative than specific, and it is their symbolic function which makes them useful.

The weakness of Schweizer's analysis seems to lie in its static understanding of symbolism and language: one meaning is linked with, or replaces, another. Against this, however, some scholars have emphasized the creative ability of language. As Robert Funk suggests:

In symbolic speech one speaks of B without referring to A, although it is supposed that A, or an A, is intended. ... The role which comparison plays varies decisively. In simile it is illustrative; in metaphorical language it is creative of meaning. In simile as illustration the point to be clarified or illuminated has already been made and can be assumed; in metaphor the point is discovered.⁵

In the same light, F. W. Dillistone observes: 'Metaphor is to provide transference from the expected to the unexpected.'⁶ The point is that when one juxtaposes familiar symbols in new ways, or in new contexts, new meanings and ideas are suggested. Since these new meanings depend on the inter-action of the hearer or reader, this type of symbolism tends to offer more than one level of interpretation; in Funk's terms the 'focus' is 'soft' rather than 'sharp'.⁷ Figurative or symbolic language can, therefore, do more than explain; it can challenge the reader to think, to probe, and to interpret.

It is not difficult in this light to credit John with the use of symbolic or metaphorical language.⁸ For example,

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5. R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 136f.
 6. F. W. Dillistone, *Signs, Symbolism and Sacraments* (London: Collins, 1955) 160.
 7. Funk, *Language*, 138-140.
 8. I will be using the terms 'symbol' and 'metaphor' interchangeably. Obviously, one could (and many have) make a distinction between these terms, but this distinction does not seem necessary for this discussion.

the statement in John 10:11, 'I am the Good Shepherd', is generally acknowledged to reflect the OT concept of the shepherd (esp. Ezk. 34). The personification of this concept in Jesus emphasizes on the one hand his faithful care of God's people, and on the other hand sets Jesus in contrast to the official caretakers of Israel.⁹ The following discourse expands this idea to include the idea of the self-sacrifice of the shepherd, but this is still basically a re-interpretation of a familiar OT image.

In this sense the gospel is rich in symbolic language. There is a thriving variety of symbolism throughout the gospel:

1) In addition to John 10 there is a prominent use of OT symbols. For example the little parable of the woman in labour in John 16:21 develops a well known OT image in terms of the transition from sorrow to joy (see Is. 66: 7ff). To this we could add the vine analogy of John 15, the Jacob background of John 3 and 4, the manna-bread concept in John 6, the 'living water' of John 7 and others. Each of these concepts is more or less 'contemporized' and applied either to Jesus himself (as with the 'I am' statements), or to the situation of the disciples.

2) The narratives in John, especially the miraculous signs, are themselves symbolic.¹⁰ In John 9 the healing of the man born blind is virtually a morality play on the concepts of spiritual blindness and faith.

3) Within the narratives one can find sharp, dramatic sentences which contrast starkly with the normal Johannine sentence. For example John 13:30 is especially dramatic when it notes after Judas' departure, 'It was night'. The chronological fact is clearly used to reflect the nature of Judas' mission.

John, therefore, seems to be alive to the symbolic potential of language and events. The question for this paper is: in what sense does John use or refer to the

9. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 389.

10. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 140.

sacraments in his symbolic language? As the above sentence implies, there are two parts to this question. In any symbolic relationship you have the symbol (A), the thing to which the symbol refers (B), and (in this case) the literary context (x), so that $A(x) = B$ suggests that symbol A in context x refers to B. If the sacraments are mentioned in John, the question is, are they symbols (A) used in reference to something else, or are they the object (B) of some symbolic reference? We shall see that the sacraments are primarily symbols used in reference to another object, in this case the meaning of the mission of Jesus and its results for believers. However, this is no great surprise, for, as Brown asks, 'What other role could the sacraments play in a gospel?'¹¹

There is also a critical problem which can hardly be avoided. There are those (best represented by Rudolf Bultmann) who either deny that the original gospel had any reference to the sacraments, or suggest that John was actually anti-sacramental. This position can only be maintained by relegating certain passages to an 'ecclesiastical redactor'. We will deal with the question of redaction in each passage as we go, but methodologically it would seem that an anti-sacramental position can only be claimed for John if one can find either some explicitly negative statement about the sacraments, or some negative reference to the sacraments in the use of sacramental symbols. If, on the other hand, the author uses the sacraments as symbols in a positive context, this would seem to be evidence for the acceptance of the sacraments, even if we cannot develop a thorough sacramental theology from this. If we have neither a clear negative reference to the sacraments, nor a positive use of sacramental language, the matter of John's acceptance or rejection of the sacraments would remain undecided. Silence should not be interpreted as rejection without further evidence.

Finally, we must deal on the other extreme with those who find sacramental references everywhere in the

11. R. E. Brown, *New Testament Essays* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965) 59.

gospel.¹² P. Niewalda rightly criticizes Cullmann and the other exegetes who follow this 'hyper-sacramental' interpretation for their lack of exegetical support. He in turn carries out a thorough study of the history of interpretation, and on the basis of this study of church fathers and early Christian art, argues for a strongly sacramental tint to Johannine symbolism.¹³ Brown accepts that Niewalda has provided a strong negative principle for interpreting John - that what is not supported by later tradition cannot be claimed for John - but he goes on to insist that there must be some internal, contextual evidence supporting a sacramental interpretation.¹⁴ Brown's point is surely correct; Niewalda's work, thorough as it is, depends largely on sources more than a generation after the writing of John, and cannot therefore be finally determinative for interpreting John.

II INTERPRETING JOHN¹⁵

If the sacraments were ever to be on the receiving end of symbolic language, we would expect to find this in the narrative sections (where obviously the primary level of action is the narrative itself). The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12) and the Healing of the Man Born Blind (John 9) are frequently mentioned as narrative sections with strong sacramental features. Therefore, we turn to these passages first.

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12. The best example of this is O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM, 1953) 38-119.
 13. P. Niewalda, *Sakramentssymbolik im Johannesevangelium?* (Limburg: Lahn, 1958) 14-17, 26-29, 30ff.
 14. Brown, *NT Essays*, 64.
 15. There are too many passages which have been claimed by one person or another to have 'sacramental' references to be examined in this paper. Therefore, only those which are most likely to have sacramental significance are examined in the following section. One can easily fault the omission of passages such as John 4 or 7, but the passages which are examined should provide a significant base for understanding the Johannine approach to the sacraments.

(a) The Wedding at Cana

The Wedding at Cana contains the miracle of the transformation of the water to wine; this could, of course, reflect the wine used in the eucharist. As external evidence, Niewalda mentions a second or third century fresco in Alexandria which combines the Cana miracle and the multiplication of the loaves and clearly develops the sacramental imagery of these two miracles.¹⁶ Brown also suggests that there are some internal connections with the eucharist, notably the mention of the 'hour' (cf. 13:1), the setting in 2:13 before the Passover (cf. John 6 and 13), and the fact that Mary's presence is only noted here and in John 19 (where the flow of blood and water from the wound in Jesus' side is also thought to have eucharistic features). Nevertheless, Brown suggests that these connections only make a eucharistic allusion possible.¹⁷ It should also be pointed out (a) that the mention of the Passover in 2:13 is really linked with the cleansing of the temple, and is not necessarily connected with the Cana pericope at all, and (b) that the mention of the 'hour' is strictly negative, and therefore is a tenuous connection with the eucharistic last supper.¹⁸

The problem, moreover, is to find some way in which the passage can be interpreted legitimately in terms of the eucharist. As Brown correctly suggests, the main symbolic function of the miracle at Cana is to call attention to the 'replacement of the water prescribed for Jewish purification with the choicest of wines'. The miracle reveals the glory of Jesus (verse 11) in that it points on the first level to his ability to transform

16. Niewalda, *op. cit.* 136f. Note also that Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III 16:7) seems to make a similar connection between Cana and the eucharist.

17. Brown, *John*, 110.

18. The hour motif is, in any case, broader than a simple reference to the eucharist. The 'hour' and 'glory' are linked in 12:27f, but this is specifically grounded in the death of Jesus (in contrast to John 2), and suggests that the meaning of Jesus' life is finally revealed in his death.

things, and secondly, and more subtly, to his ability to surpass the things of Judaism.¹⁹ The 'glory' which is reflected here is not linked with his death (which would support some allusion to the eucharist), but with his power. Therefore, any reference to the eucharist seems unlikely. Though the mention of 'wine' might suggest the eucharist to a Christian reader, the connection does not seem to be exploited.

(b) The Man Born Blind

The relationship between John 9 and the rite of baptism is similarly problematic. The external evidence from the interpretation of the early church is undeniable.²⁰ Internally, the fact that the man was washed in water, and ends in proclaiming faith (verse 32) is suggestive of the link between confession of faith and baptism in Christian life. Further, as Brown again stresses, the fact that the man was born blind may suggest that 'the evangelist is playing on the idea that the man was born in sin - sin that can be removed only by washing in the waters of the spring or pool that flows from Jesus himself'.²¹

The problem with this interpretation is, again, that the thrust of the passage is not in this direction. If we have a reference to baptism here, then the order of the washing and faith is curiously reversed (verses 7 and 38). Moreover, the fact that the man was born blind is specifically disconnected from the question of sin in 9:3. The significance of his being born blind seems to serve to heighten the contrast between this man and the Pharisees, between his correct perception of Jesus and their stubborn refusal to see. His confession in verse 38 stands as the climax of his developing understanding (*cf.* verse 17) of the meaning of the miracle. The symbolic nature of the healing is so strongly developed in terms of the theme of spiritual blindness and spiritual perception, that the significance of the water in the miracle is definitely secondary. Again, if there is a connection between baptism and this passage, it is not greatly exploited.

19. Brown, *John*, 103-105.

20. *Ibid.* 380. I will follow Brown's comments in general as a representative (and admirable) commentary.

21. *Ibid.* 381.

(c) *John 3:5*

The discourse material, in contrast to the narrative sections of John, does seem to exploit the sacraments, though as symbols themselves. John 3:5 is the passage most often connected with baptism in this respect:

Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

Bultmann, however, suggests that the phrase ἐξ ὕδατος is the addition of an ecclesiastical redactor. The reference to baptism here is said to conflict with the ideas of verses 6 and 8, so that here (as well as in John 6), 'the evangelist consciously rejects the sacramentalism of ecclesiastical piety'.²² This, however, seems doubtful in the face of the disciples' baptismal ministry in 3:22. Even if this is not specifically extended to Jesus himself, it is seen as appropriate activity for the disciples, and implicitly for the church. Moreover, the connection between baptism and new birth is not confined to John (cf. also 1 Pet. 1:2,3 which uses ἀναγεννάω, and Titus 3:5 which uses παλιγγενεσία; also Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 61:3ff). On this basis Kōster insists that even without 3:5 the discourse would suggest baptism.²³

If ἐξ ὕδατος is left in the text, we still have the problem of interpretation. Though the connection between water/baptism and re-birth seems justified, the fact remains that the accent in the passage is on the agency of the πνεῦμα. The image of water is not mentioned again after verse 5. Nor can one say that baptism is meant to lead to the spirit; ὕδωρ and πνεῦμα are simply co-ordinated in 3:5. The spirit is clearly the key actor in 're-birth'. The kingdom of God is something which cannot be reached through human means (σάρξ). Birth 'from above' is accomplished only by divine means, and though it is observable, it is not something that can be understood in human terms or controlled by man (3:8).

22. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 138n.

23. H. Kōster, *ZTK* 54 (1957) 63f.

In this sense Brown can say on this passage: 'There is no emphasis on the sacrament of baptism: the theme is one of eschatological begetting through the pouring out of God's Spirit by the agency of Jesus.'²⁴ So that finally, 'we do not think there is enough evidence in the Gospel itself to determine the relation between begetting of water and begetting of Spirit on the level of sacramental interpretation'.²⁵ Köster says the purpose of John 3:5 is not to search out the meaning of baptism, but to witness to the historical Jesus.²⁶ Both of these observations suggest that though there is a reference to baptism in 3:5 this reference is not developed systematically by the evangelist.

It is possible, however, to connect this passage with other uses of the symbols of 'water' and 'spirit' in John. In John 7, as in John 3, the 'living water' is connected with the spirit at the end of a controversy about the origin of Jesus and the validity of his ministry (7:38-39). Again, in 4:10 'water' is linked with 'life', and in 4:23 true worship is defined as worship in 'spirit and in truth'. Significantly, this passage, too, raises the question of Jesus' origin. The link between the themes of origin, new life and spirit/water is evident in John 3. Here Jesus defends his 'born from above' statement on the grounds that only one who has come down from heaven can explain heavenly things (3:11-13). It is clear that Jesus recognizes that only through his own 'heavenly' origin can the 'divine' nature of the new birth be confirmed. The quality of the new birth is therefore rooted in the 'sent-ness' of Jesus.

In this sense both 'water' and 'spirit' refer to the divine nature of the new birth. Since the time of John the Baptist (note Luke 3:10-14) the rite of baptism has represented the desire to repent and to change. Therefore, baptism is an appropriate symbol for the observable change which the new birth occasions. But baptism is not seen as the explanation for the new birth any more than feeling the wind is connected with

24. Brown, *NT Essays*, 93.

25. Brown, *John*, 144.

26. Köster, *art. cit.* 64.

explaining the origin of the wind. The Spirit is the only explanation offered for the new birth and its divine nature.

(d) *John 6:51-58*

This passage contains the most obvious reference to the eucharist in the book of John, and for that reason has been hotly contested. The end of verse 51 is strongly reminiscent of the Words of Institution:²⁷

ὁ ἄρτος δὲ ὃν ἐγὼ δώσω ἡ σὰρξ μου ἐστὶν ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ζωῆς.

For this reason Bultmann distinguishes between 51c-58 and the preceding *Brotrede* (or Bread of Life Discourse).²⁸ He suggests that these verses (verses 51ff) present the eucharist in Ignatian terms as a 'medicine of immortality'.²⁹ This contrasts strongly with the normal attitude of the evangelist, and therefore must be the work of a later redactor.

This view has been most strongly contested by E. Ruckstuhl. Ruckstuhl finds 'stylistic' characteristics of the evangelist in almost every verse of the eucharistic speech:

- 1) verses 53-56 are chiastically constructed;
- 2) the use of μένω in verse 56 is reminiscent of John 15;
- 3) verse 58 condenses verses 49-51 in good Johannine style.

Furthermore, in terms of content, the speech is strongly Johannine:

- 1) there are connections in thought between verses 41 and 52; 32 and 53; 39, 40, 44 and 54b; and 51a and 58;
- 2) verse 57 continues the theme of the 'sent-ness' of Jesus;
- 3) verses 51b and 53 are parallel to other statements which suggest that Jesus is able to give life (5:

27. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1966) 107f.

28. Bultmann, *John*, 228n, and 234.

29. *Ibid.* 219.

26), and to make the dead alive (5:21).³⁰

On this basis, Ruckstuhl claims that the entire eucharistic speech is interwoven thematically and verbally with the *Brotrede*.³¹

Against this, G. Bornkamm argues that the verses following the eucharistic speech (6:60-71) refer not to these verses, but to the preceding *Brotrede*.³² This suggests that 51c-58 are an insertion. As a basis for this view he notes:

- 1) the change of the meaning of *σάρξ* in verse 63;
- 2) the fact that what is tied to the sacraments in 51c-58 is elsewhere tied simply to *faith*;
- 3) the fact that if one interprets 51c ff without reference to the context, these verses do indeed reflect an Ignatian or magical view of the eucharist.³³

Brown agrees with Bornkamm that these verses form a later addition, though he thinks that they are simply a development of the eucharistic ideas present in the *Brotrede* on a secondary level. In particular he finds a striking difference in the meaning of *σάρξ* as it is used in verse 63 (and compared to verses 51 ff): the claim that the 'flesh is useless' could never apply to the eucharistic element.³⁴

G. Richter agrees with Bornkamm's finding in an article which is largely a critique of P. Borgen's argument for the unity of John 6 based on midrashic style (above note

30. E. Ruckstuhl, *Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums* (Freiburg: Paulus, 1951) 243-250. P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) 90-95, argues from midrashic style, but comes to a similar conclusion.

31. Ruckstuhl, *op. cit.* 254.

32. G. Bornkamm, *ZNW* 47 (1956) 167.

33. *Ibid.* 162f.

34. Brown, *John*, 300-303.

30). Richter suggests that only the *Brotrede* fits Borgen's midrashic pattern, and that the 'Eucharistic Speech' departs from this pattern. Using John 20:31 as a definition of the 'goal' and vocabulary of the gospel, Richter suggests that in 6:51-58:

- a) there is no use of *πιστεύειν* or its synonyms;
- b) there is no identification of Jesus as 'Messiah' or 'Son of God', nor any idea that he is the salvation bringer (the use of the 'Son of Man' title in this passage is termed 'unreflective');
- c) 'life' is not a result of faith in Jesus, but of eating his flesh and blood;
- d) belief, therefore, is in the 'eucharist' as Jesus' flesh rather than Jesus himself;
- e) the eucharist has, in fact, become the 'Bread from Heaven';
- f) the suggestion that the use of *μένω* lessens the impact of these objections is false since the only use of this language outside John 6 is John 15, which is itself redactional.³⁵

H. Thyen, in a long article reviewing the problem of this chapter, agrees with Richter that 6:51-58 is secondary, but refuses to set the 'Eucharistic Speech' so sharply against Johannine thought. Thyen agrees that the change in 6:51-58 from the theme of the previous section suggests its redactional nature, but he also suggests:

Darum kann man auch nicht sagen: In der *Lebensbrotrede* gewähre einzig der Glaube an das Wort des Offenbarers das ewige Leben, wogegen es in der *eucharistischen Rede* sakramental durch das Essen und Trinken von Fleisch und Blut des Menschensohns gewonnen werde. Denn weil die sogenannte 'eucharistische Rede' niemals für sich allein und die 'Lebensbrotrede' kaum je in einer ohne die gemeinsame Feier des Herrenmahls lebenden Gemeinde existiert hat, lässt sich das 'Glauben' nicht gegen das 'Essen' ausspielen.³⁶

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35. G. Richter, *ZNW* 60 (1969) 21-40. Richter thinks that the 'remain' language of John 15 is a development of the 'one-ness' language of John, but this only confirms its secondary nature in his eyes (40, n. 57).
36. H. Thyen, *TR* 44 (1979) 99; cf. R. E. Brown, *John*, 286.

Thyen would rather think of a 'Johannine' redaction of his own work which employs eucharistic symbols in developing the christology.³⁷

Thyen's hesitation in making a sharp division between the theology of the 'Bread of Heaven' discourse and the 'Eucharistic Speech' is well founded. There are eucharistic allusions visible in the earlier section of the chapter.³⁸ Specifically, the action of verse 11, and the use of the verb εὐχαριστέω, seem to anticipate the last supper.³⁹ Furthermore, there are two verses which have a strongly eucharistic flavour in the *Brotrede*, but which fit easily into the general theme and style of that speech:

6:35 'Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς· ὁ ἐρχόμενος πρὸς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ πελνάσῃ, καὶ ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ διψήσῃ πώποτε.

6:50 οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβαίνων ἵνα τις ἐξ αὐτοῦ φάγῃ καὶ μὴ ἀποθάνῃ.

6:35 connects 'life' with coming to Jesus (or believing in him) and with the ideas of eating and drinking. This places the language of faith firmly next to the language of the eucharist. 6:50 connects 'not dying' with 'eating' the bread which has 'come down from heaven'. Here the familiar question of origin is connected with eucharistic language.

The eucharistic section then develops the ideas of eating and drinking in a different direction. In verse 51c the bread is said to be Jesus' flesh which is given for the life of the world. In verse 53 not to eat his flesh means that one will not have life. The emphasis on 'flesh' and 'blood' and on the vicarious nature of

37. H. Thyen, *TR* 43 (1978) 354.

38. Köster, *art. cit.* 62, and Brown, *ibid.* 286.

39. The repetition of the verb εὐχαριστέω in verse 20 is omitted by D and other Western witnesses. One suspects that its presence in other MSS is a recognition of the eucharistic nature of these verses by later scribes, and that the verb is here a later addition.

Jesus' action for the world suggests that the primary thrust of this passage has moved from Jesus' origin to the meaning of his death. The eucharistic symbols underline the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death. On the other hand, verse 57 reminds the reader that it is the Father-Son relationship that Jesus has with God that lies at the root of the 'eating' and 'drinking', and verse 56 emphasizes that the result of this meal is not only 'immortal life', but also an 'abiding' relationship with Jesus. Therefore, though the emphasis in verses 51-58 is more obviously developed through sacramental language, there is significant continuity between this section and the *Brotrede*.

There is, therefore, good reason for accepting both these sections as 'Johannine'.⁴⁰ Obviously, the 'Bread of Heaven' discourse is concerned with the 'origin' question, while the 'Eucharistic Speech' goes in another, but still christologically-centred, direction. There is still the question of the meaning of the eucharistic allusion in these verses. Given the emphasis on Jesus' real death in verses 51-58, some have suggested that these verses are part of John's anti-docetic polemic.⁴¹ Barrett suggests that 'the fact that eucharistic and non-eucharistic statements stand in parallel shows that John is not concerned to argue for the uniqueness of the eucharist as a means of grace'.⁴² The stress in the passage is, therefore, said to be the word of Jesus, not the sacraments.⁴³

While these verses are not arranged to give us specific information about the eucharist itself, the fact that

40. The idea that these verses are 'secondary' and still 'Johannine' is acceptable to me, but I must confess some curiosity as to what this implies. Did the evangelist have to wait a long period to add these verses; or could they simply be second thoughts directly after the first writing?

41. So Borgen, *op. cit.* 188; E. Schweizer, *EvTh* 12 (1952 /3) 358-360; W. Wilkens, *EvTh* 18 (1958) 356-360.

42. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2nd ed., London: SPCK, 1978) 297.

43. Köster, *art. cit.* 63.

the eucharistic elements are significant symbols in this context reflects indirectly on the evangelist's understanding of the Lord's Supper. The confrontation of the Bread of Life Discourse centres around the crowd's willingness to accept Jesus as the only mediator between God and men. The eucharistic speech places this theme at the centre of communion itself. The eucharist is first a reminder of the purpose of Jesus' mission, to bring eternal life and the hope of the final resurrection to the world. At the same time, verse 56 stresses that the eucharist points not to a magical means to this new life, but to the necessity of an on-going relationship with the one who brings the opportunity for this life. Therefore the elements of the eucharist symbolize the real death and sacrifice that Jesus suffered in order to bring life to the believer, and suggest the necessity of maintaining a continuous relationship with the one who has 'the words of eternal life' (verse 68) if one is to go on enjoying the fruits of his sacrifice.

The 'flesh' here is certainly not the 'flesh' of verses 60ff, but there is a quite deliberate contrast. The 'flesh' of verse 63 is worthless because it is symbolic of human power (as in Jn 3). But the 'flesh' of verse 55 is true (ἀληθής, or 'truly food' ἀληθῶς) because it is 'my flesh', that is the flesh of the Word incarnate. The eucharistic language points the communicant to the one who makes Christian life possible.

The thrust of this passage is really to subordinate the eucharistic symbols to Jesus. Note verse 54: 'The one eating my flesh I will resurrect him.' Again verse 57: 'The one eating me will likewise live *through me*.' The instrumentality of Jesus in giving this new life is clearly primary in these verses. The eucharistic elements point to the fact that it is Jesus and Jesus alone who can give life to man.

(e) Omission of the Words of Institution

The Upper Room Discourse as the Johannine account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples is a natural place to look for sacramental passages. Surprisingly, this section lacks any synoptic-like account of the Words of Institution.

The question becomes: why has John omitted this part of the Last Supper? Schnackenburg lists seven different interpretations of the omission of the Words of Institution:

- 1) the Evangelist is anti-sacramental (Bultmann);
- 2) the Evangelist does not know of the Last Supper setting for the founding of the eucharist (Windisch);
- 3) the Evangelist has already presented the eucharist in 6:51c-58;
- 4) the re-working of the gospel into a passion gospel has caused the omission (W. Wilkens);
- 5) because of a church *Arkanzdisziplin*, the gospel holds back specific information on the sacraments (Dodd, Niewalda);
- 6) the footwashing scene replaces the eucharist, showing its deeper meaning (J. Betz);
- 7) the evangelist is strongly sacramental, but prefers to refer to the sacraments and interpret them in a deeper way through other stories, such as Cana, and the miracle of the loaves. (Cullmann).⁴⁴

There are problems with all of these suggestions. Bultmann objects to the *Arkanzdisziplin* argument, since the evidence for this is all in the late second century.⁴⁵ This, however, cannot eliminate the argument as a possibility, since the tendency toward *Arkanzdisziplin* is not a Christian development, nor a purely second century phenomenon in religions as a whole; John could be the earliest witness for this tendency in Christianity. Arguments 6 and 7 both depend on an interpretation of the footwashing which has found little support. The anti-sacramental argument is also unlikely, if our study so far has any merit. Wilkens' argument depends on his reconstruction of John, and at best would only explain *when* the Words of Institution were omitted, but not *why*.⁴⁶

Windisch's argument depends on the lack of any reference to the eucharist in the Upper Room Discourse.⁴⁷ However, some authors have found allusions to the eucharist in Jn

44. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1975) II 48ff.

45. Bultmann, *John*, 472.

46. Wilkens, *art. cit.* 369.

47. H. Windisch, *Johannes und die Synoptiker* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1926) 74f.

13:18 and 13:34. In 13:18 the evangelist quotes Ps. 41: 9, but substitutes the verb τρώγω for ἐσθίω which appears in the LXX. This, of course, is the same verb which is used in the eucharistic speech of John 6.⁴⁸ However, it is difficult to evaluate this since John uses the present tense of 'to eat' only in these two places. It is, therefore, possible that this is simply a Johannine preference in vocabulary and has no theological significance.⁴⁹ Similarly, some scholars have seen the reference to the 'new' commandment in 13: 34 as a Johannine development of the 'new covenant' motif normally connected with the Last Supper.⁵⁰ But the evidence for this interpretation is simply the context of the saying in the Last Supper, and the word 'new'. Nevertheless, shaky as this evidence is, it does suggest that we cannot be sure that John did not know of a Last Supper setting for the eucharist.

We are left, therefore, with no firm reason for the omission of the Words of Institution, but the variety of explanations we are offered should alert us to the danger of interpreting from silence. The 'anti-sacramental' explanation can be discounted since we have found no evidence for this tendency in John, and have probable evidence against it. Similarly, it is hard to credit John with an over-powering interest in the sacraments, given the lack of the Words of Institution. But, it is difficult to say more than this. The omission of the eucharistic meal in the Upper Room Discourse certainly hinders our understanding of John's approach to the sacraments, but it is not itself a reliable tool for interpreting John's approach.

(f) *The Footwashing*

The Footwashing of John 13 has at times been interpreted in terms of both the eucharist and baptism, but most

48. Ruckstuhl, *op. cit.* 270f.

49. Barrett, *op. cit.* 299.

50. Most recently argued by T. Onuki, *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 3 (1977) 208f.

scholars have rejected the eucharistic interpretation.⁵¹ More support is found for a reference to baptism based on:

- 1) the mention of washing with water (13:5);
- 2) the fact that this is related to cleansing (13:10);
- 3) the relationship between the footwashing and the disciples' inheritance (such is the meaning of μέρος in verse 8).⁵²

The structure of the passage makes a baptismal interpretation complicated to work out. The Footwashing is often claimed to have two interpretations: a 'soteriological' interpretation in verses 6-10, and a 'didactic' interpretation in verses 15ff.⁵³ Certainly, the latter section emphasizes the example of Jesus (cf. Luke 22:24-27), while the former section suggests that the washing is necessary to be included among those who receive the benefits of faith in Jesus. Yet, neither section indicates that the Footwashing itself is to be a 'sacrament' in that no sign is given that what we have here is a rite to be repeated. Indeed, the significance of the act is something that can only be understood later (μετὰ τῶντα), after Jesus' death. Even the suggestion in 13:10 that the disciples are 'clean' does not seem to be a reference to the efficacy of the footwashing, but to the disciples' present position because of their faith in Jesus (note also 15:3).⁵⁴ Given this faith, however, the disciples are not fully aware of what Jesus' mission demands for them

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51. So Cullmann, *op. cit.* 105-109; but the earliest appearance of this interpretation is in the middle ages (Brown, *John*, 559), so such an interpretation is unlikely on historical grounds.
 52. So Schnackenburg, *op. cit.* III 53; Brown, *John*, 566; Dodd, *Interpretation*, 62; Barrett, *op. cit.* 441.
 53. See Brown's comments, *John*, 560f, and T. Onuki's diagram, *art. cit.* 162.
 54. The textual variants here do not change the meaning. One is tempted to accept the shorter reading as the more difficult reading, but see B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York, London: UBS, 1971) 240 for the opposite view.

or for him. Therefore, as Brown suggests, the primary reference here is 'a prophetic action symbolic of Jesus' passion and death. In demeaning himself to wash his disciples' feet Jesus is acting out beforehand his humiliation in death.'⁵⁵

The introduction to the Footwashing supports Brown's view that it is connected with the passion: the motif of the 'hour', the statement that Jesus loved his own 'to the end', and the reference to the betrayer in 13:1-2 all point to the cross. Significantly, it is *after* the betrayer departs in 13:31 that Jesus says, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him'. This connection of the betrayal and the 'glory' of Christ stresses the centrality of the cross in the mission of Jesus. But the cross is a scandal to the disciples (16:1), and a source of grief for them (16:16-22), and a cause for their temporary failure of faith (16:32). Although they accept that Jesus is the one who has come from God (16:30), the disciples have not yet accepted the fact of Jesus' humiliation. The so-called 'first' interpretation makes it clear that one cannot truly accept Jesus as the one from God, unless one also accepts his humiliation.

The 'second' interpretation extends this idea: unless one takes on Jesus' example as his own life-style, he is really not a disciple. John 13:15ff suggest that a disciple must be like his master, and that Jesus came as one who serves. One must, therefore, not only accept the sacrificial nature of Jesus' mission, but also take up that sacrificial attitude as a way of life. The Footwashing, therefore, dramatizes the cost of one's inclusion in the community of faith both for Jesus and for the disciple.

If there is a reference to baptism in this, it is obviously secondary. Since the disciples are already 'clean' through the word (15:3), there is no allusion to baptism as an initiatory rite. There may, however, be some suggestion that the 'washing' reflects baptism as a symbol of one's *inclusion* in the community which expects to inherit the hope of Christ (cf. Titus 3:5-7; 1 Pet. 1:3-4). It may be significant that the love commandment

55. Brown, *John*, 562.

appears both here (13:34) and in John 15 which also is said to have sacramental significance. The love commandment is the acceptance of Jesus' example of sacrificial love and service for oneself. Baptism may here be a symbol of that repentance which leads to a new lifestyle, a lifestyle characterized by love.

(g) *The Vine*

Like the Footwashing, the vine analogy of John 15 is often connected with sacramental symbolism, in this case the eucharist. This sacramental connection is suggested by:

- 1) the vine symbolism of the eucharistic prayers of *Did.* 9:2;
- 2) the idea of unity and communion suggested in the use of μένω in 15:11.⁵⁶

There is again, however, some question whether the eucharistic symbolism is really so apparent. The significance of the vine analogy is that Jesus is portrayed as the true vine in contrast with disobedient Israel.⁵⁷ In the vine discourse the theme of obedience is quite clearly transferred to the disciples (15:7,10), and forms the basis for the disciples' 'remaining' in Jesus, receiving his love, and the promise that their prayers will be answered. In this sense any idea that blessing from God can be achieved merely through ritual means is excluded.

Nevertheless, the chapter does have a eucharistic undercurrent.⁵⁸ 15:13 certainly looks forward to Jesus' death, so that the joy that is offered in 15:11 is grounded in his own self-sacrifice. Furthermore, there are several points that suggest the future communion of

56. Köster, *art. cit.* 68f; Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium* III 122.

57. Note in this connection that it is the *obedience* of Jesus that provides the link between chapters 14 and 15 (*cf.* 14:31). For the vine as a symbol of Israel's *disobedience* see Is. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21.

58. See Köster, *art. cit.* 67; Brown, *John*, 672-674.

the disciples with Jesus:

- 1) the fact that the disciples are $\phi\lambda\omicron\iota$ of Jesus;
- 2) the promise that they will share in the opposition and suffering which he faces (15:18-25);
- 3) the promise that their fruit will remain (15:16), which is an eschatological promise of endurance.

All of this could reflect the same promise of sharing the future and the suffering of Jesus symbolized in the eucharist. Even so, it is still clear that the theme of obedience is primary, and that the sacramental undertones are secondary and subordinate. It is the ethical considerations as expressed in the love commandment which are stressed here,⁵⁹ so that the eucharist appears as a symbol of Christ's love on the one side, and of the disciples' love-in-response on the other. Therefore, as in the Footwashing scene, as Christ serves we are to serve, and as he loved we are to love. Baptism, then, is used as a symbol of his humility, and our humility in return, and the eucharist of his love which secures for us the love of God, and our need to respond in kind.

(h) *John 19:34-35*

The flow of blood and water from the side of Jesus after the lance wound has been suggested as a reference to both baptism and the eucharist.⁶⁰ Bultmann agrees that the allusion is there, and therefore excludes 34b-35 as a redaction.⁶¹ Brown disputes this analysis, pointing to the fact that the whole of 19:31-37 is in the context of the reference to Zechariah 12:10. Therefore, the section emphasizes the sacrificial death of Jesus as a messianic sign.⁶²

The question remains whether or not the reference to the blood and water flowing from Jesus' side is anything other than a reference to an eye-witness statement concerning Jesus' real death (cf. 19:38).⁶³ As a reference to his real death, these verses could be little more than a part of John's anti-docetic polemic. However, Brown and Schweizer point out that if the

59. Barrett, *op. cit.* 84.

60. Cullmann, *op. cit.* 114-6.

61. Bultmann, *John*, 667n, 678.

62. Brown, *John*, 948.

63. Barrett, *op. cit.* 556f.

anti-docetic factor were the only point in question, then the mention of the blood would suffice.⁶⁴ But, the interpretation of the phenomena is still puzzling. Schweizer finds several possible parallels in ancient literature:

- 1) in 4 Maccabees 9:20 blood and 'fluid' or water are connected with the death of a martyr;
- 2) the rabbis and the classical physicians, Galen and Heracles, all thought that man was composed half of water and half of blood;
- 3) Homer suggested that the gods when wounded bled not blood, but a divine substance called ἵχρῶς, which Schweizer translates *Blutwasser*.

Combining these, E. Schweizer suggests that:

Blut und Wasser wären dann die Zeichen für Menschheit und Gottheit, für 'Fleisch' und 'Geist', die sich in Jesus gemischt hätten, wie es gnostischen Denken ganz entspräche.⁶⁵

The basic problem with this or any other interpretation is that there is simply not much internal development of the 'sign' of the flow of blood and water.⁶⁶ Verse 35 strongly suggests that these are primarily witnesses to the historical reality of Jesus' death on the cross, and the use of Zechariah 12:10 ties this to the suffering of the Messiah. If there is a sacramental reference here, it is at most a reminder that the meaning of the sacraments is tied with the real life and suffering of Jesus.⁶⁷

III CONCLUSIONS

On the whole this study suggests that there are problems in approaching John in terms of 'sacramental symbolism'. Johannine symbolism is broad and inclusive, drawing largely from OT symbols, but re-interpreting and applying these symbols in new and startling ways. There is no need to read sacramental references into a text which is

64. Brown, *John*, 948; E. Schweizer, *EvTh* 12 (1952/3) 349.

65. *Ibid.* 350f. For the meaning of ἵχρῶς Schweizer cites P. Haupt, *American Journal of Philology* 45 (1924) 54f.

66. So also Brown, *John*, 951.

67. E. Schweizer, *EvTh* 12 (1952/3) 352.

already so rich in theological significance. Nevertheless, it does seem that the sacraments, or at least the sacramental elements, were used by the evangelist as symbols themselves. This is only natural since it is likely that these sacraments were a part of the life of the church for which he was writing. But, since the sacraments were used primarily as symbols relating to the meaning of the mission of Jesus, and in some cases subordinate to other symbolic referents, it is very difficult to reconstruct John's sacramental theology on the basis of his use of the sacraments as symbols. Given this cautious statement, there are some conclusions which can be drawn.

1) Neither of the extreme sacramental approaches to John seems to deal satisfactorily with the text. The hyper-sacramentalist approach seems exegetically fanciful and theologically unprofitable. Not every mention of water necessarily suggests baptism, nor are the narratives generally developed with the sacraments in mind. What reference does exist to the sacraments seems to be secondary and indirect. The sacraments are used symbolically in reference to the meaning and mission of Jesus and the nature of Christian discipleship. No attempt is made in John to develop the meaning of baptism or the eucharist in any detailed manner.

There is no real evidence either, however, for the view that John devalued the purpose of the sacraments. The tendency of the anti-sacramental interpreters to isolate or exclude certain texts seems to create their conclusions rather than prove them. The best argument for this view is the omission of the Words of Institution, and that is a precarious argument from silence. On the other hand, there do seem to be some places where the sacramental elements are used to symbolize the nature of Christian life. This positive use of the sacramental elements seems to affirm the value of the sacraments themselves. The gospel clearly stresses the priority of faith in Jesus and obedience to his word, but this stress on faith is not necessarily in opposition to the sacraments. On the contrary, the symbolic use of the sacramental elements suggests that the sacraments point to the meaning of faith in Jesus.

2) The symbolic use of the sacramental elements serves largely to explain the meaning of Christ's mission and of Christian discipleship. The eucharistic speech of John 6 and the Footwashing scene suggest on the one hand that the sacraments point to the life and death of Jesus for their central meaning. Baptism is tied in the Footwashing to his death and humiliation. The eucharist in John 6 is made to reflect his death for the life of the world (6:51). The vine analogy of John 15 stresses that our obedience is based on his prior 'true' obedience. Any magical understanding of the sacraments therefore seems unlikely in this gospel. Rather the sacraments stand as symbols of our participation in and acceptance of Christ's sacrifice and humiliation.⁶⁸

At the same time, this acceptance seems to imply a response on the part of the disciple. This is most clearly expressed in the Footwashing scene and in John 15. In the Footwashing we find that the disciple not only is to accept the humiliation and death of Christ, but is to take up the example of Christ for his own life. In John 15 this is spelled out more clearly. As he was persecuted, so will the disciple be persecuted. As he obeyed, so must the disciple obey. As he laid down his life for his friends, so must the disciple be prepared for this 'greatest' expression of love. The commandment to love one another ties these two sections together. The sacramental references in these two chapters are, therefore, tied to this commandment, suggesting that our ritual commitment to Christ consists in acts which reflect our living commitment to love as he loved. The sacraments are symbols of the change which the Christian life demands; the essential meaning of this change is loving service.

Beyond this, however, the sacraments also point to the mystery of the new life. Both John 6:63 and 3:8 affirm that the Christian life is not something attainable by human means, but something which is fundamentally divine (or of the 'spirit') in origin. The sacraments stand as physical representatives of this mystery, but are not meant to explain the new life or to cause it, any more than to feel the wind enables one to explain its origin

68. Barrett, *op. cit.* 82-85, suggests basically the same idea; cf. Brown, *John*, cxiv and others.

or cause.

The divine origin of the new life which Christ offers is in turn based on the origin of Christ himself. Therefore, the only way that the disciple can maintain this new life is to 'remain' in Christ (6:56; 15:5-10). This is primarily accomplished by obedience (John 15), but both the vine analogy and the eucharistic speech of John 6 suggest that this is also part of the significance of 'communion' itself. The eucharist is, therefore, symbolic of our commitment to Christ himself, of our determination to endure the scandal of his humiliation and to obey his commands. It is also the symbol of our future expectations, our hope for the final resurrection (6:54), and for fruit that will last forever (15:16).

The sacraments for John are, therefore, meaningful pointers to the meaning of the life of Christ and Christian discipleship. They combine images of sacrifice and commitment, promise and command. It is this symbolic value which is exploited in the gospel. It is impossible, of course, from this viewpoint to determine what John thought about the nature of the efficacy of the sacraments in any explicit way, but this is not the point of a gospel. The point of a gospel in John's eyes is to examine the meaning of faith in Christ and its implications for life (John 20:31), and it is in this light that the evangelist finds the significance of the sacraments.