

THE LANCE THRUST TO JESUS' HEART*

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Introduction

In the present notes, I do not pretend at all to resume studies made on the Gospel passage where St. John recounts the lance thrust to Jesus' heart, nor to criticize interpretations proposed up to this time; I only wish to point out certain interesting details.

To begin, here is the translation of Jn 19:28-37, slightly paraphrased in order to turn more light on the discreet nuances characteristic of the style of the Fourth Gospel.

"After that, knowing that all things were now accomplished, in order that the Scriptures should be fulfilled Jesus said, 'I am thirsty'. There was nearby a vessel of sour wine. Having fixed a sponge soaked with this upon a branch of hyssop, they put it to his mouth. Then when Jesus had taken this sour wine, he said '(All things) are fulfilled', and inclining his head he gave up the spirit.

"I must tell you that this was a very important Sabbath, a day of ritual "Preparation", and in order that the crucified should not remain upon their crosses during the Sabbath, the Jews requested of Pilate that those three on Golgotha should have their legs broken and be taken down. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first thief—who was still alive—and did the same to the other man who was crucified with Him. Coming to Jesus and seeing that he was already dead, they did not break his legs; but look what happened; one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance and immediately water and blood flowed out. And it is he who saw all that who bears witness to it—not only is his witness a witness in all the force of the term, but furthermore He knows that what this person says is true—so that you too will continue to believe.

"For certain, these things happened so that the text of the Scripture would be fulfilled ... *not one of his bones will be broken*; and on the other hand, another text says: ... *they looked upon him whom they have transpierced*."

All this is told with a simplicity, a realism, which excludes the intention—and even more, the invention—of a mere symbol.

The Proceedings of the Jewish Authorities to the Governor

In the year 30 of the Christian era, the new moon of March fell on

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the 22nd, and the crescent was probably visible at Jerusalem and in the Land of Israel by the evening of the 23rd, which would explain how the Pharisees and the Galileans had the right to immolate the paschal lamb on the day of Thursday April 6, and to eat it after sunset. In any case, the officials—I mean by that the High Priests and those who conducted the Temple cult—fixed the 25th of March as the first day of the month of Nisan, which meant that Jesus' enemies were required to "eat the Passover" on the evening of Friday April 7, the official beginning of 15 Nisan.

The "Jews"—in the vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel this term most often designates the religious chiefs hostile to Jesus—the Jews had three reasons to want the crucified of Golgotha "taken down" before sunset:

a) A text of the Mosaic Law (Deut 21:22-23) requires that the body of a hanged man disappear the same day of the hanging. The historian Josephus, writing his book on the Jewish Wars about 78 AD, assures us that the jurisprudence had interpreted this prescription to apply in the case of those crucified: "Also those who have been lifted up on the cross following their condemnation, should be taken down and buried before the setting of the sun".¹ It seems that the Roman Procurators had permitted this usage.

b) Since the Sabbath began on the evening of Friday, the Jews had to see to it that the Holy City should not be profaned by the presence of the crucified, dead or alive.

c) This obligation was even more imperative because that year the Saturday coincided with the first day of the Feast of Azymes, a feast which for a long time had been associated with the date of the sacrifice of the paschal lamb commemorating the Exodus from Egypt. Later, Apollinaire, bishop of Hierapolis, relates that the churches of Asia Minor retained the tradition that the Lord Jesus "ate the paschal lamb" on 13 Nisan, and that "He himself suffered" on the 14th, eve of the "great day" of the Azymes, an expression borrowed from St. John. Now Josephus narrates that merely the sight of the Roman emblems at Jerusalem had incited a riot;² one can imagine the indignation of the pilgrims if they had seen, near a gate of the City, the cadavers of three crucified, and on the middle cross the *titulus*, "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews".

The Lance Thrust

Having left the Praetorium equipped with the necessary instruments, the soldiers break the legs of the two thieves, but they decided not to break the legs of Jesus. They had taken this decision because it was obvious that Jesus had ceased to breathe. One of the soldiers, though, had the idea to strike Jesus in the breast with a lance. Why? Was he perplexed a bit over the fact of so rapid a death? Did he want to finish Jesus off, in case this death was only apparent?

Whatever prompted the soldier, the fact remains that John saw what happened. "Do not trouble yourself and do not lower your eyes,

O Well-Beloved," St. John Chrysostome cries, "for what they did for an infamous motive served to insure the victory of the Truth."³ From the wound, blood and water immediately flowed out.

The Eye-Witness

More than all the others, St. John the Evangelist discerned the power of a testimony furnished by an eye-witness. Having seen the Father (6:46) and what is more, being the only one to have seen him (1:18), the Son could bear witness of that which he had seen in the presence of his Father (3:11, 18:37). Having seen the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descend and alight upon Jesus, John the Baptist bore witness that this was the awaited Messiah (1:32-34). Having seen "the Glory of Jesus" at Cana, the Apostles believed in him (2:11). Having seen Lazarus come living out of his tomb, many Jews believed in Jesus and bore witness in his favor at his messianic entry into Jerusalem (11:45, 12:17). Having seen the Lord risen from the dead, Mary Magdalen bore witness immediately. Having seen Jesus alive and still bearing his wounds, the Apostles testified to the absent Apostle. And when this latter saw the place of the nails and the lance, he believed and declared his faith in the divinity of Jesus.

"There is no doubt that John foresaw the reproaches of illusion or of bad faith",¹⁰ therefore he insists on his quality of eye-witness. Modern reportage admits the use of the first person and if I may be permitted to play the role of "commentator", here is how I would render John's thought: "And I who have seen all these things, have always given witness of them—not only is my testimony a testimony in all the force of the term, but furthermore the Lord Jesus knows very well that I say nothing that is not true—so that you too will continue to believe in Christ, Son of God, dead and resurrected for our salvation" (19:35).

"He who has seen" is the "Disciple" to whom Jesus, just before expiring, had confided his Mother, and if the writer could say that that Disciple had "from that moment" taken Mary into his own family, it is precisely because the writer is none other but him of whom he speaks.

Writing to Pope Victor about 190 or 195, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, points to John as "witness and teacher"; witness of that which was the object of his teaching.

The "Canon of Muratori" is an VIIIth c. Latin text translated from a Greek original of the beginning of the II c. Rev. Lagrange attributes it to Papias, from 110 to 130 bishop of Hierapolis, 200 kms from Ephesus. Now in this document we read: "The Fourth Gospel is by John, one of the Disciples ... In each book of the Gospels the principal events are taught in [particular] nuances, but that presents no difficulty for the faith of believers because in each Gospel and in all of them, everything was written in the light of only one Supreme Spirit; about the Lord's birth, his conduct toward his Disciples, his passion, his resurrection, and concerning his two Advents; spurned in his lowly estate at the time of the first, which has already taken place; clothed with royal power at the second glorious Advent, which is still to

come. What is there so surprising, then, if John avows each event with such energy? Even in his Epistles, when speaking of himself, he says: 'That which we saw with our eyes, heard with our ears and touched with our hands, that is what we have written to you'. In this way he clearly presents himself not only as having seen, but also as having heard, and what is more, as having written, in their proper order, the wonderful deeds of the Lord".

The Testimony put into Writing

You will perhaps be astonished at the paradoxical character of what I am about to say, but the weight of the reasons which I will give will promptly reassure you.

In the works attributed, right or wrong, to Plato, I found a hundred times—ninety-nine times to be exact—the words of the root *martyr*. To my great surprise, the word *martyria* is found only eight times, and it seems that Plato does not use it except when it concerns written testimony. One will object that John does not hesitate to employ the word when the testimony is given orally. This is incontestable, but almost always it involves a metaphor. Thus Jesus confirms the works that he accomplishes by the testimony of the "Scriptures"; and the Holy Spirit will testify on behalf of Jesus and of his Apostles as well. John does not pretend to write up a testimony destined to be read before a tribunal like the one presided by Caiphas—there is no tribunal like that one. No, what John has in mind is the tribunal of history, of the history of salvation; he presents himself as an eye-witness and he gives a written testimony to which he joins, as evidence, the testimonies written before his time and preserved in the sacred library of Israel.

However, he does not say *graphei* but *legei*, because the essential mark of a testimony is what the witness *says*: the writing is only the material record of the deposition; the judge will pronounce according to what the witnesses will say. Jesus loved to employ the formula, 'Verily, verily I *say* unto you that...!'

In Plato, I was struck by the number of times the noun *logos* or the verb *legein* designated an attestation produced during a judiciary debate. John 15:25 is typical of the way the noun "word" is sometimes used in the sense of a *written attestation*. Jesus says, "If I had not done these works among them which no other had ever done, they would not be in sin; but now they have seen and (despite that) they hate both myself and my Father! But it was necessary so that the *word* which is written in the Law should be accomplished: They hated me without a cause."

"*And That One knows that (this one) says the truth.*" The second clause is more important than the first. In Greek, the expression 'and the poor and the rich' signifies: the *rich as well as the poor*, and the emphasis lies on the second term. Xenophon, too, eulogizing the government of Cyrus, wrote: "In the government of Cyrus it is lawful *and* to a Greek *and* to a barbarian, so long as he does nothing wrong, to travel about without fear wherever it pleases him."⁴ It was already

very good in the case of a Greek, who was a stranger of quality among the Persians, but that this liberty should be extended even to a barbarian ... The thought of St. John is therefore: It is evident that my testimony is a testimony in all the force of the term, but what is more important to me and to you is that the Lord Jesus knows that I do not say anything but what is exact.

This crescendo is perceptible in the following passages: "No one tears a piece from a new garment to add it to an old one; for not only would he have torn a new garment (which already would be absurd) but also the piece taken from the new garment would not match the old garment at all."⁵—To the man born blind whom he had cured, Jesus says: "Not only have you seen (the Son of Man) but know also that he who speaks with you (at this moment) is He."⁶—"I say to you that not only has Elijah returned (and that is already good news) but know also that they did to him everything that they wished, as it is written about him."⁷—The most precious text for the readers of this journal is Jn 20:6-7. Let us listen as John presents to us the progression of events. "And Simon Peter (once he had entered into the tomb where we had buried Jesus) saw (there is no doubt about it) the linens lying flat (as I then saw for myself, a fact which could not but greatly astonish us, for the body of Jesus was no longer there), but besides that he also saw this amazing thing: the *sudarium* which had been tied at the top of Jesus' head was not flat like the linens but, quite the contrary, still rolled and enveloped in the linen at the precise same place where it had been two evenings earlier.* I too entered and when I saw that, my faith in the glorious resurrection of the Lord was absolute."

John was at Golgotha when Jesus was crucified and he assisted at the scenes of which he wrote the account. Moreover, he considers himself qualified to give a testimony worthy of the term. Presenting himself thus at the tribunal of the history of salvation, he gives his oath that he has said nothing but the pure truth. He takes God as witness of his personal sincerity and to the exactitude of the facts that he reports. His testimony concerns the Christ from still another point of view; John affirms that this happened and that happened, but—*except for Jesus*—the personages on the scene were never in the least aware that they themselves were taking part in the realization of the messianic prophecies.

If Jesus had died at any other moment, things would not have happened as they did. And as we know that Jesus died at the precise hour which he chose, one could say that he "knew" all that was going to happen to him. "My Father," he had said, "loves me for this reason, that I lay down my life so as to take it up again. No one takes my life from me, but I offer it myself, of my own accord. I have the power to lay down my life and the power to take it up again; that is the commandment that I have received from my Father."⁸ And when on the

* See A. Feuillet, "The Identification & the Disposition of the Funerary Linens of Jesus' Burial According to the Fourth Gospel": *Spectrum* #4, Sept. 1982. [Ed.]

second day afterwards Jesus takes up his life after having voluntarily sacrificed it, he would take care to preserve those ineffable wounds which would prove the reality both of his death and of his resurrection.

The Intention of the Evangelist

Just as one ought to recognize God in his works, one ought to recognize the Christ from the miraculous signs which he realized, because these are just so many testimonials signed by God to authenticate the words of his Envoy. "Jesus did many miracles or signs in the presence of his disciples, in the presence of the Jews."⁹ The Author chose several of those "signs" to record so that others would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by that faith have life. It would be impossible to stamp the doctrinal and very practical character of this history in a better way. And it is decidedly a history in the thought of the Author-witness, since his own faith was born in the sight of miracles; and he presents his testimony so that others might believe without having seen them."¹⁰

To his own personal testimony, John adds two authorized testimonials: that of Moses and that of Zacharias. However, he does not name them because he personalizes the two scriptural texts, inviting them to come give their evidence with him at the tribunal. Just as Jesus had said one day: "You search the Scriptures because you think that it is there that you will find eternal life; and the Scriptures are the testimonies concerning me, and (in spite of that) you do not want to come to me to receive that life."¹¹

First text cited: "Not one of his bones will be broken." "In the fact that the legs of Christ were not broken, John recognizes the fulfillment of a prefiguration represented by one of the rites of the Passover, which, as we have explained, was a symbol of survival and salvation."¹² The immolation of the paschal lamb dates back to Israel's nomadic period; it was common to the Israelites' ancestors and to other nomadic shepherds. But in Israel it took on a special significance when it was placed in relation to the Exodus from Egypt, of which it thus became the memorial. On eating this lamb, each Israelite was conscious that he was personally a beneficiary of this liberation effected by the merciful power of God. To this was added, more and more, the sentiment that this lamb, immolated and eaten in family groups, prefigured a more perfect liberation, more complete, more definitive; and this new intervention by God, which would be decisive, was awaited with fervor.

This expectation was fully and completely realized the day that Jesus, "our Passover", was immolated as a sacrifice on the cross. Since that time, all men, whether they be Jews or not, are dispensed from offering a lamb each year; instead, they are invited to participate with faith in the eucharistic sacrifice instituted by the Christ to maintain the new and eternal life which he communicated to them.

Second text: "They will look upon him whom they have transpierced."

John precedes the second testimony with these words: *kai palin etera graphi legei*.¹³ *Palin* means not only "again, moreover", as when St. Paul accumulates citations to mutually reinforce each other. We know that the primitive sense of invariable words is better preserved in the compound form of which they are a part. Now the compounds of *palin* indicate most often a movement in contrary sense. Thus an arrow would be *palimbelos* if it is shot backwards; in *palindromicos* we understand a tendency to retrogression; one is *palimporos* if he retraces his steps.

The *palillogia* is a retraction, and *palin legein* signifies, most of the time, "contradict", while *palin erein* and *palin ladzesthai* say the opposite of that which one has just said, or takes up his word again giving it another meaning.

On Golgotha, St. John fervently hopes that the body of Jesus will not be submitted to yet another outrage, and his surprise was great to see a soldier give this lance thrust to the heart of Jesus. In order to clarify this mystery, he produces a second text which, at first hearing, seems to contradict the first: it was forbidden to break the legs of the paschal lamb; and yet, on the other hand, God had let it be known that he would tolerate that the Messiah should be transpierced ...

Citing this text from Zacharias,¹⁴ St. John had recourse to the original Hebrew, as he liked to do whenever he wanted to show that a prophecy had been fulfilled.¹⁵ That which is mysterious in this passage is that the prophet does not by any means describe a fact but only an impression ... The principal personage does not appear, even though all depends on him, or rather, on his death ... Those who had committed the crime will be the first to cry over the death of the victim, and that death will be a source of pardon."¹⁶

As the Israelites of the Exodus gazed upon the Bronze Serpent, now there will be hope in the eyes of those who look upon the Transpierced. Isaiah had warned; "Then they will be alarmed and confused on account of Ethiopia, in which they hoped, and about Egypt which was their boast!"¹⁷ May we never glory but in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ!¹⁸

Conclusion

Those among us who believe in the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin love to contemplate the image of "our Passover", the image of the Lamb of God; they can see for themselves that not one of his bones is broken and that in his side is the wound from which flowed infinitely precious blood and life-giving water.

NOTES

1. *Jewish Wars* IV,v,2
2. *Jewish Wars* II,ix,2
3. PG 59 col. 463
4. *Anabase* 1,9,13
5. Lk 5:36
6. Jn 9:37
7. Mt 9:13
8. Jn 10:17ff
9. Jn 12:37
10. Rev. Lagrange, *Evangile selon saint Jean*.
11. Jn 5:39-40
12. Rev. de Vaux, *Les Sacrifices de l'Ancien Testament*, p. 26
13. Jn 19:37
14. Zach. 12:8 to 13:1
15. See Jn 6:31, 12:14-15, 12:39-40 and 13:18
16. Rev. Lagrange, *Le Judaïsme avant Jésus-Christ*, p. 381
17. Isa. 20:5-6
18. Gal. 6:14