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ETERNITY AND TIME IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Wieczność i czas w Ewangelii Jana

ABSTRACT

The relationship between eternity and time has been a perennial issue in Johannine studies. Consider that the *pre-existent* Word of God enters *in time* and within concrete human history, thus bridging eternity and time. The evangelist describes both Jesus' *divinity* as the Logos, existing in an eternal, timeless "beginning" (1:1), and Jesus' true *humanity* as the historical person who was made "flesh" (1:14), taking on the human condition in all its fragility, in its temporality, suffering and death. His earthly mission was fulfilled "in time" – in a concrete "hour". Reading the Fourth Gospel in this light may help us appreciate the Johannine understanding of eternity and time. This survey presents the various interpretations of the expression "in the beginning" and also of the time-related noun "hour", used by the evangelist on certain occasions with detailed precision: "it was about the tenth hour" (1:39); "it was about the sixth hour" (4:6; 19:14); and "at the seventh hour" (4:52), refer-

KEYWORDS

The Gospel of John, beginning, time, hour, symbolism

ring always to a particular chronological point in time. However, this article does not place undue emphasis on the *numbers* recounting the particular hour, but rather tries to identify the links of each *hour* with the accompanying words and deeds of Jesus.

STRESZCZENIE

SŁOWA KLUCZE

Relacja między wiecznością a czasem jest przedmiotem nieprzerwanych studiów Janowych. *Odwieczne* Słowo Boże wkracza bowiem *w czas* i w konkretną historię ludzkości, łącząc wieczność i czas. Ewangelista opisuje zarówno *boskość* Jezusa jako Słowa istniejącego w odwiecznym, ponadczasowym „początku” (1,1), jak i prawdziwe *człowieczeństwo* Jezusa jako postaci historycznej, która stała się „ciałem” (1,14), przyjmując na siebie ludzką kondycję w całej kruchości: w jej doczesności, cierpieniu i śmierci. Jego ziemski misja została wypełniona „w czasie” - w konkretnej „godzinie”. Czytanie Czwartej Ewangelii w tym świetle może więc uwydatnić Janowe rozumienie wieczności i czasu. Niniejsza publikacja przedstawia różne interpretacje wyrażenia „na początku” oraz związanego z czasem rzeczownika „godzina”, używanego przez ewangelistę przy pewnych okazjach: „Było to około dziesiątej godziny” (1,39); „było to około szóstej godziny” (4,6; 19,14); „o siódmej godzinie” (4,52), odnosząc się każdorazowo do chronologicznego, określonego punktu w czasie. Jednakże niniejszy artykuł *nie* ustala znaczenia *liczb* wskazujących daną godzinę. Jego celem jest wypuklenie związków każdej *godziny* ze słowami i czynami Jezusa, które jej towarzyszą.

Ewangelia Jana,
początek,
czas,
godzina,
symbolika

INTRODUCTION

Today the majority of Johannine scholars do not hesitate to accept the pervasive and tendentious symbolism of the Fourth Gospel. Many of them find it even on the most material level – that of the evangelist’s use of time. They pay particular attention to the “hour” of Jesus. This detail is very characteristic of John who describes the whole life of Jesus in concrete time and as directed towards “the hour” of his crucifixion and resurrection, which is the highest point of Jesus’ earthly mission. However, this culminating hour never ends; on the contrary, it is a new beginning. Similarly, the beginning is not fixed as the starting point in history either. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus’ life does not begin with his birth. Jesus is the pre-existing Logos who “was in the beginning” (ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος), before the creation of the world (1:1).¹ Even though the linearity of time seems to be scrambled, the evangelist, in fact, expresses a carefully thought-out concept of time related mainly to the event of Jesus in time.

Hence, in John’s Gospel, the time-related noun “hour” (ὥρα) plays a major role and is expressed by the evangelist in several ways.² First, on certain occasions the evangelist gives the hour with astonishing precision “it was about the tenth hour” (ὥρα ἦν ὡς δεκάτη) [1:39]; “it was about the sixth hour” (ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη [4:6; 19:14]); “at the seventh hour” (ὥραν ἑβδόμην [4:52]); when referring to chronological, particular points of time. Second, it is used in an eschatological sense to refer as some undetermined future time “the hour is coming” (ἔρχεται ὥρα [4:21.23; 5:25.28; 16:2.25.32]) and “their hour comes” (ἡ ὥρα αὐτῶν [16:4]). Third, we note a sort of tension of the temporal indications that are coexistent, i.e., “the hour is coming and is now”

¹ Zimmermann, “Eschatology”, 293.

² The term “hour” (ὥρα) occurs 26 times: 25 times in the singular and only once in the plural in Jesus’ enigmatic question: “Are there not twelve hours in the day?” (Jn 11:9).

(ἔρχεται ὥρα καὶ νῦν ἐστὶν [4:23; 5:25]) or “the hour is coming, indeed it has come” (ἔρχεται ὥρα καὶ ἐλήλυθεν [16:32]). Fourth, a number of times throughout the gospel, the evangelist refers to “the hour” of Jesus specifically as “his hour” (ἡ ὥρα αὐτοῦ [7:30; 8:20; 13:1]), or “this hour” (ἡ ὥρα [8:20; 12:23.27x2; 16:32; 17:1; 19:21]), or “my hour” (ἡ ὥρα μου [2:4]). Indeed, from the narration of the wedding in Cana (2:1-11) this “hour” of Jesus is constantly kept in view as one of the major themes.

The purpose of this article is to explore the fourth evangelist’s standpoint on eternity and time as referring to a chronological, particular hour, which is a noticeably unique, prominent and pervasive Johannine trait: one that is closely related to Jesus’ identity, to his mission and his decisive hour of passion, death and resurrection.

1. THE ETERNAL WORD LINKS ETERNITY AND TIME

Through proposing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God as the core message of his gospel (20:30), John describes the uniqueness of Jesus as *vere deus* and *vere homo*: as truly eternal Son of God and as man (ὁ ἄνθρωπος), a truly historical person. Thus, eternity and time are two aspects which the evangelist considers linked to each other. Eternity, in fact, is continually interwoven with time and remains the binding point between the eternal God and human beings living a specific history in a concrete point of time.

Consequently, all of John’s temporal terminology tends to focus on the identity of Jesus and to highlight the convergence of eternity and time, of the human and the divine. Therefore, speaking of time, or of the “hour” in the Gospel of John, first we have to examine some essential indications of “eternity” which the evangelist points out from the first verse of the Prologue. Although neither the noun “time” nor

“the hour” occurs there, the evangelist refers to “the beginning” (ἐν ἀρχῇ) and, for the first time, to Jesus, with significant qualifications: ὁ λόγος, pointing out that he was *with God* and he *was God* (1:1). The Word, who was originally in *the beginning with God*, and *was God*, in verse 14, is designated as made flesh (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο [1:14]); namely, a visible manifestation to the world. This profound reality leads to the essential question of interpretation: What does it mean that in the reality preceding the incarnation of Jesus, we refer to the “beginning”; namely, to the time before the existence of the world?

The answer is strictly linked with the high theology described in the Prologue and throughout the entire Gospel of John. Because of this very significant example of Johannine style we shall consider his standpoint on two indications: “in the beginning” (ἐν ἀρχῇ [1:1]) and “the Word was made flesh” (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο [1:14]), which are the noticeably unique expressions of his gospel. Only then shall we be able to perceive the close link with Jesus’ mission carried out in a specific point of time and brought into fulfilment in “his hour” of glorification.

1.1. *In the beginning*

Right from the first verses opening the Prologue, the fourth evangelist sets “the beginning” before the reader, framed outside of narrative temporality and the realm of time: ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος (1:1). At first glance, this opening expression “in the beginning” could seem as identical or paralleling the Old Testament ἐν ἀρχῇ (Gen 1:1 LXX). It should be noted, however, that the Gospel of John does not allude to the beginning of *the act* of creation but to *the state* existing before and beyond time, in a “pre-temporality”. It refers to the “source” and “origin” which is beyond time and creation³. Indeed, it does

³ Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung*, 220; Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, 173; Painter, “The Prologue”, 40; Mensch, *The Beginning*, 18;

not speak of the beginning, but of a reality without beginning, namely, of the Logos who exists eternally.

This is confirmed immediately when the evangelist adds an explanation ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν (1:1b) indicating that the Logos shares what God himself is. God is the real Subject of ἐν ἀρχῇ and “the place” of the Logos⁴. In his Word, God expresses himself without limits. So, his self-revelation and his self-communication are the same because *his Word* means, from the beginning, *his Son Jesus*⁵. Moreover, this expression “the Word was with God” (ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν [1:1b]) points to the relationship of mutual communion and active, dynamic fellowship, the special intimacy between ὁ λόγος and ὁ θεός⁶. God is presented *in relationship*, not merely because he creates outside himself, but because he is in himself *relationship*⁷. The parallel expression that follows, “He was in the beginning with God” (οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν [1:2]), not only harkens back to “pre-temporality” but speak also of the closeness and of the continuous, intimate relationship between the Creator and the Logos.

The third phrase connected with “the beginning”: “The Logos was God” (θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος - 1:1c) is the most important definition and best expression of the dignity and essence of ὁ λόγος, whose name is θεός. This is, however, no indication whatever that the Logos is the same person as God, or that he is an «additional god», but that the Logos is *from the very being of God*, a distinct person, who *was* with God as one person is with another⁸. Thus, God and

Frey, “Die johanneische Theologie”, 818-819.

⁴ Schnelle, “Trinitarisches Denken”, 372; Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung*, 222; Blank, *Johannes*, I, 83.

⁵ Blank, *Johannes*, I, 83; Schnelle, “Trinitarisches Denken”, 373.

⁶ This formulation is indicated by the use of the preposition πρὸς with the accusative case τὸν θεόν. Cf. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 66.

⁷ Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, 176.

⁸ Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung*, 224; Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 203; Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, 178.

the Logos exist equally, with an equal power of acting⁹. God reveals himself as the one who pronounces, who speaks. But his Word is more than mere pronouncement. It is the life-giving Word of the Creator, the creative *channel* (δι' αὐτοῦ) of life and light that shines in the darkness (1:4-5)¹⁰ through whom “in the beginning” of time everything was made.

Subsequently, throughout the gospel, the evangelist forthrightly maintains the eternal existence of Jesus as totally one with the Father, sharing his divinity, as he himself confirms: “I and the Father are one” (10:30). He points out his eternal existence and identity along the way of his earthly mission, when he declares to the Jews: “*before* Abraham came into being, ‘I AM’” (8:58); and also in his farewell prayer when he asks the Father to glorify him with the glory which he had with the Father *before* the world existed (17:5)¹¹.

These introductory verses of the Prologue (1:1-3) help the reader to grasp the notion of “the beginning” before the creation of heaven and earth, and to perceive the identity of Jesus who is the Logos: the eternal, divine Person Jesus Christ. This is because the Word – with God before time and creation, one in essence and nature, yet personally distinct – is the only revealer and interpreter of the inner being of God (1:1.18), the reflection and visible image of God, and His visible manifestation to the world.

⁹ Söding, “Die Offenbarung des Logos”, 410-411.

¹⁰ Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos*, 219; Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, 182; Schnelle, “Trinitarisches Denken”, 372; Söding, “Die Offenbarung des Logos”, 410-411.

¹¹ There are several statements in the gospel, which point out to Jesus’ eternal origin. We point out some significant examples of this divine “beginning”: “He who comes *after* me has surpassed me because he was *before* me” (1:15); “A man who comes *after* me has surpassed me because he was *before* me” (1:30); “Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was *before*?” (6:62); “for you loved me *before* the foundation of the world” (17:24). Cf. Frey, “Die johanneische Theologie”, 820-821. For the detailed study of this theme, see the recent study of Kunath, *Die Präexistenz Jesu im Johannesevangelium*.

1.2. *And the Word was made flesh*

Positioned before and beyond time, the eternal Word of God comes into earthly reality to dwell among us in flesh. With the characteristic words, ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο and by the use of the verb “was made” (ἐγένετο)¹² the evangelist has linked the eternal, timeless existence of the Logos with the fragile flesh of created humanity and located his existence at a definite historical point in time (1:14). Hence, such an indication expresses a profound paradox – the eternal Logos (ὁ λόγος), who is from the very being of God, was not only spoken in the sphere of earthly, human reality, but was himself made flesh (σὰρξ ἐγένετο) in all the totality and fragility that accompanies the human condition: temporality, suffering and death¹³. He who, as Logos, clearly belongs to the domain before time and creation belongs at the same time to the sphere of the temporal and perishable, as Jesus: a fully human person: He is the God-man through whom all may have eternal life (20:31). Therefore, while John emphasizes the *eternal* existence of the Logos with God (1:1-3) in the first verses of the Prologue, he then moves on to stating the *historical* event of the incarnation (1:14)¹⁴. Consequently, in the Word made flesh the divine and the human, eternity and time, the material and the immaterial are linked together as a source of unity for everything. Moreover, the event of the incarnation results in the *Word's dwelling* among us; namely, “pitching (ἐσκήνωσεν) his tent” among us as the living tabernacle of God's presence in our world

¹² The verb ἐγένετο is used in the Prologue to denote the creation of all things (1:3[x2]), the appearance of John (1:6), the created world (1:10); in verse fourteen the same verb describes the profound truth of the eternal Logos who was made flesh.

¹³ Painter, “The Prologue”, 56-57. Further, for the Christological importance of *Jesus' flesh* (σὰρξ), see the research of Kunath *Die Präexistenz*, 52-54.

¹⁴ Akala, *The Son-Father Relationship*, 167; Jojko, *Worshipping*, 329.

(1:14)¹⁵. Through his incarnation, eternity has left its mark on all human history and time. In no other book of the New Testament are Jesus' pre-existent being and temporal, fleshly nature so sharply portrayed as in the Gospel of John.

Subsequently, after the Prologue, John describes Jesus as *vere homo*; as tangible man in concrete mission, time¹⁶ and geography¹⁷, showing him in his encounter with real persons¹⁸ and attending Jewish feasts¹⁹. This concrete man (ὁ ἄνθρωπος) is the Son of God who is sent by the Father,

¹⁵ Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung*, 249; Mensch, *The Beginning*, 44-45; Jojko, *Worshipping*, 329.

¹⁶ Like, e.g., the next day (1:29.35.43; 6:22;12:12); the third day (2:1); the first day of the week (20:1.19); after this (2:12; 3:22; 5:1; 6:1.66; 7:1; 11:7; 19:28.38); in the meantime (4:31) the sixth hour (4:6; 19:14); winter time (10:22); early in the morning (8:2; 18:28); by night (3:2; 19:39); it was night (13:30); the Jewish day of Preparation (19:42).

¹⁷ The evangelist locates every event in space: e.g., Capernaum (2:12; 6:24); Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 12:2); Judean countryside (3:22); Samaria (4:4); Galilee (4:3.43.45.47; 7:1.9.41.52). The descriptions within the narrative are very precise: e.g., Bethany across the Jordan (1:28; 10:40); Cana in Galilee (2:1.11; 4:46; 21:2); "on the other side", and "by" the Sea of Tiberias (6:1; 21:1); across the water (6:19); the Portico of Solomon in the temple (10:23); Bethsaida in Galilee (12:21); Bethany in Judea (11:1; 12:1); a town called Ephraim (11:54); the brook of Kidron (18:1); the Praetorium (18:28); near the city (19:20). Often the meaning is explained: e.g., the Sheep Gate called Bethzatha (5:2); the Pool of Siloam which means Sent (9:7); the Place of the Skull called Golgotha (19:17). Cf. Jojko, *Worshipping*, 7.

¹⁸ John sometimes gives the names of persons with an explanation, for example: Caiaphas, who was high priest this year (11:49; 18:24); Annas, who was father-in-law of Caiaphas (18:13); Joseph of Arimathea who was a secret disciple of Jesus (19:38); Nicodemus, who was a man of the Pharisees and a ruler of the Jews (3:1), who came to Jesus by night (7:50; 19:39), etc. He also mentions historical figures like Pontius Pilate, who was the Roman governor, and Caesar. Cf. Jojko, *Worshipping*, 7.

¹⁹ The progression of time is marked by reference to annual Jewish festivals. For instance: the Passover (2:13; 6:4; 12:1; 13:1); the Feast of Booths (7:2); the Feast of Dedication (10:22). Apart from these annual feasts, there are weekly events like the Sabbath (5:9; 9:14; 19:31) and the Feast of the Jews (5:1). Very often, during the ministry of Jesus, his "words"

who always does the will of his Father, and who accomplishes (τελειόω) his work (4:34)²⁰. In fact, this particular “work” (ἔργον) is *all* of Jesus’ activity – his revelation, signs, passion, death and resurrection – which he accomplishes entirely in the “hour” of his glorification. In this “hour” Jesus returns to the glory which he had with the Father “before the world began” (17:5). Therefore, his incarnation, his earthly mission “in time” and his physical death on the cross does not cancel out his eternal existence as θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (1:1) – none other than the μονογενῆς θεός who was in the bosom of the Father and who made him known (1:18)²¹. It is no wonder that when the gospel account reaches its culminating point, the Risen Jesus is called by the apostle Thomas: ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου (20:28)²². Here, at the end of his gospel, the evangelist once again emphasizes Jesus’ eternal existence and divine identity which he had “in the beginning”, during his earthly ministry, and which was accomplished in this specific point of time as ὁ ἄνθρωπος: in the “hour” of glorification as the Savior of the world, the Crucified-Risen Lord, equal in nature to God his Father.

1.3. Conclusion

The Prologue leads the reader to grasp that all of John’s temporal terminology tends to focus on the identity of Jesus in whom eternity and time are united. Thus John clearly affirms Jesus’ eternal origin and unique relationship with God:

and “works” are linked together by other temporal indications, e.g., “after this” (2:2; 19:28) or “after these things” (3:22; 5,1; 6:1;7:1; 19:38).

²⁰ This fact comes to the fore in the entire ministry of Jesus who repeatedly asserts he has come to do the will of the Father and to accomplish the Father’s work (e.g., 5:36; 6:38).

²¹ Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung*, 261.

²² In the New Testament there are very few passages in which Jesus is identified as (ὁ) θεός explicitly. Apart from the gospel of John, Jesus is called God in Rom 9:5; Heb 1:8.9; Tit 2:13; 2Pt 1:1; and 1Jn 5:20. Cf. Jojko, *Worshipping*, 157.

θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (1:1c) – none other than μονογενῆς θεός who was in the bosom of the Father, one in essence and nature, yet personally distinct (1:1.18); the revealer and interpreter of the inner being of God; the reflection, the image of God, and His visible manifestation to the world. The words revealed by the Word are, at the same time, a self-communication of the Father himself who is the subject of the revelation (1:18). Therefore, Jesus' preexistence indicates why *only he* can make the Father known by living as a real, tangible human person, in a concrete, historic space of time.

In this way, John firmly maintains the essential identity of Jesus: his transcendence and humanity and, consequently, his divine primacy over every person, as well as his supremacy over life, history and time. From this perspective, we intend to develop our study on the theme of time, discovering *if* or *how* such temporal linearity is linked with Jesus' earthly mission entrusted to him by the Father. We shall also look at the different opinions of scholars, who suggest explaining the import of time as linked with the universal gift of the incarnation; and of salvation for everyone (12:20-23) transcending the limits of time.

2. THE MISSION OF JESUS IN CHRONOLOGICAL "HOUR"

After his solemn and magnificent presentation of Jesus in the Prologue as *vere deus* and *vere homo*, the evangelist sets Jesus' ministry in a temporal and historical setting. Thus, John focuses on the identity of Jesus within a precise time element: there is a "sixth hour" (4:6; 19:14), a "seventh hour" (4:52) and a "tenth hour" (1:39)²³. The core intention of the evangelist is to draw attention to the *effects* of Jesus' go-

²³ There are, as well, seven other relevant passages in which time is indicated in such a way as to avoid the problem created by the question of reckoning hours. Thus, the evangelist indicates "daybreak" (18:28; 20:1;

ing his earthly way; namely, becoming flesh and dwelling among us in concrete history, geography and time²⁴; and also as encountering concrete persons found inside and outside Jewish boundaries.

The issue of time, which plays an important role for the evangelist, could suggest that he is reckoning calendrical or chronological time like everyone else in the ancient world. However, the complex and highly-developed temporal references found in the fourth gospel have brought about various opinions in John scholarship. Thus, we do not intend to seek out a comprehensive explanation, but simply to perceive *if* the detailed descriptions of Jesus' mission and the *particular hour* provide no more than mere chronological information within their immediate context. Can such numerous temporal indications be understood as the intentional structuring of time, or are they only superfluous narrative elements? Why does the evangelist mention them in particular contexts? We do *not* intend to put a primary emphasis on the importance of *numbers* recounting the particular hour²⁵, but to identify the links of each precise *hour* with the accompanying words and deeds of Jesus.

2.1. *It was about the tenth hour (1:39)*

After the solemn testimony of John the Baptist to the priests and Levites from Jerusalem (1:19-28), all of the episodes centered on Jesus take place in a series of days

21:4), "evening" (20:19) "night" (3:2; 13:30) and that a typical day has "twelve hours" (11:9).

²⁴ Like, e.g., the next day (1:29.35.43; 6:22; 12:12); the third day (2:1); the first day of the week (20:1.19); after this (2:12; 3:22; 5:1; 6:1.66; 7:1; 11:7; 19:28.38); the sixth hour (4:6; 19:14); winter time (10:22); early in the morning (8:2; 18:28); by night (3:2; 19:39); it was night (13:30); the Jewish day of Preparation (19:42).

²⁵ The gospel refers frequently to numbers like, e.g., "the tenth hour" (1:39); "46 years" (2:20) "five porticos" (5:2) "38 years" (5:5) "100 pounds" (19:39); "153 large fish" (21:11).

(1:29.35.39.43) each with different and separate witnesses to Jesus (1:35-51). Thus, in the “next day” (τῆ ἑπαύριον), the evangelist introduces Jesus’ first contact with John the Baptist and the first disciples who follow him. Here, the unique identity of Jesus is portrayed through the witness of John the Baptist²⁶ and the disciples’ recognition. Thus, the readers come to know Jesus as the Lamb of God (1:36)²⁷ and as Rabbi (1:38) who takes initiative in the beginning of discipleship by turning and speaking to his first two followers²⁸. This profound message regarding the identity of Jesus, his initial question and his invitation to “come and see” is placed in the content of that “next day” which had been begun (1:35) and of the “tenth hour” (ὥρα ἦν ὡς δεκάτη) which concludes “that day” (τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκέλευν [1:39]).

Though this temporal indication can be understood as a parenthetical reference, its semantic significance remains enigmatic²⁹. Why does the evangelist add this annotation of the hour? Is his description, ὥρα ἦν ὡς δεκάτη, simply temporal information? According to some scholars, such an emphasis on the specific *hour* alerts the Johannine reader that Jesus’ ministry is to be taken in a deeper sense intend-

²⁶ In the immediately preceding context, John the Baptist witnesses the *eternal origin* of Jesus who is “the Man who ranks before” John, because “he was before” him (1:30).

²⁷ In the same introductory presentation of Jesus as the Lamb of God, this description points out the *divine origin* of Jesus and recalls the presentation of the “Lord’s servant” (Is 42:1) as being endowed with his Spirit. Jesus’ possession of the Spirit enables John to interpret his significance and recognize in him the Lamb of God (1:29.36), who is endowed with the Holy Spirit: the “Baptizer” in the Holy Spirit (ὁ βαπτίζων ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ [1:32-33]) and the Son of God (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ [1:34]). At this juncture, through these designations, the evangelist already points to the future hour of Jesus’ sacrificial death – the one who takes away the sin of the world. Cf. Nielsen, “The Lamb of God”, 243.

²⁸ At the end of his ministry during his farewell discourse, Jesus again highlights his initiative in choosing the disciples: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (15:16).

²⁹ Zimmermann, “Eschatology”, 304.

ed by the evangelist³⁰. Thus, this temporal detail, which, at first glance, seems to have no other narrative purpose³¹ is a significant indicator that the evangelist is using a *symbol* to express a message lying beyond the actual narrative³². Some exegetes note that John's pattern of noticing the hour of the day is one of the significant touches that point to him as an eyewitness³³ and who, therefore, describes important moments in the ministry and passion of Jesus by recording the particular details: e.g., the hour of the day. Consequently, his statement: "It was about the tenth hour", which is the first reference to exact time in this gospel, gives such evidence of an eyewitness testimony.

Thus, what is the significance of the "tenth hour" and what is the message to learn from this time of the day? According to some scholars, there is likely a meaning related to the symbol of the number ten in the Old Testament. For this reason, they assert that the "tenth hour" is the hour of fulfilment³⁴. Other scholars, interestingly, refer to the Jewish tradition, where this particular hour plays an important role connected in the biblical account of the creation of man, his sin and his expulsion from the garden of Eden, all of which took place *in the tenth hour*. For these scholars it would be conceivable, therefore, that in the context of the call of the first disciples (1:39), the evangelist saw a connection: Jesus comes, eschatologically, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin which originated in the disobedience of the first man. Through the call of his first disciples in *the tenth hour* Jesus inaugurates a new relationship and com-

³⁰ Brown, *John*, I, 75, 79; Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 83; Beutler, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 110.

³¹ Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel*, 103; Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 191 recognizes this phrase as enigmatic and functioning "as a narrative pause".

³² Coloe, "Witness and Friend", 327.

³³ Köstenberger, *John*, 75; Panimolle, *Lettura pastorale*, I, 174.

³⁴ Bultmann, *Johannes*, 70; Brodie, *John*, 160; Ferraro, *L'ora di Cristo*, 99; Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 130.

munion with humanity³⁵. Such an interpretation is very appealing; however, it requires great caution³⁶.

Another small number of exegetes have argued for an interpretation that is associated with the temporal indication itself: “it was about the tenth hour” would then be connected with the indication of John the Baptist who presents Jesus as the Lamb of God (1:36), and with the daily afternoon *Tāmīd* sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple, where a lamb was sacrificed each morning and evening³⁷. Nevertheless, we admit that such an interpretation is not clearly evident to us and should not be highlighted.

While it is true that the number “ten” is very significant in the Old Testament, in the context of the call of the first disciples, the main emphasis is placed on the first encounter with Jesus and on “the beginning” of the permanent and personal relationship between him and his first disciples. This is the principal motivation for the fourth evangelist to point out: ὥρα ἦν ὡς δεκάτη (1:39). Although it is sometimes argued that he follows the Roman calculation of time, the majority of scholars suggest that during the time of Jesus’ ministry in Palestine the hours were counted according to the Jewish system; namely, from sunrise to sunset³⁸. Starting the count, then, as was customary, from sunrise at around

³⁵ Cf. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 88.

³⁶ Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 190.

³⁷ The Hebrew adverb *tāmīd* (תָּמִיד); which means perennially, continuously, forever; refers to the daily (morning and evening) sacrifices as required and set out in Exodus 29:38–42 and Numbers 28:1–8. To the *tāmīd* sacrifice was ascribed the function of eliminating the sins of Israel. Jesus, sacrificial Lamb, is symbolized by the Lamb of the *tāmīd*, the quintessential burnt offering, the highest cultic expression, given to God. Cf. Zimmermann, “Jesus”, 85-86; Rigato, “Gesù”, 103-104.

³⁸ It is commonly accepted by the majority of scholars that the hours of the day in the Fourth Gospel are calculated according to the Jewish system. John gives an emphasis to the hours of the day that are defined as 1-12 between sunrise and sunset or as 1-12, the time between sunset and sunrise. The only Scriptural reference to the twelve hours in a day is found in

the sixth hour in the morning, the “tenth hour” would correspond to our *four in the afternoon*³⁹. Because at that point, daylight was going to run out before long, people refrained from engaging in major outdoor activities and began to make preparations for lodging⁴⁰. Here, in the context of calling the first disciples, the indication of time points in more than one direction. This time detail (4 p.m.) would be the traditional time for a wedding celebration⁴¹; it was also the hour which would refer to the afternoon prayer before the evening meal. Consequently, such a temporal indication may designate the first evening prayer and the first supper that the disciples had with Jesus⁴². It serves, moreover, to indicate the length and fruitfulness of their conversation, which went on all the evening⁴³.

First of all, however, it suggests the importance of the hour at which the disciples entered into permanent fellowship with Jesus⁴⁴. The first element that moves beyond the surface of the story is that of *remaining*. The disciples of a Rabbi, as he has been called, did not only learn from him, but lived and stayed with him to learn completely from him, his words and his life. From this “tenth hour”, they remain *with* (παρά) Jesus and consequently they remain *in* (ἐν) Jesus: *in* his word and *in* his love (15:4,7). Such communion with him is, at the same time, communion with the Father; since Jesus promises that he and the Father will come to dwell with those who love him and observe his words: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with

the gospel of John, where Jesus asks his disciples a well-known question: “Are there not twelve hours in a day?” (Jn 11:9).

³⁹ Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 88.

⁴⁰ Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 309; Köstenberger, *John*, 75.

⁴¹ Coloe, “Witness and Friend”, 327.

⁴² Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 70.

⁴³ Köstenberger, *John*, 75.

⁴⁴ Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 309; Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 191.

him” (14:23). This is the only reason that they *remain* that day with Jesus in this highly symbolic scene⁴⁵. For them, this temporal indication: ὥρα ἦν ὡς δεκάτη is the decisive turning point in their lives⁴⁶.

2.2. *It was about the sixth hour (4:6)*

When describing Jesus’ presence in Samaria (4:1-42), the evangelist explicitly sets the story in a concrete geographical and temporal context. Jesus is presented seated by the well of Jacob in Joseph’s field (4:5-6), identified to be at the foot of Mount Gerizim: in turn, presumed to be well-known as the sacred place of Samaritan worship⁴⁷. The evangelist states, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη (4:6) – an important detail, which also stresses Jesus’ tiredness⁴⁸. This description of Jesus’ state on arriving at Jacob’s well points further to his being thirsty but not having a vessel to draw the water. Furthermore, Jesus, tired (κοπιᾶω) from the long journey (4:6), sits down alone by the well, “for his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food” (4:8). It is under these circumstances that the evangelist presents the Samaritan woman who arrives to draw water, and consequentially highlights Jesus’ very real request for a drink: δός μοι πῆλιν (4:7).

Why does the evangelist indicate the time here? Is he referring to Jesus’ tiredness, or to an unusual time for the drawing of water? Should the note help in characterizing Jesus who is resting, thirsty, at the well; or the woman who goes to the well at this time? Since the evangelist does

⁴⁵ Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 131.

⁴⁶ Beutler, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 110.

⁴⁷ Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 155; Burge, *John*, 140-141.

⁴⁸ As in the first particular time indication (1:39), the scholars’ debate concerns the interpretation of the phrase, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη (4:6). Different explanations emerge depending on which option they accept. On the Jewish method of counting, sixth hour indicates the sixth hour after sunrise, this is twelfth at noon time, at the full light and heat of the day. Cf. Blank, *Johannes*, I, 285; Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 187.

not provide any answer in the framework of the narrative (4:1-42), one should assume the possibility of wider symbolic references within the context of the entire gospel⁴⁹. Accordingly, many commentators emphasize both the unusual time for the woman's fetching of water and Jesus' exhaustion and thirst⁵⁰. Others tend to offer a possible symbolic explanation by paralleling Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in full noon daylight (4:6) with Nicodemus' coming to Jesus "at night" (3:2). Light and darkness, indeed, are such prominent Johannine motifs that their presence in the narrative signals an important theological meaning⁵¹.

We assume, however, that at a deeper level the fundamental reason for this temporal indication is that the evangelist intends to draw attention to the identity of Jesus as *vere deus* and *vere homo*; just as he does throughout the gospel. In Samaria, this temporal detail, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη (4:6), stresses Jesus' thirst and tiredness, thereby accenting the "effect" of his becoming flesh and dwelling among us (1:14)⁵². The Son of God is presented as true historical "Jew" (4:9); as "the man" (ὁ ἄνθρωπος [4:29]); and as "the Savior of the world" (4:42) who fulfils the universal mission entrusted to him by the Father and who, therefore, meets various people in his own land and outside Israel as well. Thus, in this context he is the "itinerant," leaving Judea towards Galilee and passing through Samaria: a strange and religiously hostile land (4:3-5). This description of Jesus' state upon arriving at Jacob's well – thirsty, tired by the long journey and in need

⁴⁹ Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 186; Fausti, *Il Vangelo di Giovanni*, 59.

⁵⁰ Burge, *John*, 142.

⁵¹ Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 462; Frey, *Die Herrlichkeit*, 443. 705; Burge, *John*, 139.

⁵² Right from the start – beginning with the Prologue, then moving through the entire – the evangelist has been emphasizing the identity of Jesus as the Word-made-flesh. See Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 244; Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus*, 16.

of a favor (4:6-7) – underscores his real humanity; so doing, it highlights the reality he fully lives from his incarnation until the hour of his crucifixion⁵³. Also, throughout the events in Samaria (4:1-42), the evangelist provides much additional explicit and implicit information. He intends to emphasize Jesus’ identity⁵⁴; the gift of living water welling up into eternal life (4:14; cf. 7:38); “the hour” of eschatological worship that the Father himself seeks (4:23-24)⁵⁵; and Jesus’ own “food” – namely, doing the work of the Father, which is accomplished in the “hour” of Jesus’ “glorification” (4:34; 19:14.30). For post-Easter believers John uses these expressions to call their attention and point out the benefits of Jesus’ crucifixion; he reminds them of the “gifts” offered generously by the Son of God, the Eternal Word of God, who “was made flesh”, who died, and who is risen.

2.3. Connection between the Sixth Hour in 4:6 and 19:14?

Reading 4:6 in the light of fulfilling the above-mentioned themes found in the Samaritan narrative (4:1-42); some scholars, following the suggestion of R.H. Lightfoot⁵⁶, point out that, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη (4:6), may be pre-eminently associated with “Jesus’ hour”. Namely, the hour of his passion and crucifixion (19:14), since here the gospel again refers to some of the central themes. Our treatment of some

⁵³ Panimolle, *Lettura pastorale*, I, 387; Panackel, *Ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος (Jn 19:5b)*, 88.

⁵⁴ The important issue of Jesus’ identity is subsequently indicated through different appellations in the course of the narrative (4:1-42). Jesus is called: Ἰουδαῖος (4:9), κύριος (4:11.15.19), προφήτης (4:19), Μεσσίας and Χριστός (4:25.29), ἄνθρωπος (4:29), ῥαββί (4:31), ὁ σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου (4:42). Eventually it is Jesus who reveals himself in these words: ἐγὼ εἰμί ὁ λαλῶν σοι (4:26).

⁵⁵ Through the temporal indication, «the hour is coming» (4:23) John always points to the hour of Jesus’ cross and resurrection and exaltation.

⁵⁶ Lightfoot, *St. John’s Gospel*, 122-123.

scholars' proposals will attempt to bring together, in a sort of synthesis, the themes to which they have alluded. This synthesis may be spelled out in five successive points:

First, scholars note that in both narratives there is a time indication that noon is the intended hour: "it is about the sixth hour" (4:6; 19:14), and in both scenes we read of Jesus' physical thirst (4:7; 19:28)⁵⁷. Furthermore, in both scenes, we can assume that Jesus is the giver and source of the living water (4:10; 7:37-38). Although he is physically thirsty needs more than just a drink; the context implicitly indicates his more consuming thirst⁵⁸. Accordingly, some scholars suggest that this is another example of Johannine irony: that the very source of living water would be thirsty⁵⁹. Indeed in John's Gospel, Jesus' thirst and his food both have a spiritual and theological dimension⁶⁰.

Second, Jesus' tiredness (κοπιάω) "from long journey" (4:6) could be compared with his greater physical tiredness after being flogged, crowned with thorns, struck on his face (19:1-3) and introduced to the Jews in the words of Pilate ἰδοὺ ὁ ἄνθρωπος (19:5).

Third, this connection is further confirmed by the verb τελέω which occurs both in the context of Samaritan narrative (4:34) and Jesus' crucifixion (19:28.30)⁶¹. On the cross, knowing that the revelation and the entire "work" has reached its completion (τελέω [19:28]), and that in all this he is fulfilling the Scripture (τελειόω [19:28]), Jesus gives voice to his last word: τετέλεσται (19:30)⁶². Thus, John not

⁵⁷ Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*, 71; Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 187; Brodie, *John*, 220; Fausti, *Il Vangelo di Giovanni*, 58.

⁵⁸ Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel*, 122.

⁵⁹ Senior, *The Passion of Jesus*, 118; Mannucci, *Giovanni*, 113.

⁶⁰ Beutler, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 505-506.

⁶¹ Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel*, 122; Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus*, 3-4; Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 244.246; Ferraro, *L'ora di Cristo*, 126-127.

⁶² This verb τελέω which means "to fulfil", "to finish" occurs only twice in the gospel of John. To the same semantic domain belongs τελειόω with

only describes the traditional fulfillment of the Scripture, but goes beyond it. In fact Jesus' last word from the cross, *τετέλεσται*, does not mean "it has been finished", but rather, "it has been completed, brought to its perfect completion"⁶³; it indicates the fulfillment of Jesus' earthly mission for which he was sent. This refers back to his journey through Samaria when he clearly affirms to his disciples that his food is to do the will of the Father who sent him and – *τελειώσω αὐτοῦ τὸ ἔργον* – "[he] will accomplish his work" (4:34).

Fourth, at yet another level, two titles given to Jesus in Samaria implicitly echo Pilate's proclamation. The woman declares to her people that Jesus is "the man" (ὁ ἄνθρωπος [4:29]). The Samaritans, in turn, accept Jesus, welcome him to stay with them, and recognize him in faith as the Savior of the world (ὁ σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου [4:42]). The transition from Jesus ὁ ἄνθρωπος to Jesus ὁ σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου recalls a similar transition on the part of Pilate when he first presents Jesus as ὁ ἄνθρωπος (19:5) and then as ὁ βασιλεύς (19:14). This title "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" is confirmed and declared to the whole world in the description placed on the cross (19:19) in the culminating "hour" when Jesus, "the Savior of the world", brings the entire "work" of his Father to perfect fulfillment (4:34); when he gives his own life that the world might be saved through him (3:17).

This leads us to conclude that the message which surfaces in both narratives links the motifs of the "sixth hour" – thirst, weariness and fulfillment – which Jesus – "the man", "the King" and "the Savior of the world" – realizes. In this culminating hour, Jesus brings the entire revelation into perfect accomplishment and inaugurates a new era in the history of salvation.

the similar meaning, "to fulfil, "to make perfect", which occurs five times (4:34; 5:36; 17:4.23; 19:28).

⁶³ Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, 187.

2.4. *It was about the sixth hour (19:14)*

In the narrative of Jesus' passion during his trial before Pilate (18:28-19:16) at the very moment in which the whole process climaxes, the fourth evangelist again indicates the precise occasion (παρασκευή τοῦ πάσχα) and hour of that day (ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη). It is at this specific time that Pilate, the official representative of the Roman emperor, presents Jesus to the Jews as their King: "Behold your King!" (19:14); then, he hands him over to them to be crucified (19:16). Many scholars have noted that that the evangelist, in giving such detailed information, underlines the deep significance of this scene.

Predominantly, this climaxing moment constitutes the pinnacle of what the evangelist seeks to communicate to the reader: namely, that Jesus the long-awaited Messiah is the King: "Behold your King!" (19:14; cf. 18:33.37). This solemn declaration of Jesus' kingship is very significant, because it is pronounced by a gentile, a representative of Roman Imperial power⁶⁴. The real impact of this presentation of Jesus as the King becomes plain, as the chief priest declares: "We have no king but Caesar" (19:15). At this very time; the Passover when Israel's great celebration remembered God's almighty power that liberated them from slavery; when people bowed in reverence and worship to proclaim God as their King and to renew the eternal covenant with their Savior; in this very same hour, they reject God by rejecting Jesus, the Son of God, their King and their Savior⁶⁵. However, although Jesus is portrayed in this account as being judged and accused in humiliating circumstances, both by the Jews and by the Roman governor, ironically enough it is Jesus, the condemned one, who is the true King with majesty and dignity. Moreover, they are

⁶⁴ The Johannine characterization of Pilate and the motives that the evangelist attributes to him for his various words and actions have been studied by many scholars, e.g., the extensive assessment of Bond, *Pontius Pilate*, 163-193, and Piper, "The Characterisation", 121-162.

⁶⁵ Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God*, 35-37.

convinced that *this* is Jesus' major "guilt" and that it provides the decisive reason for his death. Such a "transgression" is confirmed in this same "hour of his exaltation" on the cross, on which Pilate orders the *titulus*⁶⁶ be written. There, Jesus' identity and his "crime" are indicated: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (19:19)⁶⁷. The specific mention of time (19:14) that enables a chronological contextualization of the crucifixion scene leads scholars to interpret it as a clear indication of the fulfilment of the envisioned plan of God and all of the Old Testament tradition behind it.

Accordingly, the indication of Passover Eve and the specific hour, ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη, when Pilate declares the kingship of Jesus and the definitive renunciation of the Messiah takes place (19:14), is a very significant time for the Jews: it is a time for prayer (Act 10:9). In this particular day of the Preparation of the Passover, on *Nisan* 14⁶⁸, at around the 12th hour, at noon⁶⁹, they officially begin to celebrate Easter. The heads of families were about to take their paschal lambs to the temple where the priests would begin to slaughter them in the temple precincts. It is about this very hour, on that very Friday when the trial of Jesus ends; when

⁶⁶ It must be noted that only the Fourth Gospel calls the words written on the cross of Jesus "a title" (τίτλον). In fact, these words are titles pointing to the identity of Jesus. In the gospels of Mark and Luke they are termed an "inscription" (Lk 23:38; Mk 15:25) and Mathew calls these words "the charge" (Mt 27:37). For the meaning of this "title" placed on the cross of Jesus see Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 735-736.

⁶⁷ Here, in fact, "King of the Jews" means nothing less than "the Messiah of Israel". The expression is very similar to "King of Israel" as found on the mouth of Nathanael (1:49) and the crowd that receives Jesus in Jerusalem (12:13). Cf. Marcheselli, *Studi sul Vangelo di Giovanni*, 68.

⁶⁸ Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, III, 306; Frey, "Die 'theologia crucifixi' des Johannesevangelium", 526.

⁶⁹ It is excluded that John follows the Roman counting of the hours beginning from midnight, as is sometimes supposed: in 18:28 the early morning had been given as a temporal indication; therefore in 19:14 it simply cannot be about six o'clock in the morning. Cf. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, II, 245 (n. 177).

he ascends to Golgotha to be crucified and to pour out his blood that will cleanse the world from sin (1Jn 1:7). Therefore, the time parallels the hour for bringing and slaughtering the lambs in the temple. Accordingly, scholars generally agree that this “hour” refers to the paschal lamb: namely, to Jesus, the true Paschal Lamb⁷⁰. This is confirmed by the fact that, after the death of Jesus, the evangelist highlights that Jesus’ bones were not broken “so that the scripture might be fulfilled” (Gv 19:36). This prophecy “not a bone of him shall be broken” (Ex 12:46; Nm 9:12) refers clearly to the paschal lamb. In this way, Jesus is described as the eschatological, paschal Lamb of the new Passover, as confirmation and fulfillment of the words of John the Baptist: “Here is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (1:29)⁷¹. Indeed, as the evangelist describes it, God has planned “the hour” carefully⁷².

It must be emphasized that the above-mentioned time has been portrayed with the paradoxical Johannine touch. He describes the Jews renouncing their expected Messiah-King and Savior, but at the very moment when their priests begin preparations for the annual feast that recalls God’s powerful deliverance of his people. In their commemorated history, God marked their ancestors to be saved by the

⁷⁰ Zimmermann, “Jesus”, 87; Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, III, 307; Brown, *John*, II, 895; Ferraro, *L’“ora” di Cristo*, 121; Frey, “Die ‘*theologia crucifixi*’ des Johannesevangeliums”, 526-528; Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, II, 267; Fausti, *Il Vangelo di Giovanni*, 447. There is likewise a reference to the fourth song of the suffering servant. Is such a comparison not misleading and ultimately based on an error? Among the different opinions of scholars we follow the position holding that within the context of John’s narrative as a whole it is likely that more than one symbol is used. John identifies Jesus with the Lamb and with the suffering servant of Yahweh (Is 53:7) to whom a unique role is ascribed with respect to sin.

⁷¹ Frey, “Die ‘*theologia crucifixi*’ des Johannesevangeliums”, 528; Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, II, 245.

⁷² Brown, *John*, II, 895.

blood of the paschal lamb, provided protection and liberation from slavery in Egypt and led them to live in freedom in the land of Israel. Now, instead, they choose the Roman emperor (19:15), rejecting and condemning their expected Messiah-King whom God sent into the world “not to condemn it, but to save it” (3:17). Nevertheless, Jesus – the Son of God, with the sacrifice of his life, accomplishes the liberation “of the world” from the slavery of sin and opens the way to lasting communion with the God of Israel through the sacrifice of his life⁷³. The Passover taking place on this year and at this very hour was a unique Feast; when the salvation of the world was accomplished through a radical reversal of its history.

2.5. *At seventh hour* (4:52-53)

In the narrative of the healing of the royal official’s son (4:46-54) the term “hour” occurs three times in two verses (4:52,53). After the portrayal of the long-distance healing that heightens the significance of the miracle, the evangelist calls it “the second sign” (4:54) at Cana (4:46), so as to stress the new universal scope of Jesus’ mission. He gives fullness of life; the life he gives knows no time and no borders.

The description of this miraculous event, accompanied by a few phrases that are repeated, is rather brief and straightforward: A “royal official”, hearing that Jesus is in Galilee, travels from Capernaum where his son is ill, to meet with Jesus (4:46)⁷⁴. The father is motivated by the critical posi-

⁷³ Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, II, 267; Frey, “Die ‘*theologia crucifixi*’ des Johannesevangeliums”, 526-528.

⁷⁴ The considerable distance between Cana and Capernaum (more than 26 km) also emphasizes the significance of this healing over distance. The question remains why the father meets his servants only on the following day, while he was descending the mountains leading to the Sea of Galilee (4:51-52)? According to some scholars, it was possible to have travelled the previous day, especially if the seriousness of the father’s concern for his son is taken into account. It is reckoned that a person could travel about

tion of his dying boy (ἀποθνήσκειν). He beseeches, pleads urgently (ἔρωτάω), that Jesus may come down (καταβείνω) with him to heal this child who is terminally ill (4:47). After a surprising rebuke from Jesus, declaring that people will not believe without seeing signs and wonders (4:48), Jesus sends the royal official home with only a few simple words of assurance: πορεύου, ὁ υἱός σου ζῆ (“Go, your son lives!” [4:50]). Without any visible sign to confirm that the desired intervention has actually taken place; the man believing in Jesus’ words, returns home. On his way back to his home, his servants, who function here as the witnesses⁷⁵, meet him with the message that his son lives (4:51). Without any interruption, the text moves into the climax. The official inquires at what time his son began to improve; then he realizes that the fever left the boy at a very precise time: “yesterday at the seventh hour” (4:52)⁷⁶. Consequently, when the royal official recognizes that this hour was the exact moment when Jesus spoke to him; he and his entire household believed (4:53)⁷⁷. The verb ἐπίστευσε is used (4:53) in the absolute sense, indicating his complete and adequate faith response; it does not denote a single act of faith, but conversion to a *life of faith*. He and his household became believing adherents of Jesus in the deep sense of this word. Because of such authentic faith, the royal official be-

32 km per day, starting in the morning. Perhaps 25 km was too far for a half a day’s travel.

⁷⁵ Kok, *New Perspectives on Healing*, 83.

⁷⁶ As indicated above, the time-reckoning followed by John is according to the Jewish system. Most exegetes admit that, in this case, the seventh hour indicates that the healing took place around 1:00 p.m., the very time at which Jesus spoke to the official. Cf. Blank, *Johannes*, I, 327; Moloney, *John*, 162; Burge, *John*, 152.

⁷⁷ “His household” encompasses the entire house community, not just the family in the narrower sense, but also the servants, slaves and so on. Cf. Blank, *Johannes*, I, 326.

comes a disciple of Jesus and an instrument of transmitting this gift to others (4:53)⁷⁸.

The healing of the royal official's son spans the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Taking into consideration the particular vocabulary and repeated phrases, it becomes clear that the evangelist is underlining the unconditional belief of the royal official: like the mother of Jesus, he believes in Jesus' word, independently of any sign, leading to the faith of others (2:1-12; 4:46-54)⁷⁹. This is in evident contrast with a merely incipient faith based on signs and wonders (4:48). As R. Schnackenburg rightly notes, "mangelnder oder unzulänglicher Glaube in Jesu eigenem Volk – Glaubensbereitschaft bei Vertreten der nicht jüdischen Welt!"⁸⁰. Jesus gives fullness of life and the life he gives knows no time and no borders.

It is remarkable that in this narrative, the evangelist inserts the term "hour" between two central themes of his gospel: life and faith. In fact, through the three-fold repetition of ὥρα, he expresses the key message of the narrative: that the hour of healing corresponds to, and occurs simultaneously with, the word of Jesus. The emphasis, however, is *not* on the significance or symbolism of the hour as such, but on the two central notions that dominate this brief narrative. *First*, on the life-giving and healing word of Jesus "Your son lives" (4:50.51.53) and *second*, on the believing response to Jesus (4:48.50.53)⁸¹.

Because of these two primary messages of this narrative, a number of Johannine scholars stress the significance of both

⁷⁸ Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 293; Kok, *New Perspectives on Healing*, 83.

⁷⁹ Moloney, *John*, 156.

⁸⁰ Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 455.

⁸¹ The "believing response" to Jesus is one of the major theological themes in the gospel of John, where the verb πιστεύω occurs 98 times (Mt 11 times; Mk 14 times; Luke 9 times). The noun πίστις is never used by the fourth evangelist. This indicates the active character of Johannine faith. "Believing" means "believing in Jesus" which is also, at the same time, believing in God, the Father (12:44).

key-terms – “life” and “faith” – which are not only closely linked to one another but also to the contents of the entire Gospel of John. Read from this perspective, Jesus’ words “your son lives” acquire a deeper sense: it is through the only begotten Son that true life, eternal life, is bestowed⁸². Jesus himself is the Life (11:25) as well as the Revealer of the life which the Father has within himself (5:26). Also, the person who believes has passed from death into life (5:24). Now, people may, or may not, receive this gift of life that Jesus offers if they respond to him in faith. Indeed, the evangelist emphasizes throughout his gospel that to believe means to have eternal life, as Jesus reveals in his final prayer to the Father: “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (17:3).

Summing up, we are led to conclude that the temporal indication ὥρα (4:52-53) is here linked to the two principal themes of faith and life⁸³. Two themes which are, in fact, the whole gospel in a nutshell: “that you may come to believe (or continue to believe)⁸⁴ that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

2.6. Conclusion

The chronological, temporal indications described above, are considered by Johannine scholars in various ways. Some exegetes note them as particularly clear historical memories,

⁸² Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 293; Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I, 178.

⁸³ Ferraro, *L’ora di Cristo*, 155.

⁸⁴ Some manuscripts (P^{66vid} ⳨* B Θ 0250) have the present tense πιστεύετε which suggests continuing to believe; others (⳨² A X Δ Λ Θ Ψ Ω) have the aorist tense of the verb πιστεύσητε which is translated as coming to believe. Cf. N-A²⁷. In the concrete *Sitz im Leben* of the community the verb πιστεύ[σ]ητε should be taken in the sense of strengthening believers in their doubts, struggles, persecution and conflicts. Cf. Panimolle, *Lettura pastorale*, III, 450.

others as an unsolved problem of Johannine exegesis. Still other interpreters, though few, see them as superfluous narrative elements – perhaps only added editorially. These various speculations about the meaning of the chronological hour shows the perplexity of scholars in dealing with this specifically Johannine trait.

Recent studies on the symbolism of the Gospel of John have shown that the technique of parenthetical explanation in the Fourth Gospel is stylistically and thematically consistent, frequently used by the evangelist and characteristic of his work. Accordingly, the meaning of the specific information on time – to which the evangelist applies a special care – is a clear sign that he is a reliable witness and therefore, very well informed about the events. Moreover, such temporal indications should be understood as symbolic narrative elements used by the evangelist in a deeper sense. Throughout his gospel, this Johannine trait is rooted concretely in time, whereas ultimate meaning is “a-temporal” and transcendent⁸⁵.

For this reason these chronological, temporal remarks cannot be grasped solely by seeking their historical significance, or by considering them as a superfluous narrative reference. Rather, it is necessary to determine what the entire narrative context is all about. Since there is no equally applicable explanation for all the evidence, it is necessary to distinguish between the individual “hour” and the context in which the temporal indication occurs. Among the various opinions of scholars we follow the position which holds that these detailed descriptions of the hour do not provide mere temporal information; rather, they are elements linked closely with Jesus’ mission and identity, with Johannine symbolism and an invitation to respond in faith.

⁸⁵ Akala, *The Son-Father Relationship*, 165.

3. FINAL CONCLUSION

The distinct and highly-developed concept of time in the fourth gospel is not a kind of intellectual matter, but rather the medium of expression for its theology and particular scope⁸⁶. The fourth evangelist significantly contributes to the understanding of the message of his gospel, projected as it may be, through indications of both eternity and time. Accordingly, he describes Jesus' eternal existence – his incarnation, mission, death and resurrection – as *one complex event* which goes back to “the absolute beginning” beyond and before time, but which is accomplished according to the inevitable succession of historical time. Since such a message is complex and enigmatic, our understanding of its temporal indications will never be complete.

Therefore, it would be accurate to conclude that the temporal conception portrayed by John is complex, veiled, and enigmatic. At the same time, it is a clear and fully-harmonized chronology of events referring to the historical existence of Jesus. In this *one complex time line*, the Father's ever-creative project of redemption is perfectly fulfilled by Jesus who brings about victory over sin and who initiates the *timeless* reality of salvation, extended to the entire world (12:32). The closely-interwoven motif of eternity and time is totally centered on the identity of Jesus and the mystery of salvation. Hence, all temporal indications do not merely designate a mathematical period of time when particular events take place; but it designates the unique, timeless reality of salvation offering eternal life: a reality that is present “now”. With Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, eternity becomes a great “now”: the culminating point of history and the continuous reality of salvation. This gives orientation, meaning and purpose to the concrete life of every person, precisely because the *pre-existent* Word of God enters *into*

⁸⁶ Zimmermann, “Eschatology”, 305.

time within a concrete human history. And so, he bridges eternity and time, God and humanity, forming a “totality” inseparable from him.

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