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The Fourth Gospel

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### Water and Blood

In this paper, I want to look at John 19:34, “but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out.”<sup>1</sup> This verse occurs at the end of the passion narrative in John, after Jesus has already died. Because it was the “preparation day” of Passover, and the next day was a solemn Sabbath, the celebration of Passover, the Jews did not want the crucified bodies to remain on the cross, so they asked Pilate to have the victims’ legs broken to hasten their death.<sup>2</sup> However, when the soldiers approached Jesus, they saw he was already dead, and did not break his legs,<sup>3</sup> but as we see in the verse in question, a soldier pierced Jesus’ side with a lance. In the following verse, an emphatic statement is made that this event was testified to by a trustworthy eyewitness so that the reader may come to believe, indicating that this event is important.

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical quotations are taken from *The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Jn. 19:31.

<sup>3</sup> Jn. 19:33.

The detail of note here is the fact that a flow of blood is not expected from a dead man because his heart is not pumping. Although doctors today say it is possible for pent up blood to flow from a recently deceased body in a vertical position, the separate flow of blood and water is very difficult to explain naturally.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we should look at the significance of blood and water, especially when they occur together. The only other occurrence of blood and water together in Johannine literature is 1 John 5:6-8 “This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood. The Spirit is the one that testifies, and the Spirit is truth. So there are three that testify, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord.” Unfortunately, this passage is difficult to understand, but it does relate together five things: Jesus, water, blood, testimony, and the Spirit. In John 19:34-35 we have four of the five things mentioned: Jesus, water, blood, and the testimony of the witness. Since in 1 John the Spirit is associated with these four things, this might be an indication that this flow of blood and water has something to do with the Spirit.

We get further evidence of a connection with the Spirit by looking at the use of the word “water” in John’s Gospel. The first uses of the word have to do with John the Baptist, who baptized with water,<sup>5</sup> but in Jn. 1:33, the Baptist says, “the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970) 946.

<sup>5</sup> Jn. 1:26, 31, 33.

remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.” These verses give us a connection between water, baptism, and the Holy Spirit.

The next occurrence of water in the Gospel is at the wedding at Cana. There are six stone jars that Jesus commands to be filled with water, that then becomes wine.<sup>6</sup> The context of this sign is the new beginning of a marriage, so there is an association here between water and new beginnings. In the next chapter, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> In this passage we see new birth, which is like the new beginning at the wedding at Cana, and we have an association between water and the Spirit.

In chapter 4 we have the story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. Being at the well, the conversation revolves around water, beginning with Jesus asking the woman for a drink.<sup>8</sup> He later tells her about a gift of “living water”<sup>9</sup> that whoever drinks of it “will never thirst”, but that water will “become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”<sup>10</sup> This water is a gift from Jesus that results in a satisfaction of desire and eternal life. We get more information about this living water that flows from the heart in chapter 7, where we have the following passage.

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<sup>6</sup> Jn. 2:6-9.

<sup>7</sup> Jn. 3:5.

<sup>8</sup> Jn. 4:7.

<sup>9</sup> Jn. 4:10.

<sup>10</sup> Jn. 4:14.

On the last and greatest day of the feast [of Tabernacles], Jesus stood up and exclaimed “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’” He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.<sup>11</sup>

First of all, Jesus is calling out to the crowd, inviting people to come to him. He is offering living water for those who thirst, and we are told that he was speaking of the Spirit, which would be made available when Jesus was glorified. Now we have living water linked with the gift of the Spirit, which will come when Jesus is glorified, which is his crucifixion.<sup>12</sup> We are starting to build a picture now of the flow of water from Jesus’ side at the crucifixion signifying the gift of the Spirit, which is associated with the sacrament of Baptism.

Although John’s use of water focuses on its power to quench thirst, water is often used in Scripture in connection with cleansing.<sup>13</sup> This idea is not foreign to John because he mentions that the stone water jars at Cana were used for “Jewish ceremonial

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<sup>11</sup> Jn. 37-39.

<sup>12</sup> Jn. 12:23.

<sup>13</sup> L. Goppelt, “hýdōr [water],” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and abridged Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1204.

washings,"<sup>14</sup> and of course water is used to cleanse when Jesus washes his disciples feet.<sup>15</sup> This cleansing aspect may be a secondary meaning to the water flowing from Jesus' side.

Cleansing is also associated with blood, which is used in the ritual for the cleansing of lepers,<sup>16</sup> but the stronger Old Testament association with blood is that of life. Not only was the life of a man or animal associated with its blood, but there was power associated with the blood to protect against death, such as in the lamb's blood put on the door frame in the Passover event.<sup>17</sup> John does indicate the Passover significance of Jesus' crucifixion with his chronology that places Jesus' death in the afternoon of the Preparation day, during the time when the Passover lambs are killed.<sup>18</sup> Also, John mentions hyssop,<sup>19</sup> which was used at the first Passover to spread the blood on the doorframe.<sup>20</sup>

One thing we can say about the flow of blood is that it indicates that Jesus was dead. If the life is in the blood, and Jesus blood was spilled, we know that Jesus gave his life on the cross. Perkins connects this passage with 1 John 5:6-7, which we mentioned

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<sup>14</sup> Jn. 2:6.

<sup>15</sup> Jn. 13:5.

<sup>16</sup> Lv. 14.

<sup>17</sup> S. David Sperling, "Blood," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), I-762.

<sup>18</sup> Jn. 19:14.

<sup>19</sup> Jn. 19:29.

<sup>20</sup> Ex. 12:22.

before, and 1 John 1:7, which makes “the ‘blood’ (death) of Jesus necessary for salvation.”<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the mention of hyssop five verses earlier hints at an association between the blood of Jesus poured out here and the blood of the Passover lamb spread with hyssop.

Finally, we must mention that the other place where blood is mentioned in John’s Gospel is in chapter 6 where he says that it is necessary to eat his flesh and drink his blood to have eternal life.<sup>22</sup> Whatever else Jesus might be saying in chapter 6, it is not difficult to make a connection between drinking his blood and having some kind of participation in his death in order to receive eternal life, which connects with the blood spilled in chapter 19. There is also a connection between these verses in chapter 6 and the Eucharist, which leads to a possible Eucharistic significance to chapter 19. Indeed, a connection between the water and blood flowing from Jesus side and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist have been made as early as Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and John Chrysostom.<sup>23</sup> We have seen strong textual evidence for linking the water with Baptism, but the evidence for linking the blood with the Eucharist is not as strong.

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<sup>21</sup> PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel According to John,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown, *et al.* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 982.

<sup>22</sup> Jn. 6:53-56.

<sup>23</sup> JOEL C. ELOWSKY, ed., *John 11-21, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament vol. IVb* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 328-329.

In conclusion, the flow of water and the blood from the side of Jesus show us that his death accomplished our salvation. There is a direct connection between Jesus' death, his shedding of blood, and the gift of the Spirit, which is given in the sacrament of Baptism. From Jesus' death flows eternal life in the Spirit. Secondly, the flow of water and blood may signify the cleansing nature of Jesus' death, and his death as the source of the sacraments.

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