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20-950 Lublin, Poland

Wydawnictwo KUL
ul. Konstantynów 1H
20-708 Lublin
tel. 81 740-93-40
e-mail: wydawnictwo@kul.pl
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The Judah–Tamar Episode (Gen 38): Rhetorical Dynamics as an *Argumentum ad Absurdum*

VERONIKA KLIMOVA
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, veronakl@amu.edu.pl

Abstract: The narrative of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38) has often been regarded as a secondary or interruptive insertion within the Joseph cycle. This study argues instead that the episode is a coherent and rhetorically sophisticated unit that plays a crucial role in the broader patriarchal tradition. Adopting a narrative approach, this article demonstrates that the account unfolds through a sequence of misrecognition, reversal, and eventual disclosure, culminating in Judah's acknowledgment of Tamar's righteousness. Particular attention is given to the dynamics of discernment, the levirate obligation, and the intertextual connections with Gen 37–39. The analysis indicates that the narrative does not offer explicit legal or moral instruction but rather exposes tensions inherent in the normative structures it presupposes. By allowing these norms to reach their logical limits, the text reveals their insufficiency when applied without regard for the ethical implications. In this perspective, the episode may be interpreted analogically to the narrative form of *argumentum ad absurdum*, in which the internal logic of judgment is turned against itself. Tamar emerges as the central agent of this rhetorical process, embodying both the preservation of lineage and the critique of unjust social practice. Thus, Gen 38 contributes to theological reflection on responsibility, justice, and divine providence, demonstrating that the continuation of the covenantal line is not realized under ideal conditions but in situations marked by ambiguity, failure, and transformation.

Keywords: Genesis 38, Judah and Tamar, recognition motif, levirate marriage, *argumentum ad absurdum*

The account of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38[1] may be read as a carefully constructed rhetorical narrative rather than as a marginal or subsidiary episode within the patriarchal traditions of the Book of Genesis. Although positioned within the Joseph cycle and often described as interruptive, the episode exhibits a high degree of internal coherence and narrative purpose. Its placement invites consideration not only of literary continuity but also of the normative assumptions governing lineage, responsibility, and judgment within the ancestral framework. The narrative traces Judah's separation from his family, his marriage into a Canaanite household, and the deaths of his sons Er and Onan, both of whom die while married to Tamar and are each described as acting wrongly in the sight of the Lord. As a result, Tamar is left twice widowed and subsequently denied the fulfillment of the levirate obligation through

1 The Tamar narrative does not appear to have originated with the editor of Genesis, who likely incorporated an already existing written account. The identification of the author of Gen 38 with the writer of the earlier "J" passages in Genesis remains uncertain, despite the predominance of the divine name "YHWH" (Kittel 1923, 230).

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Judah's third son, Shelah. Her response to this prolonged state of suspension leads Judah, unknowingly, to impregnate her. The subsequent confrontation, initiated by Judah's judgment and resolved through the presentation of material evidence, culminates in Judah's acknowledgment of Tamar's claim and the birth of twin sons, thereby securing the continuation of his lineage.

Approached from a narrative and rhetorical perspective, Gen 38 unfolds through a sequence of escalation, misrecognition, inversion, and recognition, leading to a moment in which the logic of judgment is redirected toward its own agent. Rather than proposing legal reform or alternative norms, the narrative brings to light the limitations of the existing framework when applied without due discernment. The narrative does not argue against the law as such, nor does it propose an alternative legal order; instead, it allows the internal logic of existing norms to unfold to the point at which their consequences become practically unsustainable. This study therefore examines Gen 38 as a rhetorically structured narrative whose persuasive power lies in the exposure of such internal tensions, a dynamic that may be described—by analogy—as a narrative form of *argumentum ad absurdum* rather than as a formal logical demonstration. This procedure denotes a form of logical reasoning in which a position is shown to be untenable by demonstrating that its premises, or the conclusions that follow from them, result in contradiction (Clark 1961, 144–46; Goodrich and Strauss 2019, 310–312).

1. Literary Setting and Intertextual Connections

From a purely narrative perspective, the Judah–Tamar episode could have been placed almost anywhere in the Book of Genesis following chapter 33, which recounts Jacob's return to the land; the editorial decision to position it precisely between Gen 37, describing the sale of Joseph,[2] and Gen 39, introducing Joseph in the house of Potiphar, is therefore highly significant and calls for careful examination. This placement highlights the close literary and thematic relationship between

2 In contrast to other patriarchal narratives, the Joseph cycle exhibits a relatively high degree of literary coherence within the Book of Genesis. The sequence of episodes is largely continuous, with causal relationships maintained and transitions generally unobtrusive, making it a unified narrative unit. This coherence has been explained either by positing a single underlying tradition or by assuming the combination of multiple traditions subjected to a careful editorial process that produced a consistent narrative flow. Closer analysis, however, has identified certain points of variation, most notably the alternating references to Ishmaelites and Midianites in the account of Joseph's removal from the pit and subsequent sale. These variations have been interpreted as evidence of two distinct narrative strands. In one, Judah proposes selling Joseph to Ishmaelite traders (Gen 37:26–27); in the other, Midianite merchants remove Joseph independently (Gen 37:28). Correspondingly, the roles of Judah and Reuben differ between the strands, with each figure assuming responsibility for Joseph's preservation in a distinct narrative context.

the Judah–Tamar narrative and the preceding account of Joseph's sale, in which a subtle yet powerful intertextual dialogue is established between Judah and Joseph (Goldin 1977, 27–44; Rendsburg 1986, 438–46; Ho 1999, 514–31; Auld 2000, 93–106; Clifford 2004, 519–32; Bekins 2016, 375–95). One of the clearest indicators of this linkage is the use of the Hiphil imperative, masculine singular, of the verb "know/discern/identify/recognize," together with the interjection "pray, now" (*hakker-nāʾ*) which appears only twice in the Hebrew Bible: in Gen 37, the brothers, acting on Judah's initiative, present Jacob with Joseph's bloodstained tunic and compel an act of recognition, while in Gen 38[3] Tamar confronts Judah with his seal, cord, and staff, eliciting the same acknowledgment through an identical lexical formulation:

> And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: **know** now whether it be thy son's coat or no (Gen 37:32).
>
> When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law … and she said, **Discern**, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff (Gen 38:25).

The narrative may thus be read as following the principle of *measure for measure*. The demand for recognition (*hakker-nāʾ*) is redirected toward Judah himself: the very formula once used on his father is now applied to him. What Judah imposed upon Jacob is now similarly imposed upon Judah. This parallel also explains the public character of the recognition scene. Just as the earlier act of recognition before Jacob was public, so too Tamar's demand is not presented in private but deliberately in the open. The parallel continues, as in both narratives a goat is a key element of deception or compensation: its blood stains Joseph's garment in Gen 37 (*śəʿîr ʿizzîm*, "a male goat," Gen 37:31), and a young goat is offered by Judah as payment to Tamar in Gen 38 (*gədî ʿizzîm*, Gen 38:17). In each case, the episode revolves around acts of deception within the family, with the brothers deceiving Jacob and Tamar, in turn, deceiving Judah.

This intertextual network is reinforced by a sustained garment motif running across Gen 37–39. It encompasses Reuben's torn garments (*bəgādâw*, Gen 37:29) upon discovering that Joseph is no longer in the pit; Joseph's tunic torn and stained with blood (*kətōnet*, Gen 37:33); Tamar's widow's garments (*bigdê ʾalmənûtāh*, Gen 38:14, 19) and her prostitute's veil (*ṣəʿîpāh*, Gen 38:19); and Joseph's garment (*bigdô*, Gen 39:12–13, 15–16, 18) left in the hands of Potiphar's wife. Even when the specific Hebrew terms for "tunic" and "veil" are set aside, the broader garment imagery—frequently expressed through the root *bet–gimel–dalet*, denoting both "garment" and "betrayal"—subtly links these scenes together and intensifies the thematic focus on deception and moral reversal.

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3 With the exception of a few literal translations, the translation of the Bible verses used in this article comes from the King James Bible.

The thematic relationship between Gen 38 and 39 is readily apparent. Both chapters depict a patriarchal figure who becomes involved in a problematic encounter with a foreign woman and must confront the consequences of that encounter. Potiphar's wife is portrayed as manipulative and persistent in her attempt to seduce Joseph, yet she fails to achieve her purpose. Joseph resists her advances and initially emerges as a model of moral integrity, although he ultimately faces false accusation and imprisonment. Tamar, by contrast, acts with discernment and strategic insight. Judah yields to physical desire without recognizing her and subsequently becomes her accuser when her pregnancy is revealed. It is, however, Tamar who ultimately emerges as the righteous one. At the same time, the comparison suggests that the contrast is not merely moral but also pedagogical, directing the reader's attention to different forms of testing, responsibility, and moral discernment. From this perspective, the sequence of Gen 38–39 should be viewed as a deliberate compositional strategy rather than as a narrative interruption (Redford 1970, 16–18; Bach 1997, 62–63).

When these narrative correspondences are considered, the Judah–Tamar episode emerges not as a digression but as a deliberate and theologically charged interlude. Judah, who orchestrated Joseph's sale, now becomes the object of deception himself. From this perspective, the story of Judah and Tamar may be read as a form of narrative consequence: Judah is confronted with the ethical consequences of his earlier actions and undergoes a moral exposure and transformation. In this sense, Gen 38 offers an implicit judgment upon Judah's conduct in Gen 37. This reading accords with the opening verse of the narrative in Gen 38, which describes Judah as "going down from his brothers" (*wayyēred yəhûdāh mēʾēt ʾeḥâw*). Such a descent should not be understood merely in geographical terms; it also conveys a moral decline and a diminution of status. It is only through this painful encounter that Judah begins the process that will eventually prepare him for leadership within the family, a development that becomes explicit in the later Joseph narrative (Adelman 2013, 54; Fokkelman 1996, 152–87).

2. Marriage, Lineage, and Social Obligations

Within the textual world of the ancestral traditions, questions of marriage and lineage are key structuring elements of the plot. The issue of intermarriage, in particular, is treated with meticulous care in several patriarchal narratives of Genesis, where considerable literary effort is made in securing endogamous unions. Abraham's deliberate attempt to obtain a wife for Isaac from among his kin (Gen 24), as well as the analogous concern governing Jacob's marriages (Gen 28–29), exemplify this tendency. This concern is made explicit when Isaac summons Jacob, blesses him, and—significantly—commands him (Gen 28:1): "Thou shalt not take a wife of the

daughters of Canaan" (*lôʾ tiqqaḥ ʾiššāh mibbənôt kənāʿan*). The same prohibition is reiterated a few verses later, when Esau learns that Isaac had sent Jacob to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there and had charged him not to marry a Canaanite woman (*lôʾ tiqqaḥ ʾiššāh mibbənôt kənāʿan*, Gen 28:6). The narrative further notes that Esau perceived the daughters of Canaan as displeasing in the eyes of his father Isaac (Gen 28:8), employing the term *rāʿôt*, a form derived from the Hebrew root *resh-ʿayin -ʿayin*, which carries strong negative moral connotations, including "evil" or "wrong" (Waltke and Fredricks 2001, 516).

Against this broader narrative backdrop, the Judah account presents a distinct configuration. The episode opens with Judah's departure from his brothers and his association with Hirah the Adullamite, a detail that contributes to the social setting of the account. Judah then takes as his wife the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite woman, and Gen 38:3–5 records that she bears him three sons—Er, Onan, and Shelah. This development continues when, upon reaching maturity, Judah's sons are drawn into marriage arrangements, beginning with the union of his firstborn, Er, and Tamar, who likewise appears to belong to the Canaanite milieu (Amit 2009, 275–76). Er is described as "wicked in the sight of the LORD" (*raʿ bəʿênê YHWH*) (Gen 38:7); consequently, the LORD puts him to death. At this point, one may suspect that the name Er (*ʿayin–resh*) itself is not accidental but may reflect a deliberate wordplay, anticipating the term *raʿ* (*resh–ʿayin*, "evil"), which explicitly describes his conduct in the narrative (Spackman 2010, 67).

In response to Er's death, Gen 38:8 records Judah's instruction to Onan to go in to his brother's wife, marry her, and raise up offspring on behalf of his brother. The formulation evokes the institution later known as levirate marriage (*yibbum*), familiar from other biblical narratives, most notably the account of Boaz in the Book of Ruth. In its normative formulation, levirate marriage requires that when a married man dies without descendants, his widow is to marry one of his brothers. The first child born from this union is regarded as the heir of the deceased brother, while subsequent children are considered the offspring of the living brother. The institution also served a broader social function. It allowed the widow to remain within her husband's household under conditions of relative security. At the same time, it benefited the deceased husband's family by preserving the bride-price investment and retaining within the household a woman already integrated into the family structure and capable of bearing offspring (Belkin 1970, 275–329; Weisberg 2004, 403–29; Matlock 2007, 295–310; Weisberg 2009). The narrative of Judah and Tamar does not provide a detailed exposition of this practice; its fuller legal formulation appears in Deut 25:5–6.[4] This raises the question of how the characters in Gen 38

4 Eryl W. Davies interprets the expression "his name (*šəmô*) may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut 25:6) as reflecting the broader purpose of the levirate institution. In his view, the preservation of the deceased's "name" encompasses not only the continuation of his lineage but also the preservation of his ancestral

can be portrayed as acting in compliance with a law that, according to biblical tradition, was formalized only in the Mosaic period. From a critical perspective, however, this poses no substantial difficulty: if the Torah narratives reached their final form through later composition and redaction, it is not unexpected that earlier figures are depicted as operating within legal concepts articulated more fully in subsequent textual layers (Menn 1997, 28–30; Amit 2013, 296–99).[5]

Despite the social and legal advantages associated with levirate marriage, the narrative indicates that Onan deliberately refuses to fulfill this obligation. Genesis 38:9 states that Onan was aware that the offspring would not be regarded as his own and therefore took action to prevent conception, thereby denying offspring to his deceased brother. The description of his wasting seed underscores his intentional and sustained refusal.[6] Classical commentators address this verse with notable explicitness. Rashi understands the passage as referring to sexual intercourse accompanied by withdrawal (*coitus interruptus*), through which Onan deliberately avoided conception. Ibn Ezra, in keeping with his exegetical method, employs the verse to advance his own interpretive position and explicitly challenges explanations he considers inadequate, adopting a polemical stance characteristic of his broader engagement with competing readings. Rabbeinu Tam of the Tosafist tradition understands the phrase "he spilled it on the ground" as referring to sexual relations conducted in an unnatural manner, which he interprets as implying anal intercourse. This reading represents one of the more restrictive medieval interpretations and illustrates the diversity of rabbinic engagement with the text. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the narrative of Judah and Tamar constitutes the primary—and effectively the only—clear narrative context within the Torah from which later tradition derives a broader prohibition against the wasting of seed. The association of Onan with this

estate, as indicated by Num 27:1–11, 2 Sam 14:4–11, and especially Ruth 4:10, where the perpetuation of the deceased's name is explicitly linked to his inheritance. Consequently, the levirate institution served three interconnected purposes: to preserve the deceased's family line, to prevent the alienation of the ancestral property, and to provide protection and security for the widow through marriage (Davies 1981a, 138–44).

5 Classical rabbinic tradition was compelled to address this chronological tension. Nachmanides (Ramban), for example, interprets levirate marriage as a profound mystery embedded within the divine ordering of human generation, perceptible to those endowed with discernment even prior to the giving of the Torah. In his view, ancient generations recognized the significance of levirate marriage as a practice that preserved the name of the deceased and ensured the continuity of inheritance within the family. From this perspective, *yibbum* functions not merely as a later legal prescription but as a principle consonant with the underlying order of creation, reflecting an attempt to allow the soul of the departed to return to this world (Alshekh 1991, 231).

6 Genesis 38 may preserve an earlier stage of the levirate institution, in which the obligation was compulsory. In contrast to Deut 25:5–10, where the levir may formally renounce his duty without legal penalty, Judah's command to Onan and Onan's covert refusal suggest that no legitimate means of avoiding the obligation existed. Tamar's reluctance to seek public intervention need not imply that the levirate obligation was non-binding but may instead reflect the social shame associated with making such a delicate matter public. The narrative also points to the authority of the *paterfamilias*, who could require his sons to fulfill the levirate obligation (Davies 1981b, 260–263).

prohibition thus emerges from subsequent interpretive developments rather than from a general legal formulation in the biblical text itself. Indeed, the Torah does not articulate a comprehensive ban on the wasting of seed as such; rather, the condemnation in Gen 38 concerns a specific and exceptional situation, namely Onan's deliberate refusal to fulfill his levirate obligation toward Tamar (Devine 1942, 323–40; Homolka 2009, 205; Benjamin 2015, 171–73; Saad 2023, 60–74).

The biblical text confines its assessment of Onan's conduct to a brief and theologically charged judgment. Genesis 38:10 declares that "the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also." As before in the case of Er, the text refrains from specifying the exact nature of the offense, offering only the statement of divine displeasure and punishment. This narrative reticence concerning Er's sin became a stimulus for subsequent interpretive traditions. Rabbinic exegesis, noting the identical outcome suffered by both brothers—death inflicted by divine agency—infers a fundamental similarity in their transgressions. On this basis, Er is likewise believed to have deliberately avoided impregnating Tamar (Morimura 1993, 56). The Babylonian Talmud develops this inference further, proposing that Er's conduct was motivated by a desire to preserve Tamar's physical beauty, which he feared would be compromised by pregnancy (Yebam. 34b). Such explanations represent an interpretive effort to fill the narrative gap left by the biblical text, aligning Er's motives with those explicitly attributed to Onan and thereby reinforcing the coherence of the moral judgment rendered upon both figures (Drazin and Wagner 2006, 255–56, nn. 1–12).

With the deaths of Er and Onan, the narrative shifts to the unresolved question of the levirate obligation, which now formally passes to Judah's third son. Judah instructs Tamar to remain a widow in her father's house until Shelah reaches maturity, a directive that appears prudent and consistent with custom, offering verbal assurance of deferred fulfillment. The narrator, however, discloses Judah's concealed motivation: while his words suggest only delay, his thoughts are governed by fear "lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren did" (Gen 38:11). Rather than interpreting the deaths of Er and Onan as consequences of their own wrongdoing, Judah implicitly associates their fate with Tamar herself, construing her as a source of misfortune. Unaware of this reasoning, Tamar complies with Judah's command and returns to her father's house, entering a prolonged and indeterminate state of widowhood, neither dismissed nor restored, but suspended between promise and fulfillment (Friedman 1990, 23–58; Patterson 2018, 190–193).

This tension within the narrative may be further explained by a closer look at the details surrounding Judah's third son, Shelah. This designation is not merely a conventional personal name but also points to the possessive expression "hers" (*šellāh*). Read in this light, the name suggests a subtle narrative evaluation. Although the narrator generally maintains a restrained and ostensibly neutral tone, this detail may be understood as an implicit judgment on Judah's attitude, as though the child were

conceived primarily as Judah's possession rather than as Tamar's rightful means of restoration. This evaluation is reinforced by an additional textual detail: Shelah is born at Kezib (Gen 38:5), a place name etymologically related to the Hebrew root *kof–zayin–beth*, which denotes deception, falsehood, or disappointment.[7] The convergence of name and place thus invites the reader to perceive Judah's actions as marked by duplicity, thereby underscoring the moral tension that frames Tamar's continued marginalization (Wünsch 2012, 794).

3. Tamar's Strategy and the Dynamics of Misrecognition

The account then undergoes a decisive transition: time passes, Judah's wife dies, and after a period of mourning, Judah resumes normal life. With the onset of the sheep-shearing season, he travels with his associate Hirah to Timnah, a movement that signals the shift from narrative background to decisive action. Tamar, having observed that Shelah has reached maturity and recognizing Judah's refusal to fulfill his promise, resolves to act. She removes her widow's garments, veils herself, and *tit*ʿ*allāp* (Gen 38:14). Given the Hebrew root *ʿayin–lamed–pê*, whose primary biblical sense denotes "to wrap" or "to cover oneself," the verb is best understood as referring to concealment. However, in some contexts, it may also mean "to grow faint," thus remaining open to semantic debate. The apparent redundancy underscores Tamar's complete envelopment and consequent unrecognizability (Menn 1997, 23–24).

The text notes that Judah assumes Tamar to be a prostitute because she has covered her face, a detail that may reflect a contemporary association between veiling and prostitution. This explanation, however, is problematic. If physical appearance played a central role in sexual attraction, the deliberate concealment of the face is difficult to explain. One possible interpretation appeals to the social logic of shame: in a traditional society, veiling could preserve anonymity and allow eventual reintegration into the household or community. Another interpretation reads the passage differently, suggesting that the covering of the face explains only the failure of recognition, not the assumption of prostitution. On this reading, Judah's conclusion derives from other contextual cues, especially Tamar's presence by the roadside, since according to prevailing social norms respectable women neither traveled alone nor remained unaccompanied at a crossroads. This problem of recognition becomes clearer when the narrative setting of the episode is considered (Mathewson 1989, 378–79; Alsen 2019, 61–62).

7 The semantic range of this root includes both deliberate falsehood and the experience of proving unreliable or deceptive. For example, Ps 116:11 states, "All mankind are liars" (*kol-hāʾādām kōzēb*), while Jer 15:18 compares an unreliable stream to deceptive waters (*kəmôʾaḵzāb mayim lōʾ neʾĕmānû*), employing the same semantic field of disappointment and unreliability.

The encounter between Judah and Tamar occurs at a location called Enaim (lit. "eyes"). While place names in Genesis often function as geographical markers, in this instance the toponym also evokes the motif of sight. The scene is structured by a tension between seeing and misrecognition. Judah arrives at the entrance to Enaim with his eyes open, yet his perception proves inadequate. Tamar, by contrast, acts with deliberate agency: she discerns Judah's weakness and devises a calculated course of action that secures her objective. Judah sees Tamar but fails to recognize her or grasp the situation before him, whereas Tamar, though veiled, perceives more accurately. The place name thus reinforces the ironic reversal that shapes the episode. Some interpreters further suggest that Enaim functions as a narrative cue: Tamar not only sits at a place called "eyes" but also engages Judah through her gaze. Even behind the veil, this visual dynamic intensifies the motif of sight and misrecognition that permeates the scene (Leuchter 2013, 221).

In any case, Judah interprets the veiled woman as a prostitute and remains unaware of her true identity. Consequently, he turns aside from the road and addresses her with the request, "I pray thee, let me come in unto thee" (Gen 38:16), a formulation that in biblical usage clearly denotes sexual intercourse rather than social interaction. To remove any possible ambiguity, the narrator explicitly notes that Judah did not recognize her as his daughter-in-law; his approach is therefore not motivated by an intention to commit incest but rather by the assumption that he is dealing with a prostitute. The scene nevertheless presents a socially problematic situation: a man traveling along the road encounters an unknown woman and proposes sexual relations, which stands in tension with prevailing social norms and underscores the transgressive character of the episode within its cultural context. The brief remark in verse 12 that Judah's wife had also died carries interpretive significance. On the one hand, it removes an immediate moral obstacle, since Judah is no longer married and therefore is not portrayed as committing adultery. On the other hand, it provides a pragmatic explanation for his behavior, situating his actions within a period following bereavement. At the same time, the narrative does not offer an explicit moral judgment concerning Judah's sexual conduct, leaving its evaluation implicit (Opoku-Gyamfi 2014, 44–47).

This pattern of misrecognition prepares the ground for a significant reversal of roles within the narrative (Gen 38:17–18). What initially appears as a brief and marginal encounter gradually proves to be a moment in which positions of authority, initiative, and vulnerability are subtly reconfigured, as the narrative shifts from the problem of perception to a redistribution of agency between the characters. Although Judah approaches Tamar, it is she who raises the question of payment, thereby transforming the encounter from an impulsive act into a regulated transactional arrangement. Judah proposes to send a young goat from the flock, offering a deferred payment. Tamar, however, requests a pledge to secure the fulfillment of the agreement, a demand consistent with established legal and economic practice.

When Judah asks what pledge is required, Tamar specifies his seal, its cord, and the staff in his hand. Judah agrees and hands over these items; his promise of future payment places an obligation on him, while his lack of immediate resources renders him vulnerable. The account thus undermines Judah's apparent social and gendered authority, exposing it as contingent rather than absolute. Tamar, by contrast, emerges as a figure whose actions decisively shape the course of events, directing the interaction through measured responses and strategic restraint without overt speech or explicit assertion of power. Sexual relations then take place, and Tamar becomes pregnant (Bosworth 2008, 47).

The narrative still refrains from offering an explicit judgment. The text neither condemns Judah's actions nor praises Tamar's initiative; instead, the accumulation of actions, assumptions, and delays gradually produces an unstable situation. The escalation is structural rather than rhetorical: each step follows logically from the previous one, yet at the same time intensifies the tension within the social and moral order presupposed by the narrative. Tamar returns to her father's house with the three personal items belonging to Judah, removes her disguise, and resumes the garments of her widowhood. Judah, having arrived at Timnah, attempts to resolve the matter discreetly by sending the agreed payment—a young goat. Hirah the Adullamite goes to the place in order to recover the pledged items but fails to find the woman. When he asks the local inhabitants about the *qədēšāh* (harlot)[8] who had been at Enaim by the roadside, they deny any knowledge of such a person and treat the inquiry as an offense against the reputation of the community. Hirah reports this to Judah, who decides to abandon the matter, declaring that the woman may keep the pledge lest they become an object of ridicule. The priority thus shifts from restitution to reputation: the loss of valuable personal items is considered preferable to the risk of public exposure and shame (Hamilton 1995, 446–48).

The pledge demanded by Tamar—the seal, the cord, and the staff—represents the material core of the narrative inversion. These are not neutral objects but highly personal items associated with their owner's identity and social standing within the

8 In the Tamar–Judah narrative, Tamar is described as a *zônāh* in verse 15 and as a *qədēšāh* in verse 21, without any clear indication that the referent has changed. The precise distinction between these two terms is uncertain. A survey of the biblical evidence suggests that in most contexts they function as near synonyms, although the possibility of an earlier semantic distinction cannot be excluded. In the cultures of the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia, women designated as *qədēšôt* appear to have been connected with cultic institutions and may have participated in forms of ritualized sexual practice. Against the background of religious syncretism, a phenomenon well attested in the history of Israel, it is conceivable that such terminology was at times incorporated into Israelite religious discourse, perhaps even in relation to the worship of YHWH, as suggested by texts such as Deut 23:18. The references to *qədēšim* (male cult prostitutes) in 1 Kgs 14:24 and 15:12 further complicate the picture. At the same time, the precise social or cultic function of the *qədēšôt* remains difficult to reconstruct because of the limited evidence, and a number of modern scholars have questioned whether cultic prostitution ever existed as an institutionalized practice (Emerton 1979, 412; Westenholz 1989, 245–60; Spackman 2010, 69; Leuchter 2013, 221–22).

ancient legal and social framework. The seal, typically a semiprecious stone engraved with a personal name or emblem, was used to validate ownership and contractual claims, while the cord most likely refers to the string by which the seal was worn. The staff, by contrast, represents a common walking implement, though it may likewise have borne carved designs that underscored its personal character. An illustrative parallel may be noted in the staff of Moses, an object similarly invested with symbolic and performative significance within the biblical narrative tradition. Together, the seal, cord, and staff constitute highly personal items that normally remain in the possession of their owner. By relinquishing these objects, Judah unknowingly transferred the means of future recognition into Tamar's possession. What appears to be a temporary pledge thus establishes the narrative conditions for the later disclosure that will ultimately turn his authority against him (Wünsch 2012, 799).

4. Crisis, Recognition, and Genealogical Implications

The crisis becomes unavoidable some three months later, when Tamar's pregnancy is reported to Judah. As indicated in verse 24, "Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by whoredom." What had previously remained a private consequence of the encounter now enters the public sphere, and Tamar is subjected to formal accusation. The charge frames her pregnancy not merely as a biological fact but as a transgression of sexual norms and familial obligation, thereby transforming latent tension into an explicit judicial crisis. Judah's response is immediate and uncompromising: "Bring her forth, and let her be burnt" (Gen 38:24), a reaction that suggests the charge provides an opportunity to resolve the situation decisively by removing Tamar from the household. At this juncture, the narrative implies that Tamar has anticipated this moment, her earlier actions revealing deliberate preparation for the consequences once her pregnancy became known. As she is led from her dwelling toward the place of judgment, she intervenes by sending a message to Judah accompanied by the pledged items, stating, "By the man to whom these belong, I am with child.… Please determine whose these are" (Gen 38:25). By allowing the objects themselves to testify rather than issuing a direct accusation, Tamar shifts the burden of recognition and responsibility back onto Judah, thereby decisively reframing the impending judgment (Adelman 2012, 90–95; Claassens 2012, 664–65).

It is noteworthy that some classical commentators, most prominently Rashi, interpret the episode in a way that emphasizes Tamar's moral restraint. According to Rashi, Tamar deliberately avoids publicly shaming Judah by refraining from an explicit accusation; instead, she declares, "By the man, whose these are" (Gen 38:25), thereby allowing Judah to recognize the objects himself, even at the risk of her own

condemnation. From this Rashi derives the ethical maxim that a person should cast himself into a fiery furnace rather than humiliate another publicly. This interpretation, however, raises several difficulties. It is striking that such a principle stems from a narrative in which Judah repeatedly places Tamar in a position of vulnerability, arguably making him the primary agent of injustice. Moreover, the assumption that Tamar acted discreetly is difficult to sustain in light of the narrative context. Tamar is brought out toward the place of execution in what must be understood as a public setting. The presentation of the seal, cord, and staff—previously given to Judah's messenger—would therefore have constituted a transparent and widely intelligible act, even if accompanied by restrained speech. The gesture thus functions as a public accusation in all but words. The narrative reaches its decisive turning point when Tamar adds, "Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff" (Gen 38:25), prompting Judah's immediate recognition and his public confession: "She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son" (Gen 38:26). With this confession, the narrative exposes a serious tension within the normative framework presupposed by the story. The law is neither rejected nor replaced; rather, its application reveals internal contradictions when pursued without discernment. The episode introduces no new legislation and offers no procedural remedy. Instead, it confronts the reader with the exposure of a normative order that, when applied mechanically, undermines its own claim to justice (Clifford 2004, 530–532; Novotný 2020, 139–41).

This tension becomes particularly evident in the narrative's treatment of the relationship between the levirate obligation and marriage. Judah, albeit unknowingly, fulfilled the levirate obligation,[9] yet the question of marriage between him and Tamar is never raised. This silence, however, does not necessarily imply that marriage was irrelevant. Tamar's decision to disguise herself as a prostitute is explicitly linked to the fact that Shelah had reached marriageable age, yet had not been given to her as a husband (Gen 38:14). This wording presupposes that she still expected the promised levirate marriage. At the same time, the narrator notes that after the encounter, Judah "did not know her again" (Gen 38:26), indicating that no marital relationship followed. This stands in marked tension with Deut 25:5, where the levir is explicitly commanded to "take her as his wife" (*leʾiššāh*) and thereby fulfill his levirate duty. The same pattern appears in the Book of Ruth, where marriage is the expected

9 Deuteronomy 25:5–10 not only transforms the levirate obligation from a compulsory duty into one that may be formally declined but also restricts its application to the brothers of the deceased. By contrast, Gen 38 appears to preserve an earlier stage of the institution, in which the obligation extended beyond the deceased's brothers to include his father. Within this legal framework, Tamar's attempt to conceive a son by Judah required her to disguise herself as a prostitute. Although such an act would ordinarily have constituted incest (Lev 18:15; 20:12), the narrative presents her conduct as justified, a judgment ultimately confirmed by Judah's declaration in Gen 38:26. Tamar's actions are therefore portrayed as a legitimate means of compelling Judah to fulfill his levirate obligation.

and integral component of levirate responsibility. The narrator's concluding remark therefore carries an additional irony: although Judah "knew" Tamar at Enaim, he neither recognized her nor understood her purpose, and after unwittingly fulfilling the levirate obligation, he never entered into the marriage that the institution itself presupposed (Davies 1981b, 260–267).

The concluding genealogical notice describing the birth of Tamar's twin sons, Perez and Zerah (Gen 38:27–30), provides an interpretative key to the preceding narrative. What at first appears as a sequence marked by deception, accusation, and the threat of punishment is not an isolated episode within the history of Judah's family. The narrative is incorporated into Israel's remembered genealogy and thus becomes part of the broader history of the people from which the Davidic monarchy will later arise. By including Perez—born from Tamar, presented as a Canaanite woman—Genesis places this controversial episode within the lineage that culminates in David. The genealogical trajectory beginning with Perez reappears in Ruth 4:18–22, where Boaz, a descendant of Perez and the great-grandfather of David, is described as marrying Ruth the Moabite (Alshekh 1991, 337–45). In later royal tradition, Solomon is associated with Naamah the Ammonite, identified as the mother of Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:21; 2 Chr 12:13) and therefore as an ancestress of the Davidic dynasty. From this perspective, the genealogical foundations of the Davidic line involve unions with women originating from foreign peoples. Significantly, these groups correspond to those with whom intermarriage is explicitly discouraged or prohibited in Deuteronomic legislation (Deut 7:1–3; 23:4–5). Yet within this genealogical framework, David and his descendants emerge as central figures in Israel's political and theological memory. The Davidic monarchy becomes the focal point of the Kingdom of Judah and gradually acquires paradigmatic significance within biblical tradition. Ultimately, Israel's hope for the future is expressed in reference to the expected Messiah who is to arise from the house of David.

Conclusion

As the account is narrated from a retrospective perspective, the figure in question is none other than the eponymous ancestor of the tribe of Judah, the lineage from which the Davidic monarchy—and, in a broader sense, Israel's historical identity—would later emerge. This genealogical significance invites reflection on the meaning of Judah's conduct. The narrative raises the question of whether Judah is portrayed as a figure overcome by impulse, relinquishing his most significant personal signifiers—his seal, cord, and staff—in exchange for a fleeting sexual encounter. While psychological speculation or anachronistic moralizing must be avoided, an explanation based solely on the recent death of his wife appears hermeneutically insufficient.

Moreover, such behavior contrasts with other literary portrayals of Judah, where he emerges as a discerning, responsible, and initiative-taking leader (Menn 1997, 143). The text may intentionally preserve this tension in order to present a more complex characterization. Yet the narrative does not ultimately center on Judah's motivations; rather, its center of gravity shifts decisively toward his daughter-in-law, whose initiative and agency are the primary dynamic of the episode.

Tamar emerges as the central figure of the episode. Her initiative drives the plot, and the narrative devotes the majority of its verses to her actions, which is relatively unusual for female characters in the Hebrew Bible. In a literary context in which female figures often serve secondary roles, the biblical narrative allows Tamar's voice and initiative to come to the fore, presenting her claim to justice as a key element of the story. Although the union between Judah and Tamar might appear to stand in tension with broader biblical norms, the narrative does not treat her deception as something deserving condemnation. On the contrary, Judah's acknowledgment of her righteousness (Gen 38:26) is the decisive narrative evaluation. The episode concludes not with punishment but with the birth of twins—a doubling of the blessing that confirms Tamar's pivotal role in the continuation of the family line. From this perspective, the narrative may be considered as employing a strategy analogous to *argumentum ad absurdum*, in which a socially marginalized figure becomes the one through whom the ethical logic of the story is revealed.

By elevating a female figure to the role of hero, the biblical author conveys a didactic message that operates through a dual rhetorical strategy:

1. **The Primacy of Procreative Duty.** The central thrust of the chapter concerns the obligation to ensure the continuation of the patriarchal line. Tamar is presented as a moral exemplar (*exemplum*), while the rhetorical force of the episode is closely connected with her status as a woman originating from beyond the covenant community. Her conduct—entailing both a radical disguise as a prostitute and the risk of summary execution—is not presented as a pursuit of personal self-realization but rather as an action to preserve the name of her deceased husband. By depicting the success of a Canaanite woman who receives offspring and whose actions are implicitly vindicated in the narrative, the text establishes a significant point of comparison for the women of Israel. The presence of an "outsider" intensifies the logic of the account: if even a foreign woman, situated beyond the Israelite tradition, recognizes the importance of safeguarding the family line and is willing to risk her life for its preservation, the failure of an Israelite woman to do the same would appear as a moral absurdity. In this sense, the portrayal of Tamar serves as a rhetorical mirror addressed to the primary audience of the story, underscoring the value attributed to generational continuity within the patriarchal world reflected in the text.
2. **Intermarriage with the Peoples of the Land.** The motif of intermarriage—specifically with the indigenous population of Canaan—is not an end in itself but

rather a rhetorical device that reinforces the primary message of the narrative. In contrast to many Pentateuchal traditions that emphasize endogamous marriage patterns, the account in Gen 38 presents the outcome of such a union in a positive light. This is particularly noteworthy within the broader context of the Hebrew Bible. While several narratives refer to foreign wives—such as Hagar the Egyptian, Zipporah the Midianite, or Aseneth, the daughter of the priest of On—these figures do not originate from the Canaanite population, and their foreign origin is rarely presented as a central theological concern. In Gen 38, however, a fruitful union with a Canaanite woman represents an unusual narrative development. Rather than serving as a theological endorsement of intermarriage, it is a rhetorical strategy that intensifies the argument of the episode. By portraying a Canaanite woman as the figure through whom the family line is preserved, the narrative places particular emphasis on the importance of generational continuity, even as it engages with questions of identity and belonging within the community.

Taken together, these observations suggest that Gen 38 ultimately resists reduction either to moral warning or to narrative irregularity. By holding together the exposure of flawed judgment and the continuity of promise, the text bears witness to a biblical vision in which divine fidelity does not depend on the perfection of human systems. The episode neither idealizes its protagonists, Judah and Tamar, nor dismantles the structures within which they act; instead, it reveals that God's purposes advance within histories marked by ambiguity and limitation. In this way, the narrative participates in the wider scriptural testimony that divine providence works through recognition, responsibility, and repentance rather than through abstract legal certainty. The story thus remains theologically significant not because it resolves the tension it exposes, but because it situates that tension within the enduring horizon of God's covenantal faithfulness.

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The Holy Mountain of Galilee: Could Mount Meron Be the Site of the Transfiguration?

VIKTOR KOMARNYTSKYY
Independent Scholar, wikomar@gmail.com

Abstract: The traditional location of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor has long been challenged by exegetes, since it does not adequately fit the narrative context of the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Mark. Alternative hypotheses have likewise encountered widespread scepticism, leading most scholars to treat the question as unresolved. This article proposes that Mount Meron in Upper Galilee is a particularly strong candidate for the historical site of the Transfiguration. A close reading of Mark's Gospel, supported by the reference in 2 Pet 1:18, points to a high and holy mountain in the context of Jesus' final Galilean ministry. Although the later Jewish veneration of Meron cannot be directly traced to the time of Jesus, the strongest case for this identification arises from a historiographical reading of Mark, in which the events surrounding the Transfiguration are concentrated in the Meron region.

Keywords: Transfiguration, Mount Meron, Gospel of Mark, Upper Galilee, "messianic secret" motif

1. Introduction: The Problem of Locating the Mountain of the Transfiguration

The event of the Transfiguration, as described in the Synoptic Gospels, took place on an unidentified "high mountain" (ὄρος ὑψηλόν in Matt 17:1 and Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28 simply has τὸ ὄρος). It marked the beginning of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, where suffering and death awaited Him. Christian tradition has commonly identified the site of the Transfiguration with Mount Tabor in Lower Galilee, which lies on the natural route from Galilee—the main area of Jesus' ministry—to Judea, the place of His suffering and death. The New Testament accounts themselves, however, provide no geographical details that would allow the mountain to be identified with certainty.

The authentic memory of Galilean Jewish Christians concerning the site of the Transfiguration was most likely lost or severely distorted as a result of the dramatic events of the 1st and 2nd centuries. Of particular importance were the Jewish Wars (66–73 and 132–135), which brought massive casualties, deportations and the dispersion of the population, while also deepening tensions between different religious groups. Following the events described in the Gospels, most Galilean followers of Jesus moved to Jerusalem, which became the principal centre of the movement. Galilee rapidly lost its significance and virtually disappeared from the New Testament narrative as a field of apostolic activity. In the early centuries of Christianity the

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region seems almost absent from the map of the Christian world, leaving behind very few—if any—material traces or literary references (Deines 2014, 79, n. 2, 98–101; Boin 2015). Another significant factor was the gradual severing or weakening of ties between Judeo-Christians and the developing Gentile Church (Bauckham 2007, 75–81; Dunn 2009, 875–94; 2015, 472–78; Luomanen 2012, 233–44). As a consequence, the location traditions known to us today are full of belated and often arbitrary decisions; they did not originate in the milieu of Galilean Judeo-Christians, but were formed later in the Hellenistic-Roman world, where the systematic recognition of places associated with particular Gospel events began on a large scale only in the 4th century.

The identification of Mount Tabor—a mountain rising 588 m above sea level in the Jezreel Valley, situated between Nazareth and Nain (localities associated with Jesus' ministry in the Gospels) (cf. Mark 6:1–6 par.; Luke 7:11–17)—as the site of the Transfiguration is widely accepted in Church tradition. This tradition, however, does not reach back directly to the time of Jesus. The earliest explicit testimony linking the Transfiguration to Tabor appears only in the 3rd century and is attributed to Origen,[1] after whom the identification of Tabor as the mountain of the Transfiguration became widespread in the Christian world (Manns 2006, 173–76). It should be noted that no extant Christian source earlier than Origen links the Transfiguration with Tabor. From the mid-4th century onward the identification is widely accepted, but it remains uncertain to what extent later authors depended directly on Origen.

One frequently cited objection to the identification with Tabor concerns the settlement status of its summit in the 1st century CE. Archaeology does not provide a definitive answer, but it is known that during the Hellenistic and Hasmonean periods a fortress stood on the summit, which was later likely abandoned and only rebuilt (or restored) in 66 CE (Shatzman 1991, 260; Leibner 2009, 339–41). In Jesus's time, therefore, the summit may have housed either a Roman garrison, minimal civilian settlement, or simply abandoned ruins. While this would not have precluded its use for private prayer, in the opinion of some exegetes it weakens the case for Tabor.

An even more serious objection relates to chronological and geographical factors. The author of Mark 9:2, who generally employs a concise, reportorial style, indicates that the Transfiguration took place "after six days" from the events near Caesarea Philippi. This would mean that Jesus and His disciples covered approximately 65 km on foot to the south—a journey of three to five days. Such a route would make sense in the context of a journey toward Jerusalem. In the subsequent narrative, however, Mark describes Jesus' return to Capernaum (about 45 km to the north), followed

1 Origen cites an earlier text from the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews: Ἄρτι ἔλαβέ με ἡ μήτηρ μου, τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, ἐν μιᾷ τῶν τριχῶν μου καὶ ἀπήνεγκέ με εἰς τὸ ὄρος τὸ μέγα Θαβώρ (Origen, *Comm. Jo.* II.12.87). In his commentary on the Psalms he states more directly: Θαδὼρ δὲ ἔστι τὸ ὄρος τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐφ᾽ οὗ μεμορφώθη Χριστός (Origen, *Sel. Ps.* on Ps 88:13). Origen's phrase τὸ ὄρος τὸ μέγα Θαβώρ, in the Gospel context, fits better with ὄρος ὑψηλὸν λίαν (Matt 4:8)—the event of Christ's temptation.

only later by another journey south through Perea. Such a route would involve passing Mount Tabor twice, which the evangelist does not explain.[2]

These considerations have contributed to scholarly scepticism regarding the traditional location. As early as John Lightfoot ([1859] 1989, 311), scholars questioned whether Tabor was consistent with the topography described in the Gospels, suggesting that it should lie closer to Caesarea Philippi and Mount Hermon. Henry Barclay Swete (1913, 187) likewise identified the Synoptic "high mountain" as probably Mount Hermon. Gustaf H. Dalman, by contrast, explicitly rejected both Hermon and its spurs as the intended location. He proposed instead several isolated volcanic heights in the northern Golan—Tell el-Ahmar, Tell Abu en-Neda, and Tell esh-Shecha—which offered both considerable elevation and the solitude appropriate to the Lukan emphasis on prayer (Dalman 1935, 203–5). Joseph Klausner regarded Hermon as the most plausible candidate because of its proximity to Caesarea Philippi. He also suggested that the mountain's snow-covered summit may have provided the visual background for the description of Jesus' garments as dazzling white, although he interpreted the Transfiguration itself as a visionary experience of the disciples (Klausner 1925, 303).

Klausner's observation is certainly valid. If the main argument in favour of Mount Hermon (or one of its south-eastern peaks) is the Gospel text itself, then it is reasonable to ask in what season of the year this event might have taken place. Since Passover was celebrated in the spring,[3] and that Luke's "Travel Narrative" spanned several months, some scholars date the Transfiguration to late autumn or winter (Troftgruben 2025, 147–66).

The exact chronology of the crucifixion is not decisive here, since Passover fell in the early spring. More problematic is the length of the "Travel Narrative" in Luke (Luke 9:51–19:27). Even if one accepts a longer duration of the journey, significant difficulties remain. The route through Perea (the eastern bank of the Jordan) led through an area sparsely populated by Jews (Josephus, *B.J.* 3.3.3; Treacy-Cole 1992, 224–25), where in winter or early spring it was difficult to find lodging for a group of disciples and to conduct regular preaching activities. In Luke, however, Jesus is constantly surrounded by a crowd (ὄχλος appears repeatedly throughout the journey) and leads a rich social life (Luke 10:38–42; 11:37–52; 13:10–17; 14:1–24; 15:1–2; 18:15–16). The argument based on the large amount of material is not convincing. Luke does not provide any coherent topography of events, and the so-called "Travel

2 Such objections apply even more strongly to the identification of the Transfiguration with the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, proposed by "the Pilgrim of Bordeaux" in the first half of the 4th century. The Mount of Olives lies far outside the geographical setting of the events and cannot reasonably be described as a "high mountain" (Foreman 2016, 299–300). At the same time, this testimony may serve as an indication that pilgrims of that period were not yet familiar with the Tabor tradition.

3 For example, according to Harold W. Hoehner (1977, 114) the crucifixion took place on April 3, 33 CE, while Colin J. Humphreys (2011, 62–79) proposes either April 7, 30 CE, or April 3, 33 CE.

Narrative" appears to be a redactional composition of various Galilean traditions. Moreover, Luke 17:11 (cf. 9:52) suggests that Jesus was still on the border between Samaria and Galilee, which implies that the actual journey to Jerusalem may have been considerably shorter.

This, in turn, effectively rules out Mount Hermon as the site of the Transfiguration, since during late autumn or winter the peaks of the massif (2,814 m above sea level, with the southern slopes at approximately 2,350–1,800 m) would have been covered in snow. Moreover, a journey to Hermon would have required traveling in the opposite direction from Jerusalem, involving a strenuous ascent in harsh winter conditions.

The highlands proposed by Dalman—Tell esh-Sheikhah, Tell Abu en-Neda, and Tell el-Ahmar, all of volcanic origin—are situated in the Golan Heights. This would mean that Jesus first ascended to the plateau of the northern Upper Golan, entering Iturean territory (Hartal 2016, 391–415). Consequently, none of the proposed Hermon alternatives seems convincing from the perspective of chronology and narrative logic.

Other isolated suggestions (the Mount of Beatitudes, the Horns of Hattin, the Mount of Olives, Sinai, etc.) have occasionally appeared in the literature, but none has gained any lasting scholarly traction.

The inability to determine the location of the "high mountain" has led most contemporary commentators to refrain from proposing their own hypotheses, limiting themselves instead to citing the views of earlier scholars (e.g., Davies and Allison 2012, 694–95; Keener 1999, 437; Standaert 2011, 485). Some exegetes have gone even further, regarding the entire Transfiguration scene as a purely symbolic and theological construct—an anticipation of the Resurrection devoid of any historical core (Bultmann 1931, 278–79; Carlston 1961; Miller 1994). Even if one accepts this interpretation, it does not preclude the possibility that the pericope is rooted in the memory of a real event, which was subsequently reshaped through deep literary and theological transformation.

Remaining within the narrative world depicted by Mark, some scholars have proposed Mount Meron—the highest peak in Upper Galilee—as the site of the Transfiguration (Ewing 1915, 3006; Kraeling 1956, 389–90; Hendriksen 1973, 665; France 2002, 350). Mount Meron (Jebel Jermuk), the most striking feature in the entire Galilean landscape and offering a marvellous prospect over the whole of Galilee, was regarded as a better candidate precisely because of its coherence with the texts of Mark and Matthew. These scholars—whose hypothesis was only briefly hinted at and never systematically developed—were persuaded by the combination of newly available archaeological evidence concerning the inhabited character of Mount Tabor's summit (Ewing 1915; Kraeling 1956) with two interrelated arguments drawn from Mark: that the Transfiguration ought to be located within the Jewish ecumene, surrounded by Jewish settlements (an argument against Mount Hermon), and that it

ought at the same time to lie on the route from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum (an argument against Tabor).

A further argument may be drawn from the reference to the mountain in the Second Epistle of Peter (2 Pet 1:18), where it is called the "holy mountain" (ἐν τῷ ἁγίῳ ὄρει). Emil G. Kraeling (1956, 390) connects this designation with a tradition supposedly contained in the Gospel of the Hebrews, which, in his view, would merely point to the early origin of the Tabor tradition. The expression itself, however, can be understood in two ways: either as a mountain already recognized as a sacred site, or as a place that became holy only through the Transfiguration event itself. In the first case we would be dealing with the existence of some pre-Jesus cult, for which the powerful religious cult of Meron in contemporary Judaism may offer indirect evidence.[4]

The proposal to give serious consideration to one of the mountains of Upper Galilee—and in particular to Mount Meron as its dominant peak—as the historical site of the Transfiguration has not gained widespread support, since the two-thousand-year-old tradition holds an overwhelming advantage over any alternative, even when that alternative (Mount Meron) appears "far more logical" (Hendriksen 1973, 665). The aim of the present study is therefore to determine whether, and to what extent, the hypothesis that views Mount Meron as a possible site of the Transfiguration is justified—especially within Mark's narrative world and "his Galilee." It should be stated at the outset that the article does not claim to offer a definitive solution. Its more modest purpose is simply to examine whether this hypothesis can be considered a serious possibility, even though, unlike Tabor, Mount Meron possesses no ancient tradition associating it with the Transfiguration, and unlike Hermon, it has seldom been treated as a plausible candidate by major scholars. William Ewing and Emil G. Kraeling were the first to put forward the idea—but how well-founded is it? The following section investigates the religious traditions associated with Meron as a sacred site, in order to assess whether the mountain's holiness in the time of Jesus could itself serve as an argument for locating the Transfiguration there. The second

4 The earliest archaeologically confirmed evidence of human activity on the summit of Mount Tabor consists of the remains of a Hellenistic fortress. There is no convincing non-scriptural evidence to suggest that the summit ever served as a cultic site. Supporters of an earlier cultic tradition associated with Tabor appeal to a few Old Testament passages (Hos 5:1; Deut 33:19) and later rabbinic midrashim (e.g., Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Genesis Rabbah, Yalqut Shimoni) in an effort to demonstrate the existence of some Jewish religious tradition connected with the mountain (Manns 2006, 171–73). The current state of research indicates no secure material (archaeological) evidence of Christian presence on the summit of Mount Tabor earlier than the Byzantine period (4th–5th centuries) (Urbani 2019; Luca 2025). As for the summit of Mount Meron, it has never been the subject of systematic archaeological research and remains inaccessible today due to the presence of an Israeli Air Force unit (506 יב"א) stationed there. In any case, the absence of direct archaeological evidence for cultic activity on the summit cannot be considered a decisive argument against its sacred status, since the sacred character of a mountain does not necessarily depend on the existence of a sanctuary or cultic installations at its peak—it may derive from the inherent nature of the place itself, as in the case of Sinai, Olympus, or Kailash.

section then turns to a historical-critical analysis of the Galilean section of Mark's Gospel, taking into account recent archaeological and historiographical data, with the aim of reconstructing the most probable pattern of Jesus' movements in the period surrounding the Transfiguration.

2. Jewish Traditions Concerning the Meron Region

Upper Galilee—the northern, mountainous part of the region that includes the areas around Meiron, Sefat (Tsfat), and Gischala (Gush Halav)—constitutes a classic example of an area with relatively scarce direct sources for the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, since the Jewish population that settled in Galilee from the 2nd century BCE onward left behind almost no written records of its local traditions. Almost everything we know about their religiosity in that period comes from Judean sources or from literature originating outside Galilee.

The region's rich theological and mystical tradition in later centuries nevertheless encourages us to attempt a cautious use of backward inference in order to reconstruct, at least hypothetically, its religious context in the period under discussion. The tombs of the great Tannaim—above all those traditionally ascribed to Hillel and Shammai, as well as the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) and his disciples—have been venerated at the foot of Mount Meron for centuries. The presence of these holy graves and the associated cult is securely attested from the 11th–12th centuries onward (Reiner 1988, 237–38, 295–305), although it remains unknown how far back their origins truly extend.

The prominent figure of Rashbi and other disciples of Rabbi Akiva linked to Galilee and Meron in the 2nd century CE is largely a product of the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt (135 CE). While the tombs of the Jerusalem Tannaim may well have been cenotaphs erected after the fall of Judea, those of later Galilean teachers—such as Rashbi, Yossi ben Kisma, Yochanan ha-Sandlar, or Yitzchak of Meron—could mark their actual burial sites. Contemporary researchers are unable to determine whether Rashbi's present-day grave is his authentic resting place or yet another cenotaph (Ben Zion 2021), especially given that Benjamin of Tudela, the 12th-century traveller, while listing the tombs of the Tannaim in the region, does not yet mention the grave of Rashbi (Benjamin of Tudela 1907).

Archaeological and historiographical evidence indicates that during the Roman period Upper Galilee contained several dozen settlements, some of which were fortified (Frankel et al. 2001, 151–53). According to Josephus, the boundaries of the Jewish ecumene in this region were marked by the cities of Baka (Peqiʿin) and Gischala (Josephus, *B.J.* 3.39). The *Baraita de-Tehumim* similarly records that the halakhic boundary extended approximately 10 km into the Tyrian hinterland (Frankel

et al. 2001, 111–12). The settlement of Peqiʿin, lying west of Meron, later became strongly associated with Rashbi, who is said to have hidden there from the Romans, and with the legendary composition of the Zohar.

Although most of the excavated synagogue buildings in Upper Galilee date to the 3rd–5th centuries CE, archaeological finds demonstrate that the region's inhabitants already possessed a clear Jewish religious identity in the 1st century (Reed 2000, 43–51; Arubas and Leibner 2024). The local population was renowned for both its deep religiosity and its warlike spirit (Josephus, *B.J.* 3.41–43).

Contrary to widespread opinion, Galilee from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE was a deeply Jewish region and an integral part of Second Temple Judaism (S. Safrai 2010; Chancey 2009). In the first half of the 1st century CE, Galilean religiosity was saturated with messianic fervour and eschatological expectation, constantly producing reformers, prophets, and messianic claimants who longed for the restoration of Israel to the glory associated with David's reign. The mountainous terrain of Upper Galilee, long a refuge for dissidents and visionaries, provided crucial support for such aspirations.[5]

One of the key embodiments of the messianic expectations of that era was the figure of the prophet Elijah, who also plays a central role in the Transfiguration scene and is attested in all three Synoptic Gospels. Although traditional theological interpretation often associates this event primarily with the scene of Moses on Mount Sinai, the apostles ask specifically about Elijah. It is noteworthy that in Mark's account (the earliest version of the tradition), Jesus does not explain who this Elijah is, and identifying him with John the Baptist (Matt 17:13) is a later, editorial interpretation.

Morris M. Faierstein (1981) has convincingly shown that the idea of Elijah as the universally recognized forerunner of the Messiah was not as unambiguous or widespread in Second Temple Judaism as is often assumed, but is largely a Christian retrojection. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that such a concept circulated within certain local traditions. Given the intense messianic and eschatological atmosphere of Upper Galilee in the early 1st century, it is at least plausible that the figure of Elijah carried particular significance in this region (cf. Allison 1984; Fitzmyer 1985).

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5 Although the extent of Galilee's revolutionary and eschatological ethos during the Roman period remains a matter of scholarly debate (Freyne 1980, 208–47), there is substantial evidence that the inhabitants of Upper Galilee—living in areas largely untouched by Hellenistic and Roman urbanization and bypassed by major Roman roads due to the rugged terrain—exhibited a stronger religious conservatism (Meyers 1976). Because of its inaccessibility, this mountainous and peripheral region became a natural refuge for fugitives, rebels, and visionaries (Bösen 1985, 39; Hengel 1989, 56–59; Horsley and Hanson 1999, 48–87). It was here that messianic, prophetic, and even apocalyptic hopes flourished with particular intensity (Hengel 1989, 229–312; Horsley and Hanson 1999, 147–87). The title "Son of David," frequently applied to Jesus in the Gospels, most likely belongs to this semantic field.

In the final period of the Second Temple, the prophet Elijah emerged as a complex, multidimensional symbol: he was a model of zeal, renewal, and hope for Israel, drawing on the Maccabean tradition and the ideal of religious restoration (Hein 2025, 90–108). He became increasingly identified with Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, which made him a figure of the eschatological high priest—guardian of the covenant, model of the priesthood, and teacher of the people (Giambrone 2021, 212–14). In this sense, Elijah participated in the broadly understood theocratic messianism of the Galilean revolutionary movements prior to 70 CE, uniting in himself both a priestly and a prophetic-revolutionary dimension (Hengel 1989, 138–86; Horsley and Hanson 1999, 172–87).

Together with the persecutions that followed the First Jewish War, the catastrophe of the Bar Kokhba revolt fundamentally transformed the spiritual landscape of Galilee—shifting it from a region marked by intense messianic and eschatological fervour to a centre of mysticism and the theology of exile. Following the defeats in the Jewish Wars, the figure of Elijah evolved—from a radical, "lone hero" of zealotry, he became a wise old man and providential protector of the "remnant of Israel" (Wiener 1978, 174–98; cf. Lindbeck 2010). As a mystical figure, he was reborn with particular intensity in 13th-century Kabbalah (Zohar), reaching the height of his prominence in 16th-century Lurianic Kabbalah in Sefat. There, Elijah came to be regarded as a source of divine revelation and a symbol of the highest mystical wisdom (Matt 2022, 50–114). In this context, he became strongly associated with the ethos of the region—especially the surroundings of Mount Meron.

"Elijah's Throne"—a natural rock formation in the Nachal Meron ravine—stands as a living witness to the enduring tradition that links this part of Galilee with the prophet. According to a centuries-old Sephardic tradition, it is on this very rock that Elijah will sit in the end times to announce the coming of the Messiah (Vilnay 1932, 396). The fundamental question is: how far back does this tradition actually reach?

In summary, the use of backward inference to reconstruct the religious context of Upper Galilee in the first half of the 1st century CE has only limited applicability, because after 70 CE, and especially after 135 CE, Galilee underwent a radical transformation. It became a sanctuary for waves of refugees from Judea, which fundamentally altered its social and religious landscape. In the absence of the Temple and with a weakened priesthood, the region developed into a new centre of Jewish thought, Torah study, and the mysticism of exile. In the 2nd century, Upper Galilee continued to serve as a place of refuge—this time for the Tannaim—and synagogues were built and expanded, particularly in the Meron region and in the eastern part of Upper Galilee (Frankel et al. 2001, 1–2, 151–52). Meiron (the settlement at the foot of Mount Meron) itself appears for the first time in Tannaitic sources—indirectly in the Mishnah (*m. Rosh ha-Shanah* 1:2) and directly in the Tosefta (*t. Demai* 4:13)—as a priestly settlement and the northern border of Jewish Galilee. From the Amoraic

period onward, the area at the foot of Mount Meron gained increasing importance as one of the most important burial sites of the Tannaim.

It is difficult, however, to determine whether the area around Meron became sacred because of the graves of the great teachers who chose it as their final resting place, or whether their choice was influenced by a pre-existing local sacred tradition. The Galilee of Jesus's time differed fundamentally from the Galilee that emerged after the Jewish Wars (66–73 and 132–135). Jesus encountered a region marked by relative calm, vibrant religious life, and a predominantly agrarian population that was only lightly Hellenized, deeply devout, and surrounded by Gentiles, yet ready to defend its identity.

In the absence of contemporary Galilean sources, the Gospel of Mark remains the earliest narrative that may still preserve echoes of the religious world of Galilee in the time of Jesus.

3. The Gospel According to Mark as a Historical Source

Although the Gospel of Mark is less firmly anchored in the broader historical and religious framework of the New Testament period than the other Synoptic Gospels, this feature should not lead us to undervalue its historical worth. A critical assessment of Mark's reliability already appears in Papias, who observed that the evangelist did not record "the order of the Lord's sayings and deeds," since he depended on Peter, who "had no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's words." (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15–16) The widespread ancient conviction of Matthew's priority led early commentators to regard Mark as a secondary text. Irenaeus, for example, described it as a "compendious and cursory" narrative (*Haer.* 3.11.8).

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark pays relatively little attention to situating "the time of Jesus" within the larger history of humanity or within an explicit eschatological framework. Instead, he presents a relatively straightforward chronological sequence of events in the life of a particular individual. Broader historical framing is largely limited to the opening verses. The narrative network of Mark is constructed primarily through topographical markers; chronological indications appear only sporadically, remain imprecise, and are often difficult to correlate with one another (Malina 2020).

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that Mark's narrative is, in certain sections, remarkably coherent from a topographical point of view. In the Galilean section of the narrative in particular—especially in the events centred on the Lake of Gennesaret (Sea of Galilee, hereafter: Kinneret)—Mark displays a surprising degree of topographical and chronological consistency. As will be shown below, the reader can follow the movements of Jesus and His disciples with a level of precision that is

unusual in the Synoptic tradition. The situation changes somewhat when the narrative moves away from the lake, yet even then Mark continues to indicate the general direction of travel relative to the centre of activity and the spiritual significance of these journeys.

The aim of this section is to "unashamedly go into historical questions" (Reed 2000, 178) concerning Mark's text, reading it primarily as a historiographical work and focusing on what the author conveys directly rather than on the later interpretations offered by Matthew, Luke, or early Christian commentators. Particular attention is given to topographical descriptions and the concrete actions of Jesus, while seeking—as far as possible—to set aside pastoral and symbolic interpretive assumptions. The goal is to reconstruct, as faithfully as possible, the *Sitz im Leben* of the events within the historical, cultural, and religious realities of Galilee, the Golan, the Decapolis, and Phoenicia in the 20s and 30s CE.

It must be acknowledged that in certain places—most notably in the account of the Transfiguration, which, unlike other Markan locations, lacks a precise geographical setting—Mark's narrative remains incomplete. In such cases, literary criticism, combined with topographical, archaeological, and historiographical data, may help to fill the narrative gaps and offer a hypothetical reconstruction of the location of the Transfiguration.

3.1. "Markan Galilee"

In Mark's Gospel, Galilee serves as the stage for events that took place about forty years earlier, recorded largely on the basis of oral traditions stemming from Galilean eyewitnesses and local community memory (Bauckham 2007; Keener 2019).[6] According to the widely accepted source theory, Matthew and Luke, in their Galilean sections, rely primarily on the Gospel of Mark, expanding it with material drawn from other traditions. Markan style is predominantly "reportorial," rich in concrete topographical detail. The later evangelists largely adopt Mark's text as their foundation, while giving it a stronger theological emphasis. Where they introduce their own material, it is much less rooted in the topographical realities of Galilee and consists mainly of teaching and miracle stories.

In the first nine chapters of Mark's Gospel, the northern shore of the Kinneret forms the principal geographical centre of Jesus' Galilean ministry in Mark. The evangelist refers to the lake no fewer than eighteen times (Mark 1:16; 2:13; 4:1; 5:21, etc.), not counting mentions of boat crossings and activity along the shore. A fairly

6 For the exegetical debate over whether the Gospel according to Mark should be seen as the work of a conservative editor who faithfully transmitted collected material in its original form, or rather as that of a creative theological author who constructed a deeply symbolic text see Räisänen (1990, 9–15). In each of these approaches, however, a certain historical basis for the narrative is acknowledged—the differences concern only the degree of its fidelity and the precision of its rendering.

coherent itinerary of Jesus' activity in Galilee can be traced as follows (Mark 1–9): (1) Kinneret; (2) Capernaum (which Mark calls πόλις); (3) "all Galilee"; (4) return to the lake; (5) grain fields (in the depression around the Kinneret); (6) the synagogue in Capernaum; (7) by the lake; (8) on the mountain (one of the nearby hills); (9) "house" (οἶκος in Capernaum); (10) by the lake; (11) first boat trip to the country of the Gerasenes (eastern shore); (12) return by boat to Capernaum (second boat trip); (13) "hometown" (?); (14) sending out the disciples; (15) third sailing to a "deserted place" (eastern shore); (16) sailing to Bethsaida (a few kilometres north, storm on the lake—winter!); (17) fifth sailing to the western shore (land of Gennesaret); (18) the region of Tyre (first northern journey); (19) return to the eastern shore of the lake "through Sidon"; (20) sixth sailing to the vicinity of Dalmanutha (western shore, probably Magdala); (21) seventh sailing back to Bethsaida; (22) second northern journey "to the villages around Caesarea Philippi"; (23) "a high mountain" ("after six days"); (24) a large crowd at the foot of the mountain; (25) "after leaving there, they travelled through Galilee"; (26) Capernaum → the road to Jerusalem.

In this way, nearly the entire Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry takes place on the shores of a tectonic lake situated in the Jordan Rift Valley, which lies in a depression about 208 m below sea level, in an area densely populated by Judean colonists from the Hasmonean period. These places can be arranged in clockwise order as follows: Dalmanutha (possibly Magdala), the Ginosar Valley (the land of Gennesaret), Capernaum, Bethsaida (el-Araj)—located on the shore of the Kinneret between the mouth of the Jordan and the Meshushim Stream (Kučera 2026), an unknown settlement on the shore between Gamla and Hippos (Susita), and the border of the country of the Gerasenes (probably the region of Nahal Samach). The coastline from Magdala to el-Araj consists of fertile fields, surrounded by mountains that form a characteristic "bowl" shape around the lake. The areas on the eastern shore of the lake, including the area around el-Araj, administratively belonged to Gaulanitis (Golan) and the Decapolis (including the district of Hippos), but culturally and ethnically were considered part of Galilee (Meyers 1976, 100; Hartal 2006, 271).

The narrative achieves its greatest topographical precision in the accounts of events occurring near Capernaum, which functions as both the geographical and narrative centre of the entire Galilean section of the Gospel. It was most likely there that Jesus had His permanent residence (οἶκος, cf. Mark 2:1; 3:20; 7:17; 9:33). The memory associated with Capernaum and Bethsaida appears particularly rich, as suggested by certain doublets that may represent different versions of the same events. By contrast, in descriptions of places farther from the lake (the eastern shore, the Decapolis region, the borders of Tyre and Sidon, the villages near Caesarea Philippi), Mark clearly loses detail, resorting to generalities (McCown 1941, 1–9). Even Chorazin, located just 4 km from the shore and about 300 m above the lake's level, does not appear in the Galilean geography of Mark.

During the Galilean period, Jesus ventured beyond the "bowl" formed by the mountains surrounding the Kinneret only a few times. A common feature of the accounts of these journeys is a noticeable loss of precision: the destination is often unclear and the broader geographical context is only vaguely defined. This may indicate both the author's unfamiliarity with these inland areas and the fact that such traditions were preserved primarily in the memory of the lakeside communities (Lang 1978; Theissen 1991, 242–58; Dunn 2003, 238–43). Places lying outside the immediate vicinity of the lake are frequently described in generalised terms ("the region of Tyre," "the Decapolis," "the country of the Gerasenes")—that is, as broad regional designations rather than precise topographical markers.

In this narrative perspective, "Galilee" itself may primarily denote the area around the lake. One gains the impression that "Markan Galilee"—in full keeping with the etymology of the name—is the "circuit" of settlements surrounding the lake, which constituted the real, central Galilee. Consequently, a "return to Galilee" need not imply a long journey from a distant northern mountain (as assumed by Foreman [2016, 305], who advanced this as an argument in favour of Hermon), but simply a return to the familiar centre of Jesus' activity.

3.2. The Journey to the "Hometown"

Southern Galilee is virtually absent in Mark's Gospel, with the exception of Jesus' "hometown," which, based on Mark 1:9; 10:47; and 16:6, can be identified as Nazareth. In contrast, Luke and John independently mention other locations of Jesus' ministry in this region: Nain (Luke 7:11) and Cana in Galilee (John 2:1–11; 4:46–54), both located in close proximity to Nazareth. This suggests that Jesus' mission in southern Galilee was either unknown to Mark or deliberately omitted by him.

Luke's references to Nain, located about 16 km south of Nazareth, belong to material unique to the Third Gospel (the so-called L source) and most likely stem from a pre-Lucan, local tradition of that area (Fitzmyer 1981, 656). Similarly, the mention of Cana in the Gospel of John (presumably Khirbet Qana, situated approximately 13–14 km north of Nazareth, or Kafr Kanna, about 6 km to the north-east) reflects an independent tradition that may stand in tension, or even competition, with the Capernaum-centred perspective dominant in Mark (Richardson 2004, 91–107).

It therefore appears that, alongside Markan Capernaum-centred tradition, there were also other independent South Galilean traditions (attested by Luke and John), including those associated with the area around Mount Tabor. However, neither Luke nor John—despite drawing on South Galilean material—transmits any independent tradition of the Transfiguration. Matthew and Luke reproduce Mark's account; John omits the episode altogether.

The first significant journey beyond the shores of the Kinneret—to Jesus' "hometown"—appears to be a redactional insertion within the narrative of His ministry

in Capernaum (Mark 5:43 → 6:6b). It likely belongs to the broader thematic unit found in Mark 3:21–35. The scene is prepared in verse 3:20, in which Jesus returns "home" after a period of intense activity. What follows is a carefully crafted chiasm: A – His relatives think He has lost His mind; B – Scribes from Jerusalem accuse Him of being possessed or practicing black magic; B' – there is no forgiveness for those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit; A' – Jesus identifies those who do the will of God as his true family (Jesus speaks to the Galileans living by the lake). In this way, Mark introduces early in the narrative a note of threat coming from the south and foreshadows one of his central theological themes: the contrast between the rustic, idyllic Galilean shore and the land beyond, especially Jerusalem—the place from which the scribes come and where suffering awaits Him.

3.3. The First Journey North

Jesus' journey to the region of Tyre marks the beginning of the northern motif of Mark's narrative. At first glance, it is described with relative clarity: it begins in the region of Gennesaret and heads toward the borders of Tyre. The most likely route passed through Upper Galilee toward the settlements of Meron and Sefat, from where it could either turn west toward Baka or continue north toward Gischala (Dalman 1935, 199–200).[7] Both of these localities lay on the border between Galilee and the territory of Tyre (Josephus, *B.J.* 3.3.1; *t. Demai* 4:9; Frankel et al. 2001, 111–12).

Exegetes often interpret chapters 7–9 as "the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles." However, the mission to the Gentiles itself is almost invisible in the text, and the entire hypothesis is based mainly on the references to Sidon in Mark 7:24 and 7:31. The phrase ἦλθεν διὰ Σιδῶνος in Mark 7:31 is well attested in the oldest manuscripts (sometimes appearing as καὶ Σιδῶνος ἦλθεν), whereas the mention of Sidon in Mark 7:24 seems to be a later harmonization (NA28). This reference, however, creates serious interpretive difficulties, because the route through Sidon across pagan territory would have been approximately 150 km long and highly improbable.

The appearance of the name Σιδῶνος in chapter 7 can be explained in several ways:

1) Mark may have used the expression "Tyre and Sidon" in a conventional sense, to denote the entire southern Phoenician border region (cf. Mark 3:8; Joel 4:4; Zech 9:2) (Dalman 1935, 198–99; Donahue and Harrington 2002, 239).
2) Σιδῶνος may be a scribal error and should be read as Βηθσαϊδά (Wellhausen 1903, 60).

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7 An alternative, easier route existed that avoided the highlands of Upper Galilee by following the valleys westward toward the Carmel region. Such a path, however, would have led directly into predominantly Gentile territory, would have been topographically less coherent with the subsequent movements in Mark's narrative, and would have failed to provide the sense of withdrawal from public activity that the context suggests (see 3.5 below).

3) It may refer to a settlement on the Jewish-pagan border known in rabbinic literature as צדין / צידן (e.g., *m. Avodah Zarah* 3:7; *m. Gittin* 7:5; *m. Kiddushin* 4:14), most likely Bethsaida-Julia (Freund 1995).
4) Joshua lists the city of צִידוֹן רַבָּה (Great Sidon) in the territory of Asher, perhaps to distinguish it from another Sidon, for example, the "small" one mentioned in Sennacherib's list (Kallai 1986, 212–13), or yet another one. According to the lists in Judg 1:31 and/or 2 Sam 24:7, such a Sidon was said to lie near Acco or Tyre, inland. A candidate might be the city of צְדִים in western Upper Galilee, mentioned only in Josh 19:35, whose name changed from צדם to צדן as a result of Aramaization.
5) Settlements bearing names derived from the root דוצ ("to hunt, to fish") were probably as common in the Levant as those with roots such as אפק, קדש, רחב and, like many others, disappeared without a trace during the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods due to demographic and political changes (Leibner 2009, 351–76).

Each of these possibilities seems more plausible than a winter journey through the mountains to Great Sidon and back. It makes more sense to assume that Jesus returned by the same route to the eastern shore of the lake, to the "Decapolis region," which was in fact the Jewish-populated section of the Kinneret shore between Gamla and Hippos (Hartal 2006; 2016, 412–14; Ben David 2011, 315–19). By traveling along the eastern shore of the lake through the territories of the Golan and the Decapolis, Jesus remained within the boundaries of the Jewish ecumene. This enabled Him to gather around Him large crowds consisting of the descendants of Judean settlers from the Hasmonean period. The only contact with the pagan population of the Decapolis is the episode of the Gerasenes demoniac (Mark 5:1–20), which ends with Jesus being asked to leave their territory—a scene deliberately and strongly accentuated by the symbolism of the herd of pigs.

Another certain encounter between Jesus and a representative of the pagan world in the Galilean section of Mark's Gospel is the scene with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30). This was likely the only such encounter known to the evangelist. Mark therefore highlights the woman's origin with particular emphasis—ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἦν Ἑλληνίς, Συροφοινίκισσα τῷ γένει—underscoring that she was seen as an outsider in a Jewish setting (Yarbro Collins 2007, 364–65). The text suggests that Jesus did not enter a pagan house—it is difficult to imagine Him referring to Gentiles as "dogs" while lodging in a pagan home—and most likely did not cross into predominantly Gentile territory. The foreign woman may have found Jesus on her own in a border area or in a region with a mixed Phoenician-Jewish population that spoke Aramaic (Theissen 1991, 75–76), as the Phoenician population had begun to penetrate Upper Galilee already in the Persian period (Reed 2000, 163; Berlin and

Frankel 2012). The journey could thus have ended in the region of the Jewish settlement bloc of Meiron–Baka–Gischala.

The motif of "Tyre and Sidon" appears to be a narrative framework added to the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, rather than its actual historical background (Yarbro Collins 2007, 364; Focant 2012, 300). Mark, on the other hand, may have regarded the whole of Upper Galilee as the "borderland of Tyre and Sidon"—an area of blurred ethnic boundaries which, unlike "Markan Galilee" (i.e., the shore of the lake), was marked by mutual distrust and occasional open conflict between Jews and Phoenicians (Josephus, *B.J.* 2.18.2–6; Theissen 1991, 66–68). This tense context, contemporary to the author of the Gospel, may have contributed to the sharp tone with which Mark recounts Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman.

3.4. The Second Journey North

The second Markan journey to the north—"to the villages of Caesarea Philippi" (Mark 8:27)—presents significantly more difficulties. The purpose of this journey remains unclear. The most likely route led across the Chorazin Plateau toward the Hula Valley, where it crossed the Jordan and continued along the river's eastern bank toward Paneas (cf. Whitten 1997). The northern Lower Golan region (from the Hula Valley to the vicinity of Paneas) was, during this period, an area of Iturean settlement and relatively sparsely populated (Urman 1985; Ma'oz 1997; Myers 2010). The administrative territory of Paneas—one of the regions of Herod Philip's tetrarchy—lay east of the Jordan and included the northern Golan and the northern part of the Hula Valley as far as the southern shores of Lake Semechonitis (also known as Hula, Yam Sumchi, or "the Waters of Merom"). During Philip's rule, these areas enjoyed peace and religious pluralism, allowing the Iturean population to coexist relatively peacefully on the southern outskirts of Caesarea Philippi, where a Semitic-Hellenistic religious syncretism prevailed (Hartal 2006, 269–75).

Crossing the Jordan River at Jacob's Ford (Gesher Ya'akov) would have meant entering a culturally and religiously foreign region—a land of swamps, rocky terrain, and a long history of banditry (Hartal 2016, 379–81). However, the distribution of characteristic pottery indicates that Jewish settlement may have extended to the eastern bank of the Hula Valley as far as the area of present-day Kibbutz Gonen along the road toward Paneas. This attests to the existence at that time of certain Jewish settlements on the western slopes of the Lower Golan (Shaked and Avshalom-Gorni 2004), which could theoretically have been the destination of the journey εἰς τὰς κώμας Καισαρείας τῆς Φιλίππου.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that by "the villages of Caesarea" Mark meant settlements located on the western bank of the Hula Valley (Hulatha), which had also belonged to Paneas since the time of Herod the Great (Hartal 2006, 271–72). This region belonged both to the mountainous landscape of Upper Galilee and to the

historical territory of Naphtali. North of Meroth and Teila began an area inhabited by a predominantly Syro-Phoenician population (including Kedesh / Cadasa and Qeren Naphtali) that was quite hostile toward the Jews (Josephus, *B.J.* 3.3.1; Frankel et al. 2001, 111).

Venturing into these mountainous areas on the margins of the Jewish ecumene can only be reasonably explained as a retreat or temporary withdrawal from public activity. The reason for this move appears to have been the growing conflict with the religious authorities from the Kinneret coast, which is clearly evident in the sequence of events:

1) After the dispute over the "tradition of the elders" in the Ginosar Valley (or possibly even earlier, after receiving news about Herod—Mark 6:14–16), Jesus withdrew northward, where He took refuge in a house ("He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it"—Mark 7:24);
2) a return to the eastern, more desolate shore of the lake;
3) an attempt to go to the region of Dalmanutha, which provoked yet another conflict;
4) the healing of a blind man in Bethsaida with a clear instruction to avoid publicity;
5) a journey to the border of the Jewish ecumene, where He spends "six days" (Mark 9:2);
6) a discreet return through Galilee ("they travelled through Galilee, but He did not want anyone to know about it"—Mark 9:30).

If this northern journey were a retreat prompted by growing pressure from the authorities and religious leaders, then Herod Philip's tetrarchy would have offered Jesus relative safety (Hartal 2016, 403–4). However, the most natural and likely place of refuge was Upper Galilee, in the region bordering Tyre and Paneas (Hulatha). These areas were densely populated by Jews but lacked major cities and main roads, lying more than a day's march from the centres of power (Z. Safrai 2014, 278). Upper Galilee was an ideal place for those hiding from persecution (Horsley and Hanson 1999, 77–85), while remaining deeply traditional in religious matters and economically oriented toward Phoenicia (Horsley 1995, 162–63, 238–40).

The reason that drove Jesus northward is of decisive importance for determining the locations of His stays in this region, and consequently also for identifying the area where the event of the Transfiguration may have taken place.

3.5. The Messianic Secret or a Crisis of Misunderstanding?

In many scenes from the period of Jesus' withdrawal to the north, scholars have traditionally identified the so-called "messianic secret" motif, using it to explain Jesus' avoidance of publicity regarding His miracles, His identity, and His whereabouts. However, applying this hypothesis consistently proves problematic. Before the mention of Herod (Mark 6:14–16), Jesus shows no inclination to avoid publicity. On the

contrary, He often heals in public, is disappointed by the lack of faith in Nazareth, and then sends His disciples out to preach and heal. The problem lies rather in the fact that His deeds are not interpreted as messianic: the people of Nazareth do not believe in Him despite knowing about His miracles; Herod considers Him to be John the Baptist; others regard Him as Elijah, a prophet, or someone possessed by Beelzebub. It therefore seems that the motives behind the commands to remain silent varied depending on the context (Dunn 1983, 117–26; Räisänen 1990, 155–60).

Mark undoubtedly developed this motif and gave it a strong theological dimension, especially with regard to the healings in Mark 1:44 and 5:43, because these healings did not remain secret and clearly differ from the healings following the conflict at Ginosar: the healings in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31–37) and Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26), where in both cases Jesus takes the people aside, avoiding witnesses and commanding them to remain silent. In the context of growing tension and possible persecution, such cautious conduct is entirely understandable and stands in clear contrast to Jesus' earlier public demonstrations of power (Sanders 1985, 157–73).

The period of Jesus' ministry described in Mark 7:24–9:50, often interpreted as "the mission to the Gentiles" and believed to contain a significant element of the "messianic secret" motif, is in reality governed by a clear narrative thread. This thread—to adapt the previous hypothesis—can more accurately be called "messianic misunderstanding." The motif of Jesus' bitterness or even irritation due to this lack of comprehension, crystallized in the question Οὔπω συνίετε; (Mark 8:21), begins with the sharp conflict with the scribes from Jerusalem, which involves the use of harsh words (ὑποκριταί). The conflict is no longer about accusations of magic (as in Mark 3:22), but concerns fundamental issues of the Law and the "Tradition of the Elders"—the oral law later codified in the Mishnah, which in Pharisaic Judaism was considered equal in authority to the Torah (Pesch 1980, 577–78). The debate, which ended in a conflict involving an appeal to the crowd, most likely took place in the densely populated Ginosar Valley, where many inhabitants observed the prescriptions of ritual purity (Reed 2000, 43–57; Zangenberg 2008; De Luca and Lena 2015).

This gives reason to believe that the following journey to the borders of Tyre may not have been the beginning of a "mission to the Gentiles," but rather the start of a new dynamic: withdrawal, desert places, solitude, and concealment. The departure toward the mountains takes place with a smaller group of disciples, perhaps even fewer than could fit into a Galilean boat of that time. At the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus seems to be alone, whereas at the Transfiguration, only His three inner disciples accompany Him.[8] After a period of intense public ministry, there now comes a time of reflection, mystery, and profound spiritual experience.

8 Given that religious authorities were accusing Jesus of blasphemy, the vision of Moses—the giver of the Law—conversing with Him could have significantly strengthened the faith of the disciples, some of whom were already beginning to turn away from Him at that time (cf. John 6:66–67).

This phase can be described as a crisis of transformation, which brings the Galilean chapter of Jesus' mission to a close and prepares Him for the path of self-offering. It is precisely then that, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins to proclaim that He must suffer and be handed over to death.

During this same period of withdrawal Jesus finds Himself on the border of the land of Tyre, staying in one of the Jewish houses. There He meets a Gentile woman. His words of bitterness may also be directed at Himself: if the "children" do not need bread, perhaps He should give it to the Gentiles? If so, this scene takes on new, existential dimensions, and the Syro-Phoenician woman becomes a figure comparable to the "good thief" who confesses Jesus as He hangs on the cross—as an act of mercy in His greatest abandonment.

The later evangelists, when describing the healing of Gentiles from a distance, emphasize the strength of their faith, but it is more of a pastoral gesture toward Gentile Christians ("O woman, great is your faith!"; "I have not found such great faith in anyone in Israel!"). In Mark's Gospel, however, Jesus values above all the woman's humility and her ability to cross cultural and religious boundaries. The Syro-Phoenician woman most likely saw Jesus as just another magical healer capable of healing from a distance. Mark deliberately picks up on this "foreign" perspective in Jesus' response: "It is not right to take the children's bread," as if to suggest that the healer's power is limited (Haenchen 1966, 274). Healing from a distance was very unusual in the Jewish world at that time—it required direct contact and often, especially in Mark's account, even very invasive contact (Mark 7:33; 8:23–25). Perhaps, in the diverse and eclectic religious world of Syria and Phoenicia (Nutzman 2022, 149–53), such practices were more common, and Mark testifies that Jesus is in no way inferior to pagan healers.[9]

The same motif of misunderstanding returns in Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. Peter acknowledges the Messiah, but as a triumphant King of the Jews—the vision of the suffering Son of Man terrifies him (Dunn 1983, 124; Räisänen 1990, 181–83). Neither the Syro-Phoenician woman nor Peter sees the truth, and both are sharply rebuked by Jesus.

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9 While agreeing with Barry Blackburn's thesis that the influence of Hellenistic culture on Mark's portrayal of miracles has often been exaggerated, it is nevertheless worth noting that the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman appears to be an exception for him (Blackburn 1991, 264). In Qumran and Talmudic literature, healings of Gentiles from a distance are cited as proof of the power and truth of the Jewish religion (Muir 2006, 61–62). The motif of the missionary or charismatic messenger of a new faith, who legitimizes his mission through a public "power encounter" with representatives of the old religious order, is a universal religious archetype. Classic examples of this pattern can already be found in the Old Testament—in Moses's contest with the Egyptian magicians (Exod 7–9) and in Elijah's dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18). This pattern continues in the New Testament, where Paul triumphs over the magician Elymas (Acts 13) and casts out a spirit of divination from a prophetess in Philippi (Acts 16). Similar mechanisms can also be found in other religious traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

The culmination of this motif of misunderstanding occurs in the scene immediately following the Transfiguration. The encounter with a large crowd, among whom scribes were arguing with the disciples (εἶδον ὄχλον πολὺν περὶ αὐτοὺς καὶ γραμματεῖς συζητοῦντας πρὸς αὐτούς, Mark 9:14), at the foot of the mountain provokes Jesus' words of irritation: "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). These words echo the earlier confrontation in Dalmanutha: "Why does this generation seek a sign?" (Mark 8:12). We may propose the hypothesis that ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη (ἄπιστος), which in Dalmanutha demanded "signs," found Jesus even in His place of withdrawal, bringing with them a particularly difficult case for healing. It follows that the Mount of Transfiguration could not have been far from the Ginosar Valley and must have lain within the Jewish ecumene, which was able to supply the ὄχλον πολὺν for that massive scene.

For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that the last of the arguments mentioned—concerning the proximity of Dalmanutha to the Mount of Transfiguration and the presence of Jewish settlements at its foot—also applies to Tabor. However, the context of Mark's narrative points in a different direction.

3.6. The Hypothetical Location of the Event according to Mark's Narrative

In Mark's narrative Jesus moves northward. The similarity in the circumstances of both northern journeys is striking: conflict at Ginosar → withdrawal to the north → return to the Kinneret. This suggests the hypothesis that Mark may have described a single journey northward, during which the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, Peter's confession, and the Transfiguration all took place. Jesus does not go beyond the boundaries of the Jewish ecumene, at most into areas of mixed settlement, as indicated by the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7:24–30. If a retrospective literary analysis is applied to Mark's narrative—namely, that the Transfiguration is immediately followed by the journey to Jerusalem—the event is best dated to winter or early spring.[10]

The territory surrounding these events extends north of the Kinneret—from the Phoenician border of Upper Galilee (the Baka–Gischala line) in the west, through Hulatha in the north, to the eastern edge of the Hula Valley in the east. This delineation of the Jewish ecumene restricts the search for a hypothetical location of the event to a limited number of peaks belonging either to the "Mount Meron Block" (the Meron and Peqiʿin Mountains) or to Eastern Upper Galilee—the "Eastern Mountains" subregion, divided into three component parts: (a) the Sefat Mountains in the

10 Against this dating, Benjamin A. Foreman (2016, 304) argues that the event should be placed in the summer, close to the Feast of Tabernacles (ἑορτὴ σκηνῶν), on the basis of the mention of τρεῖς σκηνάς (Matt 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33). This hypothesis is difficult to sustain, however, because it disrupts the entire Synoptic sequence leading to Passover.

south; (b) the Dalton-Avivim Heights in the centre; and (c) the Ramim (Manara) Ridge in the north (Frankel et al. 2001, 1–2).

The dominant formation of the Sefat Mountains is Har Kenaʿan (highest point 955 m). It is a mountain ridge with a series of lesser peaks, on the slope of one of which the settlement of Sefat was located. Within easy reach lay the Jewish settlements of Naburiya (Nevoraya), Meiron, Gischala and Meroth (Khirbet Marus). This makes it hypothetically plausible that one of the peaks of Har Kenaʿan could have served as a place of solitary prayer and the Transfiguration, after which Jesus would have encountered an excited crowd coming from the surrounding settlements (e.g., near Sefat or lower down, in the vicinity of Nahal Meron). A less likely candidate is Har Dalton (approximately 900 m) north of Sefat, since it is not a prominent, isolated summit but rather a culmination of the basalt plateau in eastern Upper Galilee, north-east of Sefat. In the landscape it functions more as part of the broader Dalton Heights than as a single spectacular mountain. Further north, in the region of Kedesh Naphtali, lay Tyrian territory hostile to the Jews. It is therefore improbable that the mountain of the Transfiguration should be sought north of Nahal Dishon, the natural topographical boundary in eastern Upper Galilee between the region settled by Jews (to the south) and the Tyrians (to the north) (Frankel et al. 2001, 111).

Over this entire area towers the central Meron block, crowned by the imposing summit of Meron (1208 m), the highest peak in Galilee. Har Addir, a prominent high peak (1008 m), lies too far to the north—most probably already in the Tyrian zone—and at a considerable distance from the nearest significant Jewish settlements, Kefar Barʿam and Gischala. Har Hillel is a more plausible candidate (approximately 960–980 m). It lies on the route from Upper Galilee toward the shore of the Kinneret and is even closer to the lake. Yet the event cannot really be described as taking place "on the summit," because Meron clearly dominates the landscape and remains visible even from the top of Har Hillel, so that the symbolism collapses. The same applies to the nearby peaks of Har Shefannim, Har Kfir, Har Hen and the other summits belonging to this mountain formation: the absence of major settlement in the immediate vicinity makes the village of Meiron at the foot of Mount Meron the most probable setting for the subsequent scene with the crowd and the epileptic boy.

Somewhat further west, toward Peqiʿin, lies a constellation of high ground—Har HaAri and Har Tzafrir. These are not classical, isolated peaks in the manner of Meron or Tabor, but rather high points and culminations of ridges and plateau shelves in the western part of the Meron block. Today the Druze village of Beit Jann occupies precisely these extensive high ridges (around 1000 m), which form an undulating plateau with local elevations. The nearest known settlement is Peqiʿin (Baka), which Josephus regarded as marking the border of the Jewish ecumene. The mountain formation itself constitutes a plateau suitable for cultivation and pasture; sporadic farmsteads or seasonal shelters may well have existed there. Given its proximity to the "borders of Tyre," its belonging to the Jewish ecumene, and its relative isolation, this

area is a better candidate for the scene of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman than for the Transfiguration. As a site for the Transfiguration the formation fits less well: there is no major settlement, no distinct summit, and it would require a significant detour from the route to Capernaum.

The above considerations indicate that, when seeking a probable location solely on the basis of Mark's text together with archaeological and historiographical data, we are left with a choice between one of the peaks of Har Kena'an and the summit of Meron—the highest in the region and dominant even over Har Kena'an. The peaks of Addir, Hillel, Kfir and others belong to a single mountain formation and can be regarded as summits only nominally; in the presence of Meron they lose the symbolism of a true height.

In the Markan account of Jesus' northern sojourn, topographical precision is unfortunately not the author's concern. This is particularly surprising in light of the unusually precise temporal reference μετὰ ἡμέρας ἓξ ("after six days"—Mark 9:2), which is atypical for Mark and underscores the exceptional character of the Transfiguration.[11] It is therefore all the more striking that, despite such chronological precision, the author does not indicate the location of this pivotal event. Or does he?

Hypothetically, the phrase itself, ὄρος ὑψηλόν, may be a literal translation of הַר מָרוֹם (cf. 2 Kgs 19:23; Isa 37:24; Ezek 17:23; 20:40; 34:14). This expression appears in the Hebrew Bible both in its literal sense (ὄρος ὑψηλόν) and in its metaphorical sense (ὄρος ἅγιον), where the noun מָרוֹם denotes "summit," "height," including "the heights of God" (2 Sam 22:17; Job 16:19; 25:2; 31:2; 39:18; Ps 7:8; 18:17; 92:9; Isa 24:18; 32:15, etc.). Through the process of Aramaization, the presumed toponym הר מרום likely evolved into הר מירון, as indirectly attested by the Book of Joshua (which mentions מֵי מֵרוֹם in Josh 11:5–7, and in 12:20, which mentions the king of Shimron Meron—מֶלֶךְ שִׁמְרוֹן מְרֹאוֹן). Extrabiblical sources from the 15th–8th centuries BCE also mention a place called *mrm* in that region (Negev 1990, 240). Consequently, Mark's ὄρος ὑψηλόν (and, later, Peter's ὄρος ἅγιον) may be a literal translation of הַר מֵירוֹן—Mount Meron.

Once other criteria have narrowed the field to a few plausible candidates, the symbolic character of the event may be brought into consideration as a further supporting argument: the Transfiguration, understood as the symbol of a culminating experience, calls for a place that itself embodies uniqueness and irreplaceability. The lower peaks of the Meron block lose to the summit of Meron precisely in this respect: from their tops one can easily see that the observer is not standing on the highest point of the mountain formation. This same argument was decisive in

11 It is the only chronological marker of such precision in the entire Galilean section of the Gospel. Mark usually recounts events "as they happen," as evidenced by his use of the word εὐθύς ("immediately") as many as 41 times, or in a more general manner (πάλιν, ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις, γενομένου σαββάτου).

the traditional identification of Tabor as the mountain of the Transfiguration—a solitary, clearly defined peak that does not compete with others.

Most scholars interpret the Transfiguration scene primarily in symbolic and theological terms. However, if we consider it as a phenomenon—that is, a real historical event before later layers of interpretation were superimposed upon it—it emerges as a unique, culminating mystical experience for the inner circle of disciples. Morton Smith (1980) discerns in it a similarity to esoteric Mediterranean practices and interprets it as a scene of magical trance. Pieter F. Craffert (2008), following a similar line of thought, views it as a kind of initiation in which Jesus introduces the "three" (a very characteristic Markan motif) into the mysteries of the spiritual world. Such interpretations, while quite bold, are understandable, since—as Mircea Eliade (1951) demonstrated—humanity's mystical experiences largely draw on universal patterns of description. For the chosen disciples, the culminating experience takes place at the end of Jesus' Galilean ministry and—to venture a bit of symbolism—should take place on the highest summit in Galilee.

Andrew P. Wilson (2007) undertook an original and provocative reinterpretation, reading the scene in the spirit of deconstructionism as a phenomenon full of paradoxes: revelation and blindness, divine fullness and radical Otherness. The culmination of this "light–darkness," "fullness–emptiness" dynamic is the empty tomb in Jerusalem—absolute absence. This is precisely why the command to return to Galilee is given: "There you will see Him" (Mark 16:7). In Mark's Gospel, Galilee becomes the existential antithesis of Jerusalem, just as the Mount of Transfiguration is the antithesis of Golgotha, the place of the Skull. The disciples' experience was that in Galilee there is both light and darkness, while in Jerusalem there is only darkness. From the summit of Mount Meron one can survey the whole of Galilee, as well as Phoenicia and Syria—the lands of Mark's earliest readers—and, in Mark's own day, if one had looked carefully, even the smoke rising from Jerusalem and the Temple as they were being destroyed by the Romans.

4. Conclusion

The present study is deliberately hypothetical in character. It does not claim to have identified the historical mountain of the Transfiguration with certainty; rather, it has sought to assess which location appears most probable when the question is examined strictly within the narrative world of Mark and against the background of the archaeological and historiographical data available for Upper Galilee in the early 1st century.

The investigation proceeded in two parts. The first examined the possibility that Mount Meron already possessed a recognized sacred status in the time of Jesus.

The evidence proved insufficient. The radical civilizational and demographic transformations that followed the Jewish Wars of 66–73 and 132–135 CE thoroughly reshaped the religious and cultural landscape of Galilee. Later Jewish traditions associated with Meron—above all the veneration of the tombs of the Tannaim—cannot be projected backwards with any confidence onto the first half of the 1st century. In the absence of contemporary Galilean sources, it remains impossible to demonstrate that the mountain enjoyed a distinctive cultic significance before or during the ministry of Jesus.

The same historical cataclysm that erased so much of the earlier religious geography also severed the living memory of the original eyewitnesses. The Jewish Wars, the consequent dispersion of population, and the gradual parting of the ways between the emerging Gentile Church and the remaining Judeo-Christian communities resulted in the loss or severe distortion of local topographical traditions. By the time Christian pilgrimage and the systematic identification of holy sites began in the 4th century, the authentic recollection of Galilean Jewish followers of Jesus concerning the place of the Transfiguration had already disappeared.

In this situation the Gospel of Mark remains the earliest and, for practical purposes, the only narrative source that may still preserve echoes of that lost tradition. The present study has therefore treated Mark not merely as a theological text but as a historiographical document whose topographical and sequential indications can be examined for their internal coherence and their correspondence with the known realities of 1st-century Upper Galilee. When the limits of the Jewish ecumene, the pattern of Jesus' northern movements, the proximity of settlements, and the requirement of a genuinely "high mountain" are taken into account, the field of plausible candidates narrows to the Mount Meron block and, within it, primarily to the summit of Meron itself.

Both Markan symbolism and the symbolism that can be discerned in the actions of his protagonists further support this identification. The Transfiguration is presented as the culminating experience of the inner circle of disciples at the close of the Galilean ministry. Once other criteria have narrowed the field to a few plausible candidates, the symbolic character of the event may be brought into consideration as a further supporting argument: the Transfiguration, understood as the symbol of a culminating experience, calls for a place that itself embodies uniqueness and irreplaceability. Among the peaks of Upper Galilee, only Mount Meron fully satisfies that requirement. Whether or not Mark consciously intended the identification, the narrative logic of his Gospel points to Meron as the most probable site of the event he records.

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How Narrative and Ritual Form Communities: Theological Orientations from Paul Ricoeur and Mary Douglas

ADAM SEJBUK
The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, adam.sejbuk@pz.upjp2.edu.pl

TEREZA HUSPEKOVÁ
The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, tereza.huspekova@upjp2.edu.pl

Abstract: The contemporary Western context, marked by secularization and renewed interest in spirituality, raises the question of how communities are formed, sustained, and transformed, and what role narrative and ritual play in this process. This study explores how Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative and Mary Douglas's anthropology of ritual and social structure can be brought into dialogue to contribute to the reflection on community formation. The overall perspective is theological; however, the analysis of Ricoeur's and Douglas's thought is confined to their respective fields—hermeneutics and anthropology—while aiming to formulate issues that can later be addressed theologically. The article first presents Ricoeur's understanding of narrative and community, then Douglas's account of ritual and social order, and finally discusses their points of convergence and theological implications. It identifies three points of convergence between the two approaches: the issue of mediation; the significance of the idea of "community of meaning" in relation to narratives and ritual; and the joint role of narrative and ritual in shaping personal and collective identity. The study is preliminary in character; however, the dialogue between Ricoeur and Douglas offers a promising conceptual framework for theological reflection, particularly on liturgy, sacraments, and ecclesial communities, showing that narrative and ritual are complementary dimensions of human and communal existence.

Keywords: narrative, ritual, community, Mary Douglas, Paul Ricoeur, sacraments

Societies shaped by the European cultural tradition have recently undergone significant transformations in their approaches to religiosity and ritual practice. On the one hand, scholars have observed processes of secularisation, the erosion of grand narratives, and the gradual de-ritualisation of both religious and secular life. On the other hand, the same cultural context reveals a persistent search for transcendence and religious experience, manifested in the growth of new spiritualities and religious movements, as well as, within certain Catholic circles, in a renewed attachment to traditional devotional practices and liturgical life.[1] These sometimes conflicting

1 These complex dynamics are reflected in the work of various contemporary authors. For instance, Byung-Chul Han (2020, 2024) describes contemporary Western societies as marked by the disappearance of rituals and a recent "crisis of narration," in which narration gives way to fragmented forms of storytelling that no longer generate coherent units of meaning but instead serve primarily to promote consumption. A related diagnosis is offered by sociologist Grace Davie (1994), who, in her study on religion in Britain

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tendencies form a complex pattern and, as such, draw attention to important questions about how communities are formed, maintained, and transformed.

In this study, we approach the issue of community formation through the thought of two influential 20th-century thinkers: Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and Mary Douglas (1921–2007). Although their theoretical perspectives differ, both engage with the problem of community in ways that are pertinent to our inquiry. According to Ricoeur's mimetic theory, narratives play a mediating role in the formation of personal and collective identity. Through narratives, communities interpret their past, articulate their values, and construct a sense of continuity over time. Douglas draws attention to ritual as an important aspect of social realities that are embodied, reinforced, and transmitted through symbolic communication. In her view, rituals thrive in certain types of societies while also sustaining the structures within which communities exist. Our article examines how these two approaches can jointly contribute to understanding the process of community formation. By bringing Ricoeur's theory of narrative and Douglas's approach to ritual into dialogue, the study seeks to explore the ways through which collective identities and communal bonds are created and maintained. Hence, the central question of this article is how narratives and rituals may help to form, sustain, or transform communities.

The overall perspective of this article is theological, though conceived as a theology "from below": the analysis of Ricoeur's and Douglas's thought remains confined to their respective fields—hermeneutics and anthropology—while aiming to formulate issues that can subsequently be addressed theologically. As such, our study is a preliminary sketch intended to explore the potential of relating these two theoretical perspectives and to open paths for further reflection. Methodologically, then, we do not aim to merge the approaches or synthesise their methodologies, nor to draw strong conclusions, but rather to identify points of convergence and outline orientations to theological reflection. The essay consists of three parts: the first two sections present the elements of Ricoeur's and Douglas's approaches relevant to community formation, while the third offers the outcome of this reflection and its possible theological use.

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after 1945, writes about the phenomenon of "believing without belonging" whereby religion does not simply disappear but becomes increasingly individualised and privatised. From a theological perspective, Paul M. Zulehner (2018) likewise reflects on how recent transformations of religiosity in Europe have affected belief and practice within the Catholic Church itself. By contrast, Joshua Landy and Michael T. Saler (2009) argue that recently, in secular settings, we can observe a certain "re-enchantment of the world," in which individuals produce new forms of wonder and meaning, generating real emotional and existential experiences despite being based on invented narratives. These processes seem to be enhanced by disruptive events such as the 2020 pandemic. As Thomas Schmidinger (2022, 482) notes, in the Catholic Church, the COVID-19 crisis strengthened some conservative believers' desire for communal worship, leading them to turn towards a traditionalist worldview and a stronger adherence to their religious communities.

1. Communities and Narratives: Paul Ricoeur and Mimetic Theory

The discussion opens with Ricoeur's mimetic theory of narrative and his concept of narrative identity, taking the three-volume *Time and Narrative* (*Temps et récit*) as its main point of reference, alongside other texts (see Ricoeur 1984, 1988, 1991b, 1992). Ricoeur's interest in narrative follows from his hermeneutic orientation, according to which philosophy reflects on how the self and the world come to be understood and interpreted. He maintains that the subject has no immediate access to either its own identity or reality itself; rather, both are approached through various forms of mediation, including language, symbols, texts, and, in particular, narratives. In this sense, hermeneutics becomes an expression of the fundamental condition of the human person as a self-interpreting being (cf. Fleury and Walter 2017, 184).[2]

Ricoeur's theory of narrative takes as its point of departure the aporia of temporality, that is, the tension between objective, measurable time and subjectively experienced, or psychological time (Ricoeur 1984, 5–7; cf. Sejbuk 2025, 170). Ricoeur's aim is to show how narrative makes it possible to articulate temporal experience and, in doing so, contributes to the constitution of both individual and collective identity. He attributes central significance to narrative, arguing that it configures human experience into an intelligible whole. The profound interdependence of temporality and narrativity becomes most evident at their intersection:

> Everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds in time can be recounted.… This reciprocity that is assumed to exist between narrativity and temporality is the theme of my present research. (Ricoeur 1991a, 2)

A key concept introduced by Ricoeur is that of "narrated time" (*temps raconté*), according to which narrative "configures" time by organising events into a coherent plot (Ricoeur 1984, 3; 1988, 244). Through this process, the time of the world and the time of human consciousness are mediated by the structure of the narrative. This mediation is captured in Ricoeur's theory of threefold *mimesis*, which describes the movement from human action through narrative configuration to its interpretation

2 As noted above, because of the preliminary nature of the present study, our discussion is limited to selected works by Ricoeur that offer a coherent and systematic presentation of his approach to narrative. Ricoeur's broader philosophical legacy, however—particularly his conception of the "long way" of hermeneutics (*la voie longue*), according to which understanding is attained indirectly through interpretation—offers many other directions for further inquiry. Such research might, for example, explore his reflections on symbol, phenomenology, and semantics, developed, among other works, in *La symbolique du mal* (1960) and *Existence et herméneutique* (1969), or his account of the ethos of Europe, grounded in the exchange of memories and dialogue as processes through which identity is shaped by a shared history (see Ricoeur 1995).

by the reader (cf. Schaeffer 2013, 8). Two aspects of Ricoeur's thought are particularly relevant here. First, he treats narrative as a fundamental mode of human communication. When something is narrated, it is narrated by someone to someone; the act of narration normally presupposes a listener, even if only a potential reader of a text. Hence, narration is inherently relational and may therefore mediate between individual and collective identities. Second, in Ricoeur's hermeneutics, mediation is necessary; only through mediation is meaning produced and interpreted, including the meanings that contribute to the formation of identity.

According to Ricoeur, narrative mediation begins with *mimesis* I, or prefiguration. It refers to the prior understanding of the world shared by both the sender and the recipient of the narrative. More specifically, it denotes the pre-understanding of the world of human action that makes both the comprehension of action and the interpretation of narratives possible. *Mimesis* I thus provides the conditions for shared meaning and, consequently, communication. The recipient understands narrative through linguistic, cultural, and symbolic codes (Ricoeur 1984, 64). From this perspective, the common horizon of meanings that constitutes the narrative context—largely implicit—can be reinforced and renewed by the narrative itself, which also performs a community-building function.

The next stage, *mimesis* II, known as configuration, corresponds to the process of emplotment (*mise en intrigue*). At this level, narrative organises events into a meaningful whole, transforming fragmented experience into a comprehensible story. This operation is decisive, as it introduces coherence where there was previously only a succession of occurrences. Here, the focus is primarily on the "world of the text." As Ricoeur emphasises, "[t]his configurational act consists of 'grasping together' the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents; [it] draws from this manifold of events the unity of one temporal whole." (1984, 66) Moreover, the stage of configuration allows narrative to be read in such a way that its "end" is already implicit in its "beginning," and its "beginning" in its "end" (cf. Ricoeur 1984, 67).

A similar mechanism can be observed in the grand narratives of communities, in which a founding event may reinterpret the past while simultaneously projecting a future. In doing so, it serves as a guarantee of the continuity and durability of the "narrated" community. Tradition is thus actualised in the present, generating the group's history, which in turn is oriented towards the future—a future that, although uncertain, is already anticipated (Sejbuk 2025, 174).

The process reaches its final stage in *mimesis* III, or refiguration, which "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader." (Ricoeur 1984, 71) Refiguration is the stage at which recipients appropriate the narrative and integrate it into their own existence. Thus, the text becomes a medium through which the subject projects and transforms their understanding of themselves, discovering new possibilities of being. Within this medium, narrative enables the reader

to "enter" the world of the text, inhabit its temporality, and make the events of the plot their own.

Central to this stage is the notion of "appropriation," through which Ricoeur draws attention to the intersecting processes of interpretation and assimilation (Ricoeur 1991a, 37). This process goes beyond mere understanding of the text: it involves its creative integration into one's own interpretive horizon, which in turn affects processes of knowledge and self-understanding. In this context, Ricoeur makes his most frequently cited claim, namely, that to "understand *oneself* is to understand oneself *in front of the text*." (1991a, 37) This suggests that refiguration is interpretation *par excellence*; it occurs not within the world represented by the text but in the life of the recipient. At this final stage, narrative fully discloses its hermeneutic dimension, leading to the transformation of the subject. Ricoeur therefore emphasizes the need to "reconstruct the set of operations by which a work lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their acting." (1984, 53) In this sense, narrative does not end with the act of narration; rather, it is completed in the act of reception, which carries a transformative potential. By interpreting the text, the recipient may reorganise their own experience in its light. Ricoeur's methodology is grounded in the hermeneutic principle of the "opening of the text to its 'outside,' to its 'other.'" (1988, 158) According to Pierre Bühler, in his discussion of the theory of *mimesis*, refiguration becomes for the reader "a source of the search for personal identity." (2003, 102; our translation) In *mimesis* III, Ricoeur introduces one of his most well-known philosophical concepts, narrative identity (*identité narrative*).

Narrative identity is a dynamic account of personal identity that emerges through the process of narrating and interpreting experience. In contrast to substantialist conceptions of identity, Ricoeur suggests that human beings come to understand themselves through the stories they both construct and appropriate, continually reinterpreting their own experience (cf. Tétaz 2014, 471). To introduce this concept, Ricoeur draws on the classical distinction between two dimensions of identity: *idem* (sameness), which denotes the permanence and stability of the characteristics by which we recognise a person as the same over time, and *ipse* (selfhood), which refers to remaining oneself despite change, that is, the capacity to keep one's promises, assume responsibility, and preserve continuity throughout one's life (cf. Ricoeur 1992, 115–23). Narrative mediates between these two dimensions of identity and preserves a sense of continuity in one's life, despite the continual transformation of individual experiences, social roles, and beliefs. For Ricoeur, therefore, the answer to the question "Who am I?" or "Who is the agent [of the action]?" (Ricoeur 1988, 246; 1991b, 191, 196; 1992, 167–68) consists in recounting the course of a life in a way that gives meaning to experience and makes it possible to maintain personal continuity despite ongoing change. Ricoeur (1988, 246) draws on Hannah Arendt, who argues that these questions can only be answered by telling the story of a life, a narrative act

that Ricoeur considers foundational not only to the constitution of the self but also to the collective identity:

> The notion of narrative identity also indicates its fruitfulness in that it can be applied to a community as well as to an individual. We can speak of the self-constancy of a community, just as we spoke of it as applied to an individual subject. Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history. (Ricoeur 1988, 247; cf. Ricoeur 1991b, 188)

Ricoeur illustrates this dynamic by referring to the Jewish people as an example of a community constituted through narratives about itself that structure its past and project its future. Their identity is therefore essentially narrative:

> [N]o other people has been so overwhelmingly impassioned by the narratives it has told about itself. On the one hand, the delimitation of narratives subsequently taken as canonical expresses, even reflects, the character of this people…. But we may also say … that it was in telling these narratives taken to be testimony about the founding events of its history that biblical Israel became the historical community that bears this name. The relation is circular—the historical community called the Jewish people has drawn its identity from the reception of those texts that it had produced. (Ricoeur 1988, 247–48)

This narrative constitution of identity is evident in the commemoration of foundational events, especially in the Jewish Passover, during which the story of the Exodus from Egypt is recalled. In the Christian reinterpretation, the story of Jesus of Nazareth is likewise integrated into this refigurative process. Ricoeur notes elsewhere that the process of refiguration is not a one-time event but rather a sequence of interrelated acts of reinterpretation, which form and continually transform narrative identity at the individual and the collective levels. This is related to an experience of thought through which, as a community, we learn to "inhabit worlds foreign to us." (Ricoeur 1988, 249) The perspective of the world that emerges from the text affects the reader. It is never ideologically neutral but always offers a particular vision of reality, along with new possibilities of understanding and action, in line with the refigurative potential of narrative (cf. Ricoeur 1988, 179).

In sum, Ricoeur's concepts of triple *mimesis* and narrative identity present narrative as a space where experience is interpreted and subjectivity takes shape. Narrative refigures how we understand ourselves, others, and the world while opening the possibility of transformation at the individual and collective levels. We might say that a person is united with the community through shared narratives—whether foundational or otherwise—while the community is maintained and transformed as each individual appropriates and retells them. In short, from this perspective, we can conclude that narratives help to form and reconfigure communities. However, although

Ricoeur's account of narrative provides a powerful hermeneutic framework, we find it useful to broaden the perspective by turning to Douglas's account of the relationship between ritual and social structure, which brings these embodied and social dimensions into focus.

2. Communities and Rituals: Mary Douglas and Grid/Group Theory

Douglas, trained within the Durkheimian tradition of social anthropology, moved from African ethnography (Douglas 1963) to anthropological theory (Douglas 1966, 1970, 1994; cf. Fardon 1999, 41). Her reflections on ritual were also shaped by her Catholic background and the experience of organised religion (cf. Fardon 1999, 3–23). Since our concern is the relationship between ritual and community formation, we focus on her grid/group theory, drawing mainly on her book *Natural Symbols*.[3]

Douglas's reflection on ritual was linked to what she called the movement "away from ritual" in the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council. She observed that many Catholic pastors regarded ritualism as something inferior and obsolete, to be replaced by a more spiritual approach to religion; yet they did not seem to suspect how much their views were the product of their secular environment (Douglas 1968a, 475). In her opinion, one of the gravest problems of her time was "the lack of commitment to common symbols"; however, more mysterious to her was "a wide-spread, explicit rejection of rituals as such. Ritual has become a bad word signifying empty conformity." (Douglas 1996, 1) The "contempt of ritual," then, characterised not only reform movements within the Catholic Church but also modern Euro-American societies in general.

Douglas illustrates this point with the figure of the "Bog Irishman," her label for Catholics attached to traditional practices, who increasingly became the object of reformist efforts. When she asked the clergy why the old forms were regarded as inferior, she was told that personal commitment to God represented a more advanced stage of religious development. Douglas (1996, 7), however, rejected this evolutionary

3 The book *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* was first published in 1970, revised considerably in 1973, and reissued with a new introduction in 1996. We cite the 1996 edition unless referring specifically to the 1970 or 1973 editions. Its first two chapters derive from the earlier two-part essay *The Contempt of Ritual* (Douglas 1968a, 1968b), which differs slightly in emphasis, hence the citation of both sources. Douglas's approach to cosmology and ritual has its foundations in her earlier work *Purity and Danger* (1966), where she examines the symbolic significance of the human body, pollution, and taboo in relation to social structures and cultural boundaries. For a more detailed analysis of these key concepts in Douglas's thought, see Kate Cragen's chapter "Blood, Bile and Phlegm: Ritual Bodies and Boundaries that Blur" (Cragen 2006, 93–112).

assumption. The recent contempt for ritual may, indeed, be the outcome of an evolutionary process, but not necessarily a superior stage (Douglas 1968a, 482). She repeatedly compares the fuzzy, unritualistic worldview of secularised Londoners with that of the Pygmies of the Ituri forest, whose loosely structured social world and vague metaphysical beliefs once led ethnographers to conclude they had no religion. Thus, Douglas argues that different social experiences orient people towards either good works or ritual.

In this context, Douglas formulates a more general hypothesis: the bias toward ritualism depends on the strength of social boundaries. The better the social boundaries are defined, the greater the bias in favour of ritualism; with weaker social boundaries, doctrinal emphasis shifts towards internal states (Douglas 1968a, 479–80). The decline of ritualism is therefore likely to be accompanied by a weakening of sacramental understandings of religion, a point to which we will return.

This formed the basis of Douglas's grid/group theory, which started from Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistic framework (Bernstein 1971a; cf. 1971b). He argued that a person's identity is shaped by speech acts organised through codes of communication; in his view, "every time the child speaks or listens, the social structure is reinforced in him and his social identity is shaped." (Bernstein 1971a, 30) His approach distinguishes between *positional* families, where social control is exerted through ascribed roles, and *personal* families, where, instead of fixed role patterns, the individuality of the child is emphasised. Different family settings also result in different speech codes: the *restricted* code, which not only conveys information but also expresses the social structure ("Because he is your elder!"), and the *elaborated* code, which relies on person-oriented appeals ("Because how would you feel in this situation!").

Although the elaborated personal code is better suited to developing verbal skills, Douglas (1996, 27) notes that it frees the individual from a system of rigid positions but makes them a prisoner of a system of feelings and abstract principles. She opts for settings where a child shapes their identity by relying on external categories rather than being forced to navigate fuzzy social realities (Douglas 1968b, 534). Since Douglas describes *Natural Symbols* as "an essay in applying Bernstein's approach to the analysis of ritual," (Douglas 1996, 21) this is where her defence of ritualism begins. In her view, "[r]itual is pre-eminently a form of communication"; for this reason, rituals, like speech forms, can be treated "as transmitters of culture, which are generated in social relations and which, by their selection and emphases, exercise a constraining effect on social behaviour." (Douglas 1996, 21–22) She even suggests that ritualism might be equated with the restricted code and points to a close connection between a type of social structure and the bias for or against ritualism.

Building on this, Douglas outlines two social dimensions: the *grid*, which means order, classification, and "the overall articulation of the categories which constitute

a world view," and the *group*, which is the social pressure, "the experience of having no option but to consent to the overwhelming demands of other people." (Douglas 1973, 81–82; cf. Douglas 2007, 2–3) These dimensions show how social control varies in different settings. Douglas presents a diagram organised around these two axes (see Figure).

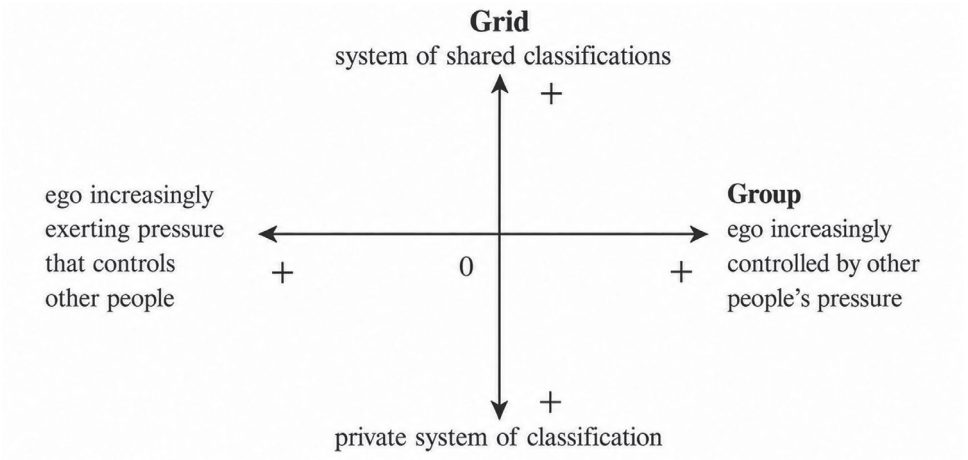

Figure. Grid and Group

Source: Douglas 1973, 84, Diagram 4.

The horizontal line represents the group: to the right, the group dominates the individual; to the left, the individual dominates the group; and at the centre, no pressure is felt or exerted between members (cf. Spickard 1989, 160). The vertical line represents the grid: moving upward indicates more comprehensive shared articulations of order, downwards from zero indicates coherent but private systems of classification, and zero itself represents "a blank, total confusion with no meaning whatever." (Douglas 1973, 83) These axes also correspond to distinct types of social control: strong grid/strong group yields a positional form, typical of highly organised communities with elaborate classification and ascribed roles; strong group/low grid is related to an enclave form, characteristic of small egalitarian communities with strong boundaries and private classifications; strong grid/weak group results in an isolate form, where members are governed by abstract, impersonal regulations; and low grid/weak group is usually linked to extreme individualism, marked by weak commitment (cf. Douglas 2007, 5–6).

For our discussion, the key aspect of Douglas's approach is the relation of cosmology—i.e. the shared beliefs and symbolic classifications through which a society legitimates its social order—to social settings. The cosmology and attitude towards

ritual appear to be closely linked to the measure of grid/group: where social interaction is scarce or shallow and the world seems to be controlled by objects, the cosmos is seen as ruled by impersonal forces (Douglas 1970, 60). The more individualistic the settings become, the more vague and diffuse cosmology we can expect, and with decreasing scope of social bonds, there is less regard for ritual (Douglas 1996, 67). By contrast, the cosmology in a strong grid/strong group environment tends to be complex, with highly condensed symbols and elaborate rituals (Douglas 1970, 105). As Douglas suggests, this link may help us understand similarities between the unritualistic Pygmies, with their loose social organisation and high mobility, and secularised Londoners living in impersonal industrial societies; if social relations "put their stamp upon speech forms … they no doubt put a pattern upon non-verbal forms of communication as well." (Douglas 1996, 68)

The grid/group framework also accounts for shifts in social structure and identity. When people find themselves in new social conditions, their old cosmology may no longer work; the greater the loosening of social bonds, the more radical revision of cosmologies, and the greater the disregard for ritual (Douglas 1996, 151). Douglas suggests that one source of anti-ritualism in low-group environments is a revolt against obsolete practices and impersonal control that treats people as things. Such contexts predispose towards millennial movements which tend to replace old rituals with undifferentiated symbols and vague humanistic worldviews. Nevertheless, in Douglas's (1996, 158–59) view, people who experience life without meaningful categories should, rather than embrace anti-ritualism, humanise the system through more flexible institutions and appropriate rituals.

Here, we can return to the post-Vatican II "contempt of ritual": in this light, it is unsurprising that Catholics whose identities are shaped by individualistic settings and the elaborated code tend to exhibit anti-ritualistic tendencies, replacing traditional practices, once embedded in a highly symbolic and socially meaningful classification, with inward acts (cf. Douglas 1996, 42–46). From a Catholic perspective, however, the more fundamental issue is the Eucharist. As Douglas notes, the Eucharistic celebration is a highly condensed, symbolic practice that unites the body of each worshipper to the body of the faithful and expresses the history of salvation. Yet, symbolising does not exhaust its reality, since the full meaning of the Eucharist involves sacramental efficacy (Douglas 1996, 47). The Eucharist not only "signifies" but, above all, "works." If, with Douglas, we accept that some types of social control are more favourable to ritualism, we can also expect that people in different settings will be more sensitive to symbolic expression in general:

> Devotion to the sacraments, then, depends on a frame of mind which values external forms and is ready to credit them with special efficacy. It is such a general attitude which commits the ritualist to sacramental forms of worship. And vice versa, a lack of interest in external symbols would not be compatible with a cult of instituted sacraments. (Douglas 1996, 8)

According to Douglas (1968a, 476), sacramental religion is impossible without a certain bias towards ritualism. For this reason, it is not surprising that, for example, the doctrine of the real presence of Christ for many Catholics now seems incomprehensible, and the Eucharist is described in terms of general togetherness or community thanksgiving (cf. Douglas 1996, 49). The problem with reformist efforts is not finding new symbols to replace the old ones; rather, people in individualistic, secularized settings tend to be blind to non-verbal signs (Douglas 1996, 9). However, Douglas seems to suggest that instead of demolishing meaningless rituals, theologians should provide the faithful with more meaningful symbolic categories, and the anti-ritualists would do better if they "turn their attention to repairing the defences of grid and group." (1996, 158)

As James Spickard notes, in the classical version of Douglas's theory, the experience of society is prior to and generative of beliefs; in applying the approach, one first analyses social structure and subsequently predicts cosmologies. However, later versions also recognise that a person can alter their social relations to fit their cosmologies (e.g., in the case of revolutions) (see Spickard 1989, 159). Although Spickard discusses cosmologies rather than ritual, Douglas's understanding of ritual as a socially generated symbolic system suggests that a similar reciprocal relationship may exist in the ritual domain. Indeed, Douglas asserts that ritual patterns are socially generated. Nevertheless, if rituals are viewed primarily as forms of communication and as symbolic, efficacious "transmitters of culture," we may attempt to reverse the perspective. Rather than asking only how a given social structure shapes attitudes towards ritual, we might also ask whether particular types of ritual sustain—or even help constitute—specific forms of social control that transform the individual's relationship to their social environment.

On this basis, we can present a hypothesis relevant to our further discussion of community formation. Following Douglas, if we understand ritual as an embodied, highly symbolic form of communication, a type of restricted code, we can suggest that it tacitly shapes individuals' identity, worldview, and relation to their social environment. Building on this, if ritual forms, as transmitters of cultural classifications, support particular types of social order, then rituals linked to specific cosmologies may reinforce or transform the social environments of their practitioners. With this in mind, we can consider an issue which, incidentally, may also shed some light on the recent movement "back to ritual" in some tradition-oriented Catholic circles. We may ask not only whether a strong grid/strong group environment is conducive to ritualism but also whether certain highly symbolic ritual forms, developed in high grid/high group settings, maintain a shared system of symbols and whether engagement with them can transform both individual identity and social interactions. In short, this perspective can help us reflect on the ways in which certain ritual forms sustain communities, a topic that will be examined in the following section.

3. Narratives, Rituals, and Communities: Towards Theological Reflection

In this section, we move from analysing selected aspects of Ricoeur's and Douglas's theories to a reflection relevant to theological discourse. We focus on three issues: first, themes in Ricoeur's and Douglas's thought that were not developed within their original frameworks but bear on the present discussion; second, points of convergence between their approaches; and third, the application of these insights to the theological notion of sacramentality.

As we have seen, Ricoeur's and Douglas's approaches each contain themes that, with regard to community formation, can be pursued further and may prove complementary. In *Time and Narrative* and in his writings on narrative identity, Ricoeur emphasises the mediating function of narrative: narratives bring together what is dispersed in time and make possible the recognition of oneself and others. Yet this account becomes more complex when applied to collective life. Human communities are usually internally differentiated, shaped by competing aspirations and forms of belonging. Individuals and social groups may refigure shared narratives in different ways, producing competing interpretations and struggles over the configuration of memory. In this sense, narrative not only integrates but can also expose tensions within a community. For all its strengths, Ricoeur's perspective is susceptible to three simplifications: first, it may presuppose an excessive degree of coherence, as though a community possessed a single narrative about itself; second, it may attribute excessive transparency to interpretation, as though conflicts amounted merely to competing narratives; and third, it may privilege meaning over practice, as though significance preceded the material and embodied forms of social life.

Although Ricoeur's theory of narrative captures an important dimension of how communities are constituted through shared frameworks of meaning, its limitation lies in privileging the interpretive order over the prereflective and practical dimensions of collective life. This is particularly evident in the case of embodiment and ritual, which contribute to the formation of collective identity before it is articulated in narrative form. From this perspective, communities are not merely communities of narrative but also—and perhaps primarily—communities of embodied practice. The body is not simply the medium that makes narrative possible; it is also a locus of social coordination. Through gestures, rhythms, shared spaces, and recurrent practices, individuals participate in collective forms of life that do not necessarily require prior interpretation. Embodiment thus resists a purely narrative reduction of experience by pointing to dimensions that remain irreducible to discourse.

This suggests the possibility of supplementing Ricoeur's account with the dimension of ritual and embodied practices as a prenarrative layer of communal life. Narrative would then appear not as the primary source of communal cohesion but as its subsequent symbolic articulation: an interpretation of what has already been

established through action, embodiment, and repetition. Community would thus be understood not as the product of a single dominant narrative but as a dynamic interplay between narratives and embodied forms of life, each shaping the other in turn.

In turn, Douglas's approach demonstrates how different forms of social organisation predispose communities towards particular cosmologies and attitudes towards ritualism. However, as we have seen, she does not fully explore the converse question: whether, and if so, how ritual itself may shape social settings and cosmologies. Since ritual exerts a constraining effect on social behaviour, one might expect it to exert a formative influence on the social structures in which it is embedded. As Spickard notes, Douglas's later work focuses on the relationship between social structures and cosmologies: cosmologies are understood as "sticks people use to coerce one another," although different "sticks" prove effective in different social contexts (Spickard 1989, 165). If cosmologies are embodied and communicated through ritual, rituals also become a means by which cosmologies shape social relations. Thus, the interaction between social structure, cosmology, and ritual appears reciprocal rather than unidirectional.

Some scholars writing on liturgy have nevertheless drawn stronger conclusions from Douglas's work (cf. Flanagan 1991, 39). In this context, Aidan Nichols attributes to Douglas the claim that the neglect of ritual leads to privatised understandings of religious experience and ultimately to a "frank avowal of humanism." (Nichols 1996, 71) Although Douglas's sympathies lay with ritualism, this causal sequence does not necessarily follow from her theoretical framework (cf. Douglas 1996, 7). Her grid/group theory explores how changes in social structures may give rise to anti-ritualism; however, it does not claim that the weakening of ritual necessarily produces a secular worldview. Although her account implies that changes in ritual practice may shape cosmological outlooks, the relationship cannot be understood in a deterministic manner.

Nevertheless, Nichols makes an important observation concerning Douglas's work: in her perspective, "the cosmos … is always seen through the medium of the body, and notably through the kinds and range of actions in which the body intersects with nature and other people." (Nichols 1996, 72–73) For Douglas, cosmology is embodied in non-verbal symbols and rituals, since "non-verbal symbols are capable of creating a structure of meanings in which individuals can relate to one another and realize their own ultimate purposes." (1996, 50) Rituals thus function as carriers of meaning, enabling individuals to relate to themselves and to others; while meanings can remain abstract, ritual participation incorporates persons into a community shaped by a particular worldview. If cosmologies are the "sticks" people use to exert influence over one another, rituals are the hands that wield them—quietly preparing the ground on which shared narratives are told and retold. This suggests that Douglas's account of ritual might supplement narrative theory by showing how embodied, non-verbal practice incorporates individuals into a community before any shared narrative can do so.

This brings us to the second issue outlined above, namely, the points of convergence between Ricoeur's and Douglas's approaches. We can identify at least three areas in which their perspectives may complement each other. First, Ricoeur's narratives and Douglas's rituals are understood as forms of communication that not only convey meanings but are also efficacious. As such, within their respective theoretical frameworks, both narratives and rituals are conceived as playing a mediating role: narratives happen between the text and the reader, whereas rituals are seen as transmitters of culture and symbolic vessels for cosmologies. At the same time, they are not reducible to each other. Narratives can exist without rituals, and, as suggested by research in the field of ritual studies, rituals may only be loosely attached to verbally articulated meanings. From this perspective, narratives and rituals are distinct but potentially complementary forms of cultural mediation, their interdependence varying across traditions. In some contexts, narratives and rituals can reinforce one another, with narratives providing interpretive frameworks for ritual action and rituals embodying narrative structures.

The second point of convergence relates to what is sometimes called a community of meaning, that is, a community whose members are connected by shared symbols and a common sense of belonging (cf. Cohen 1985, 70–96). Rituals, in Douglas's framework, are seen as highly symbolic forms of behaviour closely related to the social environment, which shapes individual bodily experience: the "social body" constrains the perception of the physical body, whereas the physical experience of the body—always modified by social categories—sustains a certain view of society (Douglas 1996, 69). Extending the argument beyond Douglas's views, more recent studies stress that human ritual is rooted in more primal, biological structures of our existence and springs from ritualisation also present in animals. This suggests that certain aspects of ritual behaviour are pre-reflective and may affect the participants on a much deeper level than a verbal or even symbolic one. In this way, ritual—or, given the complex dynamics of ritual behaviours, at least some ritual forms—can indeed unite the body of the individual with the body of the community. For Ricoeur, in turn, any narrative presupposes a common realm of meanings and pre-understandings shared by the sender and recipient, without which communication would be impossible. This is the phase of prefiguration, which encompasses a shared language along with common strategies of interpretation, codes, and symbols. From this perspective, shared ritual forms can be seen as one aspect of the "community of meaning" that shapes individuals and communities even before the act of narration begins.

The third point of resonance between Ricoeur's and Douglas's approaches concerns identity formation. In Ricoeur's mimetic theory, through refiguration, recipients appropriate the narrative and make it a part of their own world. The notion of "narrative identity" helps describe how both individual and collective identities are reinvented through the continuous retelling of stories. Going further, it also accounts for how individuals come to understand themselves as part of the community and

their personal history as part of the group's larger, shared history (as was the case with the Jewish people). Regarding ritual, Douglas's use of Bernstein's concept of language codes proves useful, since every act of utterance delivered in a particular code shapes the identity of a child—a process that, arguably, continues throughout life. If we follow Douglas's suggestion and consider ritual as equivalent to the restricted code—a form that exerts influence on an individual primarily through compliance with external rules and structures of order—we can assume that every act of participation in a shared ritual shapes a person's identity on the physical, psychological, and social levels. In this way, community ritual shapes both collective and individual identity—whether in rites of passage or in what are sometimes called rites of intensification, i.e. typically repetitive rituals that reinforce group solidarity and cohesion (cf. Chapple and Coon 1942, 507–28).

However, ritual and narrative remain distinct modes of communication, operating on different levels. As a result, their interaction regarding identity formation is unlikely to be straightforward. At times, the two may compete and generate tension; at other times, they may coexist with little mutual influence, though such coexistence is likely unstable and temporary; or they may also converge to reinforce one another's effects and have a positive influence on shaping one's identity.

Now, we can shift our attention to theological reflection. In the previous paragraphs, we suggested, from an anthropological perspective, that narrative and ritual may support one another in the process of community formation. We can apply this observation to liturgy and the sacraments as specific liturgical forms since, within the Catholic theological tradition, liturgical acts combine both a narrative element (among others, in the Liturgy of the Word and in utterances referring to the history of salvation) and a ritual element (through ritual actions, material symbols, and belief in their efficacy). Thus, we consider liturgy and the sacraments in relation to the points of convergence outlined above and ask, from a theological perspective, how this approach can deepen our understanding of sacramentality and its relation to the ongoing birth of the Church.[4]

First, regarding the question of mediation, contemporary Catholic ecclesiology understands the Church as a "visible-invisible" community whose very nature is mediatory. The Second Vatican Council's constitution *Lumen gentium* emphasises that the Church is in Christ "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." (*LG* 1) The Church therefore exercises a mediating role on both the "vertical" level (between humanity and God) and the "horizontal" level (among human beings themselves).

4 In what follows we refer only to documents and liturgical forms from the period after the Second Vatican Council. Especially with regard to the sacrament of Eucharist, our discussion is based on its present understanding, which reflects the goals of the liturgical reform initiated by the Council (cf. *SC* 47–58). For instance, the explicit pairing of anamnesis and epiclesis mentioned below is characteristic of Eucharistic Prayers II–IV, introduced after the Council.

If, with Karl Rahner, we understand Christ as the "primordial sacrament of salvation" (*Ur-Sakrament*) and the Church as the "basic sacrament" (*Grundsakrament*), as the socially and historically constituted presence of Christ, we can understand sacramental signs as rooted in this very reality (cf. Rahner 1977, xv). The mediating character of the sacraments (and of the liturgy in general) has its source in the mediating nature of the Church itself, which in turn derives from Christ as the primordial sacrament of salvation. The liturgy is intrinsically communicative, since it is a dialogue of salvation, in which God addresses his people, and the people answer, in the "voice of the Bride addressed to her Bridegroom." (*SC* 84; cf. Gréa 1909, 2)

The concept of Christ as a "primordial sacrament" points to the revelatory and mediating role of the Incarnation, which, in turn, is a foundation of the "visible-invisible" character of liturgy. The very definition of liturgy from the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that "the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs." (*SC* 7) Since, in the Incarnation, the Word expressed himself through the created world, almost any proper use of material things can be directed towards the sanctification of men and the praise of God (cf. *SC* 61). Pope Francis, commenting on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, stressed that the human body also enters into prayer. He directly states that Christian prayer proceeds through "tangible mediations" (the Scripture, sacraments, liturgical rites, and community) and that Christians find in liturgy "that objective mediation required by the fact that Jesus Christ is not an idea or a sentiment, but a living Person, and His Mystery a historical event." (Francis 2021) From this perspective, the process of mediation is made visible in both the ritual and the narrative aspects of liturgy and sacraments. In liturgy, the account of the history of salvation becomes an "actualising narrative," rendering the living person of Christ present, while the liturgical symbols can be seen as "actualising signs and actions," which make the mystery of Christ tangible for human beings, whose spiritual life is inseparably bound up with their bodily, sensory existence.

As a reality whose nature, as we have seen, is mediatory in both its "vertical" and its "horizontal" aspects, the Church, in its entirety—the whole ecclesial life, with its cult, traditions, and doctrines—can be perceived as a "community of meaning." On both the propositional and symbolic-material levels, it constitutes the environment that is prior to every act of interpreting tradition and celebrating the mysteries. Pope Francis, in *Desiderio desideravi*, the apostolic letter on liturgical formation, observes that in the liturgy, there is never just "I"—there is always "we":

> The Liturgy does not leave us alone to search out an individual supposed knowledge of the mystery of God. Rather, it takes us by the hand, together, as an assembly, to lead us deep within the mystery that the Word and the sacramental signs reveal to us. And it does this … following the way of the Incarnation, that is, by means of the symbolic language of the body, which extends to things in space and time. (*DD* 19)

On the "way of Incarnation," the initiative belongs to God, who chose to communicate himself through human language and material symbols to invite humanity into communion, while people respond through the same signs (cf. *DV* 2). Since language and symbols are shared and transmitted collectively, the "community of meaning" becomes a "reading community," which makes decisions about the canonical interpretation of the tradition (see Ricoeur 1988, 179), and, at the same time, a "celebrating community," which places constraints on its members through embodied, ritual actions (cf. Douglas 1996, 22). As *Lumen gentium* states, the Church was established by God to be, for each and all, the visible sacrament of saving unity (*LG* 9). Thus, the Church can be seen as a complex interplay of relations between individuals and the community.

This leads us to the issue of identity formation, on the individual and collective levels. Liturgical acts, and sacraments in particular—whose purpose, according to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, is to sanctify men, build up the body of Christ, and give worship to God (*SC* 59)—are inherently transformative. This is particularly evident in the sacraments of Christian initiation, which, from an anthropological perspective, can be considered both as rites of passage introducing individuals to a new situation within their communities (baptism and confirmation) and as rites of intensification reinforcing their bonds (Eucharist). Christina Condyles notes that, since through the sacraments, Christians are "continually being drawn deeper into the life of Christ and the kingdom of God," we can speak of two initiations: into the paschal mystery and into the Christian community (Condyles 2024, 162). This transformative aspect is most evident in baptism, which "incorporates us into Christ and forms us into God's people," so that the baptised, as a new creation, become "children of God." (*CIGI* 2) The rites of baptism symbolically enact the paschal mysteries and the great, collective history of salvation, actualised in the individual history of salvation of the newly baptised and their communities. Thus, in baptism, the narrative and ritual elements reinforce the sacrament's role in identity formation.

Nevertheless, it is in the Eucharist that the narrative and symbolic actualization of the paschal mystery reaches its apex. At the centre of every Eucharistic celebration stands the Christ event, which is made present through the institution narrative recounting the Last Supper. However, this narrative extends back to the Exodus, an event of foundational character for the Jewish people, likewise actualised through the narration of the *haggadah* during Passover. Christ himself reinterpreted this original paschal event, and afterward, in light of His death and resurrection, the community of the Church appropriated it as its own. Thus, the reality recounted in the Passover *haggadah* was also transformed in the narratives of the New Testament. During the Eucharistic celebration, the Church re-enacts these events through anamnesis—an "actualising memory"—followed by communion epiclesis, the prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to unite the faithful into the Body of Christ. In this way, the Church has been formed as a community through the narrative of Christ's paschal mystery,

analogously to how the Jewish people were gathered around their own foundational narratives. While the narrative dimension configures communal identity, the ritual and symbolic dimension constitutes it through embodied practice. On the performative, embodied level, this analogical process unfolds in the arc between consecration and communion: through the actualisation of the paschal mystery, Christ first becomes really present in the sacramental signs; then, through the act of communion, the newly established unity of the faithful is brought to fulfilment. In the Eucharist, identity formation—both individual and collective—attains its fullest realisation, as the faithful are not only transformed into the Body of Christ but also "most closely united to the Church in heaven," (*LG* 50) thus participating in the *communio sanctorum*. As John Paul II puts it, "the Church draws her life from the Eucharist." (*EE* 1)

From this perspective, in liturgy, narratives and embodied symbols perform a mediating function and, being rooted in a shared order of meaning, shape both individual and collective identity. Therefore, in the present Catholic understanding of liturgy, sacramentality's narrative and ritual aspects support each other in the process of community formation.

Conclusions and Orientations

This study has brought the work of Ricoeur and Douglas into dialogue, drawing on two methodologically distinct frameworks—the hermeneutical and anthropological, respectively—to examine narrative and ritual as related yet autonomous fields of inquiry. On this basis, we identified three points of convergence between the two approaches, which reveal important aspects of the process of community formation: (1) the mediatory role of both narratives and rituals; (2) the possibility of understanding embodied symbols as elements of a "community of meaning" that may be prior to the community-forming role of narratives; and (3) the function of narratives and rituals in shaping individual and collective identities. Subsequently, from a theological perspective, these observations have been considered in relation to the complementarity between narrative and ritual dimensions in liturgy and the sacraments as understood within an ecclesiological context. While this serves as a focused example of their possible application, the approach developed in the present study has the potential to be further refined into a more robust methodological framework.

These observations, in turn, point to several directions for the further application of this approach in theological reflection, providing a basis for more in-depth research. Such development may proceed at the level of the overall methodological perspective and with regard to specific theological questions. From a general perspective, it would be fruitful to apply the convergence of the two approaches to areas of inquiry beyond community formation. In terms of specific areas of inquiry, three

topics deserve particular attention. First, the theoretical framework developed in this study could support a more detailed presentation of each sacrament by exploring the relationship between its narrative and ritual dimensions and deepening our understanding of it in light of the three points of convergence. Second, our approach to the relationship between narratives, rituals, and their social contexts can deepen reflection on the changes introduced by the liturgical reform after the Second Vatican Council, particularly its emphasis on the harmony between word and rite in sacramental and liturgical celebrations. Third, the approach, particularly its community-formation dimension, can contribute to reflection on ecclesiogenesis (for instance, the formation, growth, and decline of ecclesial communities or the phenomenon of secularisation).

The present study has shown that narrative and ritual are bound together at the most fundamental level of human and communal existence. Anthropologically, we can venture the claim that the human person is innately both a "narrating being" and a "ritual being." Theologically, however, as Archimandrite Methodius of Mt Athos has suggested, the human person may also be described as a "liturgical being," (Methodius 2019) created to proclaim "God's mighty acts" (Ps 145:4) and to "praise Him in his sanctuary" (Ps 150:1). This approach, then, may deepen our understanding of community and liturgy as the place where narrative and ritual converge, and where the liturgical vocation of the human person finds its fullest and most concrete expression.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Adam Sejbuk: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing original draft, review & editing | **Tereza Huspeková:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing original draft, review & editing.

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The Church as a Pilgrim in the Age of Commercialized Tourism: An Ecclesiological Essay

ANTONI NADBRZEŻNY
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, antoni.nadbrzezny@kul.pl

Abstract: This article presents the Church as a pilgrim community of faith in the context of the contemporary phenomenon of commercialized tourism. From an anthropological perspective, commercialized tourism is a dynamic cultural practice grounded in an "aesthetics of pleasure." It tends to standardize signs, symbols, and beliefs, thereby contributing to the global homogenization of cultures and religions. The tourist has become one of the characteristic metaphors for the lifestyle of postmodern humanity. In response to this phenomenon, contextual ecclesiology seeks to present the nature and mission of the Church credibly by drawing on the category of the pilgrim, deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. It aims to identify the essential differences between the hedonistically oriented practice of commercialized tourism and the soteriologically directed ecclesial pilgrimage of faith. As Christ's pilgrim community, the Church does not deny the value of responsible tourism; rather, it opens up new horizons of human mobility: transcendent, eschatological, axiological, and soteriological. The article employs the theological method of correlation characteristic of contextual and pretextual ecclesiology. The global phenomenon of tourism, understood as a modern form of mobility, is not examined here in detail. Instead, in keeping with a "bottom-up" approach to theology, it serves as a cultural pretext for deeper reflection on the nature and mission of the Church in the contemporary world. The article consists of three parts. The first characterizes tourism as a cultural phenomenon. The second discusses the theological model of the Church as *communio peregrinans*. The third explores the significance of the Church as a pilgrim community of faith in view of the danger of existential emptiness generated by commercialized tourism and overtourism.

Keywords: mission of the Church, commercialized tourism, pilgrimage, community, faith, salvation

In keeping with the recommendation of the Second Vatican Council, contemporary ecclesiology has become increasingly willing to undertake the task of identifying and interpreting the present-day signs of the times (*signa temporis*). These signs challenge theology to develop innovative approaches that take seriously the distinctive features of changing social, cultural, and religious contexts. Earlier ecclesiological projects, often excessively abstract, did not sufficiently recognize the need for a hermeneutical form of theology capable of addressing the moral and religious dilemmas faced by people today. Only the pressure of accelerating change prompted theologians to think within the paradigm of a "bottom-up" ecclesiology, sometimes described as pretextual (Nadbrzeżny 2023, 80–83).

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The purpose of this article is to present the Church as a pilgrim community of faith against the background of the cultural phenomenon known as commercialized tourism. The hyperactivity in tourism characteristic of contemporary life sometimes develops into an obsession with directionless mobility, regarded as a supposed panacea for existential, social, and spiritual problems. In the present age of consumerism, an intense hunger for aesthetic impressions has emerged. Combined with an apotheosis of pleasure, it leads to a distinctive form of "cosmophagy": the rapid and unreflective "devouring" of the available world through the indiscriminate consumption, accumulation, and assimilation of impressions, experiences, and information, as well as objects, products, and advertising offers. This article draws a clear distinction between *tourism* in the broad sense—that is, travel undertaken for recreational, cultural or religious purposes—and *commercialized tourism*, understood as an institutionalized, market-driven and ideologically charged system that treats places, cultures, religions, interpersonal relationships and experiences as commodities.

Contemporary Western consumer societies do not confine consumption to commodities; they also consume services and interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, consumption expands to embrace life as a whole and encompasses culture, which itself becomes a commodity. This results in the characteristically postmodern erosion of the distinction between high and low culture, the massification of art, and the growth of popular culture. The obligation to consume is accompanied by an obligation to make use of leisure, with the result that consumer society, the media, advertising, and systems of codes and signs become oppressive, omnipotent, and tyrannical. Everything, everywhere, becomes an object to be purchased, used up, and discarded, while ever faster and more voracious consumption is portrayed as a magical, mythical, wondrous, and fantastic reality (Ritzer 1998, 15–17).

This limitless voracity toward the world—described in traditional religious language as "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, [and] the pride in riches" (1 John 2:16)—gradually becomes a dangerous source of alienation in human existence. It turns the human person into a cultural "vagabond," uprooted from the social, axiological, and religious spheres. This state of existential homelessness, combined with chronic dissatisfaction and a compulsion toward purposeless mobility, poses a significant challenge to contextual ecclesiology. Such ecclesiology seeks to portray the Church as a dynamic community of persons and peoples: rooted in the person of Christ, incorporated into the mystery of the Trinity, positively shaping the course of history, serving the world, creatively present within temporal reality, and at the same time oriented toward the eschaton. By promoting the model of the Church as a pilgrim of hope (*SNC* 1), theology responds to the natural human desire to discover the world. It seeks to reveal to contemporary humanity the transcendent, eschatological, communal, and soteriological dimensions of the existential pilgrimage of faith (Ratzinger 2005, 293–98).

The purpose outlined above requires answers to three fundamental questions, which also determine the structure of the article. What is tourism as a cultural phenomenon, and in what does its ambivalence consist? What is the theological meaning of the model of the Church as pilgrim in a culture that glorifies mobility? What significance does the ecclesial community of faith have in the face of the existential emptiness generated by commercialized tourism?

The article offers an original interpretative proposal. It deliberately situates itself within the current of pretextual ecclesiology, whose point of departure is the contemporary existential situation of the human person considered in relation to a specific cultural phenomenon. It employs Paul Tillich's method of correlation, which recognizes a reciprocal relationship between the existential and religious questions arising from the cultural situation of humanity and the answers formulated in the light of revelation and Christian experience (Cunningham 2021, 120–121; McGrath 2003, 103).

1. Tourism as an Ambivalent Phenomenon

One of the hallmarks of contemporary culture is the rapid growth of tourism in developed consumer societies, which, strictly speaking, emerged in Europe and North America only after the Second World War. Tourism combined with the consumption of goods becomes possible only when people have more leisure time and sufficient financial resources. In the premodern era, the rhythm of life was shaped by alternating cycles of the sacred (*sacrum*) and the profane (*profanum*), as well as by the natural stages of human existence: birth, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age, and death. Only the statutory regulation of working time introduced a significant change into human life by drawing a clear boundary between work and rest. A new concept then emerged: private, free time set aside for oneself, distinct from the religiously festive time understood in the traditional sense (Burszta 2015, 156–58).

Unlike in the premodern period, leisure in modern culture came to be measured by the rhythm of holidays and annual leave. Human existence entered the logic of a pendular life, oscillating between work and consumption, the latter increasingly realized through journeys to exotic destinations. Leisure ceased to mean passive recuperation after strenuous work and instead took the form of a holiday filled with intriguing activities, sightseeing, travel, and intensified consumption. The vigorously asserted right to paid leave places contemporary people under the pressure of mobility: they feel compelled to choose attractive offers, believe that tourism materially determines an individual's social and economic status, and fear that they may fail to meet the standards of the ideal consumer promoted by the media.

Amid these dynamic circumstances, one desire remains constant: the longing for an "other life" in an "other time," above all for an experience radically different from the days devoted to work or religious celebration. Yet the employee-consumer's longing for such radical "otherness" does not remain within the realm of spontaneous individual choice. It encounters an extensive global supply of services created by institutions devoted to promoting commercialized tourism. Travel, ostensibly intended to enable people to discover the world and consume material and cultural goods, is thus reduced to a commodity that can be purchased for a specific price. This gives rise to the complex, dynamic, and ambivalent reality of commercialized tourism as a system, distinguished from ordinary spontaneous travel by specialized organization, extreme commercialization, and sophisticated marketing (Burszta 2015, 162–64).

In view of the diverse forms taken by contemporary tourism—including ecotourism, agritourism, wildlife tourism, pro-poor tourism, slow travel, responsible tourism, and religious tourism—it should be emphasized that commercialized tourism is connected not only with a global network of institutions but also with a range of ideologies, particularly neoliberalism, consumerism, hedonism, neocolonialism, and multiculturalism. It is also worth noting that the extreme massification of tourist traffic, including pilgrimage traffic, poor event management, and the exceeding of accepted limits on time and visitor numbers can lead to the dangerous phenomenon of overtourism. The commodification of religious sites reduces them to mere objects of visual consumption, which disrupts the atmosphere of prayer and meditation. Such conditions generate tensions and "pilgrimphobia" among local communities and weaken the religious and spiritual character of pilgrimage itself (Mróz et al. 2026, 1–24).

In general terms, the ideological message of commercialized tourism may be summarized in five principal claims: (1) it promotes escapism as a flight from the burdens of everyday life; (2) presents travel as an indispensable factor in self-development and the acquisition of cultural capital; (3) endorses cultural consumption in the form of mechanically "ticking off" attractive sites and monuments; (4) encourages the obsessive collection or photography of exotic artifacts as a means of enhancing personal prestige; and (5) supports the development of inexpensive transport in the name of a universal right to travel and see the world. Each of these aspects calls for continuing ethical reflection (Holden and Fennell 2013, 323–400; Higgins-Desbiolles 2024, 476–85; Fennell 2006, 1–15).

Commercialized tourism is certainly not a neutral phenomenon. It dynamically shapes the global economy, profoundly affects the functioning of tourist destinations, intrudes heavily upon the natural environment, and produces lasting sociocultural changes in preferred destinations on a worldwide scale. At the same time, it promotes cultural tourism while contributing to the reduction of cultural differences to the status of commodities. Driven by an unrestrained appetite for commercialization,

tourism dons the costume of multiculturalism, combined with a vague category and rhetoric of the exotic. It thereby creates a dangerous strategy of seduction in which the value of multiculturalism is treated in an extremely objectifying, utilitarian, and commercial manner.

Once offered for sale, multiculturalism loses its natural specificity, depth, complexity, geographical and anthropological niche, and position on the margins of civilization. It becomes a desirable, functional, and seductive product on the global market for exotic commodities—an offer designed to detach affluent people from the problems, disappointments, and boredom of everyday life and cast them into an attractive sphere of relaxation decorated with aesthetically pleasing elements borrowed from many cultures. The point is not necessarily the physical movement of the contemporary tourist toward unknown lands on the peripheries of the world. Rather, human aesthetic perception is directed toward the "otherness" found at the heart of today's multicultural metropolises, imagined as the center of the globe, an *axis mundi*. Understood as a way of perceiving multiculturalism, commercialized tourism by its very nature oscillates between the opposing poles of strangeness and familiarity (Burszta 2008, 70–72).

Unlike earlier forms of travel, contemporary commercialized tourism promotes visits to places deliberately fashioned as paradoxical. They are expected to be exotic yet not alien, exciting yet safe, different yet entirely intelligible, wild yet sufficiently domesticated, strange yet not repellent. These reconciled contradictions mean that the exotic commodities available on the consumer market have been largely detached from their original aesthetic, cultural, religious, and geographical contexts and have become a new form of "commodity fetish." Three basic aspects can be distinguished. First, people, objects, and places are radically detached from historical and cultural experience. Second, emptied of their original meanings, they become consumer goods that provide an artificial and commercialized route to the "other." Third, they are subjected to reification, calculation, and stylization so that they may function as interchangeable aesthetic objects (Burszta 2015, 165; Huggan 2001, 18–19).

Grounded in an "aesthetics of pleasure," commercialized tourism mythologizes the regions it promotes and treats multiculturalism in a purely instrumental manner. The result is not an affirmation of difference but a standardization of people, experiences, places, and beliefs through conventional signs of otherness. Commercialized tourism thus contributes to the cultural and religious degradation of the human person by destroying originality, individuality, and uniqueness. Rather than discovering real people immersed in the currents of specific and diverse cultures and religions, it continually manufactures and commercializes them in response to a global demand for holiday encounters with otherness. It gives vacationers the illusion that, during a short holiday, they become travelers, researchers, and cultural experts (Burszta 2015, 166).

In reality, the tourist often becomes a victim of pressure exerted by the global tourism industry. In accordance with the logic of pendular life, this industry regularly transforms the productive human being (*homo faber*) into the carefree player (*homo ludens*), and then reverses the process. As the contemporary person's relationship to the natural and cultural worlds becomes increasingly instrumental, it becomes much more difficult for the tourist to adopt the attitude of disinterested contemplation of beauty characteristic of *homo contemplativus*. The value of Christian contemplation as an essential factor in shaping love for God, other people, and the created world is increasingly questioned or simply ignored (Miczyński 2025, 342–52). Devout contemplatives are increasingly being replaced by adherents of the "heresy of action."

Today's tourist frequently remains at the level of an observer chasing sensation, gliding across the surface of perceived phenomena without any need for deeper cognitive insight, understanding, an expansion of knowledge and imagination, or inner transformation. The increasing tourist mobility of affluent societies, combined with cultural and digital forms of individualistic nomadism, inevitably raises questions about the present human condition: about the deeper meaning of travel, movement, and surfing through online resources; and about the desire to recover a metaphysical, spiritual, and religious dimension within restless human existence *in via*. At this point, a space opens for theological reflection on the possibility of human pilgrimage within the community of the Church.

2. The Church as a Pilgrim Community of Faith

The rapid expansion of commercialized tourism, which draws upon the natural human desire to travel, challenges contemporary ecclesiology to reflect more deeply on the nature of the Church as a community journeying through salvation history. According to the principle of the multiple "and," the essence of the Church cannot be expressed through a single image, motif, or theoretical model. What is needed instead is a perspectival method in which the conjunction of numerous partial perspectives enables theology to approach the mystery of the *Ecclesia* credibly, without presuming that it can ever be fully comprehended or conceptually defined (McBrien 2008, 163–81).

As a *complex* and *theandric* reality, the Church is the mystery of God with humanity—a mystery that cannot be adequately expressed, described, or defined. In the context of universal anthropological experiences such as wandering, traveling, and tourism, contemporary ecclesiology returns to the traditional category of the pilgrim (*peregrinus*). Through this metaphor, it seeks to reveal the meaning and value of the Church's mission in an increasingly globalized world and in emblematic

multicultural metropolises full of contrasts and contradictions, marked not only by anonymity, haste, and crime but also by a longing for peace, solidarity, and justice (Nadbrzeżny 2017, 98–99).

The contemporary theological conception of the Church as a pilgrim community of faith accords closely with the Second Vatican Council's call to move beyond a purely institutional vision of the Church—static, one-sided, and almost exclusively focused on ecclesiastical hierarchy and papal authority (Ratzinger 1996, 33–40). A *communion* ecclesiology emphasizes above all the importance of personal relationships, which shape the distinctive nature of the Church as a social person (Bartnik 2009, 58–59).

In contrast to nominalist tendencies, a personalist approach makes it possible to understand the Church as a community of persons (*communio personarum*) that is more than the mere sum of individuals. A community is not simply an aggregate of persons, an accidental gathering of human monads, or an arbitrary configuration of human beings imposed by the caprice of fate or by an inability to resist the destructive forces of nature, technology, and history. On the contrary, ecclesial community is the fruit of God's intentional Trinitarian action. The Church is therefore a dynamic, historically situated *communion* between God and his people.

This *communion* has its source in the incarnation of the eternal Word and his entry into the history of the world; in the transforming event of Christ's Pasch and the anointing of the Holy Spirit; in the establishment of the college of the apostles and the sending of witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), both geographically and existentially; and finally in the descent of the Holy Spirit, who is the personal Memory and life-giving energy of the Church.

The process of continuing ecclesiogenesis clearly reveals the salvation-historical dimension of the ecclesial community, which realizes itself both ontologically and missionally in the world, for the world, and in dialogue with the world (Kasper 2015, 321–28). Attempts to define theologically the Church's relationship to the world continue to generate misunderstandings. In the clash of competing ideological narratives, stereotypes arise that wrongly accuse the Church of seeking to colonize the world, deprive it of its legitimate autonomy, subordinate societies to ecclesiastical power, sacralize secular reality without qualification, and impose cultural and religious uniformity upon humanity.

Such ideologically motivated accusations are particularly prominent in the current of "new atheism" associated with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. The Church is charged with evaluating temporal reality negatively, deliberately generating conflict, division, and tension, propagating an eschatological utopia, and obstructing the development of earthly civilization in the name of an imagined otherworldly Kingdom of God (Haught 2008, 15–27).

In response to these accusations, which are often accompanied by the promotion of aggressive secularization and atheization, Catholic ecclesiology seeks to formulate

a paradigmatic model of the Church's relationship to the world. Two extreme positions must be rejected: *eschatologism* and *panchristianism*.

The first of these, rooted in Gnosticism and Manichaeism, adopts a negative and radically pessimistic view of temporal reality. *Eschatologism* defines the world as wholly corrupt, demonized, subject to the dominion of evil, dominated by anti-human and anti-divine forces, and by nature hostile to the Gospel, salvation, and the ethos of the Kingdom of God. On this view, the Church is virtually obliged to criticize the world radically, deny its value, avoid worldly influences, strengthen a defensive posture, and condemn every point of contact, dialogical tendency, or proposal for cooperation between Church and world. The result is an ideology of escapism understood as unconditional flight from the world, a rhetoric of uncompromising condemnation of temporal reality, and a one-sided apotheosis of eschatology (Bartnik 2009, 267–68). Contrary to Christ's intention, the Church then ceases to understand itself as a joyful pilgrim of faith traveling through the history of the world created by God. Instead, it assumes the form of an emigrant driven by the vision of a longed-for heaven, hurriedly abandoning an earth tainted by sin and despising temporality, matter, history, and immanent progress.

The second position, known as *panchristianism*, is characterized by extreme optimism in its assessment of temporal reality. Without sufficient justification, it identifies the world with the risen Christ. Inspired by the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, it evaluates uncritically the current stage of the world's development within an allegedly inevitable process of cosmic Christification. It downplays the real presence of ontic and moral evil and minimizes its significance within the immense process of universal cosmic evolution that is said ultimately to converge upon Christ as the Omega Point. This position dissolves the dialectical tension between Church and world and affirms their mutual diffusion. By preferring a conception of the Church "dissolved" within the substance of the world, it effectively undermines the pilgrim character of ecclesial community as a personal reality. The Church ceases to be the sacramental pilgrim of faith on the roads of the world. It is absorbed, as it were, by a world that, within a universal soteriological process, is gradually recapitulated in the cosmic Christ—the Head of the universe, the Meaning of history, and the Pleroma of being. Here the pilgrimage of ecclesial community through the world is replaced by a process of the Church's *pleromatization* extending through time until the Parousia (Bartnik 2009, 269).

Rejecting these two extremes, personalist ecclesiology proposes a realistic and balanced account of the Church's relationship to the world, described as *incarnationalism*. This approach is based on the Chalcedonian model and evokes the conception of two natures that are distinct yet united, unmixed and unopposed. According to this view, the Church is not identical with the world, but neither does it reject the world's value *en bloc*. In its critical relationship to the world, the ecclesial community of faith—open to all peoples, nations, and cultures—constitutes a distinctive world in

its own right, rooted both in the mystery of the Trinity and in the heart of temporal reality. The Church's presence in the world is missionary in character. Its mission consists in sanctifying the world in its anthropological and cultural dimensions. Such sanctification has nothing in common with the mechanical or imperial appropriation of particular sectors of reality. It is instead a concern for the world's positive development and transformation through the formation of responsible persons capable of building a civilization of love, peace, cooperation, forgiveness, mercy, service, and self-sacrifice (Bartnik 2009, 270–272).

The sanctification of the world does not eliminate existing cultures; it takes the form of a dialogically oriented inculturation of the Gospel. It proceeds not through pressure, invasion, violence, or deception, but through credible witness, respect for the right of persons, communities, and societies to religious freedom (*DH* 4), and the cultivation of a culture of fraternity, cooperation, understanding, and dialogue (Kasper 2015, 344–46). Unlike commercialized tourism grounded in the cult of pleasure, the ecclesial community of self-giving love, immersed in the current of history (*DCE* 19), does not confine itself to acknowledging the immanent dimensions of cultural mobility. It does not seek to homogenize culture. In accordance with the principle of building "unity in diversity," it seeks to open contemporary humanity to transcendent, salvific, and eschatological reality. It is guided not by the logic of voraciously consuming impressions, sensations, experiences, and emotions, but by a desire to discover deeper meanings that awaken hope and strengthen mutual love. The Church-on-the-way (*Ecclesia in via*) carries out its mission of sanctifying the world within the paradigm of dialogue and pilgrimage, affirming the primacy of the sacredness of time (*kairos*) over the sacrality of place (*topos*).

The pilgrimage of the Church as a community of persons, peoples, and nations has a number of distinctive features. It possesses a clearly defined goal: service to transcendent salvation, which does not negate but surpasses and brings to fulfillment the value of the purely immanent processes of liberation, emancipation, and progress (Schillebeeckx 1993, 6–13). Ecclesial pilgrimage does not fit the pattern of pendular existence stretched between work and leisure, production and consumption, earning and spending. It embraces the whole of human life, sacramentally incorporated into the existence of the risen Lord (Rom 6:11). Because believers exist-in Christ, the pilgrim community of the Church can avoid alienation and loneliness when confronted with the many, often mutually contradictory, phenomena of culture: wealth and poverty, freedom and enslavement, peace and war, integration and fragmentation, axiological and religious memory and amnesia, secularization and desecularization (God's return). Its ontic rootedness in the person of Christ (Gal 2:20) enables the pilgrim Church to remain confident in the protective and renewing power of the Holy Spirit, who acts as the divine Navigator in the always ambiguous encounter between Church and world and amid moral, religious, and axiological dilemmas. The Church's pilgrimage through history, through the world, and through the concrete "here and

now" cannot be reduced to the universal experience of transience. It is expressed in the Church's cooperation with God for the good of humanity, so that people may "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29).

Especially in periods when the absurdity and madness of the demons of history escalate—in totalitarianism, chauvinism, nationalism, racism, political and religious fanaticism, antisemitism, and anti-Christian hostility—the Holy Spirit awakens in the human person an absolute faith, purely subjective and identical with boundless trust, which transcends every dogmatic formula. Such "absolute faith" becomes the source of the "courage to be," (Tillich 2000, 186) expressed in the acceptance of one's own self despite the terrible anxiety of fate, guilt, and death. It makes possible the discovery of the God above the "God of theism": the true God, rather than a deity reduced to a concept, doctrine, cult, moral system, or being among other beings. Faith in the "God above God"—the inexhaustible power of being and the deepest source of meaning—can become a source of rescue especially when traditional Christian concepts and symbols grow weak and degenerate into banal slogans (Tillich 2000, 187–90).

In contrast to tourism's standardized approach to "otherness," which classifies difference under the label of the exotic, the Church as a merciful, joyful, and patient pilgrim of hope (Rom 12:12) seeks to respect the pluralism of individual human sensitivities and the diverse ways in which God is sought and experienced in contemporary multicultural societies. This in no way denies the unique salvific mediation of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Rather, it expresses faith in the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, who in ways known to himself offers all people the possibility of salvation, including adherents of other religions and even unbelievers who, following the dictates of conscience, fulfill God's will to some degree and, assisted by divine grace, strive to live upright lives (*LG* 16). Ecclesial pilgrimage, it must be stressed, is not based solely on human plans, efforts, and calculations. One of its essential features is synergy. This consists in the creative union of divine grace with human activity; the dialogical encounter and cooperation of God with his people; and the harmonious conjunction of nature and the supernatural, matter and spirit, temporal reality and eternity, the present and the eschaton, created persons and the uncreated divine Persons. A renewed recognition of genuine divine-human synergy gives rise to hope that dialogue, cooperation, and shared responsibility can be more fully appreciated in addressing the world's urgent problems—war, abortion, secularism, demographic decline, migration, and ecological crisis—especially within a postmodern culture marked by haste, indifference, and self-sufficiency (*SNC* 9–15).

The pilgrimage of the Church takes place in real history, within time understood linearly, throughout the *chronos* marked by the blessing of divine *kairoi*. It has spatial and spiritual, social and individual, axiological and charitological, eventful and symbolic, historical and eschatological dimensions. Nor can it be overlooked that the Church as pilgrim (*Ecclesia peregrinans*) reveals the missionary essence of its being

in a particular way through the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the source of its life, holiness, and apostolic activity (*EE* 22). Participating in the sacramental conversion (*transubstantiation*) of the fruits of the earth and human labor into the Body and Blood of the Lord, the pilgrim Church also experiences a blessed transformation in terms of its meaning (*transignification*) and purpose (*transfinalization*).

Within the existential interweaving of meaning and meaninglessness, the ecclesial community undergoes a distinctive *transignification*. This consists in becoming aware of the new significance that the Eucharist gives the Church for the world. It is no longer perceived merely as one global organization among many but as a meaningful sacramental sign of Christ, salvation, unity, and hope for a blessed future—in Gospel language, as the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth" (Matt 5:13–14).

Amid the crucible of conflicting worldly interests, the *Ecclesia Christi* likewise experiences a form of *transfinalization*. This is the continual transformation of the temporal, secular, and provisional goals typical of purely human societies into the supernatural, religious, and salvific purposes proper to the divine-human community of the Church. In biblical terms, this *transfinalization* consists in "seeking the things that are above, not the things that are on earth" (Col 3:1–2), refusing to be conformed to this world, being transformed by the renewal of the mind, and discerning "what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

The celebration of the Eucharist is by no means a nostalgic return to a "paradise lost." It is the sacramental making-present (*anamnesis*) of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, crowned by his resurrection. This occurs in the form of a sacramental banquet that anticipates the full union of the community of the redeemed with the Holy Trinity in heaven (*EE* 15–16, 19–20). The Eucharistic food of pilgrims (*esca viatorum et panis angelorum*) enables the Church, in the face of the painful scandal of hatred, division, war, and injustice in the world, to reveal itself as a genuine, though still imperfect, community of love, unity, peace, and reconciliation (Schreiter 1992, 74–79). Ecclesial pilgrimage is therefore not directed toward collecting cultural and religious souvenirs from the ends of the earth. Its purpose is to restore to humanity the lost memory of God, who is the ground of being, the source of meaning and positive creativity, and the one "who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). Ultimately, the meaning of the pilgrim ecclesial community of faith is summed up in proclaiming the death of Jesus, professing his resurrection, and awaiting his coming in glory. Contrary to unfair assessments (Jankélévitch 2005, 88–90), Christianity has nothing in common with a perverse love of dead bodies. It is a *communion* of love between the living God and living human beings (*communio caritatis*). It proclaims not an apotheosis of death but the abundance and fullness of Life (John 10:10).

It must nevertheless be remembered that the fullness of *Life-Light* made present yet sacramentally hidden in Christ, the incarnate Word (John 1:4), inevitably confronts the culturally conditioned experience of a deficit of meaningful, happy,

fulfilled, valuable, and authentic life. A painful contrast emerges between actual human existence—entangled in the reality of sin, betrayal, guilt, and anxiety—and the life that is intuited, promised, dreamed of, and desired: a life finally liberated from the play of appearances, from the possibility of losing one's way, and from the fear of death, nothingness, and absurdity. Here there arises the possibility of an encounter between the pilgrim community of the Church and the concrete human person threatened by existential emptiness within a seductive culture saturated with clichés about the power of travel to make people happy.

3. Existential Emptiness and the Mission of the Pilgrim Church

The rapidly accelerating machinery of global commercialized tourism skillfully exploits the ineradicable human desire for happiness. It feeds, as it were, upon the tragic condition of the human person as a beggar for happiness. At the same time, it radically subjectivizes happiness by proposing a transition from the premodern *beatitudo* to the postmodern *felicitas*. It proclaims the false dogma that the experience of happiness increases in direct proportion to consumption. It disseminates the myth that commodity markets offer the only credible path to happiness and that gross domestic product provides its objective measure. It cunningly seeks to convince people that goods which by their nature cannot be commercialized—love, friendship, affection, respect, disinterested assistance, and self-sacrifice—can nevertheless be bought and sold (Bauman 2008, 4–6). Commercialized tourism tempts contemporary consumers with the deceptive promise that pearls of happiness can be found in the most distant corners of the earth, veiled in an aura of mythological mystery, fairy-tale beauty, and soothing tranquility. It insidiously invites people to enter a relentless race for the trophy of satisfaction, fulfillment, and bliss. It then forces them into fierce competition on the running track of life, reducing existence to the continual consumption of impressions, flavors, colors, and sounds and to the collection of photographs, videos, and exotic souvenirs. Ambivalent at its core, tourism creates the illusion that happiness is close at hand and treats it as an easily obtainable consumer good. Yet the greater the number of new offers through which happiness is supposedly available for purchase, the more intensely human dissatisfaction grows. An already fragile belief in the possibility of attaining lasting happiness on earth is further weakened by the unpredictability of the future, which awakens conflicting feelings: "from confident trust to apprehensiveness, from serenity to anxiety, from firm conviction to hesitation and doubt." (*SNC* 1) There are no objective grounds for claiming that tourism's absolutization of the present (*carpe diem*) and the "dictatorship of travel" (*iter facere necesse est*) can effectively overcome the paralyzing fear of the future.

As a result of the compulsive pursuit of happiness, conducted at the pace of rapidly changing tourist fashions, contemporary humanity faces the danger of falling into an existential vacuum. This condition is characterized by the perception that one's life lacks meaning, purpose, or value. Put simply, "people have enough to live by but nothing to live for; they have the means but no meaning." (Frankl 2008, 142) In this state, a person begins to experience inner chaos, fragmentation, and disorientation. Boredom, sadness, anxiety, loneliness in the midst of others, existential frustration, and the danger of despair and self-condemnation emerge (Frankl 2008, 111–14). Although existential emptiness causes psychological distress, it is itself ambivalent. On the one hand, it degrades human existence; on the other, it creates the possibility of an existential novum. Unexpectedly, it generates within the person a kind of transgressive pressure directed toward a radical transformation of thought, action, goals, networks of relationships, and configurations of trust.

Considered in the light of faith, existential emptiness as a painful limit situation may acquire the character of a *soteriophanic experience*—a sudden glimpse of the radiance of salvation. This occurs when the human person, in the most intimate sanctuary of the self, is mysteriously addressed by the divine Persons, shaken out of existential stagnation, awakened from spiritual lethargy, and liberated from apathy, indifference, and inertia. The person is invited to look beyond the horizon of temporality and to seek salvation outside the collection of purely immanent remedies obsessively promoted in countless self-help books that claim to offer simple cures for every human problem. God's inner address to the human person always disrupts the existential status quo in some way (Boeve 2006, 64–65). It interrupts the narrative of pessimism, shatters the ideology of fatalism, and transforms the routine of complaint into a practice of gratitude. It is more a dynamic event than a process extending over time. It is an efficacious intervention of the Spirit-Paraclete, enlivening, transforming, and activating, as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13).

The difficult-to-describe experience of God's gracious presence within a person afflicted by existential emptiness has the character of a brief impulse and a compelling force. It assumes the form of an irresistible imperative in which the command given to Abraham—to leave his native land and go to the country shown to him by God (Gen 12:1)—resounds paradigmatically. The result of being personally addressed by God is an impulse toward existential and historical pilgrimage in faith toward eschatological salvation. This pilgrimage, however, does not take place in solitude, apart from society, or in narcissistic self-absorption. It consists above all in believers' reception of the gift of divine *communion* (*communio*) and their active participation in it (*participatio actuosa*). Ultimately, this *communion* between humanity and God becomes concrete in history and assumes visible ecclesial forms (*communio ecclesialis*).

God's self-communication (*Selbstmitteilung Gottes*) to humanity, both sacramental and extra-sacramental, is the supernatural gift of grace. Grace forms in human

beings the capacity joyfully to accept Christ's invitation to participate in the ecclesial community and responsibly to build it throughout salvation history (*aedificatio Ecclesiae continua*), until the day of the Parousia (Bartnik 2009, 98–99). It should be emphasized that God's action in inwardly addressing a person immersed in existential emptiness does not entail a radical transfiguration of human being. God does not idealize the human existential situation or spread before the person a falsified vision of a world from which evil, sin, disappointment, sadness, and suffering have disappeared. Rather, God persuades the human person—a being dramatic by nature—that existential, spiritual, and axiological nihilism is not humanity's inevitable destiny within the complex history of the world. The person continually seeks the meaning of existence in the possibility of attaining a good that can become his or her own good. The person is not satisfied merely with "being," or even with understanding it, but desires a new quality of "being" that transcends itself toward the salvation that comes from God. In this way, the person seeks to pass from "being" to the fullness of the "Good" (Tischner 2011, 198–201).

The task, then, is to awaken within contemporary people, who are often wounded and disillusioned, a deep faith that the world—in which the dramatic alternative between destruction and rescue becomes visible—is neither ownerless nor godless. It is not ownerless because, despite the ambiguity created by the coexistence of good and evil, it still belongs to God (Ps 24:1). It is the possession of the Creator, who called it into being *ex nihilo* and in providential wisdom desires its renewal rather than its annihilation. Nor is the world godless, because neither the social "exile of God" nor the cultural "eclipse of God" can negate his kenotic, subtle, and hidden presence, which paradoxically manifests itself both in his rejection and in the longing for him (Kołakowski 2019, 945–46; Schillebeeckx 1993, 56–58).

The specter of nihilism in its many forms, arising in the wake of Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God," need not lead to the collapse of religious faith. Unexpectedly, it may contribute to faith's purification, maturation, and strengthening. The experience of losing established values, a distinctive "inclination toward nothingness," need not immediately result in flight to an "other" world, betrayal of "solidarity with those who have been shaken," or abandonment of one's obligations toward this earth (Halík 2008, 181–82). Along the winding trajectories of the world, an encounter is possible between contemporary humanity—described as a "cultural vagabond"—and the pilgrim community of the Church, which theology calls the sacrament of salvation, hope, and renewal. The metaphor of the vagabond symbolizes a postmodern *modus vivendi*. Within a globalized and commercialized world, the vagabond wanders without a definite plan or destination (Bauman 1996, 14–15). Such a person derives pleasure from constant movement, knowing what he or she is fleeing from—boredom, routine, monotony—but not knowing what he or she is moving toward. Whereas the tourist eagerly explores the world, the vagabond is unable to find a place within it. The tourist sees the

world as attractive; the vagabond experiences it as inhospitable. In the life understood as a game played by consumers, the vagabond becomes a caricature of the tourist, a peculiar alter ego. The vagabond neither seeks transcendence nor intends to gain self-knowledge. Living on the margins of society, he or she painfully senses becoming a "superfluous" person (Tyszka 2016, 93–95). Unlike the Christian pilgrim, who is conscious of an eschatological destination, respects religious and social hierarchies, is rooted in ecclesial *communio*, sustained by divine grace, and follows Christ the Good Shepherd (John 10:14), the contemporary vagabond wanders aimlessly through the world's labyrinth, embraces social horizontalism, and continually experiments within the element of human existence. Such a life is a solitary and uprooted journey, relying solely on immanent forces and directed toward something vague, ephemeral, and illusory. It is an existence that doubts the meaning of the Gospel promise that whoever follows Christ "will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

The encounter between the ecclesial pilgrim and the cultural "vagabond" is not confined to an exchange of perceptions. It is neither an accidental contact between subjects who remain distant from one another nor a polemical confrontation dominated by suspicion and accusatory rhetoric. In its most essential meaning, encounter is always a dialogical concern for the good of the persons who meet (Tischner 1993, 512–13). An authentic encounter therefore requires movement beyond merely thinking about the other and beyond the tendency to place others only within the horizon of one's own view of reality. Thought about the other must give way to a real relationship within the sphere of disclosed sufferings, desires, concerns, and longings. In this way, the first beginnings of an ecumenism of suffering, responsibility, and action emerge. The possibility arises of mutual love (*caritas*) as a foretaste of blessedness. The other always teaches us both the "irreducible transcendence of separateness" and the construction of a relationship in which, to some degree, we can participate by overcoming isolation and egocentrism (Tarnowski 2025, 238).

The contemporary cultural "vagabond," threatened by existential and spiritual nihilism, eventually experiences exhaustion and frustration. The seductive promises that suffering and uncertainty can be eliminated through the development of "mobility for mobility's sake" ultimately prove illusory. They cease to be credible even to the most enthusiastic supporters of commercialized tourism. In an authentic encounter between the pilgrim community of the Church and the disoriented wanderers of the postmodern age, one may discern an opportunity for hope to be born anew. In the perspective of Christ's Pasch, such hope is more than cheap optimism, a good mood, or mere cheerfulness. In the face of the specter of existential nihilism, the Church can present itself to the skeptical "vagabond" as a humble pilgrim of hope rooted in the person of the crucified and risen Christ: marked by the stigma of wounds yet living, humiliated yet exalted, passing through the "dark valley of death"

into the "radiant land of life." Without hearing the cry of the Crucified, the Church's proclamation of the resurrection would become a "mythology of victory" rather than the Good News of the Lamb who was slain and yet lives (Halík 2008, 185).

The wounds of the risen Lord shown to the world are not, for believers, a cause of shame, a sign of weakness, or a promotion of false dolorism. In accordance with the Gospel message (John 20:28), they are signs of the credibility both of Christ as Messiah and of the Church as a pilgrim of hope. At the heart of the world, they become a place in which truth (*aletheia*) is manifested and a space in which love (*agape*) is revealed. From a paschal perspective, the incarnate God (*Deus incarnatus*) appears within the current of history as one who is in solidarity with every suffering person, not as an apathetic absolute existing outside time and space (Halík 2008, 186). He is an engaged participant in the human drama, not a dispassionate spectator of the performance. Even today, God comes to people exhausted by ceaseless mobility and threatened by existential emptiness—the God who alone can create everything (*omnia*) from nothing (*ex nihilo*).

Conclusion

The global system of tourism, so characteristic of postmodern culture, contains within itself a burdensome ambivalence. On the one hand, it enables people to fulfill the perennial dream of travel; on the other, it commercializes cultures and religions by reducing them to the level of "commodity fetishes." Subjected to the mechanisms of aggressive advertising and obediently meeting the expectations of demanding customers, commercialized tourism contributes to the construction of distorted images of the world: one-sided, simplified, and torn from their original social, cultural, and religious contexts. It suppresses the natural plurality of cultures and religions in favor of an artificially manufactured multiculturalism labeled as exotic. Driven by the pursuit of profit, commercialized tourism creates numerous problems. For the purposes of the market, it reifies people from different cultures. It fuels hedonistic consumerism. It promotes the false claim that hypermobility is necessarily connected with happiness. It gives tourists the illusion that they have become experts in cultural studies. It popularizes the snobbish collection of exotic experiences and artifacts. Finally, it creates religious and cultural syncretisms and casts them into a stream of accidental narratives.

Although the complex phenomenon of commercialized tourism often contributes to the formation of a one-dimensional, secularized human being governed by an "aesthetics of pleasure," within a pretextual ecclesiology employing the method of correlation it can also become an inspiration for developing the model of the Church as a pilgrim of hope. This model has the potential to speak to people living in today's

culture of haste and indifference. In response to the immanent image of postmodern humanity as egocentric, voracious, and permanently dissatisfied tourists, the Church can once again present itself as a pilgrim community of faith, oriented toward self-giving love and seeking to establish a dialogical and creative partnership with the world.

The dynamism of the pilgrim Church does not derive solely from the natural vitality of its members. Its source lies in the sacrament of the Eucharist; in the activity of the Holy Spirit as Guide along the roads of the world; in the synergy of grace and human creativity; in the eschatological orientation of the history of the world; and in the providential love of God the Father. This love renews and transforms, ultimately drawing good even from the most disturbing experiences of evil, suffering, and sin (Rom 5:20–21). The Church as pilgrim is guided not by covetousness toward the world but by patient, self-giving love for all people called by God to salvation. Humble and conscious of its weakness, the ecclesial community does not seek to colonize the world but to sanctify it. It respects the legitimate autonomy of created reality and the human right to religious freedom. The pilgrim Church therefore rejects both a wholly pessimistic view of the world and an excessively optimistic apotheosis of it. It is not opposed to sustainable tourism, but it rejects commercialized tourism in its radically materialistic, technicized, and purely ludic form.

If tourism, burdened by the ideologies of consumerism and hedonism, can lead people to chronic exhaustion, the Church as a community of pilgrims (*communio viatorum*) has an opportunity to become an instrument of peace and solidarity within a culture that reduces happiness to a commercial commodity. Especially in situations of existential emptiness, when people lose a sense of meaning, purpose, and value, the Church can offer an important point of reference by recalling the spiritual dimension of culture and human existence. By bearing witness to the God who unexpectedly disrupts the routine of sadness, burnout, and doubt, the pilgrim community of love can help to overcome the axiological and spiritual nihilism that follows from the cultural, social, and existential "death of God."

Yet the specter of emptiness need not constitute an inescapable fate for postmodern humanity. From the perspective of faith, the demon of nihilism encounters the symbol of the wounds of the risen Lord. These "glorious wounds" do not diminish the joy of Christ's paschal victory; rather, they protect that victory from mythologization. Especially for skeptics enveloped in fear of yet another religious utopia, these wounds are signs of Christ's solidarity both with the wounded of this world and with God, who desires universal salvation. It must be acknowledged that contemporary consumers, often deprived of happiness, meaning, and purpose, resemble cultural "wanderers" condemned to contingency, disorientation, and loneliness—to a life that is more a *collection of episodes* than an *existential continuum*. Perhaps the encounter between lost "vagabonds" and "pilgrims of hope" will provide an occasion for the truth to resound once more along the roads of the world: "All the paths of the Lord

are steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ps 25:10), and to those who fear him, "he will instruct them in the way that they should choose" (Ps 25:12).

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Boasting in Visions, Speaking in Parables: The Rhetorical Function of 2 Corinthians 12:2–4

KATARZYNA MELDRUM
The John Paul II Catholic University in Lublin, kayameldrum@yahoo.com.au

Abstract: This article re-examines the account of ascent to the "third heaven" in 2 Cor 12:2–4, traditionally read as Paul's autobiographical report of a visionary experience. Although widely accepted, this interpretation leaves unresolved tensions, including the protagonist's anonymity, narrative repetition, lack of descriptive content, and the paradox of "unspeakable words." The study proposes an alternative reading of the passage as a self-contained parable embedded within Paul's rhetorical strategy. The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, it surveys the *status quaestionis*, outlining both traditional autobiographical and recent rhetorical approaches. Second, it argues for the plausibility of parabolic discourse within Paul's cultural and literary context. Third, it evaluates the passage against recognised genre criteria, particularly those listed in the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*. Finally, it demonstrates that a parabolic reading resolves key interpretative problems more coherently. Methodologically, the study combines rhetorical criticism with genre analysis. It treats the text as a literary construct shaped by persuasive aims within a specific epistolary context. The article concludes that reading 2 Cor 12:2–4 as a parable offers a more economical and coherent explanation of the text while illuminating Paul's rhetorical strategy: rather than recounting a private vision, he employs a crafted narrative to challenge the Corinthians' criteria of apostolic authority.

Keywords: 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, parable, rhetorical criticism, genre analysis, visionary ascent, apostolic authority

The enigmatic account of an ascent to the "third heaven" in 2 Cor 12:2–4 is distinctive within the Pauline corpus and has long generated exegetical debate. It appears in the midst of Paul's polemic against a group of new evangelisers who sought to reshape the Corinthians' understanding of the gospel and, in doing so, to displace Paul's authority. Although their precise doctrinal profile remains unclear, it is evident that they promoted alternative criteria for apostolic legitimacy and exerted growing influence within the community.[1]

This situation compelled Paul to defend himself by entering a "boasting contest" despite his explicit recognition of its dangers.[2] By adopting the persona of the "fool," Paul mirrored and at times exceeded his opponents' claims, while

1 See a detailed analysis of the opponents in Furnish 1984, 50–53; Carson 1986, 16–29.

2 Marcin Kowalski (2013, 247–50) discusses the risks of *periautologia* in classical rhetoric, conditions for its effective use and their affinity with the content of 2 Corinthians.

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simultaneously signalling his reluctance. His insistence that such boasting is "not beneficial" (οὐ συμφέρον)[3] signals that it was a strategic concession to the terms set by others.

Among the newcomers' boasts there were appeals to mystical experiences and, possibly, to privileged knowledge derived from them. In a community receptive to manifestations of the Spirit, such experiences would have carried considerable persuasive weight and may even have served as a criterion of leadership. It is against this background that Paul introduces the strange narrative of a journey to heaven and a revelation, which remains undisclosed.

1. *Status Quaestionis* and the Proposed Reading of 2 Corinthians 12:2–4

Most commentators interpret the ascent account as Paul's own visionary experience, narrated as part of his defence against opponents in Corinth. Several considerations support this autobiographical reading. First, the ascent is often linked to the subsequent reference to the "abundance of revelations" and to the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7) (Barnett 1997, 562; Furnish 1984, 524; Hanson 1961, 86, 88; Martin 1986, 582; Thrall 2004, 778, 783), sometimes seen as a consequence of the heavenly journey (Baird 1985, 660; Barret 1973, 314; Hubbard 2017, 205; Scott 1998, 221) or even as part of the same visionary episode (Gooder 2006, 171–72; Harris 2005, 827; Oropeza 2016, 663; Price 1980, 35–37). On this view, 2 Cor 12:1–10 forms a unified narrative culminating in the paradoxical disclosure, announced in 12:1, that authentic apostleship is defined by weakness rather than strength.

Second, the ascent appears within the "Fool's Speech" (2 Cor 11:1–12:10), where Paul otherwise appeals to concrete and verifiable markers of apostleship—unpaid preaching (11:7–9), suffering for the Gospel (11:23–29)—and recounts factual events. Some therefore understand the ascent as another genuine incident, functioning rhetorically as *evidentio* (Muszytowska 2009, 235) and framed by two episodes of hardship: the escape from Damascus (11:32–33) and the "thorn in the flesh" (12:7–9) (Kowalski 2013, 108, 119; Lincoln 1979, 218; Martin 1986, 602).

The passage's *Wirkungsgeschichte* supports this reading. Numerous Church Fathers understood the ascent as Paul's personal experience[4] while early Christian apocalyptic texts treated it as a paradigmatic mystical event and expanded upon

3 Greek text from *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Aland et al. 2012). All translations into English are the author's own.

4 For example, Augustine, *De Genesi*. 12.2–5; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 2.3; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 1.308.314; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.30.7; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 2 Cor* (26).

it.[5] The Eastern Orthodox liturgical tradition likewise presupposes its factuality (Wallace 2012, 179).

All these considerations are important but not decisive. The "thorn" need not be causally linked to the ascent just described since Paul is elsewhere portrayed as repeatedly receiving visions and revelations.[6] Nor is the structural context unambiguous: while the surrounding episodes highlight humiliation and weakness, the ascent describes an exalted heavenly journey,[7] creating tension. More broadly, Paul advances real arguments in relation to authentic apostleship criteria but otherwise his polemical practice shows flexibility. He concedes rhetorical weakness (2 Cor 11:6), matches his opponents' boasts of pedigree (11:22) and threatens harshness when accused of timidity (10:2). He is not bound by a single argumentative register and adapts his strategy to the situation.

Crucially, Paul explicitly distances himself from the ascent's protagonist immediately after completing his account: he allows himself to boast of knowing "such a man" but insists that he will boast of himself only in weakness (12:5). Moreover, his claim that he refrains from boasting in revelations (12:6) would be incoherent if he had just done so, even indirectly.

A minority position takes Paul's third-person narration literally and identifies the traveller as someone other than the Apostle. Michael D. Goulder (1995, 56–57) proposes a friend, a fellow believer, while Morton Smith (1996, 64–66) identifies the figure as Jesus himself.[8] Yet another person's experience carries little rhetorical weight within Paul's *synkrisis* with his rivals.

Recent scholarship has increasingly approached the passage as a literary construct, focusing on its communicative function rather than historical referentiality. Such readings generally remain compatible with the traditional autobiographical interpretation (Kim 2020; Litwa 2011; Lee 2024). Explicit suggestions that the account itself may be invented (Robinson 2025, 74), or that its historical origin is indeterminable (Betz 1972, 92) remain exceptional.

Literary readings point to the passage's long-observed resemblance to ascent narratives.[9] Paul evokes this tradition through shared vocabulary and motifs, but the similarities are superficial (Charlesworth 2016, 96; Kim 2020, 21) and key features are conspicuously absent: there is no vision of God enthroned, no angelic guide,

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5 In works such as *The Apocalypse of Paul* (both Coptic and Christian texts) or *The Life of St Andrew the Fool*. See Harrison 2004, 29–46; Kaler, Painchaud, and Bussières 2004, 173–93; Wallace 2012, 194–99.

6 Cf. Acts 9:1–18; 16:9; 18:9; 22:6–11, 17–21; 23:11; 26:12–18; 27:23–26; Gal 1:12; 2:1.

7 According to the majority view, for example, Calvin 1964, 156; Harrison 2004, 51; Lincoln 1981, 84–85; Stegman 2009, 267–68.

8 While Paul's desire to boast of his association with this man (2 Cor 12:5) supports this proposal, the chronology renders it untenable for Paul locates the event 14 years prior, in 41–42 CE.

9 For example, 1 and 2 Enoch, 3 and 4 Baruch, 4 Ezra, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Testament of Levi*, *Testament of Abraham*, *Ascension of Isaiah*, or a later *Hekhalot* story "The Four Who Entered Pardes." Cf. Morray-Jones 2014, 245–85.

no description of the journey or the heavenly realms. The resemblance lies largely in the notion of a living person ascending to a multi-layered heaven (Gooder 2006, 212–13).[10] Paul frames his account as an ascent narrative familiar from both Jewish[11] and Greco-Roman[12] traditions only to frustrate his listeners' expectations: instead of heavenly mysteries they are treated to a deliberate incongruity.

Other intertextual approaches point to parallels with rabbinic accounts of Moses' ascent (Litwa 2011, 238–57) or with Job, which combines physical vulnerability and divine support (Lee 2024). Hans Dieter Betz (1972, 87–100) famously read 2 Cor 12:1–10 as a parody in the Socratic tradition: a heavenly ascent without revelation paired with a healing without miracle. Jerry W. McCant (1999, 141–53) expanded this analysis by adding the Damascus escape (11:30–33) as a third parodic inversion, together forming a critique of classical aretalogy, in which heroism, vision, and healing are each reconfigured as weakness. On his reading, Paul subverts the ideals of apostleship and patronage prevailing in Corinth. Other scholars likewise emphasise the account's comedy, interpreting the passage as imitating Greco-Roman satirical ascents (Harrison 2004, 51–52), a mockery of the "super-apostles'" claims (Robinson 2025, 85) or highlighting its pervasive irony without committing to a single genre classification (Litwa 2011, 238–57; Loubser 1992, 507–21). These readings rightly underscore the passage's ironic texture and McCant's insight into Corinthian ideals of apostolic grandeur is compelling. Yet parody alone risks flattening the text's constructive aim: Paul seeks not merely "to expose or criticise" (McCant 1999, 150) his rivals but to reshape the community's understanding of apostleship.

This study proposes reading the ascent narrative in 2 Cor 12:2–4 not as a rhetorically crafted autobiographical reminiscence but as a self-contained parable: a fictional, didactic construction embedded within Paul's rhetorical strategy. The proposal rests first on the observation that verses 2–4 constitute a coherent literary unit. Paul's abrupt shift to third-person narration is confined to these verses and is reinforced by repeated references to someone other than himself (ἄνθρωπος, ὁ τοιοῦτος) and by consistent third-person verbal forms (ἁρπαγέντα, ἡρπάγη and ἤκουσεν). Together with the narrative's distinctive subject matter, these features create a clear stylistic and rhetorical break within the surrounding autobiographical discourse. The unit is framed by references to boasting in 12:1, which introduces the topic of visions, and 12:5–6, which mark the return to Paul's own manner of boasting.

Equally significant is the relationship between the ascent narrative (12:2–4) and Paul's commentary on it in 12:5–7. Immediately after recounting the ascent,

10 See also a survey of the ascent literature in Gooder 2006, 23–161, especially the comparison table on p. 157; Himmelfarb 1993, 95–114; Nassauer 2019, 253–57; a list of the genre's motifs in Wunrow 2022, 35–46.

11 There are at least two recorded Jewish texts from this period: *The First Book of Enoch* (Ethiopian) and the *Testament of Levi*, cf. Gooder 2006, 36. Later accounts may have been also known at the time in oral form. See also Scholem 1960, 18.

12 For example, Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis*; Seneca, *De Consolatione Ad Marciam*.

the Apostle carefully distinguishes between the anonymous visionary figure of "such a man" (τοιοῦτος) and himself (ἐμαυτοῦ); he will boast only of the former (12:5). This declared willingness to "boast" on behalf of the protagonist does not imply an independent commendation of a third party or any substantive value conferred on the episode just narrated. It completes the rhetorical movement from a fictional narrative to Paul's own situation, reinforcing the distinction.

A surprising admission follows in verse 12:6: should Paul wish to boast (ἐὰν δὲ θελήσω καυχήσασθαι), he would speak the truth. The conditional formulation naturally refers to a hypothetical act rather than one already performed, suggesting that Paul separates the narrative in verses 2–4 from actual self-boasting. He concludes by insisting that he be evaluated solely based on his observable words and deeds (12:6). The first-person autobiographical narration then resumes with the introduction of concrete suffering, the thorn in the flesh (12:7). The sharp distinction between the narrated visionary and Paul's own grounds for boasting thus supports reading verses 2–4 as a self-contained literary narrative rather than as an indirect autobiographical reminiscence.

The proposed interpretation is not affected by the disputed syntactic placement of καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων (with v. 6 or v. 7)[13] since the phrase need not refer specifically to the ascent narrative but may denote the broader body of revelatory experiences to which Paul alludes elsewhere. The plural "revelations" supports this reading.

Construing the passage as a parable neither denies Paul's genuine revelatory experiences elsewhere nor reduces the text to parody. Rather, it treats the narrative's anonymity, brevity, indeterminacy and deliberate withholding of revelatory content as purposeful literary features. The parabolic form allows Paul to engage his audience on its own terms, drawing them into the logic of visionary ascent only to overturn that logic by redirecting attention from heavenly experience to apostolic weakness. It therefore offers a more comprehensive explanation of the passage's literary form and rhetorical function than readings which regard it simply as a rhetorically crafted reminiscence.

The ascent account serves an illustrative function, bringing it close to the ancient rhetorical form of argument: *exemplum* or παράδειγμα.[14] Such argumentation proceeds by induction (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.8) or, more precisely, by analogical reasoning (Stefańczyk 2021, 102), in which the cases compared share a relevant similarity and belong to the same category (Lausberg 1998, §§419–22; Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.11.3–6). A classic example appears in the *Iliad*, where Achilles encourages Priam to eat after

13 Together with the inclusion of the inferential conjunction διό (it is missing in some important witnesses). See more textual comments in Kistemaker 1997, 414–15.

14 Cf. discussion of this genre in Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.11 and Lausberg 1998, 196–202 (§§410–426).

Hector's death by appealing to the case of Niobe, who continued to take food despite mourning the loss of her twelve children (Willcock 1964, 141–42).

This illustrative function, however, is not unique to *exempla* and, by itself, cannot determine the genre: some parables also present paradigmatic cases, and the decisive distinction lies in the mode of persuasion. An *exemplum* illustrates a thesis already known or previously established; its argumentative force is explicit and requires no deciphering (Lausberg 1998, §421). A parable, by contrast, demands interpretation: it is enigmatic, intentionally delays understanding and often culminates in a reversal that forces the audience to reassess initial assumptions. The ascent narrative exhibits precisely this pattern. Rather than illustrating a ready-made thesis, it leaves the hearer uncertain until the story's significance becomes apparent through contextual reinterpretation: the story was not about heaven after all, it was about boasting.

The illustrative function alone cannot therefore account for the passage's overall literary profile, which also includes deliberate opacity, indirect communication, rhetorical reversal, and the systematic withholding of the revelation's content. Taken together, these features make the passage more appropriately understood as a parable than as a straightforward παράδειγμα.

2. Why a Parable? Paul's Rhetorical Strategy

Paul's confrontation with his Corinthian opponents is driven by a clear rhetorical aim: to reclaim the community for the true gospel and to reassert a proper understanding of apostolic authority. Central to this task is dismantling the assumption that "visions and revelations" constitute a legitimate criterion for ministry. Only once this belief has been undermined can Paul advance his alternative standard of concrete witness expressed in word and deed. This explains his insistence that he be evaluated solely based on "what one sees or hears" (ὃ βλέπει με ἢ ἀκούει, 2 Cor 12:6).[15]

The parabolic ascent narrative performs this dismantling indirectly. The traveller's experience yields no usable knowledge, doctrinal insight or spiritual advantage. As Victor Paul Furnish memorably observes, "How exactly he was taken to Paradise, he does not know, what he saw there, he does not say, and what he heard there, he must not repeat." (Furnish 1984, 545) Paul's concluding remark in 12:6 strongly implies that such stories are not only irrelevant but also unreliable and potentially manipulative.

15 See a contrary opinion, that Paul wants to be evaluated by the "abundance of revelations" as well in Nassauer 2019, 259.

Paul's stance here is consistent with his broader teaching. Elsewhere, he criticises fascination with visions as a symptom of a "fleshly mind" (Col 2:18), subordinates ecstatic speech to intelligible communication that builds the community (1 Cor 14:18–19) and insists that spiritual gifts exist for the common good (1 Cor 12:7). Paul does not reject mystical experiences *per se* but resists their instrumentalising as a basis for authority.

Ultimately, esoteric journeys are unnecessary for Paul because the gospel itself is the definitive revelation, and no voyage through the heavens can add to what has already been disclosed in Christ.[16] As Nicholas Thomas Wright observes, "Paul believes that the ultimate dramatic apocalypse, the great unveiling of all God's mysteries, the full disclosure of God's secret plan, has already come about in and through the events concerning the Messiah, Jesus, particularly through his death and resurrection." (Wright 2005, 52) God's eternal plan has been fulfilled, eschatology realised and made available through communion with Christ in the Church: "In Him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (Col 2:3).

Given this conviction, Paul faced a strategic choice. He could have countered his opponents by narrating his own visions, as the autobiographical reading assumes. Yet this would merely have escalated the competition and reinforced precisely the criterion he wished to dismantle. We also share many commentators' conviction that Paul's spiritual life was precious to him (Best 1987, 118; Matera 2003, 277; Stegman 2009, 265) and that he would not deploy it as rhetorical ammunition. Alternatively, he could have rejected opponents' visionary claims outright or attacked them directly. In a community already captivated by such accounts, however, blunt refutation risked entrenching opposition and alienating sympathisers.

A parable offered a more effective solution. Parables reframe debates rather than settling them by assertion. They work indirectly, disarming resistance and inviting the audience to reach conclusions they might otherwise reject. As David B. Gowler notes, a parable functions as an event that transforms the situation by opening new possibilities for agreement and obliges the hearer to decide, without coercion (Gowler 2021, 13). This is precisely what Paul achieves: instead of refuting or rivalling his opponents, he disarms his hearers, unsettles their fascination with visionary prestige and creates space for a re-evaluation of what truly constitutes apostleship.

Such a strategy presupposes that Paul's rhetorical repertoire included the parabolic genre and that the Corinthians could recognise and process such discourse. This assumption is historically plausible as parables were a familiar and flexible genre in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts.[17] In Jewish tradition, the *mashal*

16 A similar approach can be found at Qumran: Teacher of Righteousness was granted special insight into the writings of the Torah and interpreted it authoritatively for the members of the community, thus eliminating the need for further mystical revelations; cf. Collins 1998, 147.

17 See an extensive analysis of parables' occurrence and characteristics in the ancient world, the Old Testament, intertestamental and rabbinic literature and the early Church in Snodgrass 2008, 38–59, or in

encompassed fables, allegories, riddles, and exemplary narratives and is widely attested in the Old Testament. Notable examples include Jotham's anti-monarchic fable (Judg 9:7–15), the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7), Nathan's story of the poor man and the sheep (2 Sam 12:1–4), Jehoash's allegorical reply to Amaziah (2 Kgs 14:9) and Ezekiel's parable of the two eagles and the vine (Ezek 17:3–10). Rabbinic literature offers an even richer corpus, with estimates ranging from 500 to 1,400 parables (Zimmermann 2009, 160). Although they survive in edited forms dating from the 2nd to 4th centuries, some likely stem from pre-rabbinic traditions (Trela 1997, 20; Zimmermann 2009, 165).

In Greco-Roman culture, analogous forms such as fables[18] and illustrative narratives were widely disseminated through education across ethnic and cultural boundaries, including among Jewish and Christian audiences.[19] At the theoretical level, both παραβολή and παροιμία were discussed by classical rhetoricians, including Aristotle and Quintilian (Zimmermann 2009, 165–66).

The New Testament reflects this shared literary environment, most obviously in the parables of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels but also in Johannine figurative discourse.[20] The widespread occurrence of parables in the New Testament, the Gospel of Thomas, other apocryphal writings, the *agrapha*, the scattered sayings of Jesus (Zimmermann 2009, 164) and later Christian teachings[21] suggests that the genre remained a familiar mode of instruction in the 1st century. As Amy-Jill Levine observes, "They would have been told at home in the evening after dinner or in the workshops and the fields, and the synagogues." (Levine 2014, 6)

Paul, a rhetorically trained, Hellenised Jew, employed a range of literary devices drawn from both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. His letters abound in metaphor, paradox, analogy, irony, and carefully crafted argumentation. He addressed a mixed audience shaped by both traditions and likely already familiar with Jesus' teaching. It is therefore historically plausible that he could deploy a parabolic ascent narrative and expect it to be recognised as such. Against this backdrop, the story in 2 Cor 12 does not appear as an odd or unprecedented literary experiment but as a contextually grounded, rhetorically astute response to a specific pastoral crisis.

Gowler 2021, 69–107.

18 The proximity between parables and fables was already noted by Jülicher 1910, 98.

19 See and overview of the two genres' relationship and interpretative consequences in Beavis 1990, 473–98.

20 Johannine παροιμίαι are sometimes classified as parabolic; cf. Zimmermann 2009, 164.

21 For example, Ephrem of Syria; see Lockyer 1982, 10.

3. Parable Characteristics and 2 Corinthians 12:2–4

Parables are notoriously resistant to precise definition. As Paula Gooder observes, "They are frustrating in the extreme and at the same time deeply satisfying. They cannot easily be defined, and yet we often know a parable when we see one, except for when we don't." (Gooder 2020, 10) This difficulty is reflected in the wide divergence of scholarly classifications, ranging from minimalist catalogues to expansive inventories[22] and attempts to identify parabolic features in modern literature (Crossman 2012, 7, 244; Schwartz 1976). Despite this diversity, a working consensus has emerged in recent scholarship around six core characteristics articulated in the *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Zimmermann 2007). Accordingly, a text may be classified as a parable if it is "narrative, fictional, realistic, metaphoric, active in appeal and interpretation, co-text and context related." (Zimmermann 2009, 170–171)[23] The following tests the ascent account in 2 Cor 12:2–4 against these criteria.

Parables are **narrative**; they present a sequence of events (the plot) involving characters and settings (the description), in a relatively compressed form. Paul's account clearly belongs to this category: it features a single protagonist, "a man in Christ," a transcendent setting, and a brief plot comprising rapture, ascent to the third heaven and/or paradise and the reception of an auditory experience.

Parables are also **fictional**; they do not present themselves as reports of identifiable historical events but rather depict paradigmatic situations that can occur anywhere, at any time. They may echo real experiences or familiar motifs but make no claim to factual particularity (Zimmermann 2015, 142). Paul's ascent narrative shares this quality: it draws on a well-known literary motif of the heavenly journey, yet its primary function is literary rather than referential, as indicated by the narrative features discussed below.

The narration is strikingly perfunctory, marked by ellipses and omissions, rendering reconstruction of the event impossible. The account systematically suppresses precisely those features normally expected of testimonial discourse: the protagonist's identity, the mode of ascent, the destination and the content of the revelation. These omissions are reinforced by literary devices that further heighten indeterminacy: repeated professions of ignorance, hesitation about the mode of ascent and the prohibition against disclosing what was heard. Taken together, these features redirect the reader away from reconstructing the event and towards literary interpretation.

Such narrative economy is characteristic of parables, whose ambiguity invites the audience to fill the gaps. By contrast, even the briefest factual accounts convey some determinate information about the narrated event or its outcome. Likewise,

22 For example, the discrepancy in the number of parables by Jesus ranges from 24 (Via 1967, 11) to 104 (Zimmermann 2009, 164). See also an overview of parables' interpretational history and issues in Blomberg 1990, 29–167; Zimmermann 2015, 21–179.

23 See also Akpan and Viljoen 2021, 2; Paciorek 2013, 79; Zimmermann 2024, 324.

Jewish and early Christian ascent accounts typically revel in detailed descriptions of heavenly realms, angelic mediators, divine thrones, fear and disclosed mysteries (Price 1980, 34; Nassauer 2019, 253–57). Paul's narrative offers none of these: the journey yields no transferable insight or identifiable benefit. This remarkable suppression of content is difficult to explain if the passage is intended as a report of visionary experience but readily intelligible if its purpose is rhetorical.

The tone of the account reinforces this impression: the delivery is light-hearted, even playful, very detached; it has been recognised as ironic, even parodic (Betz 1972, 87–100; McCant 1999, 141–53; Robinson 2025, 85). Elsewhere, Paul refers to received revelations[24] seriously and without irony; it is difficult to imagine him trivialising a genuine encounter with the divine, his own or anyone else's. He also normally reports the content of the revelation and withholds its manner; only here does he reverse this pattern (Gooder 2006, 3; Wunrow 2022, 56). All this makes the account in 2 Cor 12:2–4 unparalleled in the Pauline corpus, indicating a different communicative purpose.

The generic framing is already suggested in Paul's introduction, where he speaks broadly of "visions and revelations" (12:1). Both nouns (ὀπτασία and ἀποκάλυψις) appear in the plural and without the article, forming a hendiadys, which suggests visionary phenomena as a category rather than a single identifiable event. Moreover, the use of conventional ascent imagery is entirely consistent with apocalyptic discourse, in which heavenly journeys often function as literary conventions rather than autobiographical reports (Himmelfarb 1993, 113).

Cumulatively, these features indicate that the account in 2 Cor 12:2–4 should not be read as testimony to a particular event. Whether the narrative preserves a historical kernel is ultimately impossible to determine. What matters for the present argument is that it has been transformed to the point that it no longer functions as a specific reference. Paul frustrates readers' attempts to reconstruct the event at every turn: he introduces the anonymous "man in Christ," repeatedly professes ignorance, withholds the revelation and other ascent details, refuses to boast in the visionary, and undercuts the story immediately afterwards. The account therefore exhibits the kind of literary fictionality characteristic of parabolic discourse.

Finally, Paul's remark that, were he to boast of such experiences, he would be speaking the truth (12:6) sits awkwardly with the assumption that he has just recounted one. The statement refers to a hypothetical act of boasting that does not in fact occur and is therefore more naturally read as distinguishing the preceding narrative from genuine testimony.

Although fictional, parables remain **realistic** and grounded in ordinary experience. They are verisimilar—unlike fables, where animals speak and act as

24 Although Paul never narrates any spiritual events, he alludes to them in, for example, Gal 1:11–17; 1 Cor 11:23.

humans—and depict events that could plausibly occur in a recognisable world. Yet their realism is not absolute as they often employ hyperbole, surprise, calculated improbability or features designed to shock. Klyne R. Snodgrass (2008, 18) rightly suggests describing them as "pseudo-realistic."[25]

Parables may draw on everyday situations or stock narrative settings familiar from traditional storytelling: lavish royal banquets, large estates or masters entrusting property to servants. Paul's audience lacked direct experience of heaven but would have been familiar with literary ascent traditions. This shared imaginative framework rendered the story intelligible, while sparse concrete markers—such as timing and destination—lent it sufficient plausibility to sustain engagement.

Parables' **metaphorical** character means that their meaning exceeds the literal level and requires transfer to another frame of reference. Consequently, they admit more than one plausible understanding: meaning emerges from the interaction among narrative, audience and situation (Gowler 2021, 175–76; Levine 2014, 8; Paciorek 2013, 82–83). One or more points of comparison may be intended, yet parables do not dictate how far the metaphorical mapping should extend, so the challenge lies in knowing when to stop interpreting (Akpan and Viljoen 2021, 2; Snodgrass 2008, 28).

Transfer of meaning need not always occur between unrelated semantic domains, as in Jesus' kingdom parables, where everyday activities signify divine realities (Zimmermann 2024, 325). In many parables it operates within the same conceptual field, with a particular instance illustrating a broader phenomenon. In Adolf Jülicher's classic taxonomy this type was classified as *Beispielerzählung* or "paradigmatic stories" and differentiated from similes and parables proper (Paciorek 2013, 7–72; Zimmermann 2009, 160). The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16–21) and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:10–14) all belong to this category.

Paul's ascent narrative belongs to this latter type. The heavenly journey serves as a representative example of mystical experiences leveraged to establish authority or privileged knowledge. The transfer therefore occurs within the same religious domain rather than between distinct conceptual spheres, and not every narrative element requires symbolic decoding. The narrative invites readers to reinterpret visionary phenomena rather than decode symbolic correspondences.

Metaphor serves a didactic function. Aristotle already recognised its cognitive power: the tension between literal narrative and transferred sense generates insight and reorients perception (*Rhet.* 3.10–11).[26] By drawing on familiar frameworks, metaphors render abstract claims intelligible. They teach indirectly, engaging listeners in interpretation and application rather than delivering conclusions outright

25 See also Via 1967, 12.

26 See also Paciorek 2013, 82–83; Via 1967, 88.

(Crossman 2012, 245–47). In Paul's case, the metaphor becomes the vehicle of his pedagogy: experiences the Corinthians likely regarded with reverence are reframed as cognitively empty and potentially deceptive, incapable of grounding apostolic legitimacy.

This metaphorical quality also makes parables **active in their appeal and interpretation**. Their meaning is not given but must be constructed by the audience, who are compelled to take a stance (Crossman 2012, 244; Levine 2014, 276; Paciorek 2013, 82; Zimmermann 2015, 8). As Snodgrass (2008, 8) notes, parables initially disarm through interest and surprise, but ultimately aim to awaken insight and move hearers to action. This dynamic explains Paul's use of parabolic discourse: he seeks not merely to undermine his opponents' visionary claims but to prompt the Corinthians to act on that insight.

Finally, a parable's meaning is inseparable from its **co-text and context**. Signals of metaphorical intent often appear in introductory remarks or in the commentary that follows, while the surrounding discourse supplies the implicit question the parable addresses (Zimmermann 2009, 173). In 2 Cor 12, the ascent narrative functions within Paul's defence against rival teachers and the destabilisation of communal authority. Only against this backdrop does its rhetorical goal become clear: it is a strategic response designed to recalibrate the Corinthians' understanding of ministry and to align with him in the ongoing dispute.

Taken together, the six *Kompendium* features converge convincingly in 2 Cor 12:2–4. The passage is a brief, coherent narrative that deploys a familiar ascent motif in a deliberately indeterminate manner. It is fictional yet plausible, metaphorical without becoming allegorical, interpretively demanding, and inseparable from its literary context. Beyond the six genre criteria identified in the *Kompendium*, scholars regularly note a cluster of further traits of parabolic discourse. While not decisive on their own, these features recur across many parables and are typical of the genre. Paul's account in 2 Cor 12:2–4 exhibits several such characteristics, which strengthen the parabolic reading.

Parables are typically **brief**, employing only the narrative material needed to sustain their rhetorical force. Compared with other genres, they function as "narrative miniatures," sparse in description and economical in characterisation (Gowler 2016, 56; Paciorek 2013, 80; Snodgrass 2008, 17). Paul's ascent account fits this profile precisely.

Such brevity inevitably creates **narrative gaps** that invite audience participation. This narrative economy is sometimes accompanied by isolated, seemingly **incidental details** that contrast with the otherwise sparse account. They do not advance the plot but serve rhetorical purposes: lending verisimilitude, sharpening memorability, pacing the narrative or preparing for reversal (Snodgrass 2008, 29). Jesus' parables likewise contain them, for example, the location on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho

(Luke 10:30), specific wound dressings of oil and wine (Luke 10:34), payment of two denarii (Luke 10:35) and the exact size of the harvest thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold (Matt 13:8, 23) all serve as incidental narrative details. The same selective use of specifics appears in temporal references, such as the hour of hiring labourers in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–6), the master's potential return (Mark 13:35) or the bridegroom's arrival at midnight (Matt 25:6), which serve the same purpose.

Similarly, Paul's reference to "fourteen years ago" is juxtaposed with the otherwise opaque account. This unexpected precision lends the story an air of authenticity (Lincoln 1981, 77; Murphy-O'Connor 1996, 118; Tabor 1986, 115) and arouses the audience's curiosity since the alleged event predates Paul's arrival in Corinth ca. 50–51 (Furnish 1984, 54). At the same time, since Paul situates the event within his "silent years" in Syria or Cilicia,[27] it hinders attempts at historical reconstruction and increases uncertainty: his listeners could not verify the claim and no parallel account exists elsewhere (Barnett 1997, 561; Harris 2005, 837).[28]

Nor is such chronological precision foreign to prophetic or apocalyptic literature, where visions are frequently anchored by specific temporal references, particularly in commissioning narratives.[29] Paul's reference to "fourteen years ago" therefore functions naturally within established literary conventions.

Parables are often marked by structural balance, contrast and repetition, which create **"patterns of symmetry"** (Snodgrass 2008, 17–18). Paul's narrative exhibits striking duplication: the rapture is reported twice, with minimal variation, including repeated uncertainty about whether the experience was bodily. This repetition is reinforced by parallelism, recurring vocabulary (οἶδα, εἴτε), and asyndeton (Long 2015, 225–26). These devices are characteristic of the parabolic technique: they slow the narrative, reinforce key motifs and keep the audience focused on the unresolved mystery. In Paul's account, they do not convey information or assist in reconstructing the event; instead, they function rhetorically to maintain uncertainty while sustaining attention.

Introductory formulas or other narrative cues frequently signal parables. These may take the form of rhetorical questions, conversational prompts, shifts in topic, narrative mode or contextual triggers, all of which mark a transition into illustrative discourse. Paul's announcement of "visions and revelations" (2 Cor 12:1) performs precisely this framing role, marking a transition to a distinct narrative unit without requiring a formal introductory formula.

Many parables also conclude with a ***coda*** that clarifies their import: a conclusion or application, *nimshal*. It may simply report the audience's reaction or suggest it.

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27 In AD 41–42, since 2 Corinthians was written in 55–56 AD; cf. Harris 2005, 64.

28 See opposing views in Plummer 1915, 341; Scott 1998, 223; Morray-Jones 1993b, 285–89.

29 For example, Ezek 1:1–3; Amos 1:1; Hos 1:1; Isa 6:1; Jer 1:1–3; 26:1.

Verses 12:5–6 serve this function: having destabilised the value of visionary boasting, Paul clarifies that such claims are irrelevant and unverifiable. His remark that he could boast truthfully, yet chooses not to (12:6), implicitly contrasts his stance with that of his rivals, who must have tended to fabricate (Forbes 1986, 21; Robinson 2025, 92–93).

Anonymity is a hallmark of parabolic narration. Protagonists are typically unnamed[30] and presented as typical figures rather than historical individuals (Gooder 2020, 13), inviting personal identification. Paul's traveller conforms to this pattern: apart from ecclesial belonging implied by "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ, 12:2),[31] the figure remains undefined. The repeated use of the generalising pronoun τοιοῦτος reinforces the character's generic quality. Rather than signalling autobiographical concealment, the anonymity serves a literary function, directing attention away from the visionary and toward the point of the narrative.

Parables characteristically **surprise** listeners—they "never go the way one expects." (Levine 2014, 95) They provoke, irritate and invert expectations, all to challenge the audience to see things from a different angle (Aarde 1994, 247; Levine 2014, 3–4, 278; Paciorek 2013, 91). Expectations are built only to be overturned at the conclusion (Snodgrass 2008, 7–8, 20–22), which functions as a punchline or rhetorical twist. This dynamic, often described as the "rule of end stress," (Snodgrass 2008, 19) is critical to interpreting parables. Paul's narrative conforms closely to this pattern: what appears to promise privileged revelation collapses into an anticlimax—"ineffable words," a revelation without content.

Parables are carefully designed to **engage** imagination and sustain attention (Snodgrass 2008, 18–19). They take advantage of the narrative tension to shift listeners' focus away from themselves and draw them into the story. They are **vivid**, rely on familiar situations, anonymity and selective detail to foster identification. They build tension and tease expectations. They often employ **humour** and **paradox** to disarm resistance and even evoke images bordering on the absurd (Levine 2014, 8).

Paul's ascent narrative deploys these techniques with precision. Structural symmetry draws the audience forward; ambiguity sustains suspense and hinders testimonial recreation; and the paradoxical ending forces reassessment. Instead of conferring authority, the vision dissolves it, compelling the Corinthians to reconsider what truly constitutes apostolic legitimacy.

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30 All the characters in Jesus' parables except Lazarus in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) are anonymous; cf. Snodgrass 2008, 17.

31 In our opinion ἐν Χριστῷ indicates Christian identity, being "in the Church"; cf. Wright 2005, 46; Stegman 2009, 265; Harris 2005, 116; Scholem 1960, 17. See other interpretations in Martin 1986, 591; Plummer 1915, 340; Lincoln 1981, 76; Furnish 1984, 524.

4. Difficulties Inherent in the Traditional Approach and the Parabolic Solutions

The preceding discussion has argued that the literary features of 2 Cor 12:2–4 closely align with parabolic discourse. Significantly, these same features have long posed difficulties for the traditional autobiographical reading. Repetition, anonymity, indeterminacy and paradox repeatedly resist attempts to reconstruct the passage as straightforward personal testimony. The following examples illustrate how a parabolic reading accounts for these tensions more economically.

4.1. Repetition and the Number of Journeys

The ascent narrative unfolds in three tightly structured verses, moving from an initial report of rapture (v. 2), through near repetition (v. 3), to a climactic conclusion (v. 4). Autobiographical readings have struggled to explain why the experience is narrated twice and whether the shift from "third heaven" to "paradise" implies multiple journeys. Proposals range from two separate ascents (Plummer 1915, 344) to a single event with multiple stages (Betz 1972, 94; Rowland 1982, 381; Tabor 1986, 114, 120; Wunrow 2022, 48) or a single experience narrated twice (Furnish 1984, 793; Hubbard 2017, 207; Lincoln 1981, 77; Matera 2003, 279; Thrall 1996, 357–58). Most explanations appeal to Paul's rhetorical restraint, emotional reluctance, or deliberate reserve, yet such arguments sit uneasily with the letter's deliberate, reflective composition fourteen years after the alleged event (Richards 2004, 27–31, 169–70, 231; Robinson 2025, 79).

Read parabolically, the repetition no longer poses a problem: it slows the narrative down, amplifies certain aspects, adds emphasis and heightens anticipation (Oropeza 2016, 659; McCant 1999, 142). The question is not how many journeys occurred, but how repetition prepares the audience for the reversal.

4.2. Corporeality of the Journey

Paul's repeated insistence that he does not know whether the ascent occurred in the body or out of it has sparked extensive debate. Explanations appeal to various factors, including the disparity between Paul's and God's knowledge (Nassauer 2019, 258; Matera 2003, 279), polemical strategy (Barnett 1997, 562; Betz 1972, 94; Fallon 1980, 105; Martin 1986, 594; Roetzel 2007, 111), cultural hybridity (Jewish bodily ascent[32] versus Greek spiritual ascent[33]), mystical ambiguity (Guthrie 2015, 583;

32 For example, Enoch (1 En. 12:1; 14:8; 39:3–4; 2 En. 38:1–2), Abraham (T. Ab. VIII [B]), Baruch (3 Apoc. Bar. 11:1–2), Seth and his mother (LAE 37:1), Rabbi Akiba and companions (*The Story of the Four*).

33 For example, soldier Er in Plato, *Republic*, 10. 614–21.

Lambrecht 1999, 201; Matera 2003, 279; Rowland 1982, 383; Tabor 1986, 120; Thrall 1996, 356) or calculated indifference (Furnish 1984, 545; Goulder 1995, 57; Kistemaker 1997, 408; Lincoln 1979, 215; Scott 1998, 221–22).

All these proposals primarily seek to explain why Paul either could not or chose not to specify the mode of ascent, yet the literary function of his emphatic repetition has received considerably less attention. If Paul wished to concede the limits of his knowledge, he could have achieved that with a single statement. And if he possessed the relevant information, it is difficult to imagine him deliberately suppressing it, especially given his otherwise confident treatment of bodily existence elsewhere. Even if one accepts that Paul genuinely could not determine how the ascent occurred, it remains unclear why this uncertainty is expressed *verbatim* twice and given such literary prominence. The duplication calls for a literary explanation in addition to an epistemological one.

The repeated hesitation is more readily understood as a literary device than as a spontaneous feature of testimony. In eyewitness discourse repetition normally serves to clarify; here it dramatises uncertainty, heightens suspense, and draws in the audience fascinated by ecstatic phenomena into the question, which ultimately proves irrelevant. Paul ostentatiously displays his ignorance, thereby parodying the fascination with visionary mechanics while increasing the narrative's indeterminacy. Rather than conveying additional information, the repetition directs the reader away from reconstructing the ascent and toward interpreting its rhetorical function.

4.3. The Identity of the Traveller

The traveller's anonymity poses one of the most persistent challenges for autobiographical readings. If the figure were Paul himself, this would constitute his sole use of illeism[34]—a practice otherwise reserved for divine or royal figures (Elledge 2015, 152–53)—and foreign to his epistolary style (Goulder 2003, 305).

Accordingly, commentators have offered a wide range of explanations, their sheer number testifying to the difficulty. Most appeal to Paul's modesty, aversion to *periautologia*, or reluctance to boast of anything except weakness (Best 1987, 118; Calvin 1964, 156; Furnish 1984, 544; Guthrie 2015, 580; Hafemann 2000, 458; Hubbard 2017, 206–7; McCant 1999, 144). Yet Paul elsewhere refers to supernatural experiences in the first person[35] and has already adopted the persona of the "fool" precisely to boast. It remains unclear why he would now require further distancing or how recounting an experience he wishes to disown could serve to defend his apostolic authority. The rhetorical advantage of phrasing the account in the third person, if Paul is indeed the protagonist, remains difficult to identify. Either the audience

34 Paul's use of "illeism" in 1 Cor 3:5 ("Who then is Apollos? Who is Paul?") serves a different purpose.
35 For example, 1 Cor 14:18; 2 Cor 12:7.

recognises that Paul is speaking about himself (Harris 2005, 834), in which case his strategy fails to mitigate self-boasting, or the pretence is sustained, in which case Paul risks appearing disingenuous (Robinson 2025, 91–92).

Appeals to the event's intensely personal character and to Paul's preference for keeping it private (Stegman 2009, 265) are likewise difficult to sustain since he could simply have refrained from mentioning it. Nor does the suggestion that he sought to redirect attention to God, the true agent behind the experience (Martin 1986, 601; Matera 2003, 277; Nassauer 2019, 252, 259) persuade, for elsewhere he freely narrates divine action in his life without effacing himself.

Other scholars invoke broader traditions. Comparisons with Socratic conventions of indirect self-praise (Fallon 1980, 105; Lincoln 1981, 75; Witherington 1995, 459) or with Plutarch's advice on praising others of similar actions and character to affect a transfer of merit (*De laude* 542) do not apply. Paul is not commending a comparable figure but allegedly referring to himself in disguise, and there is no precedent for gaining rhetorical credit this way (Goulder 1995, 54). Moreover, Plutarch explicitly permits self-praise in defence of one's reputation or in response to a charge (*De laude* 540–541),[36] which was precisely Paul's situation. Rabbinic substitution of "this man" for "I" (Barrett 1973, 307; Strack and Billerbeck 2021, 1036) would be singular in Pauline writings. Apocalyptic pseudonymity (Rowland 1982, 385), likewise, offers no parallel: heavenly journeys there are consistently attributed to named authorities.

Other researchers appeal to mystical self-transcendence and blurring of one's identity (Furnish 1984, 543; Guthrie 2015, 580; Thrall 1996, 355) or even propose that Paul distinguished between two "selves"—a spiritual and an earthly one (Lee 2024; Morray-Jones 1993b, 273; Plummer 1915, 346). Yet such theories find little textual support and Paul nowhere else suggests a divided or displaced self, even when recounting other extraordinary experiences.

Recognising the limitations of single-factor explanations, some scholars combine several motives (Rowland 1982, 385; Thrall 2004, 782), but these nuanced approaches underscore the strain the protagonist's anonymity places on the autobiographical reading. By contrast, anonymity is precisely the mark of a parable, which is typically told in the third person: the traveller is deliberately generic, familiar and inviting identification. He is someone akin to the audience, distinguished only by the extraordinary experience about to be narrated. Seen this way, the anonymity is not an enigma to solve but a proof of rhetorical mastery.

36 See also an overview of periautology in antiquity and conditions of its acceptability in Forbes 1986, 8–10; Kowalski 2013, 247–50.

4.4. Dating the Event

The precise dating of the ascent has often been taken as evidence for the event's factuality, yet the reason for Paul's apparent silence about it elsewhere remains debated. Explanations vary: some see the detail as signalling the experience's exceptional or private character (Furnish 1984, 544; Lincoln 1979, 211; 1981, 77), recounted only under polemical pressure (Harris 2005, 837; Stegman 2009, 267), due to the chronological link with the "thorn in the flesh" (Thrall 2004, 783) or as a claim to priority over the opponents' visions (Kreitzer 1996, 121).

As argued above, within the parabolic reading the chronological notice functions as a selective narrative detail: it stands in marked contrast to the account's overall vagueness and lends it verisimilitude without allowing for historical reconstruction. Rather than resolving uncertainty, it accentuates the tension between apparent specificity and actual indeterminacy, while reinforcing Paul's larger point that even apparently detailed visionary claims yield no apostolic legitimacy.

4.5. The Double Destination and the Fool's Speech

A more substantial difficulty arises from the account's dual description of the destination: the traveller is caught up to "the third heaven" (τρίτος οὐρανός, 2 Cor 12:2) and to "paradise" (ὁ παράδεισος, 12:4). Whether these terms are synonymous or denote successive stages remains uncertain,[37] and Paul offers no clarification. His silence is unusual—apocalyptic accounts typically dwell at length on heavenly topography. This ambiguity has generated extensive discussion, not least because only a small number of texts explicitly equate paradise with the third heaven.[38]

Paul's reference to the "third heaven" presupposes some form of a multilevel cosmology. Ancient Jewish and Christian sources variously imagine three, seven, ten or even more heavens, arranged concentrically, vertically or in combination (Strack and Billerbeck 2021, 1037–40; Gooder 2006, 184–87). Cosmological convictions may also have shifted over time, with perhaps the tripartite scheme being older (Morray-Jones 1993a, 205; Thrall 2004, 790), linked to the Old Testament (Fallon 1980, 105; Lincoln 1979, 211) and possibly modelled on the temple structure with its three parts of increasing holiness (Morray-Jones 1993a, 205–6). Paul's language assumes at least a threefold heaven[39] but does not commit to any precise scheme; even the preposition

37 See an analysis of the terms' possible meaning in their Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts in Tabor 1986, 116–21.

38 2 En. 8:1–8; Apoc. Mos. 37:4–5.

39 See also opinions to the contrary that the numeral "three" here is symbolical in Calvin 1964, 156; Lincoln 1981, 79.

ἕως ("up to") suggests an impressive ascent without implying finality.[40] Most interpreters, however, assume that Paul intends the highest possible realm (Irenaeus *Haer.* 2.30.7; Barnett 1997, 562; Carson 1986, 137; Hafemann 2000, 459; Hughes 1962, 435, Lincoln 1979, 212; Martin 1986, 596; Morray-Jones 1993b, 278; Oropeza 2016, 666; Plummer 1915, 343) though he never states this explicitly. A journey only to the third heaven, if additional tiers existed, would be less impressive.

The unresolved status of the destination not only deepens the account's overall uncertainty but also has significant consequences for the autobiographical interpretation. If the ascent represents a successful journey to the highest realm, and Paul is the traveller, its placement within the Fool's Speech (2 Cor 11:1–12:10) creates tension with his sustained boast in weakness. The surrounding episodes—the escape from Damascus (11:31–33) and the thorn in the flesh (12:7–9)—exemplify adversity and lead to the culminating claim that power is perfected in frailty (12:9).

Scholars have proposed various solutions, all of which, however, explain only partially why the heavenly journey disrupts the flow of Paul's weakness argument. Some researchers downplay the link, focusing on the boast alone (Thrall 2004, 772–73). This, however, does not account for the juxtaposition between the vision and the surrounding episodes or for why the heavenly ascent is not the climax of the argument but is immediately subordinated to the theology of weakness. Others focus on the deliberate contrast: descent and ascent, humiliation and exaltation, set side by side (Harrison 2004, 51; Lincoln 1981, 84–85; Martin 1986, 602; Nassauer 2019, 259). This accounts for the sequence but neglects the asymmetry in the way the opposed episodes are narrated: the supposed "exaltation" is underdeveloped in content while its features—anonymity, epistemic uncertainty, anticlimactic disclosure—contribute nothing to the contrast. Gooder offers a more integrative reading, arguing that the ascent was incomplete: neither "third heaven" nor "paradise" is explicitly named the highest realm, and the narrative lacks the features of a successful apocalyptic vision. On this view, the rapture, like the Damascus escape and the thorn, all exemplify limitation rather than triumph (Gooder 2006, 190–192).[41] Gooder's proposal explains why the narrative avoids triumphalism, but it leaves unexplained why it omits many other features characteristic of apocalyptic ascent narratives, whether successful or not.

The proposed reading dissolves the problem more decisively: the ascent is neither Paul's triumph nor failure, and the references to the "third heaven" and "paradise" function as generic markers of heavenly transcendence, not cartographical coordinates. Like many parabolic details, they create the impression of specificity

40 The two texts where paradise coincides with the third heaven—2 Enoch and *Apocalypse of Moses*—both assume seven heavens in total; see Gooder 2006, 184–87.

41 See also McCant 1999, 141–53 and an opinion, that Paul's journey was successful in spite of his failing to reach the highest level of heaven in Wunrow 2022, 50–52.

without inviting cosmological reconstruction. Precision is unnecessary because the destination itself is not the point of the story.

Likewise, the account's placement between two experiences of real adversity aligns with the genre: parables frequently interrupt their contexts, puzzle their hearers and provoke reflection through unexpected turns (Paciorek 2013, 91). Simon the Pharisee must have been similarly taken aback when Jesus suddenly spoke of a creditor and two debtors (Luke 7:40–43).

4.6. Unspeakable Words

The narrative culminates in an apparent climax: the traveller hears "unspeakable words"[42] (ἄρρητα ῥήματα)—a revelation that cannot be revealed. The words may have been too sacred to repeat (Goulder 2003, 307–8; Guthrie 2015, 583; Oropeza 2016, 663; Rowland 1982, 383), too personal (Barnett 1997, 558, 563) or linguistically inexpressible (Garland 2024, 134–35; Harris 2005, 827; Käsemann 1982, 130; Kistemaker 1997, 410; Stegman 2009, 268), for example, glossolalia, songs of angels or names consisting merely of strings of sounds, frequently found in *Hekhalot* literature.[43]

Alternatively, the words may have been pronounceable yet prohibited (Fallon 1980, 105; Furnish 1984, 545; Hafemann 2000, 460; Lincoln 1979, 216; Witherington 1995, 459), as suggested by the phrase ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν λαλῆσαι. In mystery cults and some Jewish traditions initiates were indeed bound to secrecy (Furnish 1984, 527; Kruse 1987, 203–4; Lincoln 1981, 82) and visionary material was treated with caution to prevent its misuse to manipulate the community (Goulder 1995, 57–58). Yet the prohibition itself is not Paul's concern, as he never attempts to communicate the content of the revelation.

While ascent texts often acknowledge ineffability, they nevertheless convey what was seen or learned; they exist precisely to divulge privileged knowledge gained beyond the veil.[44] Paul's vision, by contrast, yields no transferable insight, which undermines the point of the story. Attempts to preserve an autobiographical reading explain this either as a display of Paul's mystical credentials (Morray-Jones 1993b, 270, 277, 282; Nassauer 2019, 259; Oropeza 2016, 676; Rowland 1982, 379–80; Scott 1998, 223; Tabor 1986, 37–38, 45; Witherington 1995, 459–61) or as a private encouragement during hardship (Kistemaker 1997, 412–13) but both clarifications remain problematic. A literal ascent that surpasses ordinary revelation would imply privileged knowledge beyond what Paul openly shares about Christ

42 "Unutterable utterings" conveys the Greek wordplay; cf. Hubbard 2017, 207; Plummer 1915, 345.

43 See an overview of opinions in Gooder 2006, 188; Thrall 2004, 794–95.

44 See many examples in Gooder 2006, 23–161; Wunrow 2022, 53. Ascent stories' *raison d'être* consists in divulging the special knowledge received; cf. Nassauer 2019, 255.

(Robinson 2025, 96)—an implication difficult to reconcile with his insistence that the gospel he proclaims is fully sufficient and communicable.

An alternative suggestion has the Apostle making a virtue of silence, deliberately contrasting his respect for the sacred with the opponents' careless divulging of such wonders (Goulder 2003, 307–8). Yet, since we do not know what the opponents were disclosing, the argument is reconstructive: it infers their behaviour from Paul's silence. Moreover, Paul does not present his withholding of the revelation as an act of discretion; the grammatical formulation points to an impossibility or prohibition. Finally, if this silence is seen primarily as a demonstration of reverence for the sacred, it is difficult to explain why it is even mentioned at all.

Read as a parable, however, the ending is entirely apt. The anticlimax overturns the Corinthians' expectations of hidden wisdom and jolts them into recognising the cognitive emptiness of visionary boasting. In the following verses (12:6–10), Paul will dot the "i" and show that it is also unverifiable.

Conclusion

This article proposes a parabolic interpretation of Paul's ascent account in 2 Cor 12:2–4 as an alternative to the traditional autobiographical reading. The latter has long commanded scholarly support but faces persistent difficulties that resist satisfactory explanation. By contrast, reading the passage as a parable offers a more economical account of its literary form, rhetorical function, and place within Paul's argument.

The parabolic interpretation neither denies Paul's other revelatory experiences nor the possibility that the narrative preserves a kernel of historical reality, which ultimately cannot be established. Paul has, however, transformed whatever may lie behind the story so thoroughly that it no longer functions as a report of a particular event.

Parables were a well-established mode of discourse in antiquity and Paul demonstrably employed a wide range of rhetorical and literary devices drawn from both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. Against this background, the use of a parable—though otherwise absent from the Pauline corpus—is neither implausible nor incongruent. It should be understood as a deliberate rhetorical choice prompted by the pressures of the situation in Corinth.

The parabolic genre is particularly well suited to Paul's aim in this passage: to dismantle the Corinthians' fascination with visionary tales as a criterion of apostolic legitimacy without directly rivalling or dismissing his opponents' claims. Instead of counter-boasting, Paul reshapes the terms of the debate itself. He guides his audience indirectly, allowing them to discover the inadequacy of visionary pretence on their own rather than confronting them with a frontal polemic.

The analysis shows that the ascent narrative satisfies the six defining characteristics of parabolic discourse identified in the *Kompendium* (Zimmermann 2007): it is narrative, fictional, realistic, metaphorical, appellative, and tightly integrated into the context. In addition, it exhibits a cluster of further parabolic features. The account displays a marked economy of disclosure, offering only those details necessary to provoke reflection while withholding any information—visionary content, cosmological precision, personal identification—that would enable reconstruction or invite comparison. The repetitions in verses 2–4 and the twice-articulated uncertainty regarding corporeality form clear patterns of symmetry, while the introduction (12:1) and *coda* (12:5–6) guide interpretation in a manner familiar from parabolic discourse.

The proposed interpretation also clarifies the passage's role in the Fool's Speech. Paul temporarily suspends autobiographical narration to introduce a crafted tale that exposes the limits of visionary boasting. What has often appeared as a structural anomaly thus emerges as a calculated rhetorical intervention, tailored to the communicative demands of the moment.

The proposal's explanatory value lies in its simplicity: rather than multiplying explanations for individual anomalies, the parabolic reading shows them to be mutually reinforcing components of a single rhetorical strategy. It also illuminates Paul's oratorical skill and his capacity to adapt genre to circumstance. By guiding the Corinthians toward discernment rather than impressing them with esoteric revelation, Paul—although supposedly "inept with words" (ἰδιώτης τῷ λόγῳ, 2 Cor 11:6)—defeats the opposition with their own weapons and reaffirms that apostleship is measured by faithful ministry marked by weakness and grace.

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Periodization of the Development of Faith and Its Possible Catechetical and Pastoral Implications

JACEK ZJAWIN
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, jacek.zjawin@amu.edu.pl

Abstract: This article analyzes the theory of stage-based faith development proposed by the Protestant theologian James W. Fowler. It also examines its relationship to the catechetical tradition, both from a historical perspective and in the context of its contemporary application within the Catholic Church. The first part outlines the assumptions of the historical catechumenal model of catechesis and discusses its contemporary catechetical and pastoral implications. The second part analyzes Fowler's stages of faith development, highlighting their similarities to and differences from catechetical practice. This article also offers a critical reflection on Fowler's theory. It employs the historical-genetic and comparative methods. The findings suggest that the theory of stage-based faith development is potentially a valuable framework for contemporary catechetical and pastoral practice.

Keywords: catechumenate, *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, stage-based faith development, James W. Fowler

The division of learners into different educational stages, the allocation of teaching content to those stages, and the adaptation of teaching methods to their developmental levels are well-established principles in modern pedagogy. This is reflected both in school curricula, which are regularly revised, and in teacher education programs that include pedagogical training.

These same principles also apply to catechetics, which prepares future teachers of religious education and parish catechists for their ministry. This approach is evident in courses such as General Catechetics and Special Catechetics, where both the content and methodology of catechesis are adapted to the developmental stage of the learner.

In parish ministry, however, such clear distinctions are often more difficult to maintain, partly because Poland lacks a consistent and systematic program of catechesis for children, youth, and adults. In schools, educational levels provide a useful framework for selecting appropriate content and teaching methods. In the parish setting, by contrast, the situation is more complex. Even during Sunday Masses intended for families, the congregation typically includes children of different ages together with their parents.

This raises several important pastoral questions. Is it possible to proclaim the Gospel effectively to every participant in such a celebration? Should children and

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parents attend a separate Liturgy of the Word? How should catechesis be conducted in parish groups whose members differ not only in age but also in their level of faith and spiritual experience?

Catechesis is the proclamation of the living Word of God. The Church teaches that God speaks personally to every individual; however, each person's ability to receive that message is shaped by numerous internal and external factors. Those entrusted with proclaiming the Word should therefore take these differences into account. In this context, postconciliar efforts to examine and describe the stages of faith development may provide valuable guidance in addressing these pastoral challenges. The two models presented in this article—the catechumenal model of accompaniment toward mature faith and James W. Fowler's psychological-theological model of stages of faith development—differ in status. The former arises from the Church's practice of initiation, whereas the latter is grounded in empirical research and describes the way human beings construct meaning and experience faith. Nevertheless, both represent the broader postconciliar effort outlined above, as will be clarified in the following sections of this article. The principal criterion for juxtaposing and comparing the two models is their attention to the developmental conditions of the human person. In the catechumenal model, the emphasis is placed on the theological dimension of the development of the grace of faith, whereas in Fowler's theory the focus is on the psychological and social dimension of the experience of faith.

At the outset, it is necessary to clarify two key concepts of the analysis presented in this article: *faith formation* and *faith development*. The former refers primarily to the intentional formation of faith, whereas the latter describes the development of the structures through which a person interprets experience, gives it meaning, and organizes their ultimate commitments. This distinction is particularly important for the reception of Fowler's theory, which concerns the field of faith development. In contrast, catechetics and practical theology more often employ the language of faith formation. These are not competing concepts; rather, they refer to different dimensions of the same process by which the human person grows in faith.

1. Catechumenate as a Primary and Enduring Model of Accompaniment in Faith Development

During the 1st centuries of the Church, catechetical formation for those preparing to enter the Christian community took the form of the catechumenate. This gradual and structured process guided candidates from unbelief—or, more commonly, from a form of natural religiosity—to faith in Jesus Christ. Over the course of history, however, the catechumenate underwent numerous changes and modifications. Influenced by a variety of historical factors described by scholars, catechesis gradually

became simplified and eventually declined (Mokrzycki 1983; Dujarier 1990; Murawski 2011).

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of the multi-stage catechumenate for adults (*SC* 64–66). This directive was implemented, for example, through the publication of *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum* (*OICA*), promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1972. The rite presents a process of gradual Christian initiation modeled on the practice of the early Church. It consists of three major rites—the Rite of Acceptance into the Catechumenate, the Rite of Election (Enrollment of Names), and the Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation—and four distinct periods: evangelization, catechumenate, purification and enlightenment, and mystagogy.

Catechetical practice has further developed this structure by identifying the specific aims and tasks associated with each stage of a catechumen's journey toward mature faith (Sielepin 1996; Krakowiak 2003, 295–363).

The first period, evangelization or the precatechumenate, seeks to awaken an initial openness to faith, foster the proper motivation for embarking on the catechumenal journey, and prepare candidates to receive the kerygma (*OICA* 69).

The second period, the catechumenate in the strict sense, deepens knowledge of Christ through listening to the Word of God and systematic catechesis. During this stage, the Church accompanies catechumens through liturgical rites, including exorcisms and blessings, which are intended to support their ongoing conversion and transformation of life (*OICA* 98–132).

The third period, purification and enlightenment, focuses on a deeper encounter with the Word of God, leading candidates toward interior conversion. During this stage, the scrutinies and the rites of the Presentation of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer strengthen and confirm the candidate's commitment to Christian life (*OICA* 152–207).

The final period, mystagogy, marks the beginning of life in Christ after baptism. During this time, the Christian community accompanies the newly baptized as they grow in faith and participate more fully in the life of the Church (*OICA* 235–39).

Alongside these four periods, the rite includes three major liturgical celebrations that mark significant moments in the process: the Rite of Acceptance into the Catechumenate (*OICA* 68–97), the Rite of Election or Enrollment of Names (*OICA* 133–51), and the Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation (*OICA* 208–34). The 1977 Synod of Bishops emphasized that the catechumenate preceding baptism should serve as the model for all catechesis (Kubik 1985, 38). This insight contributed to the development of the post-baptismal catechumenate. In the renewal of catechesis following the Second Vatican Council, the catechumenate is understood not only as preparation for adult baptism but also as a paradigm for all catechetical ministry. Its gradual, stage-based structure provides a model for accompanying believers toward mature faith (Zjawin 2022, 2024).

Based on the approach outlined by Adelajda Sielepin (2005, 15–19), the catechumenal process can be represented as follows:

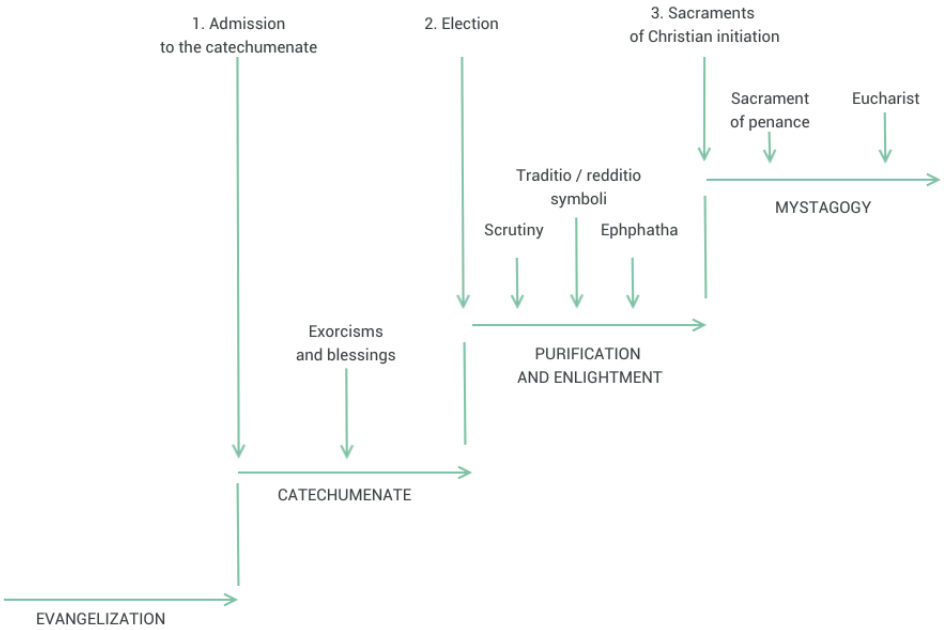

Figure. Structure of the catechumenate according to *OICA*

Source: Sielepin 2005, 23.

The gradual and staged preparation for baptism in the early Church arose from two complementary sources. On the one hand, it reflected apostolic practice, in which the proclamation of the kerygma always preceded baptism. On the other hand, it developed through the Church's pastoral experience, which gradually recognized the need for an extended period of formation to transform the catechumen's way of thinking.

Those seeking baptism came from pagan backgrounds and brought with them established beliefs about God, prayer, worship, and religious practice. The purpose of the catechumenate was therefore to foster conversion—a profound transformation of mind and heart. This process may be understood as a transition from natural religiosity to Christian faith. It aimed to open the individual to God's salvific action and to encourage a free and conscious cooperation with divine grace (Blachnicki 2011, 18–22).

Catechumens who had previously understood their relationship with the divine primarily in terms of fear gradually discovered, not only through catechetical instruction but also through the life of the Christian community, that God is love and that the relationship between God and humanity is founded on mutual love. They also came to understand that prayer is not a magical ritual but a loving dialogue with

God, and that the Eucharist is not an offering intended to earn divine favor or protect against life's uncertainties, but rather an act of thanksgiving and worship offered to the Risen Christ.

Such a profound transformation of faith and mentality could not take place after only a few catechetical sessions. For this reason, the catechumenate combined the proclamation of the Word of God, systematic catechesis, rites of purification and strengthening, and the ongoing discernment of the candidate's way of life. During the period of its greatest development, in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, the entire process could last several years (Murawski 2011, 199–200).

Progression from one stage to the next was not automatic but depended on the candidate's demonstrated growth in faith and Christian life. Advancement was possible only when the proclaimed Word bore visible fruit through a genuine transformation of attitudes and, above all, through actions that reflected evangelical love. If these signs were absent or insufficiently evident, the catechumen remained at the current stage until further growth became apparent.

This approach ensured that each catechumen was accompanied according to their individual circumstances, respecting both personal experience and the unique pace of spiritual development. The various stages functioned as reference points, helping both the catechumen and the Christian community discern the individual's progress on the journey of faith. They served primarily as indicators of development rather than as rigid or prescriptive categories.

This understanding reflects what contemporary philosophy and pastoral theology describe as a personalist approach. On the journey toward mature faith, the person encounters the personal God, and within this relationship experiences the reality of salvation. The Church and its institutions, including the catechumenate, accompany, support, and guide this process, but they cannot compel faith or conversion.

If the postconciliar catechumenate is to draw not only on the external structure of the ancient catechumenate but also on its deepest theological and pastoral principles, it must likewise be rooted in this personalist approach (Blachnicki 2015, 113).

2. James W. Fowler's Theory of Faith Development and Its Catechetical and Pastoral Implications

The principle of *faithfulness to God and faithfulness to humanity*, developed by Joseph Colomb, became one of the defining features of postconciliar catechetical renewal within the anthropological approach. Following the period of kerygmatic renewal, which stressed faithfulness to God, more and more attention was given to the life circumstances and developmental needs of those receiving catechesis, that is, to faithfulness to humanity (Panuś 2000; Duperray 2007).

James W. Fowler (1940–2015), Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University in the United States and an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church, developed his theory within this intellectual context. His model of faith development drew on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Fowler 1981, 37–88).

Between 1972 and 1981, Fowler and his students conducted problem-centered, semi-structured interviews with 359 participants, aged three and a half to eighty-four, in several cities across the United States (Fowler 1981, 313–15). The first section of the interview, *Life Review*, sought to construct a chronological account of the participants' lives together with their interpretations of significant events. The second section, *Life-Shaping Experiences and Relationships*, explored selected experiences in greater depth. The third section, *Present Values and Commitments*, addressed broader existential questions, including death, the afterlife, and the meaning of life. Finally, the fourth section, *Religion*, focused explicitly on the participants' religious beliefs and their understanding of faith (Fowler 1981, 307–9).

Analysis of the interviews revealed recurring patterns in the participants' understanding and experience of faith. On this basis, Fowler formulated a developmental theory consisting of seven stages of faith, each characterized by distinctive ways of relating to oneself, other people, the world, and God. These stages are as follows:

- **Stage 0:** Undifferentiated Faith (infancy)
- **Stage 1:** Intuitive-Projective Faith
- **Stage 2:** Mythic-Literal Faith
- **Stage 3:** Synthetic-Conventional Faith
- **Stage 4:** Individuative-Reflective Faith
- **Stage 5:** Conjunctive Faith
- **Stage 6:** Universalizing Faith (Fowler 1981, 117–213).

Fowler distinguished these stages using eight analytical dimensions:

1) Cognitive development, interpreted in light of Piaget's theory.
2) Moral reasoning, based on Kohlberg's theory.
3) Perspective-taking, drawing on Robert L. Selman's theory.
4) Scope of social awareness, shaping an individual's identity and sense of moral responsibility.
5) Locus of authority, referring to the sources an individual recognizes as validating beliefs, decisions, and interpretations of reality.
6) Understanding of coherence and meaning in the world.
7) Role of symbols in the expression of religious faith.
8) Structure of the self, interpreted in relation to Robert Kegan's developmental theory (Król 2002).

In his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (1981), Fowler describes each stage of faith development and defines the experience of faith associated with each one. His theory has attracted considerable international attention and has become the subject of numerous scholarly studies and critical analyses (Fowler, Nipkow, and Schweizer 1991; Barnes, Doyle, and Johnson 1989; Gasiul 1999; Gathman and Nessan 1997; Król 2002). The purpose of the present article is not to examine each stage in detail but rather to adopt a broader perspective by addressing the following question: Can Fowler's stages of faith development be meaningfully compared with the stages of the catechumenate?

Referring to the catechumenal model presented above, based on *OICA*, it is possible to present Fowler's seven stages in a comparable graphic form. The author himself includes such a diagram in his *Stages of Faith*, where it serves as a visual representation of the developmental process and facilitates comparison between the different stages (Fowler 1981, 289).

The juxtaposition of these two models may provide valuable insights into both their similarities and their differences. It should, however, be regarded as an initial point of reference, since a more detailed comparison of the catechumenal process and Fowler's theory of faith development would go beyond the scope of the present article.

3. Catechetical and Pastoral Applications of James W. Fowler's Theory of Faith Development

Several years after the publication of *Stages of Faith*, Fowler published a pastoral guide entitled *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (1987). In this later work, he shifted his attention from the theoretical foundations of faith development to its practical application in pastoral ministry. The book addresses topics such as the nature and purpose of practical theology, the Christian community as a community of vocation and covenant with God, and the mutual support and cooperation of believers at different stages of faith development.

The guide concludes with a practical self-reflection tool designed to help individuals identify their current stage of faith development, "The Unfolding Tapestry of My Life," which consists of a table with ten columns:

1) Calendar—the years since birth, listed chronologically.
2) Place—geographical, social, and economic contexts, including place of residence, region, and the perceived position within society or a particular community.
3) Key Relationships—people who significantly influenced the individual's life during a given period, including deceased persons or individuals known only indirectly.

4) Activities and Direction of Consciousness—covering not only how time was spent but also how the individual understood the purpose and meaning of those activities.
5) Significant Events—major turning points such as moving home, marriage, divorce, or other life-changing experiences.
6) Age—the individual's age during the corresponding period, providing an additional chronological reference.
7) Historical Events and Social Context—memories of significant social or historical events, recorded in the form of words, phrases, or images.
8) Images of God—the individual's understanding or perception of God, whether positive or negative. If no image of God existed or could be recalled, it should also be noted.
9) Centers of Value and Power—the people, institutions, goals, or values that occupied the central place in the individual's life at that time.
10) Authorities—the persons or sources from whom the individual sought guidance, validation, or confirmation of decisions and life choices (Fowler 1987, 122–25).

Fowler encourages individuals completing the table to record brief reflections for each period of life rather than lengthy descriptions. The purpose of the exercise is to view one's life as a coherent whole while appreciating both its continuity and moments of change. By reflecting on the development of relationships, values, beliefs, and experiences over time, individuals may gain a deeper understanding of the way their faith has matured throughout the different stages of life. When reflecting on this "tapestry," individuals are encouraged to view their lives as though they were a theatrical performance composed of successive acts and scenes. Each stage of life can be titled and recorded in the table, with the transitions between periods clearly marked. Fowler (1987, 122–23) also recommends returning to the completed table periodically in order to deepen the reflections or add new insights, even to periods that have already been described.

According to Fowler's biographers, one of the sources of inspiration for this exercise was the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola (Osmer and Bridgers, n.d.). Autobiographical reflection and a comparison of the individual elements of the "tapestry" with the stages of faith development are intended to help identify the stage of faith development of a particular person.

Such identification, however, cannot be based on autobiographical data alone. It requires interpretation in the light of the criteria Fowler uses to describe the stages of faith development. These include, for example, the image of God, ranging from early pre-images and anthropomorphic representations to a more mature understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent, and finally to what may be described as a "second naivete." They also include the person's mode of relating to God, especially in terms of fear, trust, and personal commitment, as well as moral reasoning

and relationships with others: from imitation of recognized authorities, through the emergence of one's own self and hierarchy of values, to love and openness toward others. For this reason, the "tapestry" should not be understood as a diagnostic instrument in a strict sense, but rather as a tool for discerning the dominant patterns through which a person interprets experience, relates to God and others, and organizes their ultimate concerns.

Such guided self-reflection has considerable potential for catechetical and pastoral practice, both in school-based religious education and in parish ministry.

The insights gained through this process could, for example, facilitate the division of larger communities into smaller groups whose members share similar developmental needs, allowing for better-adapted catechetical formation to their stage of faith.

The relationship between the formation of relatively homogeneous groups of persons with similar developmental needs and communities composed of persons at different stages of faith development requires further clarification. In a relatively homogeneous group with regard to the stage of faith, participants can follow a common program of spiritual growth; a parish formation group may serve as an example of such a setting. In more heterogeneous communities, such as the parish as a whole, diversity of stages does not prevent formation but creates conditions for mutual support in spiritual growth and maturation.

Fowler highlights that Christian communities naturally include children, adolescents, adults, and older people, each representing different stages of faith development. Rather than viewing this diversity as an obstacle, he understands it as an opportunity for mutual learning, enrichment, and support on the journey of faith. Persons at earlier stages bring to the community a need for belonging, narrative, symbol, stability, and recognized authority; these needs should be taken seriously rather than dismissed as immature. Those at the individuative-reflective stage require space for critical questioning, distance from inherited convictions, and personal responsibility; pastoral ministry should not respond to such questions merely by demanding conformity. Persons with conjunctive faith may help the community to live with tensions, combining fidelity to their own tradition with openness to ambiguity, paradox, and the "community of communities," understood as the ability to recognize the value of other perspectives without lapsing into simple relativism. Finally, universalizing faith offers a radical reminder of justice, love, and the good of those beyond one's own group, while remaining a horizon of maturity rather than a standard that can be required of all (Fowler 1987, 82–98). The discernment of stages of faith development, both among leaders and participants, may be helpful for pastoral ministry. However, it should not be treated as a decisive or self-sufficient criterion. Such awareness can facilitate addressing certain misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts that arise within a community. A leader who is aware of their own stage of faith and remains attentive to the developmental situation of those entrusted to

their care may accompany them with greater understanding and acceptance while helping to create more favorable conditions for spiritual growth.

In this respect, Fowler's proposal corresponds closely with the practice of the early Church and with the vision of catechesis promoted in both preconciliar and postconciliar Church documents. On the one hand, the Church discerns the maturity of faith of those undergoing formation; on the other hand, those who have progressed further on the spiritual journey become a source of support for those who are at the beginning of their path of faith.

4. A Critical Assessment of James W. Fowler's Theory of Faith Development

Fowler's theory of faith development has attracted considerable international attention, while also generating extensive scholarly debate. Contemporary literature includes both studies that develop and build upon his model (Socha 2000; Król 2002; Alberich 2007; Jaworski 2020, 138–52; Skubic 2021) and works that fundamentally reject its structural-developmental approach to faith development. The principal objection concerns the lack of sufficient evidence for the coherence of the stages and their sequential progression over the entire course of life. Fowler's basic premise of the relationship between faith development and personality development can likewise be accepted only with considerable reservation. The stage theory presented for this purpose lacks a sufficient theoretical foundation (Grom 2011, 57–103).

In the author's view, these divergent evaluations stem primarily from the subtitle of Fowler's most influential work, *Stages of Faith*. Although Fowler never explicitly explains why he chose to use psychology in the subtitle, the influence of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Piaget's theory of cognitive development clearly justifies this choice.

Another important consideration is the very nature of his book. *Stages of Faith* is not a technical academic monograph but a work accessible to readers without specialist knowledge, a point the author himself underscores in the introduction (Fowler 1981, xii–xiii). This intention is reflected in the structure of the book. One section consists of an imagined dialogue between Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg to illustrate the interaction between their theories. Although unconventional in style, the work presents the results of pioneering empirical research and a carefully developed theoretical model in a form that is both engaging and accessible.

At the same time, Fowler's work occupies the intersection of theology and psychology, a position that has itself become a source of debate. His academic training was primarily theological.

According to his biographers, his interest in psychology developed during his work at Interpreter's House, where he facilitated retreats for Protestant pastors that included guided reflection on personal life experiences. During this period, he became deeply engaged with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. A second formative influence was his participation in Kohlberg's doctoral seminar, where he encountered Piaget's writings and the structural-developmental tradition in psychology (Osmer and Bridgers, n.d.). These experiences significantly shaped his thought but did not alter the fact that Fowler remained fundamentally a practical theologian whose primary concern was relating theological reflection to pastoral practice rather than advancing psychological theory.

Another issue requiring theological clarification concerns Fowler's understanding of faith itself. Following his doctoral supervisor, Helmut Richard Niebuhr, Fowler understood faith not simply as religious belief but as "a relation of total trust and loyalty to the center of value and power." (Fowler 1981, 204) Such a definition broadens the concept beyond specifically Christian faith and places it within a wider philosophical and psychological framework. As a result, some theologians have argued that Fowler's model moves away from a distinctly Christian understanding of faith.

Fowler was aware of this tension. He observed that theologians often criticized his theory for being overly psychological and for failing to account adequately for the role of divine grace, which cannot be explained solely through developmental processes. Psychologists, by contrast, argued that what Fowler described as faith development would more accurately be referred to as ego development. While such a reinterpretation might have strengthened the theory's psychological coherence, it would also have removed its explicitly religious dimension and its orientation toward transcendence (Fowler 1981, 91).

The criticism, however, does not diminish the pastoral value of Fowler's theory. Regardless of the ongoing debate concerning its theological and psychological foundations, his developmental model offers a useful framework for understanding the diverse ways in which people mature in faith. In this respect, it corresponds closely with the Church's long-standing catechetical tradition and provides valuable insights for contemporary catechetical and pastoral practice.

Conclusion

Human beings develop in every dimension of their existence, and faith is no exception. Since apostolic times, the Church has recognized that each person's concrete life circumstances influence the acceptance or rejection of the Gospel. The maturity of one's faith, shaped by personal history and present experience, plays a decisive role in the reception of catechesis (Filipiak 2011).

The comparison of the catechumenal model of faith formation, renewed after the Second Vatican Council, with Fowler's theory of faith development leads to several important conclusions. First, both approaches appreciate that growth in faith is a gradual process that requires time. Second, both identify recurring patterns of development that can be described in terms of successive stages. Finally, both highlight that faith develops progressively rather than instantaneously.

In the catechumenal model, this journey begins with either the absence of religious faith or a form of natural religiosity. It gradually leads to the discovery of God's love, culminating in a response of love modeled on Jesus Christ (Blachnicki 2011, 13). Fowler's model similarly presents faith as a developmental journey, describing a progression from polytheism through henotheism to monotheism, which, in its most mature expression, is reflected in openness to a universal human community (Fowler 1981, 22–23). Both models also share a personalist perspective, understanding the uniqueness of each individual and respecting the personal pace of faith development.

The principal differences lie in their underlying assumptions about the sources of growth. In the catechumenal model, faith matures primarily through the action of divine grace, communicated through the proclamation of the kerygma, catechesis, liturgical rites, and the life of the Christian community. Fowler's model, by contrast, places greater emphasis on developmental factors such as biological maturity, significant life experiences, cognitive growth, moral development, and changing images of God. Nevertheless, Fowler himself stresses that his theory is intended as a descriptive framework for practical theology rather than a complete explanation of faith. He maintains that authentic growth in faith ultimately arises from God's call and the human response to that call through covenant (Fowler 1987, 25).

Fowler's work offers valuable insights for both catechetics and pastoral theology. His attempt to describe the dynamics and stages of faith development corresponds in many respects with the Church's catechumenal tradition, as this study has demonstrated. For catechists and pastors, who are called to accompany others on the journey of faith, an awareness of both their own stage of faith development and that of those entrusted to their care can serve as a useful aid for pastoral ministry.

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The Celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany in Eastern Christianity in the Context of the Emergence of the Feast of the Nativity (4th and 5th Centuries)

MIROSŁAW MEJZNER
Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, m.mejzner@uksw.edu.pl

Abstract: The introduction of the Feast of the Nativity (December 25) into the liturgical calendars of the Eastern Churches during the 4th and 5th centuries brought about a significant reconfiguration of the theological meaning and liturgical celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany (January 6). This article provides a historical survey of this development in several Eastern ecclesiastical traditions, including Egypt, Jerusalem, Syria, Asia Minor, Cappadocia, and Constantinople. Particular attention is devoted to the theological and liturgical transformation in the understanding of the mystery of Epiphany. Its most distinctive expression is the shift from contemplation of Christ's birth at Bethlehem to a primary focus on his baptism in the Jordan. This study also highlights the distinctive theological significance of the symbolism of light and water within the Epiphany liturgy. Drawing upon selected patristic homilies by Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Proclus of Constantinople, and Severian of Gabala, this article identifies the principal homiletic themes associated with the Solemnity of the Epiphany. It also examines the corpus of biblical lections appointed for its liturgical celebration.

Keywords: Epiphany, Nativity, baptism of Christ, light, water, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Proclus of Constantinople, Severian of Gabala

The 4th century was decisive in the development of the liturgical celebration of Epiphany. The reciprocal influence between the Eastern and Western Churches led to the introduction of the Feast of the Nativity (December 25)[1] into the liturgical calendars of the Eastern Churches and, consequently, to a reconfiguration of the celebration of the Epiphany on January 6. A historical overview of this process will provide the necessary background for the subsequent, more detailed analysis of the extant patristic homilies. Particular attention will be devoted to the various liturgical elements of the feast, especially to the scriptural lections appointed for its celebration.

1 The liturgical celebration of the Nativity of the Lord on December 25 was most likely introduced in the Church of Rome around 336 and rapidly gained acceptance throughout other regions of the Christian world (Kyrtatas 2004, 206, 211; Naumowicz 2010, 105–6; see also Naumowicz 2016, 2021).

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1. The Origin of the Name of the Feast

The designation Epiphany derives from the Greek term ἐπιφάνεια (*epifaneia*), a fact that reflects the feast's Eastern provenance. In the pagan religious milieu of the first four centuries, the terms ἐπιφάνεια (*epifaneia*) and θεοφάνεια (*theofaneia*) denoted the manifestation or visible appearance of a deity (Lemarié 1960, 39). The noun ἐπιφάνεια occurs six times in the Pastoral Epistles of the New Testament. In St. Paul's usage, it refers primarily to the eschatological manifestation of Christ at the end of time (2 Thess 2:8; 1 Tim 6:14; 2 Tim 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13). Only once (2 Tim 1:9–10) is the term employed to denote Christ's first coming, namely, his incarnation (Daniélou 1966, 19–20; BDAG 385–86).

Prior to the institutionalization of the Solemnity of the Epiphany in the Church in the 4th century, the term ἐπιφάνεια was employed chiefly to describe revelatory events, including the incarnation of the Son of God, miracles of Jesus Christ, his post-resurrection appearances, and the manifestations of God recorded in the Old Testament. With the establishment of the liturgical feast of the Epiphany, however, the term acquired a more precise liturgical meaning, designating the solemnity celebrated on January 6, while its semantic range became increasingly defined by the theological themes commemorated in the feast (Naumowicz 2016, 83–91).

In the Eastern Churches, the most common designation of the feast is Τὰ Ἐπιφάνεια (Ioannes Chrysostomus, *De baptismo Christi Christi et de Epiphania* [PG 49, 365]), although the title Τὰ Φῶτα (*Ta Fōta*), particularly in Cappadocia (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 39.1; Gregorius Nyssenus, *In diem Luminum* [PG 46, 577]), is also attested. The 4th-century pilgrim Egeria, for example, records her participation in the splendid celebration of the *Epiphania* at Jerusalem (*Itinerarium* 25.7–11), and several times she mentions the name of the feast (*Itinerarium* 9.1; 26.1; 39.1; 49.3). By contrast, the term Τὰ Θεοφάνεια was less precise in its usage, being applied both to the feast of January 6 (Ioannes Chrysostomus, *De beato Philogonio* VI, 3: *De festo Nativitatis et Epiphaniae Christi* [PG 48, 752]; Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio VII*: *In sancta Theophania* [PG 65, 757–58]) and, in certain contexts, to the celebration of the Nativity on December 25 (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 38.3).[2]

When the feast was adopted in the Western Churches, its Eastern appellations—*Theophania* and *Epiphania*—were likewise received. In Gaul and Spain, these were supplemented by the term *Apparitio* (Lemarié 1960, 50, 53). The *Pontificale Romano-Germanicum* (99.10) explains the adoption of the Greek designation *Theophania* by offering the Latin renderings *apparitio*, *ostensio*, and *manifestatio* (Vogel and Elze 1963, 4). The name *Epiphania* became firmly established only during the 12th and 13th centuries, and it has remained the standard designation of the feast in the Western tradition ever since (Auf der Maur 1990, 233).

2 See also Botte 1932, 28–30; Mossay 1965, 21–30.

2. The Origins of the Solemnity of the Epiphany in the East

Among the Eastern Churches that played a significant role in the formation of the Solemnity of the Epiphany, particular attention should be given to the traditions of Egypt, Jerusalem, Syria, Asia Minor, Cappadocia, and Constantinople.

2.1. Egypt

It is noteworthy that one of the earliest references to Epiphany—or, more precisely, to one of its antecedents—appears in a heterodox context. Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215) describes the celebration of a Gnostic feast observed on January 6 (*Stromateis* 1.21.146 [Ferguson 1991, 132]). What may be inferred from this passage is that the followers of Basilides commemorated, on either January 6 or 10 (corresponding, in the Alexandrian calendar, to the 11th and 15th day of the month of Tūbi), the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, regarding it as the moment of his true birth (Talley 1991, 121). Although it is difficult to identify this heterodox celebration as the direct origin of the Christian feast of the Epiphany, it is nevertheless possible to hypothesize a certain influence of Gnostic customs upon Christian tradition, particularly since Christian liturgical practices not infrequently developed in response to heretical movements or pagan religious observances (Nikolasch 1968). Of particular significance for the present study is the coincidence both of the date (January 6) and of certain thematic elements associated with the Gnostic celebration, such as the baptism of the Lord and the manifestation of his divinity (Lemarié 1960, 42).

Despite the complexity of the Egyptian evidence, it may be reasonably concluded that by the end of the 4th century, the Church of Egypt celebrated a feast on January 6 commemorating three mysteries: the nativity of Jesus, his baptism, and the miracle at Cana. Following the introduction of the Feast of the Nativity on December 25, around 430, these three solemnities gradually became separated. Consequently, January 6 came to be devoted exclusively to the mystery of Christ's baptism (Botte 1932, 12–13).

2.2. Jerusalem

The relatively late introduction of the Western Feast of the Nativity on December 25 into the Church of Jerusalem—probably around 430—and the popular resistance to this liturgical innovation, which persisted until the 6th century (Botte 1932, 19–21; Renoux 1969, 171–73), present a distinctive historical situation and provide valuable insight into the original liturgical understanding of the Solemnity of the Epiphany.[3]

3 For example, Jerome (d. 420), in his writings, provides evidence for the continued observance of January 6 as the date of the Feast of the Nativity in Palestine at the end of the 4th century. Jerome himself, however,

The earliest testimony to the liturgical celebration of Epiphany in the Church of Jerusalem is provided by the pilgrim Egeria, whose account of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land dates from 381–384. Chapter 25 of her *Itinerarium* reveals that the feast began with a vigil and was followed by an octave. Although an important section of Egeria's narrative has not survived, the structure of the celebration can be reconstructed with a high degree of certainty (Renoux 1971, 178–217).

The vigil commenced at approximately 6 p.m. in the Church of the Shepherds with a Liturgy of the Word, during which the *Gloria*, psalms, and passages from the Book of Isaiah were sung, followed by the proclamation of Luke 2:8–20, recounting the visit of the shepherds to the manger. Next was a procession to the Grotto of the Nativity, where another liturgical celebration took place, including the reading of Matt 1:18–25, the account of the angel's announcement to Joseph. At midnight, the celebration continued with the proclamation of Luke 2:1–17, narrating the birth of Jesus. On the morning of January 6, the Eucharistic celebration included the Gospel account of the visit of the Magi (Matt 2:1–23) or, according to the Armenian Lectionary, Matt 2:1–12 (Botte 1932, 15–16).

The sequence of Gospel pericopes proclaimed during the feast suggests that the principal focus of the Jerusalem celebration of the Epiphany was the nativity of Jesus, together with the account of the Magi. Only in the course of the 5th and 6th centuries did liturgical development gradually transform the celebration of January 6 into a feast centered primarily on the baptism of Jesus

2.3. Syria

In the Syrian Church, until the second half of the 4th century, Epiphany was celebrated as the Feast of the Incarnation. This is attested by Epiphanius of Salamis, who, in his *Panarion*, refers to the commentary of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), where the Epiphany (*parousia*) of the Lord is identified with his birth according to the flesh (*Panarion* 51.22.7–8 [Williams 2013, 51]).

An important witness to the Syriac tradition is provided by the numerous hymns composed by Ephrem the Syrian, several of which are devoted to the mystery of the Incarnation (*Hymnen de Nativitate*). On the basis of these hymns, however, it is difficult to determine precisely what constituted the object of the celebration

did not share the Jerusalem tradition and opposed it, since he understood Epiphany as the feast commemorating the baptism of the Lord: "Quintam autem diem mensis adiungit, et significat baptisma in quo aperti sunt Christo caeli et Epiphaniorum dies hucusque venerabilis est, non ut quidam putant natalis in carne, tunc enim absconditus est et non apparvit" (Hieronymus, *Commentariorum In Hiezechielem Libri XIV*, 1, 3a [CCSL 75, 6]; "He adds, moreover, the fifth day of the month, and indicates the Baptism, at which the heavens were opened to Christ. And the day of the Epiphany has been held in veneration down to the present—not, as some suppose, as the day of His birth in the flesh, for at that time He was hidden and did not appear" [all translations into English are the author's own]).

on January 6, since different mysteries—the nativity, the adoration of the Magi, and the baptism of Jesus—are sometimes presented together without a clear distinction (Lemarié 1960, 46).

According to Anton Baumstark (1921, 31–32), who reconstructed the Mosul lectionary of the Nestorian liturgy, the scriptural readings for the Solemnity of the Epiphany were Num 24:2–24; Isa 11:1–10; 12:4–6; and Titus 2:11–3:7.[4] These passages contain no explicit reference to Christ's baptism but rather emphasize his incarnation and manifestation on earth. This evidence supports the hypothesis that, throughout the East, until the introduction of the Western feast of December 25, the solemnity on January 6 commemorated the mystery of the incarnation in the fullness of its theological significance.

The first indication of a liturgical development is found in John Chrysostom's *In diem Natalem*, likely preached at Antioch in 386. In this sermon, the preacher expresses his joy at being able to celebrate "this day" together with the assembly of the faithful. The observance of December 25 had reached Antioch from Rome approximately 10 years earlier (*In diem Natalem* 1 [PG 49]), gradually—though not without resistance—transforming the existing liturgical calendar (Botte 1932, 22–24). Consequently, the solemnity of January 6 assumed a distinctly baptismal character, as evidenced by the title of Chrysostom's subsequent homily, *De baptismo Christi et de Epiphania*.

The Syriac *Martyrology of 411* begins its list with December 26, suggesting that the liturgical year commenced on the preceding day. Likewise, the homilies of Severus of Antioch attest to the coexistence of both feasts (Botte 1932, 25).

2.4. Asia Minor, Cappadocia, and Constantinople

Prior to the second half of the 4th century, there is no evidence in this region for either the Feast of the Nativity or that of the Epiphany. It is likely that the Western solemnity of December 25 was introduced only after the death of Emperor Valens (d. 378), with Cappadocia apparently serving as the pioneering region.

When Basil celebrated the solemnity of January 6 (between 371 and 373) at Caesarea in the presence of Emperor Valens, the separate Feast of the Nativity appears still to have been unknown. In recounting this event, Gregory of Nazianzus continued to employ the expression τὰ ἐπιφάνεια (*Oratio* 43.52), a designation that almost disappeared from the region within a few years, being replaced by τὰ Φῶτα ("the Lights"). This terminological change seems closely connected with the development of the

4 In Arthur John Maclean (1894, 266–67) the following readings are prescribed: Num 24:2–end; Isa 4:2–6; 11:1–6, 9–11; 12; Titus 2:11–3:8; Matt 3, although it is explicitly emphasized that the commemoration is devoted exclusively to the baptism of the Lord. Substantially the same readings (Num 24:2–9, 15–25; Isa 4:2–5; 11:1–5; 12:4–6; Titus 2:11–3:7; Matt 3:1–17) are confirmed in the *Supplementum Mysteriorum* 18 (Sacra Congregazione per la Chiesa Orientale 1960).

liturgy and the introduction of the Feast of the Nativity, which came to be known as either Τὰ Θεοφάνεια or Τὰ Γενέθλια (*Ta Genethlia*). Moreover, preachers in the region felt obliged to explain these new terms, suggesting that they had only recently entered liturgical usage (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 38.3; Mossay 1965, 28–30).

Particularly illuminating in this respect are the three homilies (*Orationes* 38, 39, and 40) delivered by Gregory of Nazianzus during his stay in Constantinople (379–381), probably in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles. These sermons form an integrated sequence: the first expounds the Feast of the Nativity (December 25), the second is devoted to the Feast of the Lights (January 6), while the third, preached on the following day, treats the subject of Christian baptism.

In *Oratio* 39.14, Gregory uses the noteworthy expression ἐγώ τε ὁ τῆς ἑορτῆς ἔξαρχος (*egō te ho tēs heortēs exarchos*), which may indicate that he regarded himself as the initiator of the celebration of December 25 in Constantinople (Bernardi 1968, 205). Consequently, the Solemnity of the Epiphany was divested of its earlier association with the incarnation of Jesus—now celebrated on the preceding feast of December 25—and came to focus primarily on the baptism of the Lord. Indeed, the homily delivered on January 6 was principally concerned with Christ's baptism, and Gregory continued the same theme on the following day by turning to Christian baptism. His insistence on this subject may have reflected a certain reluctance among catechumens to receive baptism on January 6, since the sacrament had traditionally been administered at Easter or Pentecost. This suggests that the new baptismal feast had only recently been introduced.

The baptismal character of the feast of January 6 is further confirmed by Gregory of Nyssa's *In diem Luminum*, in which the mystery celebrated is explicitly that of the Lord's baptism. Significantly, in the same homily Gregory of Nyssa also refers to the preceding feast of December 25 as the celebration of the nativity of Jesus.[5]

During the 370s, the Cappadocian Fathers played a decisive role in the anti-Arian movement, seeking support for their theological efforts even from Rome (Simonetti 1975, 421–34). The introduction of the Western Feast of the Incarnation into this region appears to have been the clearest liturgical outcome of these contacts. Consequently, the traditional Epiphany, originally understood as the ideological feast of the Lord's incarnation, underwent a significant transformation and assumed a predominantly baptismal character. This liturgical change, perhaps first introduced at Constantinople by Gregory of Nazianzus, was subsequently developed and possibly established definitively by John Chrysostom after he became bishop of the imperial capital on February 26, 398 (Botte 1932, 27–29).

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5 Ἐγεννήθη τοίνυν Χριστὸς πρὸ ὀλίγων ἡμερῶν … βαπτίζεται σήμερον παρὰ Ἰωάννου… (Gregorius Nyssenus, *In diem Luminum* [PG 46, 579–80]; "Christ, then, was born but a few days ago … Today He is baptized by John…").

Definitive evidence for the separate celebration of Christmas in Constantinople is provided by a sermon mistakenly attributed to John Chrysostom (CPG 4882). Antoine Wenger (1977), who first published the text, identified its author as Severian of Gabala and dated its delivery to the Sunday after Epiphany in 402. This hypothesis has been challenged by Sever J. Voicu (2003), who, through a detailed historical and linguistic analysis, argues that the sermon should instead be attributed to Nestorius and dated to January 11, 430. The homilies of Atticus[6] (Thomson 2000) and Proclus (*Orationes: III*, *IV*, *VII*, *XXVIII*) likewise attest to the existence of the Feast of the Nativity in Constantinople during the first half of the 5th century.

3. The Significance of the Solemnity of the Epiphany

The extant early sources do not allow for a detailed reconstruction of the liturgical celebration of Epiphany. Nevertheless, the surviving homilies, which constituted an integral component of the liturgical celebration, provide a number of significant insights.

First and foremost, they emphasize the solemn character of the feast. Epiphany was regarded as the principal traditional and popular feast of the liturgical year, comparable in importance to Easter.[7] The feast was preceded by a vigil and followed by an octave (Renoux 1971, 178–82). Consequently, preachers frequently referred to Epiphany in the following days.[8] In addition to explicit testimonies, its exceptional importance is indirectly demonstrated by the popular resistance encountered by the newly introduced feast of December 25, especially during the first years after the institution of Christmas.

Preaching at Antioch on January 6, 387, John Chrysostom complains that the Church enjoys the presence of her many children only on the occasion of the great feasts, that is, that such large congregations assemble only once or twice each year (*De baptismo Christi et de Epiphania* 1 [PG 49, 363]). Gregory of Nyssa compares the gathered multitude to a swarm of bees (*In diem Luminum* [PG 46, 577]), while

6 The homily *In Nativitatem Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* by Atticus explicitly speaks of Christ as having been born "today" of the Virgin Mary, of God becoming man—that is, becoming incarnate—and refers to the coming of the Magi from Persia. Considering also that Atticus, Patriarch of Constantinople (406–425), sought to restore relations with Rome, it appears reasonable to date this sermon to December 25.

7 Gregorius Nazianzenus, in *Epistula* IV, attests to the custom of exchanging letters and gifts on these feasts (Mossay 1965, 35).

8 "Δεῦρο δὴ καὶ ἡμεῖς τῷ προλαβόντι τὸν εἰς τὴν τῶν ἐπιφανίων ἡμέραν κοινωνήσωμεν ὕμνον. Εἰ γὰρ παρῆλθεν τῆς ἑορτῆς ἡ ἡμέρα, ἀλλὰ τῆς ἑορτῆς οὐ παρῆλθεν εὐεργεσία" (Wenger 1977, 81–82; "Come, then, let us also join in the hymn of him who has anticipated us in celebrating the day of Epiphany. For although the day of the feast has passed, the blessing bestowed by the feast has not passed away").

Gregory of Nazianzus likens it to a "sea" of people assembled to celebrate the Feast of the Lights (*Oratio* 43.52).

Proclus of Constantinople emphasizes the precedence of Epiphany over Christmas.[9] Likewise, Asterius of Amasea (*Oratio* 4 [PG 40, 217–18]) appears to distinguish between the two solemnities terminologically, referring to the Feast of the Lights as a πανήγυρις (*panēgyris*: solemn festival) and to Christmas simply as an ἑορτή (*heortē*: feast). Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus describes the Feast of the Lights as a "solemn festival" (*Oratio* 39.17) and refers to the "holy day of the Lights" (*Oratio* 39.1), whereas he mentions Christmas merely as a "feast" (*Oratio* 39.14).[10] These terms, however, are not employed consistently and often appear to denote solemnities of equivalent liturgical significance.

Apart from providing an outstanding example of Gregory's rhetorical artistry, *Oratio* 43.52–53 also offers several valuable details concerning the liturgy itself. A large assembly, ordered "more like angels than human beings," led by the bishop and his clergy, begins the celebration by chanting the psalms aloud with a voice resembling thunder. At a certain point, the offerings prepared by the faithful are brought to the altar, presumably by the deacons. Gregory also describes several architectural features of the church, mentioning the tribunal or presbyteral seating, the divine table (altar), and the curtain, which would later develop into the Eastern iconostasis. Gregory of Nyssa likewise refers to the centrally located and elevated episcopal throne, from which the bishop could readily address the faithful gathered around him (*In diem Luminum* [PG 46, 577]).

The fact that the Arian emperor Valens chose the Solemnity of the Epiphany—at that time still centered on the mystery of the incarnation—as the occasion for returning to communion with the Nicene Church under the leadership of Basil demonstrates the feast's exceptional significance. It had become, in effect, a banner of orthodox faith.

Epiphany did not lose its importance after the introduction of Christmas; rather, the mystery celebrated underwent a shift, becoming focused on the baptism of Jesus, as consistently attested by the homilies of this period. The preachers emphasize that through this mystery the Lord sanctified the waters. Within this theological context, an interesting detail reported by John Chrysostom in his Epiphany homily may point to the existence of a particular liturgical practice.

He notes that around midnight on the feast, all the faithful went to draw water—presumably from a nearby river—which they preserved throughout the entire year as a sacred reserve. According to Chrysostom, this water remained fresh and uncorrupted for the whole year. It is unclear whether this procession to the waters was

9 "Hodiernus dies majora precedenti solemnitate miracolorum cementa ostendit" (*Oratio VII* [PG 65, 757–58]; "The present day displays greater structures of miracles than the preceding solemnity").

10 Nevertheless, Gregorius Nazianzenus in *Oratio* 38.3–4 recognizes Christmas as a solemnity.

already accompanied by a liturgical rite corresponding to what later became known as the Great Blessing of the Waters (Conybeare 1905, 165–78). Wenger (1977, 75–76) believes this was the case. The opposing view advanced by Bernard Botte, although earlier, appears to be more convincingly argued. In his opinion, the silence of the 4th-century Fathers concerning such a rite is highly significant. At Edessa, for example, the introduction of the blessing of the waters is attributed to Bishop Peter (ca. 498). Moreover, a note accompanying the *Oratio Synodalis* of John of Odzun (ca. 718), which describes the blessing of the water (Ps 28, the reading of Matt 3, and the use of oil), explicitly states that the earliest manuscripts contain neither this blessing nor the corresponding scriptural readings (Conybeare 1905, 181–82). Botte (1932, 71–75) stated that Christian preachers initially sought to reinterpret the preexisting pagan water customs associated with January 6 in light of the sanctification of the waters through Christ's baptism, while the distinct liturgical rite of blessing the waters developed only later and came to be incorrectly attributed to Basil of Caesarea. Józef Naumowicz is critical of the conclusions reached by these scholars in the previous century. In his opinion, they are not sufficiently supported by the surviving documents. Certain parallels with pagan customs, involving, for example, the flooding of the Nile, do not explain the Christian practice of blessing the waters, which became a liturgical expression of the mystery of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. He emphasizes that the 4th-century text of Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 51.30.1–3) describes Christian and not pagan customs (Naumowicz 2016, 341–57).

The distinctive use of lights presents another liturgical question. This issue arises not only from the homiletic evidence but also from the very designation of the feast as τὰ Φῶτα ("the Lights"). This title likely originated from the special illuminations employed during the celebration (Botte 1932, 79–81; Mossay 1965, 24–27; Bernardi 1968, 206). Such an interpretation is suggested, for example, by a note of Nicetas, a disciple of Gregory of Nazianzus (*In orationem XXXIX*, col. 335).[11] Likewise, in Severian of Gabala's *Oratio in Dei apparitionem*, the theme of light occupies a central place. In his opening sentence, he refers to light three times: "Hodie sermones lucis in die lucis filios lucis illustrant" (Severianus, *Oratio in Dei apparitionem* 1 [PG 65, 15]; "Today the words of light illuminate the children of light on the day of light"). He concludes his sermon with the emphatic affirmation: "Tanta lux, tanta pulchritudo circumfulget Ecclesiae" (*Oratio in Dei apparitionem* 12 [PG 65, 26]; "Such great light,

11 "Baptismus porro Luminum nomine appellatur, quod purget et illustret. Quo etiam fit, ut faces eo tempore in laetitiae signum accendamus. Ac principium quidam et causa hujus festi, baptismus Christi est, qui, ut Joannes testatur, lux vera erat, hoc est, vere et proprie lux, quae nocte non secatur, nec exstinguitur, quae illuminat omnem hominem venientem in mundum…" (PG 127, 1214A; "Baptism, moreover, is called by the name of 'Lights,' because it cleanses and enlightens. For this reason, too, we light torches at that time as a sign of joy. The origin and cause of this feast, according to some, is the Baptism of Christ, who, as John testifies, was the true Light—that is, truly and properly Light which is not interrupted by night nor extinguished, which enlightens every man coming into the world…").

such great beauty surrounds the Church"). Furthermore, if, as Chrysostom indicates, the faithful at Antioch proceeded to the river around midnight between January 5 and 6 to draw water, it is reasonable to infer that they carried lamps or candles during the procession.[12]

Even if the designation τὰ Φῶτα originally referred to the material use of lights—as in analogous liturgical names such as Ash Wednesday or Palm Sunday—the Fathers consistently interpreted this symbolism primarily in theological and spiritual terms. Christ, the Light of the World, enlightens humanity, especially those preparing to receive baptism, who in turn are called to become lights shining within the world.

The solemn character of Epiphany, visibly expressed through the symbolic use of water and light, was further enhanced by liturgical chant.[13] Mention has already been made of the chanting of the psalms at the opening of the celebration in Cappadocia (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 43.52). Severian of Gabala attests to the communal singing (*sicut nuper psallebamus*) of Ps 80 (79):4: "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." (PG 65, 17–18) At the conclusion of his sermon, he declares, with characteristic rhetorical hyperbole, that hymns and sermons resound throughout the entire world (PG 65, 26). Singing also accompanied the post-communion rite, as John Chrysostom testifies when he rebukes those who left the church before offering the hymns of thanksgiving, recalling the hymn sung by the Apostles after the Last Supper (*De baptismo Christi et de Epiphania* 4 [PG 49]).[14]

The impatience and haste of the Christians of Antioch, who failed to remain until the conclusion of the Eucharistic synaxis, may indicate that these celebrations were lengthy. Chrysostom urges the faithful to dedicate merely two hours to God (*De baptismo Christi et de Epiphania* 1 [PG 49]).[15] Severian of Gabala, for his part, expresses admiration for those who remained standing throughout the evening, overcoming sleep by singing hymns (*Oratio in Dei apparitionem* 12).[16]

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12 This interpretation is suggested by Wenger (1977, 75–76), although his attempt to give this "procession" a Christianizing interpretation goes beyond what is warranted by the text of Chrysostom's sermon.

13 "Διὰ δὴ ταῦτα πάντα τὸν τῆς χαρᾶς ὕμνον ᾄσωμεν τῷ θεῷ" (Gregorius Nyssenus, *In diem Luminum* [PG 46, 599–600]; "For all these things, therefore, let us sing to God a hymn of joy").

14 "Βούλεσθε εἴπω τίνος ἔργον ποιοῦσιν οἱ πρὸ τῆς συμπληρώσεως ἀναχωροῦντες, καὶ τὰς εὐχαριστηρίους ᾠδὰς οὐκ ἐπιφέροντες τῷ τέλει τῆς τραπέζης" (PG 49, 370–371; "Would you like me to tell you whose work is being done by those who leave before the service is completed and brought to its conclusion, and who fail to offer hymns of thanksgiving when the supper is ended?"). "…οὗτοι δὲ μετὰ τοῦ Δεσπότου ὑμνήσαντες ἐξῆλθον. Ὁρᾷς ὅτι ἡ ἐσχάτη μετὰ τὴν θυσίαν εὐχὴ κατ᾽ ἐκεῖνον γίνεται τὸν τύπον" (PG 49, 370–371; "…But they, after singing a hymn with the Lord, went out. Do you see how that final prayer after the Sacrifice is offered according to this example?").

15 "Οὕτω καὶ σὺ δύο δάνεισον ὥρας τῷ Θεῷ, καὶ μυρίων ἡμερῶν κέρδος εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν εἰσάξεις τὴν σήν" (PG 49, 364; "In the same way, you too should lend two hours to God, and you will carry back to your home the gain of countless days").

16 "Σήμερον γὰρ πανταχοῦ τῆς γῆς ὕμνοι καὶ θεολογίαι ἀπὸ ἑσπέρας μέχρι τῆς δεῦρο ἑστήκασιν ἄνθρωποι, καὶ ὕμνοις τὸν ὕπνον ἐνίκησαν· καὶ χάρις ἐδείκνυτο, καὶ ἡ φύσις οὐκ ἠλέγχετο" (PG 65, 26; "For today, throughout all the earth, hymns and words of divine praise are heard. From evening until this very hour

4. The Development of the Liturgy of the Word for the Solemnity of the Epiphany

The question of psalmody naturally leads to another liturgical element of particular significance: the scriptural readings appointed for the Solemnity of the Epiphany. Their reconstruction, however, is far from straightforward. The scarcity of the available evidence precludes definitive conclusions. As already noted in the historical survey, the 4th and 5th centuries witnessed profound liturgical developments that proceeded differently in the various local Churches. In order to provide a synthesis of the liturgical readings, eight homilies from this period will be examined. These homilies provide an excellent example of theological language and of the universal principle that the interpretation of the Word of God should integrate historical facts and the demands of reason with the requirements of faith (Zatwardnicki 2021, 56).

The central theme of these homilies is the baptism of Jesus. The preachers emphasize both the sanctification of the waters and the descent of the Holy Spirit in order to establish the theological foundation of Christian baptism. Illumination, intrinsically associated with the sacrament, constitutes another recurring theme. The soteriological dimension of the mystery is expressed through the remission of sins. Having received the light of the Logos, Christians are called to become lights in the world. The eight homilies to be examined are as follows:

1) **Ioannes Chrysostomus, *De Baptismo Christi et de Epiphania*** (PG 49, 365–72). The homily was most likely delivered at Antioch on January 6, 387, following the first celebration of the Feast of the Nativity (December 25) in that city. The homily reveals the earliest theological and rhetorical strategies employed to explain the relationship between the baptism of Jesus and the manifestation of his divinity and, consequently, to provide a theological justification for the liturgical innovations. The preacher explicitly identifies and quotes the scriptural reading appointed for the day, namely Titus 2:11–13, and also refers to Matt 3:1–17 and, on several occasions, to John 1:29–34.
2) **Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Gratia Dei apparuit vel In Theophania*** (ed. Wenger 1971, 117–35). The homily, traditionally attributed to John Chrysostom (although the attribution remains uncertain), reflects an early stage in the development of the liturgy, that is, prior to the introduction of the Feast of the Nativity. One of the scriptural passages expounded is Titus 2:11. It nevertheless remains uncertain whether the sermon was actually delivered on the Solemnity of the Epiphany (January 6).
3) **Severianus Gabalitanus, *Oratio in Dei apparitionem*** (PG 65, 15–25). The homily, most likely delivered at Constantinople during the solemn vigil,

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the faithful have kept vigil, conquering sleep with hymns; grace has been revealed, and nature has suffered no reproach").

bears witness to the period in which Epiphany had already assumed a distinctly baptismal character and had come to be known as the Feast of the Lights. The community undoubtedly chanted Ps 80 (79):2–4. The predominant and systematic references to the First Gospel indicate that Matt 3 was, in all probability, the Gospel reading appointed for the solemnity.

4) **Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio 39*** (ed. Moreschini 2000, 901–21). The homily was delivered at Constantinople on January 6, 380 (or possibly 381). Intrinsically connected with the preceding homily on the Nativity, it serves as a preparation for the subsequent homily, delivered on January 7 on the celebration of the sacrament of baptism. By this time, the Feast of the Lights (Epiphany) was centered on the mystery of the baptism of Jesus. Although Gregory draws upon passages from all four Gospels, several explicit citations point, with a high degree of probability, to Matt 3 as the Gospel reading appointed for the liturgical celebration.
5) **Gregorius Nyssenus, *In diem Luminum*** (PG 46, 577–600). This sermon has a strongly baptismal character and was therefore perhaps not intended primarily for the Solemnity of the Epiphany, although it was delivered on January 6, 383 (Daniélou 1955, 362). It was most likely preached during the baptismal rite, which would also explain the presence of the immense crowd of both Christians and catechumens (Bernardi 1968, 296–97). Throughout the homily, Gregory develops a rich typology of the sacrament of Christian initiation (Nieścior 2024) drawn from the whole of Scripture. In order to emphasize the spiritual reality of baptism, he appeals to John 3:5. The distinctive character of the sermon, however, does not permit the identification of the scriptural readings appointed for the Solemnity of the Epiphany.
6) **Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio VII: In sancta Theophania*** (PG 65, 757–64). By this stage, the distinction between Christmas and Epiphany has been firmly established, with clear precedence accorded to the latter. Throughout the homily, Proclus repeatedly refers to the scriptural readings appointed for the feast. His three explicit citations point to Matt 3 as the Gospel reading. The character of the homily, which appears to be closely dependent upon the liturgical readings of the solemnity, likewise suggests Titus 2:11–13 and Ps 118 (117):26–27 as the appointed texts. The proclamation of Gen 7–8 and Ps 106 (105):1 also appears probable. It should be noted that this homily is the earliest extant text with references to both Titus 2:11–13 and Matt 3 occurring together
7) **Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio XXVIII*** (ed. Leroy 1967, 195–204). The homily, preached on the Solemnity of the Epiphany, focuses on the mystery of the Lord's baptism, exhorting its hearers to receive baptism—not only the sacramental baptism but also the spiritual baptism of conversion and the confession of sins. The principal biblical text is the Gospel reading appointed for the day. The other scriptural passages, cited in abundance, appear to aim to confirm and

further illustrate the central theme. In emphasizing the superiority of Epiphany over Christmas, the preacher opens the homily by citing Titus 2:13 and later quotes the entire passage of Titus 2:11–14. This usage strongly suggests that the latter constituted the epistle reading for the feast. The identification of the Gospel reading is more difficult, however, since both Matt 3:1–17 and Luke 3:1–22 appear to be equally plausible candidates.

8) **Pseudo-Ioannes Chrysostomus (Severianus Gabalitanus?),** ***L'oratio: In Theophania*** (ed. Wenger 1977, 73–90). The homily was delivered at Constantinople on the Sunday following Epiphany. The author refers both to the Gospel reading of the day (most likely Matt 4:1–11, recounting the temptations of Jesus) and to the preceding Feast of the Nativity, with an allusion to the adoration of the Magi. His principal concern, however, is to extol the mystery of Epiphany. He emphasizes that on this day Christ was publicly manifested through his baptism. This suggests that the most probable Gospel reading for the Solemnity of the Epiphany was Matt 3:1–17.

The conclusions reached point to at least two scriptural readings as being virtually certain, namely Titus 2:11–13 and Matt 3:1–17. It is particularly significant that Proclus' homilies refer to both passages. They therefore provide reliable evidence for the coexistence of these readings in the Constantinopolitan liturgy, a fact that would not necessarily have been expected in light of the liturgical development of the Solemnity of the Epiphany.

As noted in the historical survey, the introduction of the Western feast of December 25 into the East brought about a shift in the theological focus of Epiphany. The solemnity no longer celebrated primarily the mystery of the incarnation but rather that of the baptism of the Lord. Consequently, the Gospel pericopes relating to Christ's nativity (e.g., Matt 1:18–25; 2:1–12), which had previously been proclaimed on January 6, were transferred to the newly established feast of the Nativity, making way for Matt 3:1–17.

The passage from Titus 2:11–14, which speaks of the "manifestation" (*epiphaneia*) of grace, was nevertheless retained because of its intrinsic connection with the very name of the feast. At the same time, preachers sought to explain the liturgical development by emphasizing that, although Christ had entered the world long before, it was through his baptism that he was publicly manifested, since until that event he had remained unknown. In this way, despite the shift in the theological emphasis of the feast, the traditional designation Epiphany could rightly be preserved.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated, first and foremost, the outstanding importance of the Feast of Epiphany, which ranked among the principal liturgical celebrations of the Christian East. It was observed with a vigil preceding the feast and an octave extending its celebration. The investigation has also highlighted the liturgical development that this solemnity underwent during the 4th and 5th centuries. The various indications preserved in the extant sources have drawn attention to the distinctive liturgical symbolism associated with water—reflecting the mystery of the baptism of Jesus—and with light, as expressed in the very designation of the feast, τὰ Φῶτα ("the Lights"). Finally, a detailed analysis of several homilies preached on the Epiphany has made it possible to identify Titus 2:11–14 and Matt 3:1–17 as the principal scriptural readings appointed for the liturgical celebration of the feast.

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Between Secular Equality and Ecclesiastical Discernment: The Paradigm of Cultural Equality According to the European Union and the Synodal Path in Germany

GRZEGORZ CHOJNACKI
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, grzegorz.chojnacki@kul.pl

Abstract: Irrespective of the relationship between the paradigm of cultural equality developed in European Union (EU) documents—in particular in the Strategy for LGBTIQ Equality 2020–2025—and the religious normativity of the Catholic Church, this article analyzes this issue using the example of the documents of the Synodal Path in Germany (SW 3, SW 7, SW 12, and SW 14). The key research question concerns whether and in what way contemporary equality policies influence the reinterpretation of moral norms in Catholic theology, especially in the area of sexual ethics and theological anthropology. The structure of the article involves four main issues: an explanation of two normative orders—religious and cultural-political; the discourse concerning the equality paradigm in EU documents, taking into account its anthropological assumptions and normative language; an in-depth explication of the Synodal Path documents as a process of reinterpretation of moral norms; and synthetic conclusions regarding the mutual relations and tensions between these orders. The applied methodology is qualitative and interdisciplinary in nature: it includes source text analysis, theological hermeneutics, as well as elements of philosophical and sociological analysis. The key research tool is the hermeneutics of reinterpretation, which allows for capturing the dynamics of normative changes. The main conclusion drawn from the research indicates that the Synodal Path constitutes an example of the transformation of moral norms through a transition from a normativity based on natural law toward a relational and personalistic model. This process is significantly, albeit indirectly, influenced by the EU equality paradigm, leading to tension between doctrinal continuity and its reinterpretation in the context of contemporary culture, pointing to the need for an evaluation of the ongoing changes in the understanding of ecclesiological issues.

Keywords: Synodal Path (Der Synodale Weg), religious normativity, European Union cultural equality, sexual ethics, reinterpretation of doctrine

One of the most fundamental problems in contemporary reflection on the relationship between religion and modernity is the coexistence—as a kind of areopagus—of many competing normative orders, each of which claims the right to define the good, truth, and the proper shape of individual life. This problem becomes particularly pronounced in the context of transformations concerning sexuality, gender identity, and the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, where a direct confrontation occurs between differing visions of humanity and morality.

In this article, this tension is considered as a relationship between the secular normative order of the European Union (EU) and the religious normative order of

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the Catholic Church, analyzed through the example of the Synodal Path in Germany—a new form of synodality, unprecedented in the history of the universal Church. Indeed, applicable canon law does not provide for such a form of synodal process. It is therefore a cognitively very interesting phenomenon, created by its initiators: the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics. The Synodal Path represents a unique example of an institutional attempt to address the tensions between religious and secular norms, extending beyond the framework of church law, initiated in 2019 by the Deutsche Bischofskonferenz and the Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken. This process is not limited to administrative reforms, but touches upon fundamental theological issues, including the understanding of sexual morality. Among a number of documents approved by the plenary assembly, the following should be mentioned in the context of the explication of the undertaken topic: SW 3, SW 7, SW 12, and SW 14. They paradigmically illustrate a gradual evolution in the approach to issues of sexuality. Document SW 14 is particularly significant, proposing a reinterpretation of sexual morality in a more relational and personalistic spirit. This implies shifting the emphasis from objective norms to the context of individual experience and responsibility. At the same time, an analysis of non-adopted documents indicates that this process is not uniform. It is characterized by strong tensions between differing visions of the Church—from traditional to explicitly reformist. As Grzegorz Chojnacki (2025, 5–18) notes, the Synodal Path may lead to profound changes in the understanding of ecclesial normativity, which raises questions about its compatibility with universal teaching.

Using the hermeneutics of sources and comparative analyses, the aim of the article is to explicate these profound changes against the background of the normative framework of the EU, which is based on the post-war human rights project, according to which human dignity constitutes the highest and inalienable value. In this context, the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons are interpreted as an integral part of a broader system of protecting individual rights. The document *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025* not only defines political goals but also constructs a specific anthropological model in which sexual and gender identity are treated as elements of individual autonomy (European Commission 2020, 1–2). This idea may create tension with the religious normative order of the Catholic Church, which is based on the conviction of the existence of an objective moral order that can be known through reason and Revelation. In this view, moral norms are universal and immutable because they stem from the metaphysical nature of human beings created by God. Although, as Janusz Mariański (2015, 27–38) points out, contemporary religiosity is undergoing increasing individualization, leading to the selective acceptance of moral norms and the affirmation of the normativity of the factual state. Consequently, the Church faces the challenge of preserving the integrity of its doctrine while taking into account the real-life experiences of the faithful.

1. The Paradigm of Cultural Equality in European Union Documents

The paradigm of cultural equality developed within the framework of EU policy is one of the most influential contemporary normative systems. Its value extends beyond legal regulations, shaping the way identity, morality, and social relations are understood in a global context. This chapter provides a detailed analysis of this paradigm, paying particular attention to its anthropological-metaphysical assumptions, normative language, and mechanisms of influence on other systems, including religious normativity and the concept of "normative order," that can be understood as a set of principles, values, and interpretive rules that lend meaning to social actions and define the boundaries of acceptable behavior. In classical sociological approaches, norms were viewed as an element stabilizing society; however, contemporary theories—in particular Niklas Luhmann's (1995, 137–42) systems theory—emphasize their differentiation and mutual autonomy. In the modern world, we are dealing with a pluralization of the sources of normativity: law, religion, science, and culture function as relatively autonomous systems, each operating according to different criteria of truth and legitimation. This leads to a situation in which the individual is simultaneously subject to multiple, often contradictory norms, forcing their interpretation and hierarchization. From a philosophical perspective, this topic is also taken up by Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 6–12), who points to the crisis of contemporary ethics resulting from the breakdown of a shared moral language. In this context, the conflict between the secular and religious order is not merely a dispute over specific norms, but a manifestation of a deeper epistemological crisis regarding the sources of morality and their interpretation.

1.1. Genesis and Development of the Equality Paradigm

The contemporary model of cultural equality traces its development to the postwar human rights framework, based on the principles of the universality of human dignity and equality before the law. International efforts, along with the creation of the United Nations, contributed to foundational documents—most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)—which, together with the gradual development of international systems for the protection of individual rights, played a key role in expanding protection against discrimination. Initially focused on inequalities related to race, sex, or religion, this framework from the late 20th century has increasingly implemented issues of sexual orientation and gender identity into the broader discourse of human rights (European Commission 2020, 1–2; Vaggione 2014, 27–29).

This action is not merely legislative in nature, but reflects a deeper anthropological and cultural transformation. As Michel Foucault (1976, 43–47) argues, modernity performs the understanding of sexuality—shifting it from a moral category subject

to judgment to a dimension of identity and existence. In this perspective, sexual orientation is no longer viewed primarily as a functional behavior, but as an integral element of personal-ontic identity.

Consequently, a redefinition of the concept of equality itself takes place: it no longer applies solely to formal equality before the law, but also expresses the recognition and affirmation of diversity as a socio-cultural value. It must be added that the strategy *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025* constitutes the culmination of this development. It implements a comprehensive approach encompassing both legal measures (such as protection against discrimination) and broader social initiatives, including education, combating stereotypes, and promoting an inclusive culture (European Commission 2020, 3–5). Importantly, this document not only protects individuals but actively promotes a specific vision of society—one in which identity and sexual diversity are recognized as a positive value requiring institutional support. In this sense, this action reflects a broader transformation of liberalism, which—as Charles Taylor (1992a, 43–49) notes—has shifted from a model of neutrality toward a model based on recognition and active support for diverse identities. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (1996, 107–10) observes the transition from procedural liberalism to a deliberative model in which norms emerge in communicative processes reflecting the pluralization of contemporary societies, which will also exert an influence on the creation of new theological trends.

These transformations gave rise to a new model of equality, often referred to as inclusive or affirmative equality. It is characterized by three key elements: the extension of protection to new identity categories, the transition from neutrality to the affirmation of diversity, and the integration of legal norms with broader social and cultural policy. This paradigm increasingly influences other spheres of social life, including religion, which is reflected in the process of the Synodal Path. As Juan Marco Vaggione (2014, 27–29) notes, contemporary religions function in a pluralistic environment in which their norms must be negotiated in relation to dominant discourses on the understanding of the human person and human rights. In this light, the documents of the Synodal Path in Germany can be interpreted as an attempt to respond to this evolving model of cultural equality.

1.2. Anthropological Assumptions of the Equality Paradigm

A specific anthropological vision grounded in individual autonomy and self-determination lies at the foundation of the equality paradigm. In this concept, the human person is defined not primarily in light of objective structures of nature or the ontological order, but through the capacity to shape one's own identity through experience, reflection, and social interactions. Identity—including gender and sexuality—is thus understood as dynamic, relational, and dependent on context and

culture, rather than fixed or predetermined (European Commission 2020, 1–3; Vaggione 2014, 28–30).

Particularly influential in the context of cultural studies is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The researcher argues that socio-cultural gender is not a natural or given category, but is constituted through repetitive social and linguistic practices, ultimately leading to its legitimation on the basis of the normativity of the factual state (Butler 1990, 33–37). This perspective challenges the ontological understanding of human nature, suggesting instead that categories such as "man" and "woman" are historically conditioned and subject to change. Similar thoughts can be found in Anthony Giddens's (1991, 52–58) concept, which frames gender identity as a "reflexive project" requiring continuous construction and reinterpretation. Taylor (1992b, 25–30) likewise emphasizes the importance of authenticity, understood as fidelity to one's own inner experience and perception of self. In such ideological constructions, individual autonomy is closely linked to the right to social recognition. European Union documents reflect this shift, emphasizing that social norms should adapt to the diversity of individual experiences rather than impose uniform standards. The Strategy for LGBTIQ Equality explicitly calls for the creation of spaces in which diverse identities are not merely tolerated, but actively affirmed and protected, representing a significant paradigm shift: from tolerance to affirmation (European Commission 2020, 4–6). As a result, norms gain not only a regulatory function but also an inclusive and emancipatory one, which is also implemented by the Synodal Path.

This shift signifies a turn toward an anti-ontological anthropology in which human nature ceases to be treated as a fixed reference point for moral norms. As Foucault (1976, 92–95) suggests, contemporary societies increasingly embed normativity in discourse and relations of power and culture, rather than in nature. Norms thus become historically variable and culturally negotiable, rather than being treated as non-negotiable as before. Although this approach allows for greater sensitivity to individual experience, it also raises significant questions about the stability and universality of moral norms. In the context of this article, it can be posited that the Synodal Path functions precisely within the space of this tension between classical metaphysical anthropology and modern, constructivist approaches to identity.

1.3. Normative Language and Its Performative Function

The language of EU documents demonstrates that normativity operates not only at a descriptive level but also fulfills a performative function. Concepts such as "dignity," "inclusivity," "diversity," and "non-discrimination" do more than merely describe reality—they actively shape it, creating interpretive frameworks and directing institutional practices (European Commission 2020, 2–4). This phenomenon can be

understood through the speech act theory developed by John L. Austin (1962, 5–6) and John R. Searle (1969, 16–20), according to which specific utterances do not merely state facts but bring them into existence. In the context of equality policy, the recognition of specific identities leads directly to their institutionalization, triggering tangible legal and social changes. Declarations of equality thus exist as normative acts that initiate broader processes in the legislative, educational, and cultural spheres. As Habermas (2008, 131–34) notes, normative language also plays an integrative role in modern societies by providing a shared framework for communication and the justification of reasons in the public sphere. In the EU, human rights language serves precisely this purpose, enabling dialogue across diverse cultural and legal contexts. At the same time, it functions as an instrument of public policy, setting the direction for concrete actions such as legal reforms, educational initiatives, and anti-discrimination programs (European Commission 2020, 5–7).

However, this language is not entirely neutral. While promoting inclusivity and openness, it simultaneously establishes standards that member states are obliged to adopt, following the notion that what is linguistically conceivable is a factual state that claims acceptance. As Jutta Brunnée and Stephen J. Toope (2010, 65–70) argue, these mechanisms resemble soft law, which—despite the lack of formal compulsion—can lead to significant normative changes through processes of internalization. In this way, the boundary between description and prescription becomes increasingly blurred. Normative language becomes both a reflection of existing values and a tool for shaping them. This dynamic is particularly important for understanding how equality discourse influences ecclesial contexts, including the Synodal Path.

1.4. Institutional and Political Mechanisms

The normative influence of the EU is realized through a range of institutional mechanisms that give it practical effectiveness. These include both binding legal instruments—such as directives, regulations, and case law of the Court of Justice—and softer forms of governance, including strategies, financial programs, and monitoring systems. In many EU countries, a dispute over the precedence of legal orders—European versus national—is currently observable. The LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025 exemplifies a multi-level approach that integrates legal, educational, and social measures, enabling a broad impact on social reality (European Commission 2020, 7–10). Key institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, play a central role in shaping and promoting this normative framework. While the Commission initiates policies and legislation, the Parliament provides democratic legitimacy and reinforces their political significance (Flockhart 2008). Such a strategy yields results, as individual member states recognize the primacy of EU normative acts over national legislation, yielding to the conviction that the EU is not merely a political-economic project, but also a socio-cultural one.

These processes can be understood as part of a broader phenomenon of Europeanization, within which EU norms gradually permeate national systems—not only through formal implementation, but also through cultural and institutional internalization. As Thomas Risse (2010, 8–12) notes, norms become effective when they are accepted as legitimate by social and political actors. Undoubtedly, financial instruments also play a significant role here, supporting civil society initiatives, research, and education, thereby embedding equality norms in social practice (Checkel 2005, 804–6). Monitoring mechanisms further reinforce this process by creating evaluation systems and normative pressure. Together, these elements form a complex model of governance through norms, characteristic of modern supranational structures.

1.5. Relation to Religious Normative Systems

The relationship between the equality paradigm and religious normativity is complex and often fraught with tension. Although the EU formally maintains the principles of religious freedom and neutrality, itsimultaneously promotes values that may conflict with specific doctrinal positions, especially in areas such as sexual ethics and gender anthropology (European Commission 2020, 1–3; Vaggione 2014, 27–29). This tension reveals a deeper clash of differing concepts of normativity. Religious traditions often embed moral norms in concepts of natural law and an objective moral order, whereas the equality paradigm emphasizes historical variability and social negotiation. Habermas (2008, 131–34) proposes resolving conflicts of this type through translation processes between religious and secular language. In practice, however, this process tends to be asymmetrical, as secular frameworks exhibit a tendency to dominate public discourse (Taylor 2007, 299–304). In this context, it can be posited that the Synodal Path functions within a normative environment shaped by these broader processes, responding—explicitly or implicitly, formally and informally—to the pressure of cultural and institutional changes.

1.6. Critical Assessment of the Equality Paradigm

The cultural equality paradigm is not free from criticism, despite its merits, particularly regarding the promotion of human rights and the fight against discrimination. One of its negative traits is its tendency to prioritize individual autonomy to such an extent that it may weaken shared moral frameworks and lead to social fragmentation; put differently, individualization may supersede the common good (MacIntyre 1981, 6–12). In a similar vein, Joseph Ratzinger (2006, 52–55) warns against the dangers of relativism, demonstrating that detaching morality from objective truth risks reducing ethics to subjective preferences and acts of autonomous conscience. Another problem lies in the relationship between inclusivity and normative obligation. As Habermas notes, this paradigm promotes openness and pluralism while simultaneously

promoting a set of values that may be perceived as binding mandates. This very interesting paradox is characteristic of contemporary pluralistic societies, which must reconcile individual freedom with the need for social cohesion (Habermas 1996, 107–10), while proponents of this approach argue that this paradigm constitutes a necessary response to historical wrongs and the exclusion of marginalized groups (European Commission 2020, 2–3; Vaggione 2014, 27–29). Ultimately concluding, this discourse touches upon fundamental questions regarding the nature of normativity, the limits of pluralism, and the possibility of maintaining a cohesive moral framework in increasingly diverse societies.

Demonstrating these tensions is therefore crucial for understanding the Synodal Path, which can be defined as a space of negotiation between competing visions of the human person, morality, and the foundations of normative authority, wherein elements of deliberative culture and descriptive normativity predominate.

2. The Synodal Path in Germany as a Process of Reinterpreting Moral Norms in the Context of Contemporary Cultural Transformations

The Synodal Path in Germany can be considered one of the most significant events in contemporary ecclesial reflection in Europe. It develops within the broader context of cultural changes that increasingly shape the way moral norms are understood and justified. This is particularly visible in discussions concerning anthropology, sexuality, and the power structure in the Church. The Synodal Path launched prior to the process of discerning a new understanding of synodality initiated by Pope Francis. At its core, the Synodal Path represents an attempt to re-read traditional doctrinal frameworks in light of new social experiences and expectations of the faithful regarding sexual and spiritual abuses committed by clergy. At the same time, this process is marked by clear tensions, as it brings into contact—and often conflict—differing theological visions as well as clashing concepts of continuity and change in Church teaching. Contemporary cultural paradigms, especially the equality paradigm, play a significant role in formulating demands for reform. For this reason, the Synodal Path can be understood both as a space for dialogue between tradition and modernity and as a field of normative tensions. Analyzing this process allows for a better understanding of the mechanisms through which religious institutions respond to changing social conditions. At the same time, it raises important questions about the limits of reinterpretation and how the Church can preserve its doctrinal identity while engaging with contemporary culture.

2.1. The Synodal Path as a Model of Deliberative Theology

The deliberative dimension of the Synodal Path becomes clearer when embedded in broader philosophical and theological debates regarding the nature of truth, community, and normativity. Alongside Habermas, thinkers such as John Rawls, Taylor, and Nicholas Wolterstorff—though from different perspectives—have contributed to our understanding of the discursive nature of truth, while emphasizing the importance of pluralism and the public-social justification of norms. Above all, Rawls, in his concept of "public reason," argues that in pluralistic societies, norms should be justified in a manner accessible to all participants in social life; in other words, it concerned the communicability of principles (Rawls 1993, 212–54). A similar intuition can be observed in the synodal model, which requires theological argumentation to be communicable and rooted in the living experience of the community, rather than relying exclusively on the institutional authority of the Church. Taylor (2007, 13–22), on his part, emphasizes the importance of "horizons of significance" within which individuals and communities interpret reality. From this perspective, the Synodal Path can be understood as an attempt to renegotiate these horizons in the context of contemporary cultural changes. This does not imply a simple rejection of tradition, but rather its reinterpretation under new historical conditions. From a theological standpoint, the reflections of Yves Congar (1957, 67–89) and Walter Kasper (2015, 45–52), who emphasize the role of the *sensus fidelium* as an essential dimension of Church life, are also extremely pertinent. In their view, the community of believers is not merely a passive recipient of teaching, but an active participant in the process of understanding it. The Synodal Path goes further by developing this thought and giving it a more formalized and explicitly deliberative character. At the same time, this model has not been free from criticism. The views of two scholars should be highlighted here. Ratzinger (2006, 52–55) and Tracey Rowland (2003, 101–8) warn against theology falling into an excessive dependence on changing cultural conditions. In their conviction, a real risk exists that an overly dialogical approach may blur and thus dilute doctrinal identity if it is not clearly rooted in the objective nature of Revelation.

For this reason, the Synodal Path, understood as a model of deliberative theology, can be viewed as a point of convergence for several intellectual traditions: the theory of deliberative democracy, the philosophy of dialogue, and the theology of communion (*communio*). Its distinguishing feature is the attempt to integrate these perspectives within ecclesial reflection, making it a phenomenon that is both innovative and at times controversial.

2.2. SW 3: Power Structures as a Source of Normativity

The first of the documents discussed, SW 3 (*Macht und Gewaltenteilung in der Kirche: Gemeinsame Teilnahme und Teilhabe am Sendungsauftrag—Power and Separation of Powers in the Church: Joint Participation and Involvement in the Mission*), addresses issues of authority, power, and responsibility in the Church, constituting one of the key texts illustrating the structural dimension of the reforms proposed in the German synodal process. Its significance extends beyond matters of institutional organization, touching upon a more fundamental question: how do power structures shape the way moral norms are formulated, interpreted, and communicated? The document suggests that normativity does not arise in isolation from concrete social and institutional frameworks, emphasizing that it is instead always linked to the exercise of power, relationships between different actors, and the historical experience of the community (SW 3, 65–114).

In the classical ecclesiological model of the Catholic Church, the source of normativity lies primarily in Revelation, Tradition, and the authority of the Magisterium. Ecclesial power (*norma normans*) is understood as a service to revealed truth (*norma non formata*), rather than an autonomous source of moral norms. Document SW 3, however, introduces an additional dimension to this understanding. It emphasizes that the manner in which power is exercised can significantly influence how norms are perceived and applied. This marks a shift from a purely theological question—"which norm is true?"—to a question of a more sociological and institutional nature: Who takes part in its formulation, and what mechanisms shape its interpretation? This transition from what to how in the understanding of universal truth is a defining feature of German synodality. This perspective can be situated within the broader current of contemporary critical theories that examine the relationships between knowledge, norms, and power structures. Particularly relevant here is the thought of Foucault (1976, 184–94), who argued that social norms are not merely neutral rules governing behavior, but are also embedded in specific systems of knowledge and power. In this view, power operates not only through prohibitions and commands, but also by shaping the very ways reality is understood. From this perspective, moral norms can be analyzed not only as an expression of anthropological-metaphysical truth, but also as the result of historical and institutional processes.

At the same time, document SW 3 does not adopt Foucault's more radical thesis that norms can be reduced exclusively to power mechanisms. It is more accurate to read this text as an attempt to make the Church aware of its own social and historical embeddedness (*Sitz im Leben*). This implies that the organization of power, the participation of various groups, and decision-making procedures matter for the credibility of the Church's moral teaching. In this sense, the document focuses not only on the content of norms, but also on the conditions and circumstances under which they are transmitted and received.

One of the central demands of SW 3 is a call for broader participation of various groups in the Church in decision-making processes. This includes, above all, strengthening the role of the laity, increasing structural transparency, and developing mechanisms of co-responsibility. Behind this demand lies the conviction that the Church as a community of believers cannot be reduced to a purely hierarchical institution, but should be understood as a communal reality in which diverse charisms and experiences contribute to discerning the common good. Critics of the Synodal Path point out, however, that the representativeness of individual groups of the Catholic Church in Germany was distorted, or even intentionally created as asymmetrical. Furthermore, as critics note, SW 3 exhibits clear similarities to contemporary theories of deliberative democracy, in which Habermas (1996, 287–328), for instance, argues that the legitimacy of decisions in pluralistic societies depends not only on formal authority, but also on the quality of communicative processes in which participants can present arguments and engage in the search for common solutions.

Transposed to the ecclesial context, this perspective encourages placing a stronger emphasis on dialogue, consultation, and communal discernment. At the same time, the turn toward greater participation and a certain "democratization" of Church structures raises significant theological questions. The first concerns the relationship between participation and the sacramental nature of the Church: Does increased involvement of the faithful in decision-making remain at the level of administrative reform, or does it entail a deeper transformation in the very understanding of ecclesial authority? The second question touches upon the limits of interpretive pluralism: does a greater diversity of voices strengthen the unity of the Church, or does it risk leading to the fragmentation of its teaching?

These issues become particularly significant in the field of sexual ethics. If moral norms are considered in relation to power structures and the existential experience of the community, greater attention is naturally paid to voices that were previously marginalized or absent in the process of moral reflection. In practice, this leads to greater openness to the diversity of human experiences, a larger role for personal testimony, and a more flexible approach to interpretation. Such a model signifies a shift from a normativity grounded primarily in institutional authority to a more dialogical and participatory normativity. The key question is no longer merely: "Does a given action comply with the norm?" but also "How does the community come to understand this norm in the first place?" This approach resonates with the concept of *sensus fidelium* developed in Catholic theology by Congar (1957, 67–89), among others, according to whom the whole People of God participates in discovering and transmitting the truth of faith. At the same time, critics of SW 3 warn that placing too much emphasis on democratic mechanisms risks transferring political categories into Church life. The Church is not a political community in which truth is determined by majority vote. Ratzinger (2006, 89–94) emphasized that ecclesial

authority cannot be reduced to a process of social legitimation, because its ultimate foundation lies in its relation to Revelation. From this perspective, the problem is not participation itself, but the danger of replacing theological criteria with purely sociological ones.

Document SW 3 thus points to a significant change in the understanding of the function of church structures. Authority ceases to be seen simply as a means of transmitting norms, becoming increasingly a space for dialogue, discernment, and co-responsibility. The document clearly shows that contemporary debates on Church reform are not limited to organizational questions; they touch upon a deeper problem concerning the source of normativity itself. Does a moral norm stem primarily from objective truth transmitted by authority, or is it shaped in a communal process of discernment carried out in history and in the living experience of the faithful? In the broader context of the Synodal Path, SW 3 serves as a structural foundation for the remaining documents. Changes in the understanding of authority directly affect the possibility of reinterpreting moral norms. In this sense, structural transformation becomes a prerequisite for changes in the language and practice of the Church. The document ultimately demonstrates that the debate over moral norms is embedded in a broader debate over the model of the Church itself and the way religious authority is understood in modern society.

2.3. SW 7: Ontology versus Phenomenology of Sexuality

The Synodal Path document concerning sexual morality, SW 7 (*Lehramtliche Neubewertung von Homosexualität—Magisterial Reassessment of Homosexuality*), constitutes one of the most controversial elements of the entire German synodal process. Its significance is not limited merely to proposals for changes in the evaluation of specific sexual behaviors, but touches upon a deeper anthropological and methodological level—namely, the way moral norms are justified and legitimized. This document can be interpreted as an attempt to move away from the classical metaphysical model—in which a moral norm derives from a specific vision of human nature—toward a phenomenological model in which focus is placed on the experience of the person, their relationships, and the way they experience their own sexuality (SW 7, 237–44). In traditional Catholic moral theology, sexuality is understood primarily from an ontological perspective. The fundamental question was: who is the human person, and what is the objective meaning and purpose of their sexuality?

The answer was rooted in a specific philosophical-theological anthropology, according to which human nature possesses an intrinsic normative structure. Nature did not refer merely to the biological equipment of man, but was understood as a dynamic order pointing to the teleology of human action. In this model, moral norms regarding sexuality derived from the interpretation of the structure of the human person, the complementarity of the sexes, and the meaning of the sexual act within

the context of marriage and procreation (Wojtyła 1960, 49–56; Finnis 2011, 81–92). SW 7, however, marks a significant methodological shift. The starting point is no longer primarily the question of the ontological structure of sexuality, but a question of a phenomenological nature: How does a person experience their sexuality, and what significance does it hold in their personal development and relationships with others? This shift in perspective—from analyzing the "essence of the thing" to analyzing concrete human experience—represents almost a Copernican revolution accomplished by this synodal assembly. Sexuality is presented primarily as a personal and relational dimension whose moral evaluation should take into account the entire existential situation of the person. This approach has its philosophical roots in 20th-century phenomenology. Max Scheler (1973, 45–52) pointed out that man cannot be understood solely through abstract metaphysical structures, but through the experience of values and personal relationships. Similarly, Karol Wojtyła (1969, 25–32), in his personalistic concept, emphasized that the person is a subject experiencing self and others, and morality must account not only for the objective dimension of the act, but also for the intention, awareness, and responsibility of the acting subject. In this sense, SW 7 draws upon certain intuitions of personalism, while shifting the emphasis from the objective structure of the act to the quality of the relationship between persons. At the same time, the document contains elements of contemporary cultural constructivism, which assumes that the way sexuality is understood is also shaped by history, culture, and social experience. Particularly relevant here are the concepts of the aforementioned Butler (1990, 33–37), according to whom categories of socio-cultural gender and sexuality do not function exclusively as biological data, but are also shaped by social and linguistic practices. Adopting this perspective, at least in part, challenges the classical understanding of nature as a direct source of moral norms. Nature is understood in a more dynamic way—as a reality encompassing not only the biological dimension, but also psychological, social, and cultural ones.

Another key element of SW 7 is its reference to contemporary empirical sciences. The document takes into account changes that have occurred in psychology, psychiatry, biology, and social sciences regarding the understanding of homosexuality and the diversity of human sexuality. Of particular significance was the depathologization of homosexuality, which brought about a change in the way this phenomenon is interpreted in Western culture. The removal of homosexuality from classifications of mental disorders by the medical community did not in itself resolve moral questions, but it altered the fundamental anthropological context of the debate: homosexuality ceased to be viewed primarily as a clinical problem and began to be analyzed as an element of the diversity of human experience. Consequently, SW 7 leads to a reinterpretation of the concept of "nature." It is no longer understood exclusively as a static normative model, but as a dynamic and performative reality of the human person that is realized under concrete historical and existential conditions.

This understanding aligns with certain contemporary currents of personalism, while simultaneously raising serious theological questions regarding the limits of doctrinal development. Critics of this approach point out that moving from nature as a norm toward experience as a criterion may lead to the subjectivization of morality and the weakening of the objective character of ethical norms (Ratzinger 2006, 52–55).

The most important consequence of this shift is the emergence of relational ethics as the primary model of moral evaluation. In document SW 7, the central category is not so much the structure of the sexual act itself, but the quality of the relationship between persons. Moral evaluation focuses on values such as mutuality, responsibility, durability, fidelity, and respect for the dignity of the other person. A moral norm thus derives not exclusively from asking whether a given action conforms to a specific structure of nature, fulfilling finis operis, but also from asking whether a given relationship leads to the mutual good of the persons involved in it. This approach is close to contemporary theories of relational ethics, which emphasize the importance of care, responsibility, and mutual recognition (Gilligan 1982, 17–23). At the same time, it represents a departure from the classical model in which sexual morality was evaluated primarily by reference to the objective purpose of the act. In SW 7, there occurs a shift from an "ethics of the act" toward an "ethics of the relationship." This raises a fundamental theological question: Can the relationship itself constitute a sufficient criterion for sexual morality? Proponents of SW 7 answer in the affirmative, pointing out that the person and love—understood as responsible care for the good of the other—stand at the center of Christian ethics. Critics, on the other hand, argue that a relationship requires an additional and necessary reference to objective anthropological truth, as the category of experience alone is insufficient to define moral good (MacIntyre 1981, 23–27).

Document SW 7 can therefore be considered a turning point, as it not only proposes adjustments to specific moral norms, but brings about a change in the way they are justified. The transition from ontology to phenomenology signifies shifting the center of gravity of reflection from the question of the structure of nature to the question of personal experience and the quality of relationships. The document thereby reveals a fundamental tension in contemporary moral theology: between fidelity to an objective normative order and the necessity of accounting for new anthropological and social experiences.

2.4. SW 12: Blessing as a Practice Transforming Norms

The Synodal Path document (SW 12: *Segensfeiern für Paare, die sich lieben—Blessing Celebrations for Couples Who Love Each Other*) regarding the possibility of granting blessings to persons in same-sex relationships and other forms of partnership is a vivid example of the transition from doctrinal reflection to pastoral practice. Its significance lies not only in proposing a concrete pastoral practice, but in posing

a question about the relationship between liturgy, moral norms, and the process of doctrinal development. Here, blessing becomes not only a religious act, but also a space in which moral and ecclesial meanings are reinterpreted (SW 12, 283–90). In traditional Catholic theology, a blessing is understood as an act of prayer of the Church through which the community asks God for grace, protection, and guidance. It is not identical to sacramental sanctification, nor does it imply automatic approval of every reality to which it refers. At the same time, however, a blessing possesses a strong symbolic and ecclesial dimension—it expresses a specific way in which the community of believers views a person, situation, or relationship. For this reason, any change in the practice of blessing carries consequences that are not only pastoral, but also normative, which is acceptable and strongly promoted by decision-makers in the Synodal Path.

SW 12 shows that a change in the understanding of moral norms does not occur exclusively through formal doctrinal statements, but also through liturgical practice. Liturgy fulfills a formative function—it shapes the consciousness of the faithful, influences how reality is interpreted, and communicates a specific image of the human person and their relationship with God. As Ratzinger (2000, 9–14) emphasizes, liturgy is not merely an expression of the community's faith, but also the place where faith is shaped and transmitted. This implies that a change in liturgical practice can lead to a deeper change in the way religious norms are understood. In this sense, SW 12 fits into a broader current of contemporary pastoral theology in which the concrete experience of persons and life situations becomes an important starting point for Church reflection. It is no longer merely a matter of applying a predetermined norm to a specific case, but of discerning how the Church should accompany people in complex existential situations. This approach is close to Pope Francis (2016, nos. 296–312), who emphasizes the importance of pastoral discernment, mercy, and the gradual spiritual growth of the individual. The theological reinterpretation of blessing in SW 12 is based on the assumption that a blessing does not have to signify full moral approval of a particular way of life, but can be understood as an expression of God's presence in a person's concrete life story. In this light, blessing becomes primarily an act of accompaniment, recognition of personal dignity, and acknowledgment of the good present in a person's life. The document thus shifts the focus from the question: "Does a given relationship correspond to a specific moral norm?" to the question: "How can the Church be present to those who seek God and meaning in their lives?"

This interpretation is embedded in the development of contemporary theology of mercy and personalism. According to Kasper (2014, 67–74), mercy does not mean departing from the truth, but rather a way of transmitting it in relation to a concrete person. Similarly, Christoph Theobald (2007, 155–60) points out that contemporary pastoral theology should take as its starting point "places of experience" where man encounters God within his own concrete life story. From this perspective, blessing

can be understood as a practice through which the Church is present to people whose life situations do not fit within traditional normative frameworks. However, it is precisely here that the fundamental tension regarding the normative implications of SW 12 emerges. The question arises: does a blessing granted to a relationship not in fact signify its moral acceptance? Although the document distinguishes a blessing from sacramental marriage and from formal endorsement of a specific relationship model, opponents of this proposal point out that the symbolic nature of liturgy can be interpreted as recognition of the moral good of that relationship. This problem reveals a profound difference between two ways of understanding the function of the Church. The first can be described as normative theology, which emphasizes the need to maintain clear moral distinctions and assumes that pastoral practice should remain subordinate to doctrine. The second model is pastoral theology, which places greater emphasis on process, accompaniment, and discerning the concrete situation of the person. The tension between these approaches represents one of the central issues in contemporary moral theology. From a sociological perspective, SW 12 can also be interpreted as an example of how religious practices can precede formal doctrinal changes. Peter L. Berger (1990, 53–58) pointed out that religious institutions operate within a specific cultural environment and must constantly negotiate their credibility under changing social conditions. The practice of blessing can thus serve as a transitional space in which the community tests new ways of interpreting its own tradition. From the perspective of the analyzed problem, SW 12 shows that the transformation of moral norms occurs not only through changes in theological argumentation, but also through changes in religious practices. Blessing becomes a meeting point between tradition and contemporary social experience. At the same time, it remains an area of tension, as it touches upon a fundamental question: Should the development of doctrine consist primarily in preserving the continuity of norms or in reinterpreting them in light of new human experiences? Document SW 12 thereby reveals a particular dynamic of contemporary theology: a transition from a model in which practice is the consequence of a clearly defined norm to a model in which pastoral practice itself becomes a space for discerning and developing the understanding of the norm. In this sense, blessing ceases to be merely a religious act, becoming also a tool for interpreting the relationship between the Church, culture, and contemporary human experience.

2.5. SW 14: Moral Pluralism as Reinterpretation of Normativity

Another document of the Synodal Path, designated as SW 14 (*Umgang mit geschlechtlicher Vielfalt—Dealing with Gender Diversity*), points to a shift in the understanding of moral norms within the German synodal process. Its significance stems from an attempt to reformulate the relationship between objective norms, concrete human situations, and the role of conscience in moral decision-making. This document does

not propose a simple rejection of universal norms, but emphasizes the need to account for the pluralism of human experiences, the diversity of life situations, and the complexity of moral discernment processes (SW 14, 305–16).

In classical Catholic tradition, as already explained, moral norms were understood as an expression of an objective order of good, rooted in rational human nature and in Revelation. Although this tradition always accounted for the circumstances of the act, intention, and degree of human responsibility, objective moral truth remained the fundamental point of reference as the object of the act, rather than the goal of the actor. Document SW 14, however, shifts the emphasis: it grants a greater role to the concrete situation of the individual, their experience, and the process of individual discernment. In this sense, the document fits into a broader debate in contemporary ethics concerning the relationship between the universal character of norms and the contextual character of human action. Moral pluralism here refers to the conviction that a single general norm can be understood and applied in different ways depending on a person's situation, history, level of awareness, and concrete existential circumstances. It is therefore not merely a matter of the existence of multiple moral opinions, but an acknowledgment that the path to moral good can take various forms. This approach finds its philosophical justification in personalism and contemporary hermeneutics. Reference should be made here to Paul Ricoeur (1992, 170–175), who pointed out that morality requires not only knowledge of principles, but also the interpretation of the concrete situation in which a person makes a decision. For man does not act in an abstract space of norms, but in a concrete world of relationships, history, and limitations. Similarly, Taylor (1989, 27–32) emphasized that human moral choices always take place within specific "horizons of significance" that shape the understanding of good and responsibility.

Document SW 14 draws from this perspective, indicating that Christian morality cannot be limited to the external application of rules, but requires a process of discernment. At its center lies not only the question: "What is the norm?" but also "How can a person in their concrete situation respond to the call to good?" In this way, moral pluralism becomes an attempt to reconcile the universal dimension of Christian ethics with the diversity of human experience—that is, how I perceive and experience the truth about the good of man. The category of conscience acquires particular significance in this model. SW 14 refers to the classical Christian tradition, according to which conscience is the inner sanctuary where man encounters truth and God. The Second Vatican Council defined conscience as man's "most secret core and his sanctuary," where he is alone with God (*GS* 16). At the same time, the contemporary interpretation of conscience emphasizes its dynamic and relational dimension. It is understood not as subjective arbitrariness nor as an individual's right to create their own moral norms, but as a process of discernment in which man confronts his own experience with moral truth. In this sense, conscience becomes the meeting point of norm and life, of objective good and the concrete situation of

the person. Such an understanding of conscience is developed in moral theology by Bernhard Häring (1978, 45–52), who emphasized that Christian morality cannot be reduced to obedience to external rules, but must be based on the responsible response of a person called by God. Similarly, Josef Fuchs (1987, 112–18) pointed out that contemporary moral theology should account for human subjectivity and the capacity for mature moral discernment. In the context of SW 14, conscience thus fulfills a threefold function: it is the place of decision-making, the center of norm interpretation, and a space for dialogue between man and God. This signifies a shift from a model in which the primary task of conscience was to recognize and apply an existing norm to a model in which conscience actively participates in discerning moral good.

The greatest controversies surrounding SW 14, however, concern the limits of moral pluralism. The key question is: when does the recognition of diverse moral interpretations cease to be legitimate pluralism and become relativism? This issue is particularly relevant regarding matters of sexuality, family, and Christian anthropology, as it concerns areas where the Church has traditionally formulated norms of a universal nature. Critics of moral pluralism point out that placing too much emphasis on individual discernment can lead to the weakening of the shared moral foundation. MacIntyre (1981, 6–12) argued that contemporary societies suffer from a crisis of a shared moral language because they have lost uniform criteria for understanding the good. From this perspective, an excessive fragmentation of moral interpretations can lead to a situation where the community no longer possesses common reference points. Proponents of SW 14, on the other hand, stress that pluralism does not mean rejecting moral truth, but rather recognizing the limits of human cognition and the complexity of concrete situations. They point out that within the Church there has always existed a tradition of distinguishing between a general norm and its concrete implementation. The development of moral doctrine consists not in changing the truth, but in a deeper understanding of how that truth relates to human life. A fundamental tension between two models of normativity is revealed here. The first model can be described as objectivist normativity, in which the primary task of morality is to ensure the conformity of action with an objective order of good. The second model is hermeneutical normativity, in which the process of interpretation, discernment, and accounting for the concrete situation of the person is of fundamental importance.

Document SW 14 does not definitively resolve this tension, but makes it one of the central themes of contemporary theological reflection, showing that the debate over moral pluralism is in reality a debate over the way morality itself is understood: whether it is primarily a system of objective norms or a process of continuous discernment of the good under changing historical circumstances. In the context of the entire Synodal Path, SW 14 serves as a complement to documents SW 3, SW 7, and SW 12. While SW 7 changes the way sexuality is understood, SW 12 changes the way

pastoral practice is understood, and SW 3 changes the way authority is understood, SW 14 touches upon the most fundamental level—the way the moral act itself is understood. This document illustrates the shift from a model of morality based primarily on the uniform application of norms toward a model based on discernment, conscience, and the responsible interpretation of human experience.

2.6. Systemic Analysis of the Reinterpretation of Moral Norms in the Synodal Path

An analysis of the Synodal Path documents shows that the process of reinterpreting moral norms does not occur exclusively on a single level of theological reflection, but simultaneously encompasses several interconnected prisms: anthropological, epistemological, and normative. This means that the change concerns not only specific moral evaluations relating to sexuality, relationships, or church structures, but reaches deeper—to the understanding of the human person, the sources of moral knowledge, and the criteria for evaluating good and evil. The Synodal Path can therefore be interpreted as a process of transformation of the entire model of religious normativity, in which traditional theological categories intersect with categories of contemporary liberal and pluralistic culture.

The first level of reinterpretation is anthropological in nature and concerns the redefinition of the understanding of the human person. Classical Christian anthropology was based on the assumption that man possesses a specific ontological structure that forms the foundation of moral norms. Human nature was understood as a reality possessing intrinsic meaning and purpose that can be known through reason and in the light of Revelation. Within the Synodal Path, however, a shift in emphasis occurs from the question of "human nature" to the question of "human experience." This implies assigning greater value to life stories, relationships, individual identity, and concrete existential situations. This anthropological turn is particularly evident in the documents concerning sexuality (SW 7), the blessing of relationships (SW 12), and moral pluralism (SW 14). The human person is analyzed not exclusively as a being possessing a specific biological and spiritual structure, but as a person developing in relationships and within a concrete cultural context. This approach is partially consistent with Christian personalism, especially with the thought of Wojtyła (1969, 25–32), who emphasized the importance of the person as a subject of experience and action. At the same time, however, the contemporary interpretation of personalism in the Synodal Path is expanded to include elements drawn from cultural anthropology and the sociology of identity.

The second level of transformation is epistemological in nature and concerns changes in the understanding of the sources of moral norms. In the classical theological model, the primary sources of normativity were Revelation, Tradition, and the authority of the Church's Magisterium. The experience of the faithful mattered,

but was interpreted within a predetermined doctrinal order. The Synodal Path, by contrast, introduces a more dialogical model in which the experience of the faithful, the findings of empirical sciences, and social changes become essential elements in the process of discernment. This change marks a transition from a deductive model, in which a norm is applied to a concrete situation, to a hermeneutical model, in which a norm is interpreted in dialogue with reality. In this sense, the Synodal Path exhibits similarities to Habermas's (1996, 287–328) concept of communicative rationality, according to which the legitimacy of norms requires a process of argumentation and mutual justification. With respect to the Church, this means assigning greater weight to consultations, dialogue, and communal discernment.

The third level of reinterpretation is normative in nature and refers to changes in the criteria of moral evaluation. In the traditional model of Catholic ethics, categories of natural law, the purpose of action, and the objective structure of the act were of key importance. In the model proposed by some synodal documents, a greater role is played by criteria such as responsibility, the good of the relationship, mutuality, care, and the integral development of the person. This represents a shift from an ethics focused on evaluating the act itself toward a more relational and personalistic ethics. The result is a hybrid model combining traditional and modern elements. On one hand, it retains the language of Christian doctrine, with references to the dignity of the person, conscience, human vocation, and God's action in history. On the other hand, it draws from categories characteristic of contemporary culture: pluralism, inclusion, individual experience, diversity, and human rights. However, this synthesis is not fully stable, as both frameworks are based on differing anthropological and normative assumptions.

The process of reinterpretation undertaken by the Synodal Path is thus gradual, heterogeneous, and potentially conflict-generating. Not all circles within the Church accept the proposed changes in the same way. For some participants in the synodal process, it represents a necessary modernization of the Church's language and practice in response to social changes. For others, it creates the risk of departing from enduring elements of Christian doctrine. This conflict shows that the subject of dispute is not merely individual moral issues, but differing ways of understanding the relationship between tradition and history. Another key element of this process is the attempt at convergence between religious and secular language. The Synodal Path documents employ terms such as inclusion, equality, diversity, recognition, and non-discrimination. These concepts occupy a prominent place in documents of EU institutions, particularly in the document under discussion. Introducing this language into church documents does not mean a simple adoption of a secular value system, but rather points to a process of mutual permeation between European culture and religious reflection.

From a sociological perspective, one can speak of a process of adapting religious language to a changing cultural environment. Categories such as "dignity,"

"recognition," and "protection of minorities" have both Christian roots and contemporary legal-political meanings. The contemporary dispute therefore concerns not only the terms themselves, but also their interpretation and the hierarchy of values underlying them. The influence of EU equality policy on the Synodal Path should be understood as an indirect mechanism rather than a direct doctrinal dependency. The EU does not impose specific theological solutions on the Church, but shapes the cultural, legal, and social environment in which the Church operates. This influence occurs through the education system, public debate, human rights language, and changes in social sensitivity. This process can be described using the theory of norm diffusion developed in the social sciences. According to this perspective, norms originating in one social environment can permeate other spheres through communication, institutions, and social practices (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 887–917). In the case of the Synodal Path, this means that certain categories developed in the secular sphere—such as equality or inclusion—are transferred into religious discourse, subsequently subjected to theological reinterpretation, and utilized to formulate new pastoral proposals. At the same time, this process reveals a fundamental tension between the normative autonomy of the Church and its cultural adaptation. The Church faces the question of how to preserve its own identity in a pluralistic society: whether by maintaining a clear distance from dominant cultural transformations, or through dialogue and the reinterpretation of its own language. The Synodal Path attempts to combine both approaches. On one hand, it appeals to the continuity of Christian tradition, while on the other proposing greater openness to the experience of contemporary man. It is precisely this attempt at synthesis that generates the greatest tensions, as it requires answering where the boundary lies between authentic doctrinal development and a change in its fundamental premises—a matter closely monitored by the Holy See. Systemic analysis thus shows that the Synodal Path is not merely a reform of individual church practices, but a process of multidimensional transformation of religious normativity. It simultaneously touches upon anthropology, epistemology, and ethics, leading to the emergence of a new model of relationship between Christian tradition and contemporary European culture.

Conclusion

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany constitutes a special example of the confrontation between a religious normative order and the cultural transformations taking place in contemporary European society. An analysis of this process shows that it is not merely an intra-ecclesial debate regarding institutional reforms, but also a response to profound anthropological, social, and axiological shifts that have occurred in Western culture. At the center of this tension lies the question

concerning the source of moral norms: whether they should be understood primarily as the result of an objective anthropological order and revealed truth, or as the outcome of a historical process of discernment by the community of believers in dialogue with the modern world (MacIntyre 1981, 6–12; Taylor 2007, 299–304). The analysis conducted has demonstrated that the paradigm of cultural equality, developed particularly within EU policy toward LGBTIQ+ persons, has introduced a new way of understanding the human person, freedom, and social justice. Its fundamental premise is the conviction that protecting human dignity requires not only formal equality before the law, but also the recognition of diverse forms of individual identity and experience. In this sense, contemporary equality discourse shifts the emphasis from protection against discrimination to the active shaping of a culture of inclusion. This simultaneously implies a change in the understanding of normativity—social norms increasingly serve as tools of recognition and integration, rather than merely an expression of a predetermined moral order.

The Synodal Path attempts to respond to these changes by applying a deliberative model in which the experience of the faithful, theological reflection, and the process of communal discernment play a larger role than in the classical hierarchical-doctrinal model. In this respect, it exhibits similarities to Habermas's (1996, 287–328) concept of communicative rationality, according to which the legitimacy of norms is linked to the possibility of their justification in an open process of dialogue. Applying this logic within the Church, however, raises a serious theological question: Can communal consensus serve as a criterion for the development of doctrine, or does it remain merely a tool for interpreting truth rooted in Revelation?

An analysis of the Synodal Path documents, especially those concerning sexuality, same-sex relationships, and the place of LGBTIQ+ persons in the Church, shows that we are dealing with an attempt to shift the emphasis from the category of objective norm to the categories of person, relationship, and responsibility. This perspective finds its justification in the personalistic understanding of the human person developed by Wojtyła (1960, 15–24), among others, according to which man cannot be reduced to a single dimension of his existence, but must be understood in the integrity of his dignity and vocation. At the same time, however, the question arises whether personalism can constitute a sufficient foundation for reinterpreting moral norms regarding sexuality, or whether it requires supplementation through broader reflection on human nature and the purpose of moral action.

Another key conclusion from the analysis is that the influence of EU equality policy on the Synodal Path is not in the nature of direct doctrinal impact. Rather, it is a process of cultural and normative social pressure in which specific conceptual categories—such as inclusion, diversity, and non-discrimination—become part of the dominant way of interpreting social reality (Taylor 1992b, 25–30; Vaggione 2014, 27–29). Functioning in a pluralistic European society, the Church cannot ignore these changes, but simultaneously faces the challenge of preserving its own

theological identity. In this context, Habermas's (2008, 131–34) proposal regarding the mutual process of translation between religious and secular language acquires particular significance. The future of dialogue between the Church and contemporary culture will depend on the ability of both sides to transcend their own limitations: secularism must recognize the epistemological value of religious traditions, while religion must be prepared for a critical dialogue with the historical and social experience of humanity.

Ultimately, the Synodal Path demonstrates that the contemporary dispute over moral norms does not concern merely individual ethical issues, but reaches deeper—to the question of understanding the human person, the sources of morality, and the functioning of authority in a pluralistic society. The paradigm of cultural equality and the religious normative order represent differing, though partially dialogical, ways of interpreting human experience. The challenge for contemporary theology remains finding a hermeneutical model that allows for maintaining fidelity to tradition while responding to the real experiences of people living in a changing world (Chojnacki 2025, 17).

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Priority Pathways for the Pastoral Accompaniment of Young Married Couples Experiencing Crises

JACEK GOLEŃ
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, jacek.golen@kul.pl

KATARZYNA WOJTANOWICZ
The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, katarzyna.wojtanowicz@upjp2.edu.pl

SYLWIA MICHALEC-JĘKOT
Ignatianum University in Krakow, 27087@student.ignatianum.edu.pl

Abstract: The aim of the article is to identify key pathways for the pastoral accompaniment of married couples experiencing crises during the early years of marriage. Four interrelated areas of crisis were identified: insufficient psychological and emotional maturity; difficulties in the marital relationship and bond; dysfunctions affecting the functioning of marriage and family life; and difficulties concerning the spiritual, religious, and moral development of the spouses. The research problem was addressed using source materials, primarily documents of the Magisterium of the Church, as well as interdisciplinary literature on the subject. The study employed primarily a deductive approach, supplemented by source analysis, classification, synthesis, and comparison. On this basis, two complementary pathways of support were identified: catechumenal pastoral accompaniment and specialized supportive accompaniment. The former draws on recent Church teaching, particularly the 2022 guidelines of the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life. The authors also propose an original model of specialized support comprising the establishment of initial contact and access to assistance, identification of the crisis, assessment of safety, selection of appropriate forms of support, accompaniment through the process of change, rebuilding of the marital bond, and prevention of further crises. The analysis indicates that comprehensive assistance requires collaboration among pastors, trained mentor couples, and specialists, while respecting the boundaries of their respective competencies.

Keywords: pastoral care of families, young married couples, marriage crises, catechumenal accompaniment, spiritual accompaniment, specialist assistance

Man and woman, created in God's image (cf. Gen 1:26–28), are called to form a communion of persons in the image of the unity of the Persons of the Holy Trinity (*AL* 29, 161). Jesus Christ has affirmed the human's capability for profound unity—two will become "one body" (cf. Matt 19:5), thereby raising the matrimonial covenant to the dignity of a sacrament (*CCL*, can. 1055 §1). The bestowal of the grace of the sacrament of marriage also requires the spouses to make a steadfast commitment to strengthening the bonds of marital love (cf. *AL* 217–18). Moreover, in the light of the Magisterium Ecclesiae, the community of the Church, particularly the parish headed by the parish priest, is obliged to support married couples in

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sustaining their marriage and developing the grace of the sacrament of marriage (cf. *AL* 202; Goleń 2016, 50–55). Sacramental married couples should play a key role in the support for married couples provided by the community of the Church, acting by virtue of the mission arising from their sacrament (cf. *AL* 200). Moreover, the Church, over the last decades, has developed various forms of specialized family counseling that can provide a very valuable professional support to married couples, especially those experiencing various kinds of crises (cf. *FC* 75; *AL* 211, 229; Landwójtowicz 2010, 9).

The Church's accompaniment of married couples following the wedding—as per the latest Magisterium documents—involves, in essence, constant pastoral care of the married life (cf. *AL* 218; DLFL, no. 74). However, it is not so much about formal existence and operation of the diocesan family pastoral care structures or mere operation of the specialist counseling centers or the selected one-off activities by the Church addressed to married couples and their families. Rather, it is about progressively walking with them through subsequent stages of their formation and development, a style that is commonly practiced by the Church in relation to married couples, modeled on the openness of the Heart of Jesus (cf. *FC* 65). Pope Francis, who clearly explained the essence of accompaniment, in accordance with its biblical understanding, defines it as being with somebody, walking with somebody, walking behind somebody (cf. Liddell et. al. 1996, 52). He compares the art of accompaniment to the biblical "removal of one's sandals" (cf. Exod 3:5). He defines it as follows: "The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life." (*EG* 169; emphasis added) He refers to the example of Jesus Christ, who is the Good Shepherd of the hundred sheep (cf. *AL* 309; Goleń and Gorbaniuk 2026, 2), and patiently and gently converses with a Samaritan woman (*AL* 38, 64, 294). In this spirit, he reminds us that "each person's situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without." (*EG* 172) He emphasizes that someone good at accompaniment does not judge the situation of other persons with frustrations or fears, but rather "invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel." (*EG* 172) The Pope focuses mainly on spiritual accompaniment as a joint discovering of the God's actions in individual's lives and patient walk with them along the path of development and growth (cf. *EG* 171). Such spiritual accompaniment means not only supporting individuals in their spiritual development, but also exercising spiritual discernment together with them (see Louf 1994, 59–72).

Pope Francis defines the pastoral care of married couples as a "pastoral care of the bond"—a "pedagogy of love" that supports both the maturation of marital love and the overcoming of difficult moments, thereby contributing to the preservation of the marriage (cf. *AL* 211, 307). However, he laments that most believing spouses in

difficult or critical situations do not seek pastoral assistance, since they do not find it comprehensive, sympathetic or realistic (*AL* 234). Several years later, the Pope's idea was further developed and refined by the Dicastery of the Laity, the Family and Life, clearly emphasizing not only the care for the bond of love, but also, first and foremost, by proposing specific steps of catechumenal accompaniment of married couples in crises (cf. DLFL, nos. 87–93). Both Magisterium documents referred above stress that in personal crises and in those experienced by married couples, specialized, especially psychological, support is indispensable. Those documents emphasize the need for simultaneous provision of spiritual as well as psychological accompaniment of married couples (cf. *AL* 211, 229, 236; DLFL, nos. 81, 89–90). On this basis, two priority tasks for accompanying young married couples experiencing crises were identified.

It is worth noting that the Magisterium respects both the rhythm of the catechumenal ritual of entry as well as the principles of prevention, focusing primarily on the urgent need of pastoral accompaniment of married couples in the early (two or three) years after the wedding (cf. DLFL, nos. 24, 74; Pyźlak 2017, 133–49). It is about deepening young married couples' experience of faith and helping them in opening up to the grace of the sacrament of marriage as well as supporting them in discerning love and overcoming the first difficulties and crises appearing from the very beginning of their common path (cf. Granados et al. 2016, 62–69). However, a married couple can greatly benefit even if the spouses decide, sometime later, to undertake in-depth work on themselves and on the bond of marital love and crises that come.

The aim of the article is to show the priority tasks of pastoral accompaniment of young married couples experiencing various crises. In the light of the latest Magisterium of the Church, knowledge on marital crises and experience in specialized support, one can distinguish four main areas of crises experienced by married couples. These are: crises related to mental maturity, crises related to marital relationship and bond, crises related to family dysfunctions, and crises related to spiritual and religious as well as moral development of married couples. The above-mentioned theological sources make it possible to identify two priority tasks for pastoral accompaniment of young married couples experiencing crises. These are: (1) spiritual accompaniment of catechumenal nature and (2) supportive specialist, primarily psychological, accompaniment. The pathway of catechumenal accompaniment of young married couples in crises is shown based on the guidelines of the Dicastery of the Laity, the Family and Life (see DLFL). Within the framework of the latter of the tasks, the authors' original model of supportive specialist accompaniment was proposed, which covers the diagnosis of the crisis and safety assessment, selection of appropriate forms of assistance, accompaniment of married couples in the process of change, and actions aimed at rebuilding the bonds and preventing further crises. A synthetic presentation of those tasks may serve not only academic purposes, but may also be

helpful in practical development and implementation by particular Churches (dioceses) of specific models and programs of the Church's work for married couples and families experiencing crises.

1. Crises of the Early Years of Marriage as a Pastoral Challenge

For many years, the issue of crisis has been an important subject of academic and practical consideration. In classic approaches by Erich Lindemann (1944, 141–48) and Gerald Caplan (1964, 42, 304) crisis is treated not as a symptom of a disorder, but as a person's reaction to a situation that exceeds his or her current abilities to cope. Previously effective problem-solving methods prove to be insufficient or temporarily unavailable, which leads to a loss of mental balance and the need to seek new methods of adaptation (Gilliland and James 2008, 33). Crisis can exacerbate the existing difficulties, but it can also become an impulse for change, use of the resources at one's disposal and further development (Sęk 2000; Płużek 2002; Pilecka 2004; Kubacka-Jasiecka 2025).

A marital and a family crisis must be viewed in the context of changes that take place in relations between the members of a family at subsequent stages of joint life. A family crisis can be defined as a period of temporary disorganization and disruption of the balance between the demands placed on a family and its current adaptability (Leśniak and Dobrzyńska-Mesterhazy 1996, 83–101). It occurs when the existing methods of coping with difficulties prove insufficient, and further functioning requires changing the rules of living together, roles fulfilled, methods of communicating or performing family duties.

Diagnosing the nature of a crisis is crucial for understanding its course and for selecting the appropriate forms of support. Crises that appear in the early years of marriage require special attention, as the spouses learn to live together, shape mutual relations, take up new roles and adjust to responsibilities related to those new roles. Young married couples may experience difficulties resulting not only from natural changes related to the family life cycle, sudden random events or fixed deficiencies in the functioning of the family system. A crisis may also develop in areas directly related to the readiness of spouses for living together, the quality of their mutual relations, and the existence of serious dysfunctions. Therefore, special attention must be paid to crises related to mental maturity, relationship and marital bond, dysfunctions disturbing the functioning of the marriage and family, and spiritual growth of married couples.

1.1. Crises Related to Mental Maturity

Crises related to mental maturity constitute a significant challenge for married couples, particularly in the early years of living together. Pope Francis notes that personal crises that affect marriage are often caused by lack or insufficient maturity brought into the marriage. As a result, a person in capable of loving only with "self-centred love of a child" or "with an adolescent love marked by hostility, bitter criticism and the need to blame others; caught up in their own emotions and fantasies, such persons expect others to fill their emptiness and to satisfy their every desire." (*AL* 239) As a result of emotional immaturity of spouses, the following may occur, among others: neurotic ways of reacting to changes, excessive dependence on the family of origin, unrealistic expectations of the spouse, communication issues, and the inability to take up new roles and the related responsibilities. The way the spouses function in difficult situations may be one of the indicators of their emotional maturity. Zenomena Płużek, referring to the concept by William Menninger, notes that maturity manifests itself primarily in the ability to love, be patient, flexibly react to change, and the ability to give meaning to difficult experiences (Płużek 2002, 58). An emotionally mature person is not free of fear, anger, unrest or guilt. However, he or she can identify those emotions and cope with them in a constructive manner. The ability to experience tension without recoursing to aggression, hostility, withdrawal or autoaggressive behavior is also important. Maturity also involves readiness to care for the other person, build relationships based on mutuality, and accept and express love.

Contemporary research indicates that difficulties in identifying emotions, controlling impulses and using the appropriate emotional regulation strategies may lower the marital relationship satisfaction (Xu et al. 2023). Developing the emotional maturity of young spouses serves a preventive function: it reduces the risk of escalation of conflicts, makes it easier to take responsibility for the relationship and helps to constructively go though crises. Difficult experience may then become not only a threat for the durability of marriage, but also the opportunity for personal development and strengthening of the bonds.

1.2. Crises Related to Marital Relationship and Bond

The factors conducive to the integration of the marriage and the sense of satisfaction from the relationship include, primarily, the quality of the emotional bond, the way the spouses treat each other, communication, and the ability to resolve conflicts (Braun-Gałkowska 2008, 49–50). Emotional bond is a close and relatively durable relationship involving mutual emotional, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral interrelationships (Greszta 2000, 60). It forms the basis of the functioning of the marriage, affects mental health of the spouses and their daily relations (Szopińska and Szopiński 1980, 93). As closeness in dynamic in nature, it can be developed, but also

weakened under the influence of difficult experiences (Chrząstowski 2010, 143). Communication is a vital component of building the bond. It includes the ability to express one's needs, understanding the spouse's perspective, and constructive resolution of conflicts. Good communication is conducive to love, trust, and sincerity, while a high quality of the relationship makes it easier to cope with tension and to forgive (Jankowska 2016). Also, sexual union of the spouses, lovingly experienced and sanctified by the sacrament, strengthens their mutual love in a special manner and is a path of growth in the life of grace and sanctification (cf. *AL* 74; Goleń 2022, 13). Therefore, both communication and dialog between the spouses, as well as experience of sexual intimacy serve to greatly strengthen the bond of marital love. Thus, while striving to avoid deeper marital crises, they are worth taking particular care of and protecting despite various difficulties.

This is because relations with loved ones affect one's way of thinking, the value system, and the ability to adapt to changing life circumstances (Dwyer 2005, 19). Marital bond may be weakened both by a sudden event such as an illness, death, or job loss, and by crises related to subsequent stages of the family development. However, a crisis need not lead only to disintegration. It can be an opportunity to achieve greater maturity, self-awareness, and ability to cope with difficulties (Kubacka-Jasiecka 2025, 71–80). Whether a crisis is overcome depends on the resilience of the family system, the ability to create new patterns of interaction and to develop a healthy communication between the spouses (Słowik 2019).

1.3. Crises Related to Dysfunctions

Young married couples may experience crises resulting from dysfunctional patterns acquired from their families of origin, particularly those related to addiction, violence, or mental disorders. These are defined as endogenous crises. The other group of crises are emergency crises, caused by sudden and unforeseen events such as job loss, serious illness, experience of sexual violence, or a sudden death of a loved one. Death of a child is one of the most burdensome experiences (Nadrowska et al. 2022). A marriage crisis may lead to an increasing dysfunctionality and weakening of one or more of its functions and, as a consequence, to the disintegration of the relationship (Wojaczek 2010, 133–34). However, disintegration need not mean the break-up of the marriage. Contemporary research on post-traumatic growth indicates that dealing with a crisis may lead to positive changes in perceiving oneself, one's own abilities and relations with others. This process may be facilitated by the support provided by one's spouse and the quality of a close relationship (Purol and Chopik 2024). On the other hand, the process is put at risk by the perpetuation of the dysfunctional way of functioning or by a break-up of the relationship.

In families affected by addiction, violence or mental disorders, seeking assistance outside of the family system is of particular importance. Improvement of individual

functioning of one of the spouses may initiate a change of the entire relationship, but it sometimes meets resistance, rejection or increased aggression from the other spouse (Słowik 2019). The process of change requires significant mental commitment and readiness to work on one's own functioning. In case of domestic violence, protection of persons experiencing violence, often the other spouse or children, should be prioritized, and the victims should be provided with safety and specialized assistance (cf. *AL* 229, 241).

The way of communicating is one of the areas requiring change. Ineffective communication leads to frustration, mutual resentment, and further escalation of the conflict. Conversation may then transform into a fight for dominance, and words are not used for communication but to achieve one's own goals (Beck 1996, 108). Sometimes, disruption in communication may be a symptom of deeper wounds and defense mechanisms that cause a specific kind of "deafness" and "blindness" to the needs of the spouse (Beck 1996, 118–19). Therefore, assistance in this kind of crisis should involve both work on the relationship and individual support for each of the spouses (Słowik 2019).

1.4. Crises in the Spiritual and Religious Area

Experiencing spiritual and religious crises by married couples is a primary pastoral challenge, in addition to the risks presented above. It must be noted that crisis situations related to mental maturity, relationship and marital bond, and to family dysfunctions and other situations reveal and lead married couples towards greater developmental challenges on a spiritual and religious level. This presents married couples with difficult challenges and therefore requires holistic assistance—psychological and spiritual simultaneously.

On the one hand, often overlapping personal (including developmental and religious) and marital and family crises usually require professional assistance (cf. *AL* 236) so that, in accordance with the theory of adult developmental psychology, those crises foster growth and integral maturation of an individual (cf. Landwójtowicz 2017, 374). Such a situation requires also the spouses themselves to overcome their own limitations, to fully respect the other person's individuality, and to care for his or her development (cf. Peck 2016, 182–96). At the same time, the spouses need to commit to their own spiritual development and, in case of religious persons, also to religious and moral development. There is the need for maturation in love and continuous development of the gift of grace received in the sacrament of marriage (cf. *AL* 134–35). Results of psychological and religious studies confirm a positive influence of religion on resolution of marital and family crises (see Mahoney and Tarakeshwar 2005). However, it must be borne in mind that constructive coping in crisis situations is more common in individuals with mature (personal) religiosity based on the bond with God (cf. Tokarski 2011, 42–43). Otherwise, it would be

hard to adopt the logic of one's own spiritual maturation which takes place thanks to various crises. It is also hard to open up oneself to a paschal logic of maturation of marital love which grows and becomes stronger thanks to joint efforts as well as suffering and hardships overcome with the help of the Lord's grace (cf. *AL* 126, 130, 234, 315, 317).

In the Christian perspective, maturation of a stronger bond with God, involving the purification and spiritual transformation, very often takes place also thanks to various experiences of going through a crisis, which is confirmed by the spiritual life theology and, in particular, by the Carmelite masters (cf. Stinissen 2016, 86–94). In such a perspective, one can speak of the "grace working in weakness" also on the ground of pastoral care of married couples experiencing difficulties and crises (cf. Pérez-Soba 2014, 30–32). This shall be understood in a way that various crises are a task and a chance for spouses to grow, mature, gain experience, and strengthen the unity and intensity of their mutual relation (cf. Suminta and Ghufron 2022). They also create a chance for individuals to grow spiritually and to gain a new depth and authenticity of the relationship, strengthen the unity and become happy in a new way (cf. *AL* 232).

To this end, it is necessary to strengthen, in married couples—especially those married in the sacrament—their awareness of the deep spiritual bonds of *communio personarum* and *communio amoris* (see Bukalski and Falewicz 2022, 159–75; cf. Kobak 2022, 153). It is also necessary to strengthen their firm resolve to defend the bonds of marital love in crisis situations, and to encourage and help them develop patience, fortitude and prudence, which are essential for overcoming difficult moments. Then, a couple can mature in love and their bond in a crisis can be strengthened (cf. *AL* 238; DLFL, nos. 81, 85). However, it seems that the most important and, at the same time, difficult spiritual challenge for married couples in a crisis is to summon patience, self-sacrifice, and mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. The sacraments of Penance and Eucharist are the indispensable source of grace that strengthens and heals mutual love and enables one to forgive (cf. *AL* 38, 41, 104–6, 236, 238, 240, 318). Because, thanks to the God's grace, forgiveness of injustice is possible, it is therefore also urgently necessary to develop a ministry of reconciliation and mediation in dioceses (cf. *AL* 242). The Church is also aware that "The arduous art of reconciliation, which requires the support of grace, needs the generous cooperation of relatives and friends, and sometimes even outside help and professional assistance." (*AL* 236; DLFL, no. 90)

Good will and arduous effort of one' work on oneself and support referred to above may be needed especially when one of the spouses is not yet mature enough for love as he or she has not experienced being loved unconditionally by his or her parents (and, sometimes, by his or her siblings), which may limit his or her ability to trust and to give of oneself. Such a history of the relationship requires the healing process so that it does not harm the marital life (cf. *AL* 240). However, taking up by

the spouses of the road of his or her own healing and overcoming a crisis in such a situation

> involves recognizing a need for healing, insistent prayer for the grace to forgive and be forgiven, a willingness to accept help, and the determination not to give up but to keep trying. A sincere self-examination will make it possible to see how one's own shortcomings and immaturity affect the relationship. Even if it seems clear that the other person is at fault, a crisis will never be overcome simply by expecting him or her to change. We also have to ask what in our own life needs to grow or heal if the conflict is to be resolved. (*AL* 240)

In addition to the presented forms of support, Pope Francis specifically emphasizes the role of pastoral accompaniment of young married couples, in particular by experienced and trained married couples:

> Couples will gain from receiving help in facing crises, meeting challenges and acknowledging them as part of family life. Experienced and trained couples should be open to offering guidance, so the couples will not be unnerved by these crises or tempted to hasty decisions. Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart. (*AL* 232)

Here, the Dicastery of the Laity, the Family and Life suggests that parishes and other church communities implement a special pastoral ministry that consists in accompanying married couples in crisis, where married couples experienced in overcoming a crisis, in collaboration with pastoral workers, would be companions to married couples (DLFL, nos. 81, 87–88).

Therefore, in overcoming marital crises, in addition to motivating a married couple for the development of their own spiritual and religious commitment, one also has to create a space for meeting and dialog with God and the spouse, with other married couples and with specialists, as part of various forms of pastoral and spiritual accompaniment.

2. Catechumenal Accompaniment of Young Married Couples in Crises

The catechumenal accompaniment recommended by the Church to young married couples (see DLFL) is mystagogic in nature. As such, it gradually helps to explore the mystery of God and the workings of his Grace in the sacrament of marriage and, at the same time, to discover His actions in daily married life situations (cf. Polak 2018, 243–44). According to Pope Francis, God always accompanies the human journey, "heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through

the way of the cross." (*AL* 62) Various crises surely are in line with this God's pedagogy. Therefore, for believers, they should not be a reason for worry or feeling deserted by God. On the contrary, invoking and recognizing the closeness of Christ present in the live of a married couple, especially in crises, can constitute the most important factor in healing and strengthening their relationship. To this end, a married couple urgently needs space and pathways that introduce each of the spouses into the art of discernment of the actions of Christ as well as recognizing the situations of suffering, immaturity or wounds to overcome (cf. DLFL, no. 90). One of such pathways for the pastoral and spiritual accompaniment of married couples, developed by the Dicastery of the Laity, the Family and Life, is the formation project for local Churches, parishes and other communities (see DLFL, nos. 91–94). It is a pathway of catechumenal accompaniment of married couples in a crisis, based on the journey of Jesus walking with his disciples to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). It involves "individual" meetings, i.e. with a single couple, alternated with "group" meetings, i.e. involving several couples. The main aim is to create an opportunity for experiencing human and spiritual closeness, Liturgy of the Word of God and exploring the faith, prayer, listening, sharing as well as appropriate celebrations involving the community (cf. DLFL, nos. 91–92).

The pathway proposed in number 91 is opened by an individual meeting with a married couple, dedicated to welcoming and acquaintance. (1) In reference to Luke 24:15, where Jesus drew near and walked along the disciples, the meeting should take place in the atmosphere of confidentiality and personal closeness. The purpose of the meeting is for a couple to be welcomed and listened to by an accompanying couple and a priest. (2) At the beginning of the journey of accompaniment of the disciples, Jesus asked them what they were discussing (cf. Luke 24:17). It is a model step on the spiritual journey that allows a married couple to reflect and, in a prayerful atmosphere, tell God and the spouse what the reason is they are downcast. It is about opening the heart, which allows the spouse to find out "what makes the other suffer." At this moment it is worth focusing on one's own experience and attitude and ask oneself: "What pain do I carry inside?" "What discomfort do I feel?" "What is it about the way we treat each other that hurts me?" (3) The third step could involve one or several meetings in a group with other married couples, making it possible to highlight a crisis in a manner similar to how Jesus did it referring to the prophets and rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith (cf. Luke 24:25–26). It seems beneficial here to present the testimonies of married couples who have gone through crises and learned "new things," and give a short teaching based on the statements of the Church (e.g., the *Amoris laetitia* exhortation), texts of saint spouses going through various trials. The aim is to show that "crises," if accepted and jointly lived through with God's help, can prove to be the time of grace and growth of the couple (cf. *AL* 236). Kerygmatic catechesis is needed here—proclaiming the Christ who is present in the life of a married couple and suffers together with them for their sins but, at the

same time, shares with them in the glory of healed and "redeemed" relationship (cf. Luke 24:26). Married couples can see here that their crisis, or even various faces of death, can be transferred by the Lord into resurrection to a new life. (4) The next step of the pastoral accompaniment also refers to Luke 24:27, where Jesus explained to the disciples what referred to Him in all the scriptures. Again, this step can be implemented in a group of married couples, as it is about joint celebration of the liturgy of the word, meditation as well as sharing and joint reflection with the help of the accompanying couple. „Care shall be taken to choose biblical texts exploring themes such as: the nearness of God in trials, God's forgiveness which is received then shared with others, grace working in weakness, communion of hearts as a gift of the Holy Spirit, the call to holiness, the Sacrament of Marriage, etc." (DLFL, no. 91) (5) As in the Gospel of Luke, in the next step, a married couple can call to Jesus "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening" (Luke 24:29). This step can comprise several Eucharistic evenings. The aim is to become aware of human helplessness in the face of various difficulties and crises, and to create chances to entrust personal difficulties and crises to Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament, so that He heals wounds and hearts as well as mutual relations. It can also be done in a symbolic manner, through a simple celebration. At this stage it may prove invaluable to hold a penitential service combined with the preparation for and reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. Forgiving oneself and the spouse, which is the most important, but also probably the most difficult challenge for married couples going through a crisis (cf. *AL* 236), is possible thanks to forgiveness received from the Lord. Only then is reconciliation with God, one's self and one's past, and with one's neighbor possible. (6) The next step of accompaniment of married couples is the Eucharistic celebration. This step refers to Luke 24:30, where "Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them." More such celebrations can be suggested to a married couple so that they experience more deeply that Jesus is present also in a crisis. Because the Eucharist is the source of marital unity (cf. *SC* 28), married couples can receive grace by which "their own marriage covenant … is interiorly structured and continuously renewed." (*FC* 57) This allows them to open their suffering hearts, experience healing and growth of love, as well as mutual bestowal. (7) The final step of catechumenal accompaniment involves recognizing the Lord and the resulting dynamism, strength that makes it possible to return to the place the disciples wanted so much to go away from not long before (cf. Luke 24:31–33). At this stage it is important to learn to rest and celebrate together and to enjoy love (*amoris laetitia*), as trust and joy in the hearts can be rekindled. Pope Francis reminded us that

> Marital joy can be experienced even amid sorrow; it involves accepting that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures, but always on the path of friendship, which inspires married couples to care for one another: "they help and serve each other." (*AL* 126)

Therefore, those concluding meetings can help married couples to continue the marital life with new wisdom gained during a crisis, and thanks to experience of meeting with the Risen Jesus and accompaniment of sisters and brothers in faith. It must be added that, after this pastoral and spiritual pathway has been completed, the aim is not for accompanying persons and couples to completely part ways with a couple, but rather to be constantly present and ready to meet, listen to and support them also in the future. For some couples, the continuation of the individual meetings with an accompanying couple may be necessary and recommended for a long time to come (DLFL, no. 91).

For the Church to really be a mother for married couples, who is constantly ready to welcome her children "the parish or community should offer a pastoral service for accompanying couples in crisis, to which those who perceive that they are in such a situation can turn." (DLFL, no. 87) The motherly attitude of the Church towards married couples, particularly those in a crisis, is more pronounced also thanks to an easier access to specialist support that respects the Christian world view and is shaped thanks to the faith of the married couples' conscience, and perceives faith as a healing process supporting factor.

3. Model of Supportive Specialist Accompaniment

Assistance addressed to married couples experiencing a crisis must not be limited only to their mutual relationship. Tensions between spouses usually also affect their children, the way of performing family roles and everyday atmosphere at home. For this reason, support should take into account mental, relationship-based, social, and spiritual background of the difficulties, while referring to the resources which are still at a married couple's disposal (Ryś 2000, 29–31; Rostowski 2009, 16). Sometimes, emergency assistance is needed, but it should not replace long-term cooperation based on identifying the family's situation, respectful treatment of the members of the family, and involvement of appropriate persons and institutions (Ciczkowska-Giedziun 2017, 84–86, 93–94). A well-managed process starts at a conversation during which spouses can present their own experiences and name what has become difficult for them. Only later can the nature of a crisis be defined, level of risk assessed, appropriate form of assistance chosen, and further steps jointly established. A specialist does not make decisions for married couples. Rather, he or she helps them sort out the situation, find possible solutions and turn to the resources that they can use in daily life.

Work with married couples requires cooperation between people involved in pastoral care of families and specialists. Psychological, therapeutic, educational, mediation or social assistance addresses those areas which require knowledge and

competence exceeding pastoral conversation. However, this does not mean giving up support provided to married couples as part of pastoral care of families. Either kind of support can complement the other as long as they respect their limits and remain directed to the good of a married couple and their family (*AL* 204; Goleń 2018, 105–8). Such cooperation makes it possible to maintain the continuity of assistance and does not reduce a crisis to a single issue. It can also support rebuilding the dialog, bond, and ability to going through further difficulties together (cf. *FC* 65, 69; *AL* 232–34). The proposed model organizes the work with married couples into six areas: initial contact, identification of a crisis, safety assessment, selection of the forms of assistance, accompaniment in the process of change, and rebuilding the bond combined with prevention. They do not constitute a fixed procedure. In practice, the pace, scope, and sequence of actions depend on a family's situation. Cases of violence and danger to life or health are the exception, where protection of the victim and his or her children takes precedence.

3.1. Initial Contact and Ensuring the Availability of Assistance

An initial meeting may decide whether spouses muster up courage to speak openly about what is happening in their relationship. It is a frequent occurrence that they turn up only when tension has been present for months and previous attempts to resolve the conflict were unsuccessful. They may come with a sense of failure, mutual grief, shame or fear of being judged. Therefore, what they need at the beginning is to be calmly welcome and mindfully listened to, rather than given ready advice. A person conducting the conversation should provide space for both spouses, help them name the difficulties and identify their expectations of the meeting. Looking for the guilty one or rushing to decide who is right does not serve this purpose. Premature interpretation of the situation may close the conversation, especially when one of the parties has already felt not listened to or disregarded.

The pastoral dimension of the initial contact is expressed primarily in the presence that does not underestimate suffering, while not taking away hope. A married couple should be given a clear signal that a crisis does not exclude them from the community of the Church or rule out the possibility of receiving assistance. A conversation can open up a path to further pastoral, psychological, therapeutic, mediation, legal, or social support.

When difficulties exceed the competences of a person presiding over the meeting, the mere recommendation to "turn to a specialist" may not be enough. It is more helpful to indicate a specific person or institution, explain the operating principles and, if necessary, to facilitate the initial contact. Referral to a specialist should not mean the withdrawal from further spiritual support. A pastor can remain in contact with a married couple, keeping in mind that pastoral conversation does not replace a therapy, medical treatment or intervention.

3.2. Diagnosis of a Crisis

To plan assistance, at first one has to understand what is actually going on in the marriage. A single conflict may be temporary, but it also be a signal of the growing distance. On the other hand, an apparent calm may not mean that there are no problems; sometimes it results from one of the parties withdrawing or abandoning dialog.

The diagnosis should cover both the current difficulties and the history of the relationship. The moment when the tension appeared, the ways the spouses reacted, previous attempts to resolve the issue and what helped them go through previous difficult period must be looked into. For example, a marital crisis may be related to communication issues, being overburdened with duties, emotional immaturity, infidelity, addiction, violence, mental illness, difficulties in the sexual area or weakening of the spiritual life. It may also result from disagreements over significant marital decisions, such as having children, choosing a place to live or establishing boundaries in relationships with the families of origin. Financial difficulties can be an additional aggravating factor, as they limit the ability of a married couple to meet the spouses' important needs and may exacerbate tensions in the relationship. Usually, however, there is not a single cause. Several factors overlap and reinforce one another.

A conversation should not leave out the situation of the children. Even if they are not directly involved in disputes, they sense the change in the atmosphere at home, tension between the parents, unpredictability of behavior or difficulties in care-giving. In some families, a marital crisis also affects the elderly—dependent on a married couple or living with it. It may also be necessary to speak with each of the spouses separately. This is the case especially in situations where one person remains silent in the presence of the other, is clearly afraid of the other or is unable to speak freely about his or her own experiences. An individual meeting can reveal violence, addiction, intimidation, mental issues or other circumstances that cannot be discussed at in a group. Before starting such conversations, the limits of confidentiality and the way of using the information to be obtained must be clearly defined. When assessing the situation of a married couple as part of pastoral care of families, one must not be quick to place all the responsibility on one of the parties. The purpose of such assessment is to grasp the essence of a crisis, identify a married couple's resources, and define the limits of assistance that can be provided as part of pastoral care. It also makes it possible to establish when it is necessary to involve a specialist.

3.3. Safety Assessment

A conversation about rebuilding the relationship makes sense only when it is known that life and health of the members of the family are not in danger. Therefore, it must be checked whether there is physical, sexual or economic violence, persistent

humiliation, intimidation, controlling, alcohol or other substance abuse, suicidal behavior or child neglect in the household.

It is also essential to determine whether an endangered person is able to leave the dangerous location, contact someone he or she trusts, and seek assistance from appropriate authorities. In practice, it may turn out that a conversation about a marital relationship must be temporarily postponed, because steps must be taken to protect the abused person and the children. In a violence situation, one cannot say that either side is equally responsible. Conflict implies a dispute, whereas violence means that boundaries are crossed and the other person is being harmed. Care for the durability of marriage does not justify persuading anybody to remain in circumstances that threaten his or her life, health, or dignity. Violence must not be justified with a difficult childhood, addiction, strong emotions, or religious arguments. In the event of a real danger, actions beyond pastoral care are necessary: contacting the police, a crisis intervention center, a social welfare center or social services center, a physician, a psychiatrist, an addiction counselor, a lawyer, or another appropriate entity. Spiritual support can provide support and help restore hope during this time, but it is not a substitute for legal protection, or medical or psychological care.

3.4. Selection of Appropriate Forms of Assistance

Once the situation has been assessed, the parties can jointly consider what kind of assistance will be most appropriate. Not every couple needs marriage therapy, just as not every crisis can be addressed only through pastoral dialog. In some cases, the first step will be crisis intervention, in others it will be psychiatric treatment, addiction therapy, legal consultation, or securing the social situation. Only then will it be possible to work on the relationship. Support may combine three areas: parish and pastoral assistance, support from appropriately trained married couples living in a sacramental marriage, and specialized assistance.

A referral to a specialist alone does not necessarily mean that the spouses will cooperate. They may fear being judged, be ashamed of their situation, doubt the effectiveness of the therapy, or recall previous, unsuccessful experiences. Therefore, discussion about further assistance should address their concerns. It is worth explaining why a particular form of support is being offered, what the first meeting will look like, and what to expect after it. Motivating is not about exerting pressure, but about helping married couples realize that accepting assistance can be an expression of responsibility for themselves, the spouse, and the children. Depending on the needs, the cooperation may involve a psychologist, a psychotherapist, a couples and family therapist, a psychiatrist, an addiction therapist, a sexologist, a family mediator, a crisis intervention specialist, an educator, a social worker, a family assistant, a physician, a lawyer, or a family life counselor. A pastor or other person

providing support helps married couples choose and make initial contact with the appropriate specialist. Individual actions should complement one another and lead in the same direction.

3.5. Accompaniment in the Process of Change

Starting a therapy, medical treatment or mediation does not end the need for accompaniment. A change seldom takes a straightforward and consistent course. Periods of improvement alternate with moments of discouragement, return to old ways of reacting, and doubts whether further efforts are worth it. Then, the presence of a person who can see progress but does not conceal difficulties is particularly important.

The goals of the efforts should be specific and applicable in daily life. For one couple it will mean having a calm conversation; for another—establishing the rules of childcare, refraining from insulting, starting medical treatment, regular participation in a therapy or assuming responsibility for the harm caused. Small changes are not the ultimate goal but often make it possible to regain a sense of agency and rebuild the readiness for further work.

A person providing support does not make a decision for a married couple, nor does he or she assume responsibility for the course of the spouses' relationship. However, he or she can help them put their experiences into perspective, understand the results of one's own behavior, and return to the commitments they have made. Sometimes it will be necessary to have a conversation about the disappointment with the therapy, difficulties in implementing recommendations or about changing the specialist. During this time, pastoral support can sustain hope, without imposing on a couple the pace of changes or the directions of decisions. A pastoral conversation, prayer, sacraments, retreat, community meetings or contact with an experienced married couple can bolster the process of change. Those forms should complement specialist assistance and remain compliant with therapeutic, medical, and legal recommendations.

3.6. Rebuilding the Bonds and Prevention

Cessation of an open conflict does not necessarily mean that the bond has been rebuilt. Spouses need time to feel safe with each other again, regain trust and find out whether the implemented changes are permanent. The ways in which everyday conversations are conducted, needs expressed, tension responded to and joint decision made are of great importance.

Rebuilding the relationship may take various courses. Following infidelity, violence, addiction or prolonged humiliation, one cannot expect a quick return to closeness. Trust does not result from a single declaration or promise to improve.

Instead, it is born gradually from behaviors that confirm responsibility, predictability and willingness to make amends for the consequences of one's own actions.

In case of the history of violence, rebuilding the relationship can only be considered after the threat has ceased. A perpetrator must assume responsibility for his or her actions and undertake proper work on change. Forgiveness alone or religious declaration are not enough for the situation to be deemed safe. Pastoral support can help married couples rediscover the meaning of their mutual commitment, their shared history, and the place of faith in their daily lives.

Pastoral conversations, prayer, retreat, and meetings for married couples can support this process, but they do not automatically remove the effects of a deep crisis. Prevention begins with identifying the first signs of a deteriorating relationship. Spouses should know what situations are most likely to cause tension between them and what helps end those situations before they develop into another crisis. In practice, this means that they should take care to have regular conversation, spend time together, share responsibilities in an appropriate manner, react to recurring issues, and be willing to seek assistance again. It is not about creating a conflict-free relationship. A more realistic goal is to learn how to deal with differences and tensions in such a way that they do not lead to humiliation, violence, or permanent alienation. Then, a married couple will obtain a better ability to go through other experiences together and respond more quickly when difficulties arise.

Conclusions

An attempt to present the priority pathways for the pastoral accompaniment of young married couples experiencing crises made it possible both to define them and to present synthetically selected forms and methods of their implementation. The analyses conducted indicate that the "priority pathways for pastoral accompaniment" referred to in the title comprise two interrelated areas of support for married couples experiencing crises: catechumenal (spiritual) accompaniment and specialist support. Both pathways are important and complementary, although not every couple in crisis needs to make use of both of them simultaneously.

Crises experienced by young married couples, especially in the early years of marriage, are often related to the mental maturity of the spouses, the quality of the marital relationship and bond, family dysfunctions, and the spiritual, religious and moral development of the spouses. They therefore constitute a pastoral challenge that may require both pastoral (spiritual) accompaniment and appropriate specialist support, particularly psychological assistance. On both pathways, crisis should be approached not only as a difficulty but also as a possible "chance" for personal development and for achieving a new quality in the marital relationship. The sequence

and intensity of the forms of accompaniment should depend on the needs and choices of a specific couple.

The first of the two priority pathways is the catechumenal accompaniment of young married couples experiencing crises, as presented in the Magisterium of the Church. It primarily addresses the spiritual, religious and moral challenges associated with marital crises. This form of accompaniment supports spouses in discerning the presence of Christ in their personal experiences and marital difficulties, as well as in recognizing suffering, immaturity and wounds that need to be overcome. The formation project proposed by the Dicastery draws on the model of Jesus' journey to Emmaus with his disciples (cf. Luke 24:13–35). It includes both individual meetings with married couples and meetings within groups of couples, creating opportunities to experience human and spiritual closeness, participate in the Liturgy of the Word, deepen faith and prayer, listen to and share experiences with other married couples, receive spiritual accompaniment and discernment, and participate in important liturgical celebrations.

The second priority pathway is supportive specialist accompaniment, also recommended in the pastoral documents of the Magisterium. Within this framework, the authors' original model of specialized support has been proposed. It encompasses six interconnected areas of action: initial contact and ensuring the availability of assistance, identifying the nature and conditions of the crisis, assessing safety, selecting appropriate forms of support, accompanying the married couple through the process of change, and rebuilding the marital bond together with preventing further crises. The model should not be understood as a fixed procedure, but rather as a framework that organizes the most important stages of assistance and allows its scope and intensity to be adapted to the situation of a specific married couple. Its implementation requires cooperation between persons involved in the pastoral care of families, properly prepared accompanying married couples, and specialists, while respecting the boundaries of their respective competences.

A holistic approach remains crucial in this model of accompaniment. Pastoral care should take into account, first and foremost, the spiritual and religious dimension of experiencing marital crises, while at the same time making use of specialist assistance whenever the situation requires it, particularly in matters related to personal maturity, communication difficulties or forgiveness. Pastoral care for believing married couples therefore benefits from specialist support that respects the Christian worldview and the conscience of the spouses and recognizes religious faith as an important factor supporting the process of healing and change. Effective accompaniment of young married couples experiencing crises thus requires an integral combination of the pastoral and spiritual dimensions with appropriate specialist support. Assistance understood in this way should respond to the actual needs of married couples, foster their personal and spiritual growth, and contribute to rebuilding and strengthening the marital bond.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jacek Goleń: Methodology, Data collection, Writing the original version of part of the text, Project administration, Review & editing, Bibliography search | **Katarzyna Wojtanowicz:** Methodology, Writing the original version of part of the text, Project administration, Bibliography search | **Sylwia Michalec-Jękot:** Bibliography search, Writing the original version of part of the text, Expert consultations on the project and content.

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Resurrection, Recognition, and Discipleship in John 20

MARTIN MICALLEF
University of Malta, martin.f.micallef@um.edu.mt

Abstract: This study examines John 20 as the theological climax of the Gospel of John, focusing on Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ as a model of authentic discipleship and faith. It argues that the Evangelist intentionally parallels Mary's resurrection experience with the call narratives of John 1, especially through the recurring motif of "seeking" Jesus. Mary's journey from grief, misunderstanding, and searching to recognition, belief, and witness illustrates the Johannine process of faith, which emerges through divine revelation rather than empirical evidence alone. The study highlights how themes such as seeing and believing, absence and presence, and discipleship and witness converge in John 20, presenting the resurrection not merely as Jesus' vindication but as the inauguration of a new creation and a transformed relationship between Christ and believers. Ultimately, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a paradigmatic disciple whose encounter with the risen Lord culminates in mission and testimony, inviting readers to follow the same path from seeking to faith.

Keywords: Mary Magdalene, Johannine discipleship, resurrection faith, recognition and revelation, seeking

The resurrection narratives of the Fourth Gospel occupy a distinctive position within New Testament theology and early Christian literary tradition. Like the Synoptic Gospels, John presents the resurrection as the divine vindication of the crucified Jesus. At the same time, the Fourth Gospel situates Jesus' resurrection within its broader theology of his "hour," in which his crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation, and glorification are intimately connected (de Boer 2007; Talbert 2005). The resurrection narratives should therefore be interpreted within the larger narrative movement that begins with Jesus' death on the cross and culminates in his return to the Father. This movement not only redefines the relationship between the risen Jesus and his disciples but also transforms their relationship with God. This is expressed particularly clearly in Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17).

Accordingly, John 20 functions not merely as an appendix to the passion narrative but as the literary and theological culmination of themes developed throughout the Gospel. The chapter brings together recurring Johannine motifs, including light and darkness, seeing and believing, misunderstanding and revelation, absence and presence, discipleship and witness. These motifs are integrated into a carefully structured narrative that traces the progressive movement of the principal characters from misunderstanding toward recognition through a series of encounters with the risen Jesus.

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The convergence of these themes is particularly evident in the characterization of Mary Magdalene, whose role assumes exceptional literary and theological significance within the resurrection narrative. Although all four canonical Gospels identify Mary Magdalene as a witness to the empty tomb, the Fourth Gospel gives particular prominence to her individual encounter with the risen Jesus. Unlike the Synoptic accounts, in which the women at the tomb receive the announcement of the resurrection and instructions to inform the disciples from angelic or heavenly messengers (Matt 28:5–7; Mark 16:5–7; Luke 24:4–8), John presents Mary Magdalene alone as the first person to encounter the risen Jesus and to receive an explicit commission directly from him: "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17).

This study argues that the Fourth Evangelist intentionally structures Mary Magdalene's experience in John 20 in parallel with the call narratives of John 1. Through narrative echoes, thematic correspondences, and recurring motifs, the Evangelist establishes literary connections between the opening and closing sections of the Gospel. In particular, Jesus' question to Mary Magdalene, "Whom are you seeking?" (John 20:15), recalls his earlier question to the first disciples, "What are you seeking?" (John 1:38). These intratextual correspondences contribute to the narrative coherence of the Gospel by linking the initial call of the disciples with the resurrection narrative and by presenting recognition of Jesus as a process that develops across the narrative. Through narrative analysis, theological interpretation, and engagement with contemporary Johannine scholarship, this study examines how Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus functions as the narrative counterpart to the call narratives of John 1 and how this relationship contributes to the Gospel's literary portrayal of discipleship.

1. John 20 as a Theologically Structured Narrative

The literary sophistication of John 20 has increasingly become a focal point within contemporary Johannine scholarship. Earlier historical-critical approaches often treated the resurrection narratives as a collection of loosely connected traditions appended to the Gospel after the conclusion of the passion narrative. Source-critical studies frequently proposed multiple redactional layers, identifying apparent seams, repetitions, and inconsistencies within the chapter (Lindars 1961, 142–47; Allison 2023; Barker 2025). While these approaches contributed important insights into the possible development of Johannine traditions, more recent literary studies have emphasized the coherence of John 20 as a carefully structured narrative (Creevey 2024). The chapter exhibits recurring motifs, temporal markers, and representative characterization that contribute to its literary unity and theological

argument (Culpepper 1983). Rather than presenting a compilation of independent resurrection traditions, the narrative displays a coherent progression in which misunderstanding gradually gives way to recognition and increasingly explicit expressions of belief (Casneda 2023).

John 20 unfolds through a deliberate narrative progression in which each episode contributes to the development of the chapter's central themes. Although scholars have proposed different ways of structuring the resurrection narrative, Paul Creevey's recent literary analysis is particularly persuasive in demonstrating the structural and thematic unity of John 19:38–20:29. His proposal situates the resurrection narratives within a larger narrative sequence beginning with Jesus' burial (John 19:38–42), continuing through the discovery of the empty tomb (20:1–10), and culminating in the encounters with the risen Jesus (20:11–29). Within this broader structure, John 20:1–18 recounts the discovery of the empty tomb and Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus, developing motifs of absence, searching, confusion, and progressive understanding. Mary initially interprets the empty tomb according to the assumption that Jesus' body has been removed, while Peter and the Beloved Disciple respond to the evidence before them without the narrator fully specifying the nature of Peter's response. The narrator explicitly states that the Beloved Disciple "saw and believed" (John 20:8), although the precise object of his belief remains open to interpretation. Recognition reaches a decisive moment when Jesus addresses Mary by name, enabling her to recognise him and transforming her from one who searches for the absent body into a witness to the risen Jesus.

The second section (John 20:19–29) recounts Jesus' appearances to the assembled disciples and culminates in Thomas's confession. Here the narrative shifts from the empty tomb to the appearances of the risen Jesus within the community of disciples. Earlier motifs of fear, absence, and uncertainty are now transformed by the presence of the risen Jesus. Fear, for instance, has already characterized the disciples' response to the prospect of Jesus' departure and the hostility of the world (John 14:27; 16:20–22, 33), while the motif of absence is anticipated in Jesus' promise that he will not leave his disciples orphaned but will come to them (John 14:18–19). Uncertainty likewise emerges in the disciples' failure to understand Jesus' words concerning his departure (John 16:16–18). In John 20, these earlier motifs are transformed as Jesus appears in the midst of the disciples, greets them with peace, and brings the narrative to a climax in Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). The concluding purpose statement (John 20:30–31) provides the narrative's explicit interpretive perspective by identifying belief in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God as the Gospel's stated objective.

Several recurring motifs contribute to the literary coherence of the chapter. The narrative opens in darkness with Mary Magdalene approaching the tomb while her understanding remains shaped by grief and loss. Attention then shifts to Peter and the Beloved Disciple, whose investigation of the empty tomb constitutes

a central moment in the first stage of the narrative. In this regard, Creevey (2024) argues that John 20:3–8 forms the narrative centre of the empty-tomb account, while 20:11–18 functions as an introduction to the appearance narratives that follow, preparing for the narrative centre of 20:19–25. This proposal cautions against treating John 20:1–18 as an independent structural unit, since Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus in 20:11–18 is closely connected with the subsequent appearances to the disciples.

Within this broader structure, Mary's encounter nevertheless plays an important transitional role: it moves the narrative from the discovery of the empty tomb to the recognition of the risen Jesus and introduces themes of recognition, revelation, and witness that are developed further in the appearances to the disciples. The narrative subsequently expands from Mary's individual encounter to Jesus' appearance among the gathered disciples behind locked doors and culminates in the encounter with Thomas, where the relationship between seeing, believing, and confession receives further theological development.

The narrative rhythm is reinforced by recurring patterns of movement. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb, runs to the disciples to report what she has seen, returns to the tomb, and subsequently departs to announce her encounter with the risen Jesus. Peter and the Beloved Disciple likewise run to the tomb, enter it, observe the evidence of Jesus' absence, and then leave the scene (John 20:3–10). Their departure in John 20:10 is narratively significant and should not be reduced to a simple return home; rather, it marks a transition within the developing narrative between the discovery of the empty tomb and the subsequent appearance narratives. Jesus' appearances then occur in different settings, moving the narrative from the tomb to the gathered community of disciples. These movements function as more than transitions between scenes: they contribute to the narrative's characterization by linking physical movement with the characters' developing perception, understanding, and response to the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection.

The structure of John 20 also reflects the Evangelist's broader presentation of belief as emerging within relationships of testimony and communal interpretation rather than through observation alone. The sequence extending from Mary Magdalene to the Beloved Disciple, from the gathered disciples to Thomas, culminates in the implied reader addressed by the purpose statement of John 20:30–31. The narrative thus broadens its scope from individual characters within the story to those who encounter the Gospel itself (Wong 2023, 193–215; Whitaker 2022, 280–293).

Within this literary and theological framework, the resurrection cannot be separated from Jesus' passion and death. In the Fourth Gospel, these events belong together within the decisive horizon of Jesus' "hour" (John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). The cross itself is the moment of Jesus' glorification, while the resurrection confirms and discloses the significance of this glorification. Within this framework, the encounters with the risen Jesus reveal the consequences of his completed "hour" for the

disciples, particularly in their movement from fear and uncertainty towards recognition, faith, and witness.

2. Mary Magdalene and Johannine Witness

Mary Magdalene and Thomas occupy significant and complementary positions within the Johannine resurrection narrative. Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus and her subsequent commission to announce his resurrection introduce themes of recognition, revelation, and witness, while Thomas's encounter brings the narrative to a theological climax through his confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

The Evangelist's decision to foreground Mary Magdalene is particularly noteworthy in light of the cultural and legal constraints commonly associated with female testimony in the ancient world. The evidence concerning the status and credibility accorded to women's testimony in Jewish and wider Greco-Roman contexts is relatively limited and does not readily lend itself to a uniform characterization. Josephus, for instance, explicitly states that women are not to be admitted as witnesses in legal proceedings (*Ant.* 4.219). Similarly, in her examination of later rabbinic sources, Tal Ilan (1996, 163–66) observes that the exclusion of women from giving testimony in court appears to have functioned as a general principle, although exceptions could be envisaged in circumstances in which male witnesses were unavailable (*b. Ketub.* 74b).

The question of women's credibility is also significant in the reception of the Christian proclamation of Jesus' resurrection. Celsus, as preserved in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, dismisses the testimony concerning the empty tomb by characterizing its source as "a half-frantic woman" (*Cels.* 2.59). His polemic is significant not merely because it rejects the resurrection proclamation, but also because it appears to exploit a broader cultural assumption concerning the reliability of women as witnesses. As Mona Tokarek LaFosse observes, Celsus' characterization reflects "a generalization in the ancient Mediterranean that women and children were susceptible to superstition and easily duped." (LaFosse 2017, 385)

Taken together, these sources suggest that the social and legal status of women's testimony in antiquity provides an important context for assessing the prominence accorded to women in early Christian traditions concerning the resurrection. Nevertheless, the evidence should be handled with caution. The exclusion of women from formal legal testimony does not necessarily imply that their reports were universally regarded as intrinsically incredible in every social or religious context. Rather, the sources indicate a complex relationship between women's legal status, cultural perceptions of their credibility, and the circumstances in which their testimony was received.

John's portrayal of Mary Magdalene also differs markedly from later interpretative traditions that identified her with Mary of Bethany or with the sinful woman of Luke 7:36–50.[1] The Fourth Gospel provides no textual basis for either identification. Instead, it presents Mary Magdalene as a distinct narrative figure whose significance derives from her function within the Gospel's characterization and plot development rather than from later penitential traditions.

Mary Magdalene first appears in the Johannine passion narrative as one of the women standing beside the cross (John 19:25). Her presence at the crucifixion establishes an important narrative connection with John 20, where she occupies a central role in the discovery of the empty tomb and becomes the first person to encounter the risen Jesus. At the same time, however, the Johannine presentation raises an important question. Unlike the Synoptic accounts, John does not include Mary Magdalene, or any of the women, in the burial of Jesus. The burial narrative is instead centred exclusively on Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who take Jesus' body, prepare it according to Jewish burial custom, and place it in a new tomb (John 19:38–42). This omission is noteworthy because John subsequently gives her an especially prominent role, as she not only discovers that the stone has been removed but also remains at the tomb and encounters the risen Jesus (20:11–18). The Evangelist thus associates her with three decisive moments in the passion-resurrection sequence, namely, the death of Jesus, the discovery of the empty tomb, and the first appearance of the risen Jesus, while omitting her from the intervening burial scene. This omission cautions against assuming that John simply reproduces a continuous tradition concerning Mary Magdalene's presence throughout the events surrounding Jesus' death and burial. Rather, John has shaped the tradition according to his own narrative and theological purposes.

Within John 20:1–18, Mary Magdalene occupies a prominent narrative position, but this prominence serves the Gospel's broader theological concern with resurrection witness and testimony. Through Mary, John connects the discovery of the empty tomb (20:1–10) with the appearance of the risen Jesus (20:11–18), making her a key witness to both events. Her role is therefore significant not simply because she is the central character of the episode, but because through her testimony John explores how the resurrection is encountered, recognized, and proclaimed.

3. The First Day of the Week and New Creation

The temporal framework of John 20 plays a significant role in the narrative structure of the resurrection account. The Evangelist repeatedly specifies that the events take

1 As far as we are aware, this tradition can be traced back to Hippolytus. For studies that identify Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7, see Faucillon 1891; Feuillet 1975, 361.

place "on the first day of the week" (John 20:1, 19; cf. 20:26). The expression functions primarily as a chronological marker, locating the resurrection events within the sequence of Jesus' death and burial. Yet its repetition also contributes to the theological shaping of the narrative, as the first day becomes the temporal setting for the discovery of the empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus, and the gathering of the disciples.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline tradition, which frequently emphasize the formula "on the third day" (see Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 26:61; 27:40, 63; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 46; see also Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 14:58; 15:2), the Fourth Gospel consistently foregrounds "the first day of the week." This narrative choice has often been interpreted as evoking themes associated with creation and new beginnings.[2] Such imagery corresponds with the broader literary design of the Gospel. The Prologue deliberately echoes the opening of Genesis with the words, "In the beginning" (John 1:1), while the opening chapter unfolds through a carefully ordered sequence of days. The repeated use of the expression τῇ ἐπαύριον ("the next day") in John 1:29, 35, and 43 creates a chronological pattern that many scholars have understood as evoking a symbolic creation week centred on the person of Jesus.[3]

Read against this literary background, the temporal setting of John 20 may nevertheless resonate with the Gospel's opening. By locating the resurrection events on "the first day of the week," the Evangelist uses a temporal designation that evokes the opening of the creation account in Genesis, while also recalling the Prologue's opening words, "In the beginning" (John 1:1). The Prologue does not, however, reproduce the sequence of creation days, and the connection between John 20 and creation should therefore not be presented as an explicit structural correspondence. Rather, the recurrence of beginning imagery may invite a theological reading in which the resurrection marks a new beginning, linking the completion of Jesus' work with the renewal inaugurated through his resurrection.

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2 Jeannine K. Brown (2010, 283–84) contends that the Johannine reference to "the first day of the week" is not merely chronological but carries theological significance, suggesting that the evangelist associates Jesus' resurrection with the inauguration of a new creation week. Likewise, Mary Coloe (2011, 7) observes that early Christian tradition attributed eschatological significance to the "eighth day." Drawing attention to the *Epistle of Barnabas*, she notes that the eighth day is presented as the first day of the eschatological age and is closely linked to the motif of new creation, being described as "the dawn of another world." (*Barn.* 15.8–9) The breathing of the Spirit upon the disciples in verse 22 further reinforces this creation imagery by recalling the divine breath imparted to Adam in Gen 2. On this point see the arguments of Sosa Siliezar 2018, 153–90. On the general treatment of the motif of creation in the Fourth Gospel see also Kubiś 2020.

3 If the temporal reference in John 2:1 is understood as denoting the third day after the previously mentioned days, the resulting chronology yields a total of seven days. Paul L. Trudinger (1972, 154–59) engages a scholarly hypothesis about the structure of John's Gospel, especially John 1:19–2:11, arguing that the evangelist may have intentionally shaped this opening narrative around a seven-day creation pattern. Calum M. Carmichael (1996) argues that John 1–5 is a replication of the seven days of creation in Gen 1–2. The repeated emphasis upon Sunday also likely reflects the worshipping practices of the early Christian community. See Lindars 1972, 509; Weidemann 2008, 277–310.

Sandra M. Schneiders (1999, 217) draws attention to the significance of Jesus' address to Mary Magdalene as "woman" (γύναι) in the resurrection narrative. Although the term is a conventional form of address in Greek, Schneiders argues that, within the broader Johannine context, it may evoke the designation of Eve as "the woman" in the creation narrative (Gen 2:23; 3:15 LXX). The connection, however, should not be understood as establishing a simple identification of Mary Magdalene with Eve, since their theological functions are markedly different. The more significant correspondence may lie in the narrative setting and temporal framework: Eve appears at the beginning of the first creation, while Mary encounters the risen Jesus at the beginning of a new phase of creation. Moreover, the contrast is theologically suggestive. Whereas Eve is associated in the Genesis narrative with humanity's movement into sin and death, Mary Magdalene becomes the first witness to the risen Christ and is sent to announce his resurrection to the disciples (John 20:17–18). The allusion, if intended, therefore functions less as a direct typological equation than as a contrast: the woman associated with the beginning of humanity's fall is implicitly set against the woman through whom the risen and life-giving Christ is first proclaimed.

The setting of the resurrection narrative further supports, though does not by itself establish, this intertextual reading. John alone among the four Evangelists explicitly locates Jesus' tomb in a garden (John 19:41), and it is within this same garden that Mary encounters the risen Jesus (20:15). The garden had already appeared in the passion narrative as the place where Jesus was arrested (John 18:1), suggesting that its recurrence has a function beyond geographical description. Its precise intertextual significance, however, remains debated. An Edenic reading is possible, particularly when the garden setting is considered alongside the reference to "the first day" and Jesus' address to Mary as "woman," as Schneiders argues. Yet the garden may also evoke the imagery of the Song of Songs, in which the garden provides the setting for the search for and encounter with the beloved (Creevey 2024, 105–8). The two possibilities need not be treated as mutually exclusive, but neither should be asserted as an explicit identification intended by John. What is significant for the present argument is that the garden provides a literary setting in which themes of creation, searching, recognition, and encounter converge. Within this setting, Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus may be read as a moment of new recognition and new life, while the contrast with Eve remains suggestive rather than constitutive of John's presentation.

Nevertheless, this interpretation has been challenged by Carlos Raúl Sosa Siliezar (2018), who argues that the evidence for an Edenic allusion is less compelling than many scholars assume. His principal objection concerns John's vocabulary. Whereas the Septuagint predominantly uses the noun παράδεισος to describe the Garden of Eden in Gen 2–3, John consistently employs the term κῆπος when referring to the garden in the passion and resurrection narratives. According to Sosa Siliezar, this lexical distinction weakens the claim that John intentionally evokes Genesis. He

further argues that neither God nor Adam is explicitly designated as a gardener—κηπουρός—in the Septuagint. God is portrayed as the one who plants the garden (Gen 2:8), while Adam is commissioned to cultivate and guard it (Gen 2:15), yet neither receives the title "gardener." Consequently, Mary's mistaken assumption that Jesus is the gardener (John 20:15) should not be interpreted as an implicit identification of Jesus with either Adam or God the Creator (Sosa Siliezar 2018, 175).

Although Sosa Siliezar's lexical observations deserve careful consideration, they are not necessarily decisive. As Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (1920, 214–15) notes, κῆπος and παράδεισος are not mutually exclusive terms within Greek Jewish literature. Sirach 24:23–34 employs κῆπος as a synonym for παράδεισος, demonstrating that the semantic fields of the two terms overlap. Furthermore, Aquila's Greek translation of Genesis uses κῆπος in passages corresponding to Gen 2:8 and 3:2, indicating that the term could legitimately denote the Garden of Eden within certain textual traditions (see Hoskyns 1920, 214–15). The mere absence of παράδεισος in John's Gospel, therefore, does not preclude an intentional allusion to Genesis.

Accordingly, while Sosa Siliezar rightly cautions against relying exclusively on lexical arguments, his critique does not sufficiently account for the literary and theological coherence of John's narrative. The Evangelist's symbolism consistently operates through the accumulation of interconnected motifs rather than through direct citation alone. When the garden references are interpreted within the Gospel's broader theology of creation and new creation, the identification of Jesus as the gardener emerges as a rich theological image that complements John's portrayal of Christ as the inaugurator of the restored creation. The narrative, therefore, invites readers to perceive in the resurrection not merely the vindication of Jesus but the beginning of God's eschatological renewal of the world (Manns 1991, 426–28; J. K. Brown 2010, 281).

The significance of this temporal setting extends beyond creation imagery. The resurrection narrative also develops themes introduced in the call narratives of John 1. Those who first respond to Jesus' invitation, "Come and see" (John 1:39), reappear at the close of the Gospel within a narrative context in which recognition of Jesus becomes the dominant concern. The progression from the initial search for Jesus to his recognition after the resurrection creates an important literary correspondence between the opening and closing sections of the Gospel.

This parallelism is particularly evident in the characterization of Mary Magdalene. Her encounter with the risen Jesus is narrated in ways that may be read alongside the initial encounters between Jesus and his disciples in John 1, particularly in the movement from an initial lack of recognition to recognition and testimony. Mary comes to the tomb seeking Jesus' body (John 20:1, 13, 15), does not initially recognize the person she encounters (20:14–15), and recognizes Jesus when he addresses her by name (20:16). Her response then moves immediately from recognition to testimony, as she announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). While John 20

should not be understood as a direct repetition of the call narratives in John 1, the parallelism is suggestive: in both sections, encounter with Jesus leads to recognition and subsequently to witness. The theological significance of the parallelism therefore lies not simply in Mary's characterization, but in John's presentation of encounter, recognition, and testimony as essential dimensions of responding to Jesus.

A similar observation is reflected in Luigi Martignani's interpretation of the temporal symbolism of John 20. Martignani argues that the day on which the disciples first began to follow Jesus becomes, in the resurrection narrative, the beginning of a renewed relationship with him under fundamentally different narrative conditions (Martignani 1998, 35, n. 22). This observation highlights the continuity established between the opening call narratives and the resurrection appearances while also recognizing that the disciples' relationship to Jesus is reconfigured following the resurrection. The narrative therefore presents continuity and transformation as complementary dimensions of its portrayal of discipleship.

The significance of the "first day" therefore supports the broader argument of this study. Rather than functioning solely as a chronological notation, the temporal marker contributes to the Gospel's literary architecture by situating the resurrection within a wider pattern that begins with the creation imagery of the Prologue and continues through the temporal progression of the call narratives in John 1. While John 1 repeatedly uses the expression "the next day" (John 1:29, 35, 43), rather than "the first day," both passages use temporal markers to structure successive encounters with Jesus. John 20, however, gives the "first day of the week" a distinctive theological significance by locating the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus within this temporal setting. The relationship between John 1 and 20 is therefore not one of direct temporal correspondence, but of literary and theological parallelism, particularly in the recurring movement from encounter to recognition and witness.

4. Darkness, Misunderstanding, and the Empty Tomb

The opening verses of John 20 establish the literary and theological framework within which Mary Magdalene's movement toward recognition is narrated. Before recognition occurs, the narrative presents Mary in a state of uncertainty and misunderstanding, a pattern that recalls the incomplete understanding displayed by several characters throughout the Fourth Gospel (Culpepper 1983, 152–65). The resurrection narrative therefore begins not with explicit recognition but with a character whose search for Jesus is shaped by assumptions inherited from the events of the crucifixion.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb "early, while it was still dark" (John 20:1).[4] Although this statement denotes the time of day, it also participates in the symbolic language that characterizes the Fourth Gospel. Throughout John, darkness is associated with limited perception, misunderstanding, and the inability of characters to comprehend fully the significance of Jesus' words and actions.[5]

The reference to darkness therefore functions as more than a temporal marker; it establishes the interpretive perspective from which Mary's initial response to the empty tomb is narrated. She approaches the tomb expecting to find the body of Jesus rather than anticipating the implications of the empty tomb. Like several Johannine characters who encounter signs before understanding their significance, Mary interprets the scene according to the assumptions available to her. Her perspective remains governed by the apparent absence of Jesus rather than by the narrative's developing presentation of the resurrection.[6]

Mary's response to the empty tomb illustrates the recurring Johannine pattern of misunderstanding.[7] Upon seeing that the stone has been removed, she immediately concludes that Jesus' body has been taken away.[8] A comparable pattern is evident in the responses of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Peter observes the burial cloths but offers no explicit interpretation of their significance, while the Beloved Disciple "saw and believed," although the precise nature of that belief continues to be debated within Johannine scholarship. Their responses nevertheless underscore that the

4 The use of this adverb πρωΐ in John 20:1 indicates the final Roman division of the night, namely the period between approximately 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. See R. E. Brown 1970, 980. The Fourth Evangelist employs the adverb πρωΐ only here and in the narrative of Jesus before Pilate (see John 18:28). Martignani (1998, 213, n. 103) argues that by precisely marking both the beginning of the day of Jesus' crucifixion and the beginning of the day of his resurrection, the Evangelist intends to closely correlate these two episodes.

5 The Prologue declares that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it (see John 1:5). Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and struggles to comprehend spiritual rebirth (see John 3:2). Judas departs into the night to betray Jesus (see John 13:30). Jesus himself declares that those who follow him will not walk in darkness (see John 8:12). Douglas Estes (2020, 90–118) reassesses Johannine "light/darkness" language as a rhetorical and epistemological contrast tied to perception and understanding rather than metaphysical dualism. Luke Irwin (2024, 417–35) discusses visibility, perception, and epistemic limits in Johannine theology, contributing to readings of darkness as constrained spiritual perception.

6 Holly E. Hearon (2004, 152) argues: "Mary Magdalene is bereft of Jesus, both physically and spiritually … The stage is set for both the confusion that follows and the revelation that brings it to a resolution even as the darkness gives way to daylight."

7 Robert Gordon Maccini (1996, 208) observes that her "inability to perceive the significance of the empty tomb leaves her metaphorically in the dark, but such a metaphor can make sense only against her accurate visual perception of the empty tomb."

8 Mary Magdalene's interpretation reflects the tendency, frequently encountered throughout the Gospel, to understand divine actions according to earthly categories. Just as Nicodemus misunderstands new birth, the Samaritan woman misunderstands living water, and the crowds misunderstand the bread from heaven, Mary initially interprets the empty tomb according to ordinary human expectations. The narrative thus places her within a broader Johannine pattern in which misunderstanding becomes the necessary prelude to revelation. For discussion of misunderstanding as a Johannine literary device, see de Jonge 1971, 337–59; Duke 1985, 17–39; Carson 1991, 185–87.

empty tomb, in itself, does not disclose or establish the reality of the resurrection. The physical evidence remains open to interpretation and acquires its theological significance only within the wider narrative of revelation. In John 20, the resurrection is not inferred simply from the absence of Jesus' body but is disclosed through the subsequent appearance narratives, in which the risen Jesus makes himself known to his disciples. Thus, the narrative moves from the discovery of the empty tomb to recognition through encounter and revelation, making clear that the tomb itself is not the decisive ground of resurrection faith.

This pattern is consistent with the Gospel's broader characterization of discipleship. Throughout the narrative, understanding develops gradually rather than instantaneously, and characters frequently move from partial or mistaken perceptions toward a fuller recognition of Jesus. The first disciples in John 1 begin by seeking Jesus with only a limited understanding of his identity. Mary Magdalene's experience follows a comparable narrative trajectory. She approaches the tomb searching for Jesus, yet her initial interpretation of the empty tomb remains constrained by expectations shaped by her Jewish understanding of resurrection as an eschatological event associated with the end of the age, rather than with the resurrection of an individual within the present course of history. Consequently, she initially interprets the absence of Jesus' body in terms of its removal rather than resurrection (John 20:2, 13, 15). In both episodes, recognition develops through Jesus' initiative and the progressive clarification of earlier misunderstandings. The narrative thus presents belief not as an immediate response to empirical observation but as the outcome of an interpretive process in which signs, testimony, and Jesus' self-disclosure are progressively brought into relationship.[9]

Within this narrative progression, the empty tomb functions not as the climax of the resurrection account but as a point of transition to the appearance narratives that follow. Its literary function is to establish the absence of Jesus while simultaneously introducing the paradoxical presence of God through the two angels who appear where Jesus has been laid. The significance of the empty tomb is therefore not exhausted by the disciples' initial responses to it; rather, it is progressively interpreted through the three subsequent appearance narratives in John 20, in which recognition of the risen Jesus develops through his encounters with Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Thomas. This pattern is extended in the appearance narrative of John 21.

9 This emphasis becomes particularly evident through the chapter's repeated use of verbs associated with seeing. Mary Magdalene βλέπει—sees—the removed stone but does not understand its significance. Peter θεωρεῖ—sees—the burial cloths without arriving at an explicit confession of faith. The Beloved Disciple εἶδεν—sees—and believes. The progression suggests increasing levels of perception that move beyond simple observation toward spiritual insight. Yet even this development remains incomplete until the risen Jesus reveals himself personally. There is, in fact, a careful development of the narrative around the theme of "seeing" and "believing." On the distinct use of these two verbs in the Fourth Gospel, see Gignac 2005, 198, n. 12. See also Koester 1989, 327–48.

The movement from darkness, misunderstanding, and the perception of absence towards recognition and faith thus provides a structural and theological pattern that governs the resurrection narratives as a whole. The empty tomb, accordingly, does not function as self-interpreting evidence but as the narrative setting within which the risen Jesus is progressively revealed and the meaning of his absence is disclosed.

The Johannine motif of misunderstanding performs several important narrative functions. First, it generates dramatic irony, since the implied reader possesses information that the characters have not yet fully understood. Second, it delays recognition, thereby creating narrative tension that is resolved through Jesus' self-disclosure. Third, it enables characterization to develop progressively rather than presenting recognition as immediate or self-evident (Newheart 1996, 52–53). Within this broader narrative pattern, Mary Magdalene's response to the empty tomb provides a specific instance of misunderstanding. Having found the stone removed, she initially interprets the situation according to her pre-resurrection expectations, assuming that Jesus' body has been taken away (John 20:1–2). This should not, however, be extended to her presence at the crucifixion (John 19:25), where the narrative attributes no misunderstanding to her. Nor should her initial failure to recognize Jesus in the appearance narrative (John 20:14–15) be identified without qualification with the misunderstanding motif; this episode is more precisely understood as an instance of non-recognition that is overcome through Jesus' self-disclosure (20:16).

5. "Whom Are You Seeking?"

The narrative relationship between the call of the first disciples (John 1:35–39) and Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus (20:11–18) has frequently been recognised as an important feature of the Fourth Gospel's literary design. Through a series of verbal and thematic correspondences, these episodes suggest that resurrection faith is presented not as an isolated phenomenon but as the culmination of patterns of revelation and recognition that characterise Johannine discipleship throughout the narrative.

The clearest correspondence occurs in Jesus' question to Mary Magdalene in John 20:15: τίνα ζητεῖς ("Whom are you seeking?"). Significantly, the question is addressed by the risen Jesus rather than by the angels, thereby assigning it particular narrative prominence. Its significance, however, extends beyond its immediate function within Mary's misunderstanding. The question recalls Jesus' repeated question to those who come to arrest him in John 18:4 and 18:7: "Whom are you seeking?" At the beginning of the passion, the question establishes Jesus as the one whom his opponents seek; when it is repeated at the tomb, it acquires a transformed significance in the light of the resurrection. The recurrence of the question therefore creates

a literary link between the passion and resurrection narratives and contributes to the framing of Jesus' "hour." As F. Scott Spencer observes, it may appear "almost insultingly redundant" (Spencer 2003, 42), but its apparent redundancy is precisely what draws attention to the identity of the one whom Mary seeks.

The question also does more than expose the limitations of Mary's assumptions. Mary is still searching for Jesus within the framework of death, whereas the risen Jesus redirects her attention towards himself as the living person whom she seeks. The question thus opens rather than closes the possibility of recognition by inviting a personal encounter. Mary's grief and devotion reveal the depth of her attachment to Jesus, but her understanding remains incomplete until Jesus takes the initiative and discloses himself by calling her by name: "Mary" (John 20:16). Recognition consequently emerges not from Mary's independent interpretation of the empty tomb but through the relational encounter initiated by Jesus.

This movement from seeking to recognition is immediately extended into relationship and mission. Having revealed himself to Mary, Jesus entrusts her with a message for his "brothers": "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17). The question "Whom are you seeking?" therefore occupies a pivotal position in the resurrection narrative. By recalling the question at the beginning of the passion, it connects the resurrection encounter with Jesus' "hour"; by exposing the limitations of Mary's initial interpretation, it moves the narrative towards recognition; and by initiating a personal encounter that culminates in Jesus' self-disclosure and commission, it opens the way from seeking to relationship and witness. The episode thus exemplifies the broader Johannine pattern in which recognition develops through Jesus' initiative and self-revelation rather than through immediate perception (de la Potterie 1992, 201).

Jesus' question to Mary also recalls his first recorded words to the earliest disciples in John 1:38: τί ζητεῖτε ("What are you seeking?"). The verbal correspondence is significant, but it should not be understood as establishing a simple inclusio between the opening and closing movements of the Gospel, since the language of seeking recurs explicitly in the passion narrative. In John 18:4 and 18:7, Jesus asks those who have come to arrest him, τίνα ζητεῖτε ("Whom are you seeking?"), creating an important verbal and thematic link with his question to Mary in John 20:15. The repeated use of ζητέω is therefore better understood as a recurring narrative motif that extends across the Gospel and acquires different meanings in its successive contexts.

In John 1:38, Jesus' question introduces the disciples' search for him and leads to an encounter that develops into discipleship and recognition. The scene does not, however, present the kind of misunderstanding characteristic of other Johannine encounters; rather, it establishes the theme of seeking as an element of the disciples' initial response to Jesus. In John 18:4 and 18:7, the same language occurs within the confrontation surrounding Jesus' arrest, where the question focuses attention

on the identity of the person whom his opponents have come to seize. In John 20:15, the question is addressed to Mary as she searches for the body of Jesus, but the narrative subsequently reveals that the one she is seeking stands before her. The recurrence of ζητέω thus contributes to the Gospel's literary coherence, connecting the initial search for Jesus, the search that leads to his arrest, and Mary's post-resurrection search, while allowing the motif to move progressively from seeking to encounter and, ultimately, to recognition.

The transition from "What are you seeking?" (τί ζητεῖτε, John 1:38) to "Whom are you seeking?" (τίνα ζητεῖς, John 20:15) is nevertheless significant. In John 1, Jesus' question is addressed to those who are beginning to follow him and invites them to articulate the object of their seeking. Their response initiates a process in which Jesus' identity is progressively disclosed through the narrative. The question in John 20:15, however, is more specifically directed to the person whom Mary seeks at the tomb: "Whom are you seeking?" In this sense, the narrative has moved from an open-ended question about the object of seeking to an explicit search for Jesus himself. Yet this should not be understood as a simple distinction between seeking Jesus and seeking God. Within Johannine theology, the two are inseparably related, since Jesus is the one through whom the Father is revealed (cf. John 14:6–9). Moreover, John 7:34 and 18:4, 7 demonstrate that the question "Whom are you seeking?" functions elsewhere in the Gospel within contexts of opposition, misunderstanding, and revelation. The recurrence of the question therefore gives it a broader narrative significance: seeking Jesus becomes a recurring motif through which the Gospel explores the recognition, or failure of recognition, of his identity. John 20:15 represents its climactic occurrence, since Mary seeks Jesus without yet recognizing that the risen Jesus himself stands before her.

This development corresponds to the Evangelist's wider use of ζητέω. Throughout the Fourth Gospel, seeking denotes more than physical movement or intellectual inquiry; it frequently signifies an orientation towards revelation. The movement from "what" to "whom" thus reflects a development within the narrative from an initial search for understanding to encounter with a person. The object of faith is therefore presented not as an abstract concept but as Jesus himself. As Santi Grasso (2008, 764) argues, seeking functions as the means through which relational knowledge of Jesus is initiated. Across the Gospel, characters move from partial understanding towards progressively fuller recognition of Jesus' identity and mission, making the motif of seeking an important feature of Johannine discipleship.

Alessandra Casneda further argues that the paired questions, "What do you seek?" (John 1:38) and "Whom do you seek?" (John 20:15), function to disclose the motivations of those who approach Jesus. Both questions are followed by responses concerned with Jesus' location—"Where are you staying?" (John 1:38) and "Where have you laid him?" (John 20:15)—thereby establishing an additional narrative parallel. In John 1, the invitation "Come and see" (John 1:39) initiates an ongoing relationship

between Jesus and his first disciples. In John 20, however, Mary's dialogue with Jesus exposes the inadequacy of her assumptions and redefines the nature of relationship with the risen Christ. Her attachment to the earthly Jesus is reconfigured through Jesus' instruction, "Do not hold on to me" (John 20:17), before being redirected towards commissioned witness through the command, "Go..." (John 20:17) (Casneda 2023, 172).

The motif of seeking also resonates with Jesus' earlier declaration, "You will seek me and you will not find me" (John 7:34), which anticipates the tension between genuine commitment and incomplete understanding that characterises Mary's search at the tomb. Like the first disciples in John 1 and the Samaritan woman in John 4, Mary initially fails to recognise Jesus' identity. Her expectation remains focused on locating Jesus' body rather than encountering the risen Lord, as reflected in her request: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15).

Mary's language reflects this continued dependence upon an empirical understanding of Jesus' presence. Thomas L. Brodie (1993, 566) observes that her speech shifts from the personal designation "my Lord" to the repeated but unspecified pronoun "him," thereby illustrating the narrative's emphasis on failed recognition.[10] In this respect, the episode represents a particularly concentrated example of Johannine misunderstanding, since the failure concerns not simply Jesus' teaching but his identity. As elsewhere in the Gospel, however, misunderstanding functions primarily as a narrative strategy that guides both character and reader from incomplete understanding towards fuller recognition.[11]

This pattern is reinforced by the significance of Mary's repeated concern with Jesus' location. Mary's request, "Tell me where you have laid him" (John 20:15), therefore reflects an understanding of Jesus' presence that remains tied to physical location (Schneiders 1999, 213). From the reader's perspective, however, the question has already been rendered inadequate by the resurrection narrative, since Jesus' glorification signifies his return to the Father rather than continued confinement within the tomb.

This observation further strengthens the literary relationship between John 1 and 20. Just as the first disciples ask where Jesus is staying and are invited into continuing fellowship with him, Mary seeks to determine where Jesus has been placed, only to encounter a mode of presence that cannot be defined spatially.

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10 Paul Duke (1985, 104) similarly observes: "Now as she complains the third time, she speaks of the corpse as 'him' and unwittingly transfers κύριε to the gardener. The Greek repetition of the pronouns seems to underline Jesus' alleged absence."

11 In this light, Edwin A. Abbott's comparison between Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany gains interpretative plausibility, insofar as both figures are portrayed without explicit formulations of "belief" in the technical Johannine sense. See Abbott 1905, §1466.

Mary's initial misidentification of Jesus as the gardener likewise illustrates the limitations of unaided perception, while the garden setting itself recalls earlier Johannine scenes in which the location contributes to the narrative disclosure of Jesus' identity (cf. John 1:28; 18:1). Recognition occurs only when Jesus addresses Mary personally by name, indicating that, in her case, recognition is brought about through Jesus' initiative rather than through visual perception alone. This pattern corresponds with a central theological emphasis of the Fourth Gospel, in which faith is closely associated with Jesus' self-disclosure. Yet John 20:8 introduces an important qualification to this pattern: the Beloved Disciple enters the tomb, sees the burial cloths, and "believes" (John 20:8), suggesting that perception of the evidence can also lead to faith even before an appearance of the risen Jesus is narrated. The contrast is therefore not between perception and revelation in absolute terms, but between different modes through which recognition and belief emerge. The Beloved Disciple believes on the basis of what he sees, whereas Mary does not yet understand what she has seen until Jesus reveals himself to her personally. Her encounter thus gives particular narrative expression to the Johannine conviction that definitive recognition of Jesus depends upon his self-disclosure. Belief, consequently, is not presented merely as intellectual assent to propositions but as a response to the revelation of Jesus and an entry into relationship with him.

Mary Magdalene therefore functions not only as a historical witness within the narrative but also as a literary and theological representative of Johannine discipleship. Although introduced only in the passion narrative (John 19:25), her encounter with the risen Jesus in John 20 recapitulates and brings to completion the pattern of seeking, recognition, and witness first established by the disciples in John 1. As Robert J. Karris (1990, 93) suggests, the verbal echo of John 1:38 encourages readers to recognise a typological correspondence between Mary and the earliest followers of Jesus. Her movement from seeking to recognition, from misunderstanding to revelation, and from encounter to witness reproduces the characteristic pattern through which discipleship is portrayed throughout the Fourth Gospel.

The resurrection narrative therefore does not introduce an entirely new theological theme but develops and transforms patterns already established in the Gospel's opening chapters. Through the recurring motif of seeking, together with the accompanying pattern of recognition and disclosure, John 20 may be read as the narrative culmination of literary and theological trajectories initiated in John 1. This trajectory is already oriented towards the revelation of Jesus' identity and the "greater things" that will become visible to his disciples. In John 1:50–51, Jesus promises Nathanael that he will see "greater things" and speaks of heaven being opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Although the passage does not explicitly narrate the resurrection, its language of forthcoming revelation establishes an anticipatory horizon that reaches a decisive stage in the resurrection appearances of John 20. Within this broader trajectory, the correspondence between

the questions "What are you seeking?" (John 1:38) and "Whom are you seeking?" (John 20:15) provides a particularly clear expression not only of narrative continuity but also of theological transformation. The question that initially concerns the disciples' search for Jesus is revisited in the garden, where Mary's search is transformed through the risen Jesus' self-disclosure into recognition and commissioned witness.

6. Old Testament and Wisdom Backgrounds

Mary Magdalene's search mirrors the broader Johannine theme of the elusive Jesus, whose identity consistently resists superficial recognition. Her failure to recognise the risen Jesus after her encounter with the angels further develops this motif. Even when Jesus stands before her, she mistakes him for the gardener and continues searching for a corpse rather than recognising the living Lord. The question posed by Jesus, "Whom are you seeking?" exposes the inadequacy of her perception and reveals that genuine recognition depends not on physical sight but on divine revelation that invites relationship (cf. John 20:17).

Mark Stibbe (1993, 242–43) therefore argues that the resurrection does not eliminate Jesus' elusiveness; rather, it transforms it into a deeper theological reality whereby recognition emerges only through frustrated expectations and the reversal of human perception. Stibbe (1993, 240) interprets this Johannine portrayal within the wider Old Testament tradition of God's hidden yet active presence. Like Yahweh, who is simultaneously revealed and concealed in narratives such as Abraham's encounter with the three visitors at Mamre (Gen 18:1–15) and Jacob's wrestling experience, the risen Jesus remains present while resisting immediate recognition.

A complementary interpretation is offered by Martin Scott, who relates Mary's search to the Wisdom tradition, particularly Prov 8:17, where those who diligently seek Wisdom ultimately find her (Scott 1992, 232). Mary's unwavering devotion and grief undoubtedly resonate with this tradition, portraying her as one whose love motivates persistent seeking. Nevertheless, while this proposal is persuasive, the cumulative verbal, thematic, and literary correspondences with the Song of Songs appear substantially stronger. In particular, the recurring motifs of searching, absence, longing, and eventual reunion align more closely with Songs 3:1–4 and 5:2–8 than with the sapiential tradition (Simoens 2000, 801). This interpretation is further supported by the Fourth Gospel's extensive use of Old Testament intertextuality. As Maarten Menken (1996, 212) observes, the Gospel is deeply rooted in early Christian interpretation of Scripture, frequently appropriating biblical vocabulary, imagery, and narrative patterns to enrich its theological message.

Wendell Harris's (1992, 10) definition of allusion is particularly instructive here, since it emphasises the deliberate evocation of earlier texts in order to illuminate the

meaning of the present narrative. This approach provides a useful methodological framework for considering whether Mary Magdalene's search in John 20 evokes the bride's search for her beloved in the Song of Songs. Such an intertextual resonance may enrich the interpretation of Mary's search, particularly in relation to the language of seeking and recognition, without displacing the more immediate Johannine associations of the garden and the first day of the week. The Song of Songs therefore functions best as a possible secondary allusion within a broader network of scriptural resonances rather than as the primary interpretive framework for the scene.

7. Allusions to the Song of Songs

A growing body of scholarship argues that John 20:1–18 should be interpreted against the literary and theological background of the Song of Songs. Ann Roberts Winsor (1999, 1), in particular, contends that the Fourth Evangelist employs characteristic intertextual techniques to portray Jesus as the messianic bridegroom and Mary Magdalene as the representative bride of the believing community. This interpretation is consistent with the broader Johannine narrative, where nuptial imagery progressively develops Jesus' messianic identity. The bridegroom motif first emerges at Cana (John 2:1–11), where Jesus' provision of abundant, superior wine symbolically fulfils the bridegroom's responsibilities and signals the inauguration of the messianic age (Fehribach 1998, 25–28, 32). Similarly, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman follows the biblical betrothal type-scene (Alter 1981, 51–52), although the anticipated marital union is transformed into the establishment of a universal community of faith. Collectively, these episodes prepare readers for the climactic bridal imagery of the resurrection narrative.

The interpretation of John 20:1–18 against the backdrop of the Song of Songs enjoys a long exegetical tradition extending from the early Church to contemporary Johannine scholarship. Patristic commentators such as Hippolytus, Gregory the Great, and Rufinus identified Mary's persistent search for the risen Jesus with the bride's search for her beloved in Songs 3:1–4, emphasising that her unwavering love culminates in encounter and recognition.[12]

Modern scholars[13] have further developed this reading by arguing that the Fourth Evangelist may evoke the nuptial imagery in John 20 to portray Jesus as the messianic

12 For a comprehensive survey of Patristic and Medieval exegesis regarding the relationship between the Song of Songs and the resurrection appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in John 20, see Casneda 2023, 215–19.

13 Including Feuillet 1958, 540; Cambe 1962; Okure 1992, 180–181, 188; Stibbe 1994, 205; Schneiders 1996, 161; Winsor 1999; McWhirter 2006; Creevey 2024.

bridegroom and Mary Magdalene as the representative bride of the believing community. Although these scholars differ regarding the extent of the allusions, a broad consensus recognises that the resurrection narrative constitutes the culmination of the Gospel's bridegroom motif.[14]

Rather than relying on isolated verbal parallels, this interpretation is strengthened by the cumulative convergence of narrative structure, imagery and theological purpose. The depiction of Mary Magdalene as a new Eve and the allusions to the Song of Songs should not, however, be understood as competing interpretations. Rather, the two patterns are mutually illuminating and contribute to a coherent Johannine portrayal of the resurrection. The new-Eve typology situates Mary within the biblical pattern of creation, fall, and restoration: where Eve encountered the serpent in a garden and became associated with humanity's movement into death, Mary encounters the risen Christ in a garden and becomes the first recipient of the resurrection proclamation. The Song of Songs imagery develops this pattern in a complementary direction. Mary's movement from absence to encounter, from misunderstanding to recognition, parallels the bride's search for her beloved and transforms the garden scene into an image of restored communion. Thus, the resurrection encounter may be read simultaneously as the reversal of the rupture associated with the first Eve and as the consummation of the covenantal relationship between Christ and his people. Mary therefore functions not merely as an individual witness to the empty tomb but as a literary and theological figure in whom Johannine themes of new creation, restored relationship, recognition, and covenantal love converge.

The opening setting of John 20 intentionally recalls the nocturnal search scenes of the Song of Songs, particularly the bride's search for her beloved: "Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not" (Song 3:1). Like the bride who rises and goes through the city in search of her beloved (Song 3:2–3), Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb "early, while it was still dark" (John 20:1), seeking Jesus whom she believes to be absent (Winsor 1999, 58). The significance of these allusions lies not simply in shared vocabulary but in the thematic coherence between the two texts, where darkness symbolises both physical separation and spiritual incomprehension. Mary's journey therefore becomes both literal and symbolic, illustrating the movement from misunderstanding to faith that characterises Johannine discipleship. The nocturnal setting consequently prepares the reader for the revelatory encounter that follows.

The garden motif provides another significant point of intertextual contact between John 20 and the Song of Songs. As noted above, some scholars interpret the Johannine garden as an allusion to Eden (Wyatt 1990; Grassi and Grassi 1986, 106–7), these proposals do not account as comprehensively for the concentration of verbal, narrative and thematic correspondences found throughout the resurrection account.

14 See Casneda 2023, 215–24; Cambe 1962, 5–25; Winsor 1999; Manns 2018, 203–14.

Barrett (1978, 560) convincingly argues that the Evangelist's terminology and repeated references to the garden throughout the passion narrative point instead towards a literary and theological association with the Song of Songs. The Fourth Gospel uniquely situates Jesus' arrest, burial and resurrection within a garden setting, thereby establishing a coherent narrative framework that culminates in Mary's encounter with the risen Christ, whom she initially mistakes for the gardener.

The resonance with Song 6:2 is particularly striking. In both texts, the beloved is associated with a garden and is sought by one who longs for reunion. The Johannine narrative, however, transforms this imagery by integrating it with the Gospel's Christological themes. The risen Jesus is therefore not simply the absent beloved whom Mary has been seeking, but also the Good Shepherd who seeks his own and calls them by name (John 10:3–4, 14, 27). Mary's recognition consequently brings several Johannine motifs into convergence. Her response to Jesus' voice recalls the faithful disciple who knows and recognises the Shepherd's voice, while her preceding search and subsequent recognition evoke the beloved's discovery of the one whom she has sought in the Song of Songs. The narrative thus allows Mary to function simultaneously as a representative disciple and as a symbolic figure within the bridal imagery of the Song. Such convergence illustrates the Evangelist's sophisticated deployment of scriptural traditions, whereby shepherd imagery, the language of recognition, and the motifs of seeking and finding interact to deepen the theological significance of the resurrection encounter. Mary's recognition is consequently not merely the resolution of a narrative misunderstanding; it signifies the restoration of relational communion with the risen Jesus, whose identity is disclosed through the very voice that calls her by names.

The narrative parallels between John 20:1–18 and Song 3:1–4 extend beyond shared imagery to encompass the overall progression of the story. Both narratives centre upon a woman who searches anxiously for her beloved, questions intermediary figures, and experiences reunion only after a period of frustrated seeking. Mary's repeated declaration that she does not know where Jesus has been laid echoes the bride's repeated search for her beloved, while the angels function in a role analogous to the city watchmen who witness the search without resolving it.

These correspondences reinforce the theological irony that permeates the Johannine account. Mary seeks Jesus in the realm of death when he has already entered the reality of resurrection. Consequently, her search must culminate not merely in locating Jesus but in recognising the transformed nature of his existence. The intertextual dialogue with the Song of Songs therefore serves to redirect both Mary and the reader from physical absence towards theological presence, illustrating that genuine encounter with the risen Christ requires a transformed understanding rather than the recovery of the past.

Mary's repeated "turning" (στρέφω) has generated considerable scholarly discussion. Rather than viewing the repetition as a narrative inconsistency, many

interpreters understand it as a deliberate literary device signalling the movement from physical sight to spiritual perception. André Feuillet (1963) distinguishes between Mary's initial physical turning towards Jesus and her subsequent spiritual conversion upon hearing her name, while Winsor (1999, 36–37) argues that the apparent narrative irregularity functions as an allusive marker directing readers to what Winsor calls "ungrammaticality" or "bumps in the texts," which alerts the reader to the possibility of involving another text. The suggested text is the Song of Songs, where references to turning recur throughout the dialogue between the lovers.

Although these proposals differ in emphasis, both recognise that the repetition highlights the transformative character of Mary's encounter. The decisive movement is therefore not spatial but theological: she turns from misunderstanding to faith, from seeking a dead teacher to recognising the risen Lord. The prominence of Jesus' voice further strengthens this interpretation. Numerous passages in the Song of Songs celebrate the voice of the beloved as the catalyst for reunion, and the Johannine narrative similarly presents Jesus' utterance of Mary's name as the decisive moment of revelation. This convergence reinforces the Gospel's theological claim that authentic recognition of Christ is initiated by his call rather than by human effort alone.

The encounter culminates not in prolonged intimacy but in mission. Jesus' command, "Do not hold on to me," has generated diverse interpretations, including sacramental readings that associate the prohibition with the Eucharist (Feuillet 1963, 103–7). Such interpretations, however, remain speculative and are not clearly supported by the narrative itself. More persuasive is the literary explanation that understands the prohibition within the framework of the Song of Songs. Whereas the bride in Song 3:4 embraces her beloved and refuses to let him go, Mary is instructed to relinquish physical possession because the relationship inaugurated by the resurrection is no longer defined by earthly presence but by Jesus' impending return to the Father (Winsor 1999, 42).

Within this framework, the allusion is not merely one of contrast but of theological transformation. Unlike the bride of the Song, who brings her beloved into her mother's house, Mary is commissioned to announce Jesus' ascent to the Father's house, a destination anticipated earlier in the Farewell Discourse (John 14:2–3). Mary becomes the representative disciple whose encounter with the risen Christ issues in witness.

The cumulative intertextual evidence suggests that Mary's narrative function extends beyond that of the first witness to the resurrection. Through sustained allusions to the Song of Songs, the Fourth Evangelist portrays her as the symbolic bride whose search, recognition and commission exemplify authentic discipleship. Her journey progresses from misunderstanding and grief to revelation and mission, thereby illustrating the transformative encounter with the glorified Christ that the Gospel seeks to evoke in every believer.

When evaluated according to these criteria, the relationship between John 20:1–18 and the Song of Songs emerges as a persuasive literary and theological interpretation that enriches the Johannine presentation of Jesus as the messianic bridegroom and Mary Magdalene as the exemplary disciple whose encounter with the risen Christ models the journey from seeking to believing.

8. Recognition Through Naming

The decisive turning point in Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus occurs when he addresses her by name: "Mary" (John 20:16). Mary becomes the only female Johannine character Jesus calls by her proper name. Jesus' address recalls the imagery of the Good Shepherd discourse, in which the shepherd calls his sheep by name and they recognize his voice (John 10:3, 16). The allusion establishes an intratextual connection between these passages and reinforces a recurring Johannine pattern in which recognition results from Jesus' initiative rather than from the characters' independent perception.

Mary's response, "Rabbouni" (John 20:16), functions as the narrative expression of recognition. As in John 1:38, the Evangelist provides an explanatory gloss—"which means Teacher"—ensuring that the significance of the address is clear to the implied reader. The repetition of this designation creates a deliberate correspondence between the initial encounters with Jesus in John 1 and Mary's encounter in John 20. Rather than simply repeating the earlier call narrative, however, the resurrection account recontextualizes it within the post-resurrection narrative. Whereas John 1 introduces the relationship between Jesus and the first disciples, John 20 redefines that relationship within the context of the resurrection appearances. Mary's recognition therefore functions as a narrative bridge linking the opening and closing sections of the Gospel while preserving continuity in the portrayal of discipleship.

Jesus' subsequent instruction, "Do not hold on to me" (John 20:17), introduces a significant interpretive development. Within the narrative, the command marks a transition in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples following the resurrection. It indicates that the categories governing their previous interactions are no longer sufficient for interpreting Jesus' presence. The accompanying statement, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father," situates this transition within the broader Johannine pattern that associates resurrection, exaltation, and return to the Father (Schnelle 2008, 127–51).

The narrative offers no explicit description of Mary's physical actions in response to Jesus' command. This omission directs attention away from reconstructing her behaviour and toward the function of Jesus' words within the dialogue. The command

therefore serves primarily as a narrative clarification of the changed relationship between Jesus and his followers rather than as a commentary on Mary's actions.

Following the recognition scene, the narrative shifts immediately to Mary's commissioning: "Go to my brothers and say to them…" (John 20:17). Her role consequently develops from that of the searching disciple to that of the commissioned witness. This transition completes the narrative sequence established throughout John 20:1–18, in which misunderstanding gives way to recognition and recognition leads to testimony. Mary's commission also aligns her with the Gospel's broader pattern in which those who encounter Jesus become bearers of testimony within the narrative.

The significance of this commission is reinforced by the language Jesus employs. The designation ἀδελφοί ("brothers") is applied to the disciples here for the first time in the Fourth Gospel, marking a significant development in their relationship to Jesus.[15] Equally noteworthy is the expression, "My Father and your Father, my God and your God" (John 20:17). This formulation establishes both continuity and distinction within the dialogue. On the one hand, it extends to the disciples a new relational status in reference to God; on the other, it preserves the distinctive relationship between Jesus and the Father that has been consistently developed throughout the Gospel. The parallel structure of the saying therefore contributes simultaneously to the characterization of Jesus and to the narrative portrayal of the disciples following the resurrection.

In this sense, John 20:17 constitutes a theological synthesis of Johannine Christology and ecclesiology (Zevini 1984–87, 2:551).[16] Read within the literary context of the Gospel as a whole, this scene also recalls themes introduced in the Prologue, where the identity of the children of God is first announced (John 1:12–13). The dialogue in John 20:17 develops these earlier themes by placing them within the resurrection narrative and by redefining the relationship between Jesus and the disciples through the language of shared, yet differentiated, sonship. Mary's role as the commissioned witness thus functions not only as the climax of her own characterization but also as a narrative transition linking the resurrection appearances with the continuing witness of the disciples beyond the events narrated in the Gospel.

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15 Contrary to Charles H. Dodd (1963, 147, 324), who identifies these "brothers" with Jesus' biological relatives, the narrative context strongly indicates that the term refers to the disciples. This is confirmed by Mary Magdalene's role as emissary, entrusted with proclaiming the resurrection message to the community of followers.

16 Andrew J. Byers (2017, 27–48) argues that Johannine Christology is inseparably linked to Johannine ecclesiology, since faith in Jesus incorporates believers into a new covenant community. The Prologue employs birth imagery to depict the emergence of this new community of faith, a theme that reappears prominently in the narrative of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3. In this dialogue, Jesus teaches that entry into the kingdom of God requires being born "from above" (or "again"), emphasizing the transformative nature of spiritual rebirth as the basis for participation in the people of God (John 3:3–5).

9. Johannine Discipleship

The appearance narrative of John 20:1–18 reaches its climax in Mary Magdalene's response to the commission entrusted to her by the risen Jesus. Her movement from misunderstanding to recognition culminates in her becoming the first witness commissioned to announce the resurrection to the disciples. This conclusion, however, should not be taken as the climax of John 20 as a whole, since the subsequent appearance to the disciples, the gift of the Spirit, and Thomas's confession of faith contribute further dimensions to the Evangelist's theology of resurrection, revelation, and faith.

John 20:18 records: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her." The participle ἀγγέλλουσα ("announcing") functions as a significant literary marker within the Johannine account. Schneiders identifies it as the third major participial motif in the episode, following Mary's weeping and turning.

Together, these participles structure the narrative progression of Mary's character from loss and misunderstanding to recognition and testimony. The sequence traces her movement from searching for the crucified Jesus to proclaiming the risen Lord, thereby bringing her personal transformation within the resurrection narrative to its climax (Schneiders 1999, 222). This transformation, however, should not be understood as an isolated or exhaustive account of the chapter's theological development. Mary's proclamation forms part of the broader movement from encounter with the risen Jesus to ecclesial mission, which reaches a further theological dimension when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and commissions them for their apostolic task (John 20:21–23).

This transformation is reinforced through the contrast between Mary's opening and closing statements. At the beginning of the narrative she laments, "They have taken the Lord and we/I do not know where they have put him" (John 20:2, 13), expressing uncertainty concerning Jesus' absence. By the conclusion of the episode she announces with confidence, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). The contrast frames the episode by moving from ignorance to knowledge and from absence to encounter, thereby highlighting the narrative development of Mary's character.

The significance of Mary's testimony becomes more apparent when considered alongside the Gospel's opening discipleship narratives. John 1:35–51 establishes a pattern in which encounter with Jesus initiates a movement towards recognition and confession, but the narrative does not portray this movement as immediate, uniform, or irreversible. The first disciples progressively come to identify Jesus through titles such as "Rabbi," "Messiah," and "the Son of God" (John 1:38, 41, 49), yet their subsequent misunderstanding of Jesus' identity and mission demonstrates that recognition remains a developing process rather than a single completed act.

The same dynamic is evident throughout the Gospel, where encounters with Jesus may lead to faith, partial understanding, hesitation, or rejection. Nicodemus,

for example, approaches Jesus with a degree of openness yet fails initially to understand his teaching (John 3:1–10), while the Pharisees repeatedly encounter Jesus' signs and teaching without arriving at faith (cf. John 9:16, 24–29; 10:19–21). Recognition, therefore, cannot be understood in John as an automatic consequence of physical encounter; it depends upon the capacity to perceive the revelation mediated through Jesus and to respond to it in faith.

Within this broader Johannine pattern, Mary's experience in John 20 represents a distinctive and climactic instance of recognition. Her initial encounter with the empty tomb does not immediately produce understanding; like the other disciples, she remains within the uncertainty generated by Jesus' death and the missing body (John 20:1–2, 11–13). Even when Jesus first addresses her, she does not recognise him, interpreting him instead as the gardener (John 20:14–15). Recognition occurs only when Jesus calls her by name: "Mary" (John 20:16). Her response, "Rabbouni!" marks the transition from misunderstanding to personal recognition, and this recognition immediately issues in proclamation: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). Mary's significance, therefore, lies not in illustrating a simplistic pattern whereby every encounter with Jesus necessarily produces faith, but in embodying the Gospel's more carefully developed movement from revelation, through recognition, to testimony. Her encounter with the risen Jesus brings to completion, within the resurrection narrative, a pattern of discipleship already introduced in John 1, while simultaneously demonstrating that genuine recognition involves a response of faith to the revelation that Jesus himself initiates.

Mary's commission to announce the resurrection further reinforces this narrative continuity. Her declaration, "I have seen the Lord," echoes the language of witness found elsewhere in early Christian tradition. Whether or not the Fourth Gospel intends to attribute to Mary a formal apostolic status equivalent to that of Peter or the Beloved Disciple, her narrative function is clearly defined.[17] She is presented as the first explicit recipient of a direct resurrection revelation and the first character commissioned by the risen Jesus to communicate that revelation to the other disciples. This qualification is important, since the Beloved Disciple has

17 As the first person in John to encounter the risen Jesus and to receive from him a commission to communicate his message to the disciples, Mary Magdalene has been honoured in Christian tradition with the title *apostola apostolorum* ("apostle to the apostles"). See Moloney 1982, 429. Some scholars have further suggested that her role within the Fourth Gospel may, in certain respects, parallel the prominence accorded to Peter elsewhere in the New Testament tradition. See Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, 332. Moreover, Mary Magdalene's declaration, "I have seen the Lord," echoes formulas of apostolic authority found in Pauline literature, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of her witness. See 1 Cor 9:1. Not all interpreters, however, accept the view that the Fourth Gospel accords Mary Magdalene a uniquely elevated apostolic status. Alison Jasper (1993, 113), for example, contends that although Mary is commissioned to deliver Jesus' message to the disciples, the content of the revelation is directed primarily toward them rather than toward her. Consequently, Jasper interprets her role principally as that of a mediator of revelation rather than an authoritative leader in her own right.

already "seen and believed" on entering the empty tomb (John 20:8). His belief, however, arises from the evidence of the empty tomb, whereas Mary's encounter involves a direct appearance of the risen Jesus, personal recognition, and an explicit commission to announce his resurrection to the disciples. John therefore distinguishes between the initial recognition of the resurrection through the empty tomb and the direct reception and proclamation of the risen Christ's revelation. Mary occupies a distinctive position within this latter movement from revelation to testimony.

Within the narrative world of the Fourth Gospel, Mary functions as a paradigmatic disciple whose experience illustrates the process through which recognition of Jesus is narrated. Her movement from grief to joy, from misunderstanding to recognition, and from seeking to witnessing parallels the experiences of other characters whose encounters with Jesus similarly lead from incomplete understanding to fuller recognition and testimony.[18] The Samaritan woman, for example, initially misunderstands Jesus' words about living water (John 4:10–15), but her encounter progresses toward recognition of his identity and culminates in her returning to the city to testify to others (John 4:28–30, 39–42). Likewise, the man born blind moves from an initial and incomplete understanding of Jesus to progressively deeper recognition: he first identifies him simply as "the man called Jesus" (John 9:11), subsequently acknowledges him as a prophet (9:17), and finally confesses him as the Son of Man and worships him (9:35–38). His recognition is inseparable from testimony, as his repeated witness before the authorities becomes an increasingly explicit confession of Jesus' identity. The pattern is also anticipated in the calling narratives of John 1, where the first disciples move from seeking Jesus to encountering and recognizing him, and then to bringing others into the circle of discipleship (John 1:35–51). Against this broader narrative pattern, Mary's movement from searching for the body of Jesus to recognizing the risen Lord and proclaiming, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18), is not an isolated characterization but a concentrated instance of a recurring Johannine dynamic. In this respect, Mary serves as a representative character through whom the Evangelist develops a distinctively Johannine understanding of faith as a movement from partial perception and misunderstanding to recognition, confession, and witness.

Accordingly, John 20 brings to completion narrative patterns of encounter, recognition, and testimony that have been developed throughout the Gospel, particularly from the opening discipleship narratives of John 1. Mary Magdalene, however, requires a more nuanced consideration within this pattern. Unlike the first disciples, who are introduced and progressively characterized from the beginning of the Gospel, Mary appears as a named figure only at the crucifixion (John 19:25). Her

18 Raymond F. Collins (1976, 27) equates representative figures with "symbolic personages." See also Miller 2024, 123.

prominence in the resurrection narrative should therefore not be understood as the culmination of a character trajectory extending from John 1. Rather, the Evangelist deliberately places her within the broader Johannine pattern of discipleship at the decisive transition from Jesus' death to resurrection. Her presence at the cross establishes her as a witness to Jesus' death, while her encounter with the risen Jesus in the garden transforms her from one who searches for the absent Jesus into one who recognizes and proclaims the risen Lord (John 20:1–18). In this sense, Mary's narrative role intersects with, and brings a distinctive female embodiment to, the Gospel's wider pattern whereby encounter with Jesus leads to recognition and ultimately to testimony. Her function in John 20 is therefore not simply to conclude the resurrection narrative but to participate in the Gospel's larger theological portrayal of discipleship and witness, even though her own characterization is concentrated within the final chapters.

10. Ζητέω and the Dynamics of Johannine Discipleship

The analysis of John 20:1–18 suggests that the verb ζητέω occupies a significant place within the narrative and theological structure of the Fourth Gospel. A broader examination of its usage indicates that "seeking" functions as a distinctively Johannine term whose meaning is shaped by recurring narrative contexts rather than by isolated lexical occurrences. The relationship between John 1:19–51 and 20:1–18 should therefore be understood not as a strict lexical inclusio formed exclusively by the verb ζητέω, since the verb also occurs significantly within the passion narrative, particularly in John 18:4 and 18:7. Rather, these passages participate in a broader narrative pattern in which characters seek Jesus, encounter him, misunderstand his identity or whereabouts, and are subsequently brought to a fuller recognition of who he is. Within this larger framework, John 1:19–51 and 20:1–18 can be viewed as corresponding narrative units that bookend the Gospel's presentation of discipleship, while the intervening occurrences of ζητέω, including those in John 18, demonstrate that the motif develops progressively rather than functioning as a simple lexical inclusio. In John 20, the motif reaches a distinctive climax: Mary's search for the absent Jesus culminates in recognition of the risen Lord and in her transition from seeking to witnessing. Thus, the significance of ζητέω lies not in its delimiting the Gospel through a strict verbal inclusio, but in its contribution to a recurring Johannine narrative pattern through which the movement from seeking to recognition and testimony is progressively articulated.

Throughout the Gospel, ζητέω consistently appears alongside other key verbs that together depict the movement by which characters come to recognise Jesus. Discipleship therefore provides the principal narrative framework within which the

significance of ζητέω is to be understood. Rather than denoting simple curiosity or physical searching, the verb repeatedly marks an initial orientation toward Jesus that undergoes progressive clarification through subsequent encounters and revelations.

Its first major occurrence appears in the call of the first disciples when Jesus asks, τί ζητεῖτε ("What are you seeking?"). The disciples' approach to Jesus represents an initial movement whose significance becomes apparent only through the narrative that follows. This search is immediately linked with the motif of "finding" (εὑρίσκειν), establishing a pattern in which seeking leads to recognition through encounter. The correspondence between John 1:35–40 and 20:1–18 demonstrates that this sequence recurs at both the opening and the conclusion of the Gospel, thereby framing the narrative with a consistent pattern of searching, encounter, and recognition.

The disciples' initial following, however, remains incomplete, representing the beginning rather than the culmination of discipleship. The resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene provides the corresponding fulfilment of this earlier pattern. Her search for Jesus develops into recognition through the revelatory encounter with the risen Lord, and her subsequent commission establishes her as the first narrative mediator of the resurrection message. Her experience thus functions as the culmination of a pattern of discipleship that has been progressively developed throughout the Gospel (Marchadour 2007, 119).

The verb ζητέω is likewise closely associated with the Johannine motif of "seeing." The disciples' search in John 1 is answered by Jesus' invitation, "Come and see," followed by the narrator's statement that "they came and saw where he was staying" (John 1:39). Similarly, John 20 is structured by an extensive network of perception verbs, including ὁράω, βλέπω, and θεωρέω. Their repeated occurrence contributes to the narrative progression from incomplete perception to recognition. Visual language therefore serves not merely to describe empirical observation but to structure the development of recognition within the narrative itself.

The relationship between ζητέω and μαρτυρία (witness) constitutes another recurring feature of the Gospel's characterization. Characters who encounter Jesus subsequently communicate that encounter to others. Andrew announces to Simon, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41), while Mary Magdalene declares to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). The parallel between these episodes suggests that testimony consistently follows recognition, establishing witness as a recurring narrative consequence of encounter with Jesus.

The motif of seeking is further connected with the Johannine theme of "dwelling" (μένω). In John 1:38 the first disciples ask Jesus, ποῦ μένεις; ("Where are you staying?"). A corresponding concern with Jesus' location appears in John 20, where Mary searches for the place where Jesus' body has been laid. Both episodes initially frame their questions in spatial terms. Yet the subsequent narrative development redirects attention away from physical location toward Jesus' relationship with the

Father. Mary's inability to locate Jesus' body exemplifies a broader Johannine pattern in which characters initially interpret events according to earthly categories before receiving a fuller understanding through revelation.

Read in this light, John 20:1–18 functions as a narrative recapitulation of John 1:35–51. Both passages are organised around the interconnected motifs of seeking, encounter, seeing, recognition, and testimony. The repetition of these narrative patterns at the beginning and conclusion of the Gospel reinforces the literary unity of the discipleship narrative while demonstrating its progressive development. In both scenes, the initial search and incomplete understanding of Jesus give way, through encounter and recognition, to a testimony that communicates the significance of that encounter to others.

The movement from ζητέω to μένω likewise contributes to this development. The first disciples not only come and see where Jesus is staying but also "remain" (ἔμειναν) with him (John 1:39). This narrative motif assumes increasing theological prominence throughout the Gospel, reaching its fullest expression in Jesus' discourse on abiding in John 15, where the disciples are called to "abide" (μείνατε) in him as he abides in them (15:4). The movement from seeking to abiding thus describes not merely a transition from ignorance to knowledge but the establishment of an enduring relationship with Jesus. The resurrection narrative reconfigures this relationship in light of Jesus' return to the Father. When Jesus commissions Mary to announce, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17), his departure is presented not as the termination of the disciples' relationship with him but as its transformation. The relational language of "my Father and your Father" indicates that the disciples are drawn into the filial relationship that characterizes Jesus' own communion with the Father. In this respect, John 20:17 resonates particularly with the theology of abiding in John 15, where communion with Jesus is inseparable from participation in the love and life shared between the Son and the Father (15:9–10). The reference to the Father's house in John 14:2–3 provides a further resonance, since Jesus' departure and return are there associated with bringing the disciples into the sphere of his presence with the Father. Consequently, the question of Jesus' dwelling, introduced in John 1:38–39, develops through the Johannine theology of abiding and reaches its resurrectional reconfiguration in the announcement of Jesus' return to the Father and the commissioning of Mary to communicate this new reality to the disciples.

The correspondence between the opening and closing chapters therefore extends beyond verbal repetition to encompass the Gospel's larger narrative architecture. Whereas the first disciples seek Jesus' earthly dwelling and Mary initially searches for the location of his body, both narratives ultimately redirect attention toward Jesus' relationship with the Father and, through him, toward the disciples' participation in that relationship. Jesus' declaration that he is ascending to "my Father and your Father, my God and your God" (John 20:17) not only identifies the Father as the destination of his resurrection-exaltation but also redefines the disciples' relationship

with God in relation to his own. The recurring use of ζητέω, together with its associations with finding, seeing, witnessing, and abiding, thus contributes to a coherent narrative pattern that frames the Gospel's portrayal of discipleship from its opening scenes to its resurrection conclusion. What begins with the disciples' search for Jesus and their desire to remain with him ultimately culminates in their being incorporated, through the risen Jesus, into the relationship with the Father that constitutes the theological horizon of his mission.

Conclusion

This study has examined the resurrection narrative of John 20 with particular attention to the characterization of Mary Magdalene and her significance within the narrative and theological structure of the Fourth Gospel. The analysis has argued that John 20 functions not merely as the narrative resolution to Jesus' crucifixion but as the culmination of patterns, motifs, and character developments established throughout the Gospel. More specifically, the resurrection narratives form an integral part of the Johannine presentation of Jesus' "hour," a temporal and theological complex that encompasses his passion, death, resurrection, and return to the Father. John 20 therefore brings the *hour* to its climactic narrative expression: what begins in the passion as the moment of Jesus' glorification reaches its completion in the resurrection appearances, where the risen Jesus reveals his identity, reconstitutes the relationship between himself and his disciples, and commissions them as witnesses. Within this larger movement, John 20 serves as the literary and theological climax of the Johannine narrative, bringing earlier themes and patterns to their fullest expression in the encounters with the risen Jesus.

A central argument of this study has been that Mary Magdalene is presented as a paradigmatic disciple whose narrative development reflects the Gospel's portrayal of believing. Her progression from grief to recognition, from misunderstanding to revelation, and finally from encounter to testimony, participates in a recurring Johannine pattern through which characters come to recognise Jesus' identity and bear witness to him. This pattern is evident, for example, in the narrative of the Samaritan woman (John 4:4–42), whose initial misunderstanding of Jesus' words gives way to recognition, followed by her testimony to the people of her city: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done" (John 4:29). Likewise, the first disciples in John 1:35–51 move from seeking and encountering Jesus to recognition and testimony, as Andrew announces to Simon, "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41), and Philip invites Nathanael to "come and see" (John 1:46). Within this broader Johannine pattern, Mary's experience in John 20 represents a climactic instance: her initial misunderstanding of the empty tomb is transformed through her encounter

with the risen Jesus into recognition, and this encounter culminates in her testimony to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). As the first recipient of a resurrection appearance narrated in the Gospel and the first person commissioned by the risen Jesus to announce the resurrection to the disciples, Mary therefore occupies a distinctive position in the Gospel's presentation of discipleship and witness. Her distinctiveness lies not in the uniqueness of the pattern itself, but in the climactic resurrection context in which that pattern reaches its culmination.

The study has further argued that Mary's experience is deliberately structured in correspondence with the opening discipleship narratives of John 1. The literary and thematic parallels between the beginning and conclusion of the Gospel, particularly the recurring motif of seeking and finding Jesus, contribute to a carefully constructed narrative inclusio. Jesus' question to the first disciples, "What are you seeking?" (John 1:38), is echoed in his question to Mary, "Whom are you seeking?" (John 20:15), establishing a narrative framework in which the opening search for Jesus finds its culmination in the resurrection appearance. These correspondences demonstrate the coherence of the Gospel's literary design and reinforce the continuity of its portrayal of discipleship.

The analysis has also shown that the Gospel consistently distinguishes physical seeing from recognition. Within Johannine narrative, characters may see Jesus or perceive the signs associated with him without necessarily understanding their significance or recognising his identity. Seeing therefore constitutes an important stage in the process of recognition, but it does not by itself guarantee understanding. This distinction is particularly evident in the resurrection narrative, where Mary Magdalene initially sees Jesus but mistakes him for the gardener (John 20:14–15). Her physical perception does not immediately result in recognition; only when Jesus addresses her by name does she recognise him as "Rabbouni" (John 20:16). Her experience thus illustrates a specifically Johannine pattern in which seeing acquires its full significance through revelation and response. Physical perception may initiate the movement toward recognition, but recognition itself depends upon the revelatory encounter through which the significance of what is seen becomes intelligible.

John 20 likewise brings to completion the narrative movement from seeking to witnessing that has been traced throughout this study. Mary's testimony, "I have seen the Lord," represents the culmination of her own narrative development while simultaneously extending the pattern established in the call narratives of John 1, where encounter with Jesus is likewise followed by testimony. The resurrection narrative therefore completes the Gospel's broader characterization of discipleship by presenting witness as the narrative consequence of recognition.

Taken together, these observations support the conclusion that the resurrection narrative is carefully integrated into the literary architecture of the Fourth Gospel. Through the deliberate correspondence between John 1 and 20, the recurring use of motifs such as seeking, seeing, finding, witnessing, and abiding, and the progressive

development of Mary Magdalene's character, the Evangelist constructs a coherent narrative portrayal of discipleship that extends from the opening chapters of the Gospel to its resurrection climax.

Accordingly, this study has argued that Mary Magdalene should be understood not simply as the first witness of the resurrection but as a key narrative figure through whom the Fourth Gospel articulates its portrayal of discipleship, recognition, and witness. Her characterization provides an important lens through which the literary unity of the Gospel may be appreciated, while the correspondence between the opening call narratives and the resurrection appearance demonstrates the extent to which the Fourth Evangelist has shaped the Gospel as a coherent narrative from beginning to end.

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Is Christian Spiritual Experience an Intellectual Form? Reflections on Edith Stein's *Endliches und ewiges Sein (Finite and Eternal Being)*

PIOTR PASTERCZYK
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, piotr.pasterczyk@kul.pl

Abstract: This article examines the nature of Christian spiritual experience in light of Edith Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being*. Historically, spiritual experience can be understood in terms of either intellectual form or the practical exercise of love of neighbor. Following Stein, the article identifies intellectual form as the source of spiritual experience, which not only proceeds from the Christian conception of the Logos but is also rooted in the entire spiritual and intellectual culture of the West, from Heraclitus to Nicholas of Cusa. Stein's philosophical contribution is presented both as an attempt to bring phenomenological method into dialogue with Thomistic metaphysics and as an account of human spiritual experience in which intellectual form does not conflict with the affective depths of the soul. Her definition of the human mind as an image of the divine Logos reveals a phenomenon of transcendence within the human "I," inviting a spiritual experience in which finite being encounters eternal Being. An important part of the article addresses Stein's engagement with Martin Heidegger, a subject rarely discussed in the literature, including their shared critique of the metaphysical understanding of truth as the intellectual correspondence expressed by *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. For Stein, Heidegger's interpretation of human being as *Dasein* ultimately remains unacceptable because it is confined to the finite horizon of human life, whereas she seeks an interpretation of truth as eternal Being. The metaphors of the soul's affective interior that Stein employs in *Endliches und ewiges Sein* draw on the Christian theological and mystical tradition—Augustine of Hippo, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross—which describes the mystical union of the human person with God in terms of the soul's interior, spark, and center.

Keywords: Edith Stein, Logos, spiritual experience, intellectual form, phenomenology, metaphysics

This article explores the nature of Christian spiritual experience from a philosophical perspective. Its central research question concerns the source of this experience in relation both to the affective and practical disposition of love (ἀγάπη and *caritas*) and to the intellectual form that constitutes the essence of human cognition. Here, the concept of intellectual form refers to what Western philosophy, from Plato to Kant, has designated as λόγος in relation to the acts of νοῦς and διάνοια (Plato 2013, 509d–511e). The method employed combines the history of concepts, comparative philosophy, and phenomenological and metaphysical conceptual analysis. The question is examined through a reading of Edith Stein's most important philosophical work, *Endliches und ewiges Sein*, which addresses fundamental questions of classical philosophy from the phenomenological perspective that first shaped her thought during her collaboration with Edmund Husserl.

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This interpretation raises the question of how the metaphysical distinction between *ratio* (cf. διάνοια), as a form of discursive reason, and *intellectus* (cf. νοῦς), as a form of immediate insight, contributes to the constitution of spiritual experience as *caritas*. Stein offers a possible answer by drawing not only on Greek and scholastic philosophical sources but also on the Christian contemplative tradition. Within this tradition, love is neither a sensory phenomenon nor an intellectual form understood in purely theoretical terms. Rather, love in its original biblical sense of ἀγάπη is a profoundly spiritual phenomenon, touching the absolute essence of humanity. In the Christian mystical tradition, this essence is disclosed as the spark of the soul (*scintilla animae*), where the mind (*logos*) encounters the soul's affective elements, which Plato had already related to its inner dynamics, such as θυμός and ἐπιθυμία. The following analysis therefore also assumes that intellectual form and emotional experience are intrinsically compatible insofar as they together constitute a fully human disposition, expressed, among other ways, in spiritual experience. As Plato already observed in the *Philebus*, what constitutes the human being is neither emotion and sensory perception in the forms attributed to animals nor *logos* as the purely intellectual form of human life (Plato 1975, 21d–22e, 64a–67b). To be human in the deepest, spiritual dimension of life and in its fullest reality is to be rooted in both intellectual form and sensory experience. Nevertheless, intellectual form most clearly accounts for such phenomena as cognition, consciousness, and the kinds of spirituality to which the Christian concepts of ἀγάπη and *caritas* refer.

1. The Principle of Noncontradiction and *Coincidentia Oppositorum*

Does the Christian God, revealed as the Logos in the Prologue to John's Gospel, necessarily impart an intellectual character to the human relationship with him? A reading of both John's Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels seems to offer numerous arguments against this proposition. The Johannine Prologue states that "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14 NRSVue). This means that God reveals himself to human beings not as an idea to be understood but as a person of flesh and blood who can be touched. Such is the import of the testimony of the author of the First Letter of John: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). The same meaning is conveyed by the author of Luke's Gospel in his account of the risen Christ's appearance at Emmaus: "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:30–31). Likewise, Jesus expresses the primacy of love in the new commandment: "I give you a new commandment,

that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). Yet, on the other hand, God is initially disclosed to humanity in John's Gospel as the Logos: the Word that is in the beginning as the source of both knowledge and life. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1–3). The Logos differs fundamentally from the practical disposition of love understood, in the New Testament passages quoted above, as seeing, hearing, touching, and being together. In ancient Greek philosophy, the term refers to the rational principle governing the universe (Heraclitus), the world soul (Stoicism), the basis of every argument in debate (the Sophists), or the essence of knowledge as a reasoned account (Plato) (DK; Plato 1990).

An apparently self-evident interpretive approach to early Christian experience is to acknowledge its profound dichotomy: it is intellectual and cognitive on the one hand, yet practical on the other, manifesting itself in love of neighbor and in the encounter with the Logos made flesh. The principles of logic and metaphysics do not undermine this dichotomous interpretation, since it entails no contradiction. In the Western philosophical tradition, the logical and ontological principle of noncontradiction concerns not the opposition between spirit (reason) and body (the senses) but the fact that it is impossible for the same thing both to belong and not to belong to the same thing at the same time and in the same respect (Aristotle 2016, 1005b19–20). At the same time, this tradition also sustains a paradox that reaches beyond the principle of noncontradiction: the coincidence of opposites in the essence of God (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Nicholas of Cusa writes that "in God … contradictions coincide and converge" and that "the maximum and the minimum are one and the same." (Nicholas of Cusa 1985, I, 4, 11) *Coincidentia oppositorum* does not abolish the principle of noncontradiction; rather, it explains it and defines its limits. The logic of judgments and thoughts governs the realm of finite beings. When thought turns toward infinite Being, however, the principle of noncontradiction no longer suffices, since God, being all things, can have no opposite. Nicholas illustrates this truth by suggesting that the circumference of a circle with an infinitely large radius becomes a straight line (Nicholas of Cusa 1985). For reason, the straight and the curved are opposites; for the intellect, on the scale of infinity, they are one and the same.

Nicholas of Cusa's account of God finds a modern counterpart in Martin Heidegger's later thought. In *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, Heidegger introduces the figure of the last God (*der Letzte Gott*), whom he calls the "divine God" (Heidegger 1989, 403–17). This figure differs from the God of metaphysics, since he is neither the onto-theological supreme being nor the efficient cause of all existence. Heidegger argues that the Greek, Latin, and even German philosophical traditions confined God within the category of being. God consequently became

the object of the highest science and thus always appeared subject to the principles of logic and metaphysics, including the principle of noncontradiction (Heidegger 1957, 50–51). In contrast to God as the supreme being, Heidegger's divine God is a God who "passes by" (*Vorbeigang*): not the guarantor of being but the last God, who appears only in the clearing of the truth of Being (*Lichtung*). Heidegger's God does not "exist" in the sense of an object's presence; rather, he "happens" within the fourfold of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities (*Geviert*) (Heidegger 1989, 405–6). He enables human beings to discover their essence as "guardians of Being" rather than masters of objects. Turning to *Identität und Differenz*, and specifically "Satz der Identität," we also find Heidegger deconstructing the formula of the principle of identity, "A = A," in a manner consistent with his interpretation of the divine God. For him, the formula ceases to be a mere tautology and becomes a question about what allows the two instances of "A" to be joined by an equals sign, beneath which lies *Zusammengehörigkeit*, or "belonging together" (Heidegger 1957, 13–15). Identity does not establish the relation; rather, the primordial relation—the mutual belonging of the human being and Being—makes it possible to think identity at all. In "Satz der Identität," the event (*Ereignis*) is what enables the principles of logic to arise. At the same time, it is the process in which Being "expropriates" itself—gives itself over—to the human being, while the human being is "appropriated" by Being (Heidegger 1957). This is the "groundless ground" (*Ab-grund*) that brings us close to Nicholas's account of God, in whom the oppositions underlying thought and being coincide (Nicholas of Cusa 1985; Heidegger 1957).

2. The Logos as the Ontological Foundation of the Intellect

The question of how *logos* entered Christian religious experience and how its role developed finds an answer in the historical emergence of Christianity at the intersection of Jewish culture and the wider Greek culture of the Mediterranean world. In the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions appropriated through the monumental efforts of early Christian writers, God appears not as an irrational force but as the Logos, understood as the world's supreme principle, rational in nature. The earliest source of this Greek conception is Heraclitus, who maintains that the Logos exists eternally and that everything happens in accordance with it. The human intellect can attain truth only when it "listens to the Logos" rather than to its own opinions: "Therefore it is necessary to follow the common.… But although the logos is common, the many live as if they had a private understanding" (DK 22 B 2; cf. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 187). Heraclitus's understanding of the Logos closely converges with the Christian interpretation of the world and its laws, as fragment B1 in the collection of Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz illustrates:

> Of the Logos which is as I describe it men always prove to be uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Logos men are like people of no experience, even when they experience such words and deeds as I explain, dividing each according to its nature and declaring how it is. (DK 22 B 1; cf. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 187)

Justin, above all, draws on these Heraclitean fragments in developing the concept of λόγος σπερματικός in his *Apology*, arguing that every human being bears within himself or herself a seed of the *logos* (Justin Martyr 2009, *1 Apol.* 46.2–4; *2 Apol.* 13.3–6). A second witness to the Christian appropriation of the Heraclitean concept is Clement of Alexandria, whose writings preserve many of the fragments of Heraclitus identified by Diels and Kranz. In the *Stromata* and the *Protrepticus*, Clement quotes the fragments listed as DK 22 B14–19 (Clement of Alexandria 1919, *Protr.* 2.22.2; 1991, *Strom.* 2.4.17.4). Quotations from Heraclitus also appear in Hippolytus of Rome's *Refutatio omnium haeresium* and Origen's *Contra Celsum*. (Hippolytus 2016, *Refut.* 9.9.1 [DK 22 B 50], 9.9.4 [DK 22 B 53]; Origen 1980, *Cels.* 1.5 [DK 22 B 5], 6.42 [DK 22 B 80]). An intriguing complement to this Heraclitean source is provided by Plato, who proposes in the *Theaetetus* a definition of knowledge centered on *logos*: knowledge as "true belief accompanied by logos" (μετὰ λόγου) (Plato 1990, 201d1–2). Here, *logos* means an analytical account or definition that enables the intellect to penetrate the essence of a thing. Combining this "technical" definition of knowledge with the cosmic significance of *logos* in Heraclitus—for a Platonic parallel, see the *Sophist* (Plato 1993)—yields a coherent conception of the Logos as both divine, governing the entire visible cosmos, and present within the human intellect, enabling logical thought that produces genuine knowledge (DK; Plato 1990, 1993). This line of thought appears to trace the transition from originally Greek to Christian thought. An intermediate stage can be found among the Stoics, who employed the concept of λόγος σπερματικός before Clement of Alexandria. It already appears in Zeno of Citium, who defines God as the world's λόγος σπερματικός, describing him as a power containing the rational principles of everything that is to come into being. Similarly, the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus maintains that the human intellect (ἡγεμονικόν) is a "fragment" (απόσπασμα) of the divine fire or *logos*. If the world is a living organism governed by the Logos, then our thinking, as a fragment of that Logos, must be ontologically identical with the logic of the universe.

If "in the beginning was the Logos," every authentic spiritual experience must have a logocentric structure. Christian spirituality is therefore not an escape from reason but its radical fulfillment. On this account, faith is not opposed to knowledge; rather, it is a kind of intellectual trust in the structure of reality, rooted in a spiritual experience that includes the recognition of the cosmos's rational order. As in the traditions of the Far East—for example, in the concept of Dharma—spirituality in the Greek and Christian traditions is primarily a process through which the intellect

awakens to the truth of being. Prayer and contemplation are, in essence, the highest cognitive acts, in which the intellect unites with the object of knowledge: the Supreme Good. Were this experience nonintellectual, it would be blind, since without intellectual form the Christian would encounter not God but his or her own psychological projections.

3. Intellectual Form in Light of the Distinction Between *Ratio* and *Intellectus*, and the Intellectual Nature of Love as *Agape/Caritas*

In Plato's dialogues, the ontological conception of the Logos as an eternally existing creative power, found in Heraclitus and Stoic thought, develops toward an understanding of *logos* as a human cognitive power (DK; Plato 1990, 2013). A useful illustration of this transition from ontology to epistemology is the image of cognition in Book VI of the *Republic*. Here, the divided line represents the full range of human cognitive capacities, from sensory perception (αἴσθησις), through mathematical reasoning (διάνοια), to intellectual intuition (νοῦς) (Plato 2013). *Logos* itself appears as a cognitive power in Plato's later dialogues, such as the *Theaetetus*, where knowledge is defined by combining true belief with *logos* (Plato 1990). An exception to this epistemological tendency is the *Timaeus*, which describes the creative act of the Demiurge, a figure who not only resembles but actually personifies the Heraclitean Logos (Plato 2000). This has enormous significance for the subsequent Christian reception of the concept of *logos* and for the interpretation, in its light, of God's creative act in the Hebrew Bible. Its relevance extends beyond the reflections of Christian writers discussed above to the probable formation of the Johannine Prologue itself within the tradition of Hellenistic Judaism and the thought of Philo of Alexandria. In the *Timaeus*, Plato also mentions intellectual forms, which, alongside the Demiurge or Logos, are essential to understanding the creation of the cosmos (Plato 2000). In this account, intellectual forms constitute the rational plan according to which the Demiurge creates the cosmos. The cosmos subsequently becomes accessible to human cognitive capacities by virtue of their affinity with the structure of the Logos (Plato 2000).

The *Timaeus* served as a point of reference for Christian writers, particularly in the Middle Ages. In the present context, however, it is worth returning to Plato's greatest dialogue, the *Republic*. Its profound influence is decisive for understanding the distinction between the human intellect as νοῦς and reason as διάνοια, subsequently expressed by the Latin *ratio* (Plato 2013). The image of the divided line explains the distinction between the intellect and intellectual cognition (νοῦς, *noesis*), understood as the intuitive insight characteristic of the highest forms of human knowledge of the Forms, and reason and discursive cognition (διάνοια), understood as the mathematical and scientific analysis of the Forms (Plato 2013). Discursivity

refers above all to what we now call scientific cognition. The point of reference for διάνοια is a mathematical model of spatiotemporal reality, corresponding, in the two lower segments of the line, to the beings that are the objects of sensory cognition and to their reflections (Plato 2013). Διάνοια is thus a kind of discursive analysis of the mathematical patterns of spatiotemporal beings, represented in the image as intellectual forms situated in the third segment of the line (Plato 2013). Διάνοια predominates in knowledge of the structure of the cosmos described in the *Timaeus*, because access to an understanding of the cosmos is mathematical in character. Νοῦς, by contrast, appears in connection with the Demiurge himself, who "looks upon" the intellectual forms and constructs the cosmos on their basis (Plato 2000, 2013).

The key to understanding this point in relation to intellectual form as the source of spiritual cognition—the subject announced in the title—is the medieval distinction between *ratio* (discursive, analytical reason, corresponding to διάνοια) and *intellectus* (the contemplative intellect, corresponding to νοῦς). This distinction undoubtedly derives from the Platonic model and its subsequent interpretation in the medieval and modern periods (Thomas Aquinas 1948, *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8; 1953, *De Veritate*, q. 15, a. 1). The difficulty is that modernity reduced the intellect to logic and calculation, whereas Christian spiritual experience is rooted in intellectual form and in the corresponding faculty: the soul's spiritual eye, which "sees" metaphysical truths without the mediation of definitions. This accords with Plato's conception of the highest level of cognition (*noesis*), described in the *Republic* through the images of the divided line and the cave, the latter in Book VII (Plato 2013). In this context, Christian mysticism—as in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite—is not irrational but suprarational, since it presupposes an "open" intellect that receives the light of revelation as cognitive givenness. This account underscores the origin of spiritual experience in intellectual form: the human *logos*, as intellect, reflects that experience and seeks to understand it even within Christian faith, which resembles Platonic belief (πίστις) (Plato 2013). Anselm of Canterbury bears witness to this in his celebrated formula *fides quaerens intellectum*, which brings all cognitive capacities into relation. This is also the ultimate purpose of Plato's images of cognition in the *Republic*, since the divided yet single line encompasses the full range of human cognitive capacities, from πίστις through αἴσθησις to διάνοια and *noesis* (Plato 2013). Christian spiritual experience can accordingly be described as θεωρία: the contemplation of God that transforms the knowing subject. Without intellectual form, mystical experience would be mere emotional noise, devoid of the salvific power that this tradition identifies with knowledge of Truth.

With the title's question concerning the original source of Christian spiritual experience in view, we may now ask how love, which occupies an absolutely central place alongside the Logos in the Christian tradition, relates to this inquiry. What is love from an anthropological and philosophical perspective? This is not an easy question, since love has never become as important a theme in Western philosophy

as *logos* and intellectual form. The Platonic tradition offers a multifaceted definition of love, beginning with one of Plato's most important dialogues, the *Symposium* (Plato 1989). There, Eros in its most spiritual form is the power that leads the intellect to the contemplation of Beauty, as Diotima explains to Socrates while also revealing the essence of philosophy (Plato 1989). Within the Christian tradition, however, voices rejecting the intellect, as opposed to faith, as the principle of spiritual experience emerged as early as the formation of the New Testament texts. Among the Christian positions most hostile to the intellect are Paul's negative assessment of worldly wisdom in the First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:18–25), Tertullian's fideism ("What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?") (Tertullian 1989, *Prescription Against Heretics* 7), and Martin Luther's notion of *sola fide*, with its characterization of reason as the devil's greatest whore. Nevertheless, the position continuing Plato's insight proved the most influential within the Christian tradition. An example is Thomas Aquinas's synthesis of medieval theology, in which Christian *caritas* has a cognitive function and the intellect rests, through love, in the truth it has come to know (Plato 1989; Thomas Aquinas 1948). In this context, the Christian experience of God is intellectual because it is conscious: love without intellect would be instinct, while intellect without love would be a dead letter. The highest spiritual experience is therefore the intellect illuminated by love, which makes it the most complete form of human activity.

4. Edith Stein: Spiritual Experience in Light of Philosophy and Faith

The preceding discussion allows us to consider how the Christian understanding of the Logos takes shape in the work of Stein, both a committed Christian and one of the most significant women philosophers in the history of Western culture (Calcagno 2007; MacIntyre 2006). Throughout the history of Western philosophy, the religious commitments of thinkers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas generated an impetus to bring fundamental philosophical ideas of non-Christian origin into relation with the mainstream Christian understanding of nature, humanity, and God (Augustine 1991; Thomas Aquinas 1948). The same is true of Stein. Unlike Hans-Eduard Hengstenberg, a pupil of Max Scheler and a Catholic convert, however, Husserl's pupil does not undertake a systematic synthesis of phenomenology and the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (Husserl 1900–1901). Reflection on the metaphysical structure of the Logos is evident both in Stein's critical engagement with Heidegger, whom she had known personally since following Husserl to Freiburg in 1916 (Stein 1962; Calcagno 2000), and in her philosophical *magnum opus*, *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950, 2002a). On the one hand, Stein understands the intellect as a structure rooted in the Logos that constitutes spiritual experience. On the other, without

entering into the hermeneutical and existential experience of Heidegger's phenomenology, she defends the metaphysical, onto-theological horizon within which God is viewed as the supreme being (Stein 1950, 1962; Calcagno 2000). In her philosophical *magnum opus*, Stein does not propose a new model of thought inspired by Husserlian phenomenology and Thomistic metaphysics. Instead, she seeks to bring certain phenomenological analyses—for example, those concerning Descartes's and Husserl's epoch-making discovery of the role of the *ego cogito*—into relation with the metaphysical conviction that the object of knowledge exists independently of the knowing subject (Husserl 1900–1901; Stein 1950, 2000, 2002a; Lebech 2015).

For Stein, however, the human intellect is not merely an instrument for knowing the external world. It is also a kind of interior space in which awareness arises of finite being's dependence on eternal Being (Stein 1950, 2002a). Accordingly, in her *magnum opus*, she understands the spiritual experience of encounter with God as the Supreme Being primarily in terms of intellectual form. Phenomenological analysis of one's own "I" shows that intellectual insight into our contingency necessarily brings us face to face with the existence of a Necessary Being (Stein 1950, 2002a). Religious experience, which in Stein's thought bears an essential relation to spiritual experience, is therefore not an addition to intellectual life but an enactment of the fullness of personal being, which is intellectual by nature (Stein 1950, 2002a; Schulz 1994). Stein argues that spiritual experience must have an intellectual form if it is to be integrated into the whole of human knowledge. A spirituality that was not intellectual could thus make no claim to truth, remaining merely a subjective feeling. In *Endliches und ewiges Sein*, the intellect consequently serves as a bridge: the form in which infinity leaves its imprint on the finite structure of the human soul (Stein 1950, 2002a).

4.1. The Intellect as an Image of the Divine Logos

In her analysis of the meaning of being, Stein points to an affinity between the human mind and the divinely constituted structure of the world, or the inner order of the triune God himself (Stein 1950, 2002a). This affinity signals the Augustinian source of her metaphysical intuitions. Within the metaphysical and theological tradition, the human intellect as an image of the divine Logos receives its paradigmatic expression in Augustine's *De Trinitate*. There, Augustine argues that the image of God is to be sought not in the mind's relation to external objects but in the very structure of the human soul as it turns toward itself and its Creator: "Thus the mind remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself. If we see this, we see a triad; it is not yet God, but it is already an image of God." (Augustine 1991, *The Trinity* XIV, 8.11)

In *Endliches und ewiges Sein*, the human spirit is portrayed as finite yet created in the image of the eternal Spirit (Stein 1950, 2002a). Human consciousness can therefore appear as intelligence: a being directed by its very nature toward the Logos as the

source of every being (Stein 1950, 2002a). As a being directed toward the Logos, intelligence becomes a site of encounter, since its very structure is an image of the divine Intellect, and the encounter itself takes place through the discovery of the meaning concealed in creation (Stein 1950, 2002a; Betschart 2017, 288–89). Stein's analysis of the intellect's ontological identity requires us to move beyond both the everyday understanding of reason as a tool for processing data—compare the earlier discussion of διάνοια and its Latin rendering as *ratio* (Plato 2013)—and the Cartesian and Husserlian analysis of the subject. She redefines human intelligence by situating it within the relation between the finite spirit and the eternal Logos (Husserl 1900–1901; Stein 1950, 2002a; Schulz 1994). Following the onto-theological tradition, Stein maintains that the human spirit, though limited in its temporality and capacities, has been formed in the image and likeness of the eternal Spirit (Stein 1950, 2002a; Borden Sharkey 2010). This thesis appears not to be exclusively theological but to constitute a foundation of Greek metaphysics. It is more than the Teresian intuition of a Carmelite who draws on Teresa of Ávila's image of the interior castle. Rather, it makes a profoundly philosophical distinction between the intellect as a closed fortress of the spirit and the intellect as "being directed toward" (Stein 1950, 2002a). This concept of "directedness," reminiscent of phenomenological intentionality, is crucial: it suggests that intelligence is not a property a human being possesses but a dynamic movement toward truth (Husserl 1900–1901; Stein 1950, 2002a). The intellect is intelligence because, in its essence, it seeks to recognize the Logos as the order and meaning of all reality. Its orientation toward the Logos makes the human intellect a source of knowledge precisely as a site of encounter (Stein 1950, 2002a). Drawing on the metaphysical tradition of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Stein understands cognition as an act of participation. In the present context, this means that, since the world was created through the divine Logos, every thing bears an element of rationality, for rationality always concerns order and meaning (Augustine 1991; Thomas Aquinas 1948; Stein 1950, 2002a; Borden Sharkey 2008).

Consequently, when the intellect discovers a truth about the world—whether mathematical, natural-scientific, or metaphysical—it does not create new meaning but finds meaning already present. At the moment of discovery, the human "I" moves beyond its own finitude and touches the objective order of being (Stein 1950, 2002a). The human intellect then begins to function as an ontological bridge: it is rooted in a fragile, finite subject, yet its object and goal are eternal and unchanging (Stein 1950, 2002a). Whereas God is the fullness of knowledge and Being itself, the human being gradually discovers that knowledge and being. This likeness makes the intellect the site most receptive to transcendence (Stein 1950, 2002a). Moreover, Stein suggests that intelligence does not isolate us from reality but constitutes the highest form of openness. In understanding, a kind of communion takes place between subject and object, grounded in the Logos they share (Stein 1950, 2002a). Every profound intellectual search for meaning thus becomes a form of ascent toward eternal Being,

and the intellect itself emerges as the domain in which eternity addresses the human being in the language of intelligible truth (Stein 1950, 2002a). Truth appears here as the point of contact between eternal Being and the human intellect: the intellect is the measure of the things it knows, while those things are themselves also known by the divine intellect (Thomas Aquinas 1948; Stein 1950, 2002a). In this way, the finite human intellect enters into relation with God's creative mind. Within this relation, the cognitive process becomes a metaphysical act. Created according to divine ideas, things become, at the moment truth is known, the meeting place of the human intellect and God's original design (Stein 1950, 2002a). The intellect is thus the site at which two orders converge: the objective truth about the world, apprehended through metaphysical cognition, and the eternal source of that truth, understood as the creative act of the Logos (Stein 1950, 2002a).

In this context, intellectual form as the meeting place of the human being and God appears not as a purely metaphysical principle of organization—for example, of matter, if form is interpreted in Aristotle's original metaphysical sense—but as the primordial principle of rationality and intelligibility (*principium intelligibilitatis*) (Stein 1950, 2002a). This understanding of intellectual form provides a direct bridge to the concept of the cosmic Logos, in which every being finds its rational grounding and ultimate meaning (Stein 1950, 2002a). In the case of a human being's individual form, that form is not merely a biological template of the species but a unique reflection of the divine order in the world (Stein 1950, 2002a). To reject chaos in favor of experiencing the surrounding world as a purposefully constituted order is to recognize that, in deciphering these forms, the human intellect enters into an active dialogue with divine Reason. Participation in the Logos is most fully realized through the discovery of, and intellectual attunement to, the rational order inscribed in the very core of our individuality (Stein 1950, 2002a; Borden Sharkey 2010).

4.2. The Logos and Transcendence Within the Human Mind

The preceding section noted that, in invoking directedness to give an adequate account of intellectual cognition, Stein probably draws on the phenomenological concept of intentionality, with which she was thoroughly familiar. This concept offers a useful starting point for analyzing transcendence within the "I," since intentionality provides a basis for understanding how consciousness transcends itself (Husserl 1900–1901). In light of intentionality, a mental phenomenon cannot remain enclosed within its own immanence; by its very nature, it is directed toward an object distinct from itself. This is especially significant from the perspective of *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950), where the phenomenological postulate of intentionality undergoes an "ontologization": the directedness of consciousness can be interpreted as a manifestation of its ontological insufficiency. For Stein, transcendence within the "I" thus points to the fundamental contingency of human being. Husserl's concept

of intentionality provides only the epistemological framework for a much deeper, metaphilosophical analysis of finitude.

The principle that objects exist independently of the mind is not a straightforward consequence of Husserlian intentionality. It can, however, be related to the realist phenomenology practiced by Stein's friends in Husserl's Göttingen circle (Beckmann 2003). For Stein, it is a necessary condition of the realist epistemology she adopts in *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950). The human mind can know only when it encounters a reality independent of itself, which by definition rules out solipsistic confinement within one's own ego. In Stein's anthropology, the human "I" therefore does not complete its discovery of its own nature simply by establishing psychological facts, by undertaking a phenomenological analysis of the "I" on the Cartesian or Husserlian model, or by adopting the phenomenological hermeneutics of the early Heidegger (Calcagno 2000). *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950) does indeed begin with a phenomenology of the human "I." Its opening chapters even examine existential themes of anxiety drawn from Heidegger's hermeneutical and phenomenological analyses in *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger 1986). Nevertheless, Stein's thought leads inevitably toward metaphysics. The decisive turning point appears to be the radical experience of one's own finitude: the realization that my being is fragile, mutable, and not grounded in itself. Rather than concentrating, as Heidegger does, on the anxiety arising from human Dasein's confrontation with nothingness, Stein argues that in this very act of self-awareness the intellect discovers within itself the idea of eternal Being. This awareness establishes a logical contrast with its own finitude.

For Stein, the intellectual search for the ground of one's own being opens a clear path to transcendence. In light of the foregoing argument, the intellect possesses by nature the capacity to reach beyond itself toward the infinite. The intellectual work of the spirit consists in recognizing that the "I" is sustained in existence by an Intellect and a Will that surpass it. The human intellect thereby becomes a site of encounter, where human frailty and contingency meet the absolute fullness of eternal Being. Following Scheler, Stein differentiates the essence shared by human beings from the individual essence that makes each person uniquely who he or she is (Moran 2017, 44). Stein's rejection of a reductive stream-of-consciousness model in favor of a metaphysical conception based on the recognition of one's contingency, and hence one's dependence on eternal Being, is crucial to her philosophical development. This depth is not an aggregate of psychological experiences but a fundamental "clearing" from which the person's conscious life emerges). From this clearing flow human decisions and cognition, together with the ultimate realization that the depth of the "I" is accessible not through purely phenomenological analyses of the subject but only through metaphysical inquiry into the human spiritual interior.

4.3. *Scintilla Animae*: Christian Spiritual Experience in Relation to the Whole of Human Being and Its Faculties

In *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950), Stein takes the Cartesian *ego cogito* and Husserlian ego-consciousness as her foundation but subjects them to metaphysical analysis. For her, the intellect also becomes the space in which human beings discover their own nature as beings that have not brought themselves into existence. This analysis of consciousness arguably departs from Husserl's (1911) thought. For Husserl, not only the metaphysical conception of the subject but even the Cartesian *ego cogito* is too readily construed as a substance, in contrast, for example, to the transcendental consciousness that he articulated explicitly during his Freiburg period. Stein interprets the human "I" as open to something that transcends it. In her greatest work, she moves from phenomenological and Cartesian positions to a metaphysical standpoint, from which the human intellect, as an image of the divine Logos, appears at the point of encounter between God and the human being. This transcendence within the "I" has nothing to do with the transcendentality of Husserl's subject. Rather, it presents a unity of intellect and divine grace that Stein describes through a distinctive term for the soul's interior, encompassing both intellectual and affective acts: *gestimmtes Innere* (Stein 1950, 418), the affectively attuned interior. Stein appears to develop her understanding of the interior of human being in relation to Augustine's metaphor of the soul as an image of God in *De Trinitate* (Augustine 1991). Her account corresponds to the concept of the spark of the soul (*scintilla animae*), used in discussions of Christian spiritual experience since the early Middle Ages (Patt 2024). Although the expression *scintilla animae* does not occur verbatim in *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950), its use seems appropriate. Stein does not interpret the interior of the human soul as purely intellectual. In keeping with the Christian mystical tradition, she discusses the essence of human being in relation to the Augustinian triad of memory, understanding, and will. In *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950), she describes this triad in relation to love as such, or to spirit, love, and knowledge, which in Augustine's interpretation express the constitution of human being in its primordial elements of intellect, affect, and will. In her analysis of memory, Stein is chiefly interested in the affective dimension broadly understood, which she identifies within the pursuit of the good in three dispositions: desire, the act of willing, and love. A broader reading of *De Trinitate* (Augustine 1991) shows that Augustine describes the hidden interior of the mind precisely in his discussion of memory. He calls it the *abditum mentis* and understands it as the place within the human soul most open to divine light. Meister Eckhart takes up this expression in his writings, describing it as *scintilla* in the sense of the spark, the light, and the ground of the soul (*Seelengrund*) (Haas 2014). Like Augustine, in relating the soul's interior to a divine spark, he does not reduce it to an exclusively intellectual act. Rather, he sees it as the unchanging and unwavering source of the spontaneity of human dispositions

manifested in consciousness, love, and acts of will. Stein, too, presumably refers to this place within the soul, interpreting it in relation to cognition, will, and affect alike. For her, what she calls "das innere Sein" is not exhausted by memory and consciousness; it is also the source of affect, the "Sitz des Gefühlslebens." (Stein 1950, 455) Stein defines this place more precisely in another work, *Kreuzeswissenschaft* (Stein 2003), where she engages with John of the Cross's theology of the center of the human soul (*el centro del alma*) (John of the Cross 1991). She uses the phrase "this inmost part [of the soul; cf. *das Innerste der Seele*]" to designate the place where God dwells in the human heart and where the spiritual marriage of God and the human person takes place. This is an "ontological place": it does not become manifest only when spiritual marriage occurs but exists permanently, even when no such union ever takes place.

In analyzing the inner structure of the human person, Stein shows that, in light of the ground of the soul described above, awareness of our finitude becomes the moment in which we touch eternity. In experiencing our finitude, we discover the idea of infinite Being. Not only affect and love but also the intellect serves here as a meeting place between God and the human being, since in its depths a tension emerges between eternal Being and the human "I" in the here and now. This encounter occurs, among other ways, through the human capacity to formulate the idea of an Infinite Being—compare Anselm's "that than which nothing greater can be thought." This human capacity may well provide proof that finite being is not closed in upon itself but has an open window onto eternity. It corresponds to Stein's definition of the soul as a "unique mirror of God," in which the dignity of the human person is rooted in a direct relation to the Creator (Stein 2002a, 241). The image emphasizes the uniqueness of each being, which is not merely an instance of a species but an individual reflection of divine wisdom and of an encounter with it. Stein's metaphysical approach presupposes that the structure of the soul includes a space that remains open to infinity. Recognizing this is essential to understanding why, for Stein, personal intellectual development is a sacred task.

4.4. The Logos as the Light of Reason: A Dialogue with Martin Heidegger

In discussing the philosophical question of being in the final section of chapters III and V of *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950, 101–16, 300), Stein employs the metaphors of word and light, thereby linking the question of the truth of being to the Johannine spiritual tradition. This connection appears crucial in light of the presentation of the Logos in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. It connects participation in divine light with the human mind's search for truth, presenting truth as an encounter between the *logos* of human consciousness and the Logos of the divine essence. Of particular importance to Stein is the purity of the light that is the Logos, in accordance with the theology of the Johannine tradition, which maintains that there is no darkness in the divine Logos. Later, in chapter VII, the concept of illumination

appears in connection with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. It defines the essence of purely spiritual beings and, in a certain sense, also pertains to knowledge of the world as a process of being filled with divine light.

Appealing to the tradition of the Fourth Gospel, and to some extent to the Augustinian and Dionysian traditions that emphasize illumination as a form of cognition, allows Stein to modify the logical and metaphysical interpretation of truth. Truth is no longer merely the correspondence of thought and thing (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*) but becomes the radiance of being itself (*Seinsglanz*). An intriguing further aspect of Stein's natural mysticism of the Logos is her observation that spiritual being is not a static point but a dynamic field in which the intellect performs an essential function. In her interpretation of Stein, Mette Lebech (2015, 141) describes the function of Christian philosophy through the concept of a "consequent essential openness" (clearing) that makes transcendence possible. This concept allows human consciousness to be understood as an interior space and a site of encounter in which the phenomenological experience of the "I" opens itself to transcendence—or, in Heidegger's terminology, to the truth of Being (Heidegger 1989, 293–388). Stein's understanding of transcendence is, of course, different from Heidegger's. For her, the intellect reaches beyond the mere analysis of sense data and becomes a window of the soul through which the light of divine grace enters, both enabling knowledge and conferring metaphysical unity upon beings. Spirituality is thus not an external addition but a constitutive dimension of human being that expands the space of the soul toward infinity. The intellect's openness to transcendence makes the human being a person in the fullest sense. Through this transparency, the soul ceases to be merely a closed subject and becomes a living site of God's action. In thus redefining the Augustinian and Dionysian doctrine of illumination, Stein transfers it from the theological and ontological plane to the phenomenology of the person. This phenomenology gives modern expression to the conception of divine light as the source of the transition from seeing phenomena to knowing the truth of being, identifying illumination with the very structure through which the person is constituted within his or her own "I."

Situating the intellect within the metaphor of the clearing, where being discloses its meaning and illumination becomes a condition for the possibility of personhood, establishes common ground for a confrontation between fundamental ontology and the metaphysical account of the soul and its consciousness. Heidegger is arguably the foremost representative of the phenomenologically inspired quest for a deeper understanding of ontology, or fundamental ontology. Stein's thought, by contrast, operates within scholastic metaphysics, which Heidegger regarded as a deficient ontology, or even as a form of forgetting the question of the meaning of Being (Calcagno 2000). Yet for both Stein and Heidegger, without the metaphors of light and clearing, truth understood as *adaequatio* remains merely an external description, devoid of the inner power that shapes the human mind. For Stein, this light is divine because it invites entry into a relationship with eternal Being. Such a relationship is

possible only because the human person bears within himself or herself the potential to be illuminated by what transcends natural capacities. Both Stein and Heidegger recognized that, over the centuries, the scholastic definition of truth had been impoverished and reduced to a purely logical relation in which the human mind verifies correspondence with a state of affairs, treating being as a lifeless and mute object. Both sought to restore truth's ontological dimension. For them, this could mean that truth is not merely a property of our judgments but, above all, a property of being itself. Heidegger pursues this aim by returning to the Greek understanding of truth as ἀλήθεια throughout the successive stages of his thought, from *Sein und Zeit* in 1927 to *Zur Sache des Denkens* in 1969 (Heidegger 1969). Developing this intuition, he initially argues that the metaphysical definition of truth as *adaequatio* is derivative in relation to its original meaning. This meaning can be traced through his various renderings of the Greek ἀλήθεια as unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*), a wresting from oblivion and concealment, and clearing (*Lichtung*). Within Heidegger's imagery, Being (*Sein*) is not passive but manifests itself and emerges from concealment. The structure of a forest clearing (*Lichtung*) aptly conveys Being itself as the framework within which the incoming light can illuminate and disclose beings within the world. Stein's imagery of light as a means of interpreting being may be said to move in the same direction: when she writes of its radiance, she refers to being itself in its disclosure and manifestation.

Despite this convergence in their use of the metaphors of light, shadow, and clearing, Stein firmly rejects Heidegger's philosophy, setting out her criticism explicitly in the appendix to *Endliches und ewiges Sein* devoted to his existential philosophy (Stein 1962). There are three reasons for this divergence. The first concerns the source of light and can be expressed as a difference between transcendence and immanence. For Stein, being is radiant (*claritas*) because its architect is the divine Logos, as the Johannine tradition emphasizes in affirming that all things came into being through the Word and that in him were Life and Light. Created being shines with reflected light, pointing beyond itself to Absolute Truth: God. For Heidegger, by contrast, the clearing (*Lichtung*) and Being (*Sein*) are wholly autonomous, indeed impersonal. Despite the emergence of the motif of the last God (*Der letzte Gott*) in his later thought (Heidegger 1989), Being remains, rather, a historical event without any transcendent ground. Stein regarded this as an error, since without such a ground human existence is left suspended in a void. The second difference concerns the nature of truth, which for Stein is absolute Light, whereas for Heidegger it is what might be described as the interplay of concealment and unconcealment. Heideggerian unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*), in its relation to the Greek ἀλήθεια, is inseparably bound to concealment (λήθη). In showing itself, Being simultaneously conceals itself, so that truth becomes an unceasing interplay of light and shadow. Following the biblical Johannine and Augustinian traditions, Stein maintains, by contrast, that the source of reality is God, who is "Light, and in him there is no darkness." Because of its finitude,

the human mind encounters the darkness of mystery. Being itself, however, is wholly transparent, luminous, and meaningful. Darkness does not belong to the essence of Truth, as the First Letter of John explicitly attests (1 John 1:5). The third difference is that between Heideggerian anxiety and Christian trust. This marks an anthropological turning point, since Heidegger defines human existence (*Dasein*) as being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) and makes anxiety (*Angst*) in the face of nothingness its fundamental existential condition. Stein responds with an affirmative analysis of the phenomenon of existence: yes, my being is finite and fragile, and I may fall into nothingness at any moment; yet the fact that I endure does not fill me with anxiety but makes me aware that my existence is sustained at every moment by eternal Being. Stein replaces Heideggerian anxiety with mystical trust. She might well acknowledge that Heidegger correctly recognized being's capacity to manifest itself, its luminosity, yet stopped at the clearing and declared that nothing lay beyond it. Sustained by existential faith, Stein looks upward and understands that the clearing is bright only because the Sun shines above it: the transcendent, personal Logos.

4.5. The Logos of the Cross as an Intellectual Form of Paradox, and *Unio Mystica* as the Intellectual Unity of Being and Experience

Stein not only converted from Judaism to Christianity but also chose to enter Carmel, committing her life to the spiritual path of John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila. It is therefore worth asking whether the experience of the dark night of faith and of suffering's purifying power, so characteristic of Carmelite spirituality, also finds a place in her philosophical reflection through the motif of union with the Logos along a path leading to a kind of intellectual blindness and darkness. The question is particularly intriguing because, in another work devoted to John of the Cross's spirituality, *The Science of the Cross* (Stein 2002b, 2003), Stein examines the moment when the intellect must suspend its natural forms in order to receive supernatural light. Knowledge of the cross is not ordinary knowledge acquired from books, but acquiring it does not entail abandoning intellectual form as the source of spiritual cognition. A close reading of *The Science of the Cross* (Stein 2002b, 2003) shows that, already in the introduction, Stein suggests not merely that knowledge is possible within the Christian experience of the cross but that the cross itself becomes, in a certain sense, a cognitive form of the soul. It does so through what she calls, in the original German, *heilige Sachlichkeit*: "This is 'holy objectivity' (*heilige Sachlichkeit*), i.e. the original receptivity of a soul re-born by the Holy Spirit. Such a soul reacts to all events in the proper way and at the right depth; it has in itself a living, moving power joyfully ready to let itself be formed, unhampered by false inhibitions and rigidity." (Stein 2002b, 2–4) The expression *heilige Sachlichkeit* introduces into Stein's work a concept that, shortly after the Second World War, became a model of adequate cognition within the broad current of realist phenomenology, which sought to

unite phenomenology with a philosophy understood as realist. Hengstenberg introduced the concept of *Sachlichkeit*, with its strong epistemological connotations, in his publications. A pupil of Scheler, he, like Stein, became a convert and subsequently drew extensively on Thomas Aquinas and the entire tradition of *philosophia perennis*. Hengstenberg understood objectivity as the human spirit's disinterested orientation toward being for its own sake. This also expresses the fundamental intention of Stein's *heilige Sachlichkeit*: "the original receptivity… formed, unhampered by false inhibitions and rigidity." (Stein 2002b, 2) The convergence is not accidental, since *Sachlichkeit* is related to one of Husserl's (1900–1901) fundamental concepts, formulated during his Göttingen professorship among the thinkers of realist phenomenology, a group to which Stein also belonged.

When the phenomenon of the cross is considered in light of the purification of human cognition through the dark night of faith, it becomes apparent that, for Stein, the cross has cognitive power. In the mind's dark night of faith, the natural cognitive faculty is purified, while God bestows on the soul a new capacity for contemplation and knowledge, symbolized by God's love for the human being. In her engagement with John of the Cross, Stein writes in the second chapter of this work: "Because the natural understanding is incapable of grasping the divine light, contemplation must lead it into darkness. 'This darkness must remain as long as is necessary to remove the habit the soul has long formed in the manner of its understanding.'" (Stein 2002b, 96) In John of the Cross's theology, such contemplation is nothing other than infused, loving knowledge (John of the Cross 1991). Suffering and the so-called passive night of the cross purify the intellect and will, thereby revealing the cognitive power of love, which becomes, in a certain sense, an organ of mystical knowledge and of the soul's transformation.

According to the teaching of the Carmelite mystic John of the Cross, set out, among other works, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (John of the Cross 1991, bk. 2, ch. 3, §§1–4), the relationship between the natural mind and faith is marked by a radical asymmetry. This claim appears to conflict with the account of the human and divine intellects developed thus far in Stein's thought and, above all, with Augustine's insight in *De Trinitate* (Augustine 1991) that the human soul, with all its faculties, is a natural image of the divine Trinity. Without denying this insight, however, the Carmelite mystic articulates an important theological and philosophical truth deeply rooted in ancient and medieval thought: the human intellect bears no natural proportion to the divine intellect, because the latter is the infinite God. The mind must therefore undergo a painful process of being stripped of its natural ways of responding to reality, including cognitive forms, concepts, and images. When the senses are plunged into complete darkness, faith is the only proper and proximate means of leading the intellect to union with God. In accordance with Anselm of Canterbury's medieval maxim *fides quaerens intellectum*, we can therefore affirm that faith is indeed a distinctive cognitive form. Yet it operates as "dark knowledge," wholly transcending

rational discourse. John of the Cross is deeply convinced that "dark knowledge" does not communicate divine truths in a doctrinal or intellectual sense. Rather, it allows human beings to experience God himself through an interior insight that cannot be conveyed discursively (cf. *ratio*). This immediacy and the absence of concepts, on which the security of our reasoning depends, may appear to natural reason as a painful blindness. From the perspective of another work by the Spanish Carmelite mystic, *The Dark Night* (John of the Cross 1991), this blindness of natural reason—experienced as suspension in a conceptual void—becomes the space in which a new cognitive power emerges: faith. Returning to the imagery of light, we may say that faith as a cognitive power operates as a supernatural light, which John of the Cross explicitly calls illumination. In the light of faith, the cross can appear as a cognitive form, since union with the crucified Christ is not merely a moral or ascetical act but also an act of knowing. In John of the Cross's mystical theology, the cross embodies the destruction of human supports, natural appetites, and rational safeguards. Through the radical experience of self-emptying (*kénōsis*), the soul acquires a capacity for spiritual perception previously obstructed by excessive attachment to the senses.

In *The Science of the Cross* (Stein 2002b, 2003), Stein draws on John's description of the stages of the night of faith as a distinctive condition of the spirit and the human psyche. She notes that, at this stage, the soul employs its higher and lower faculties, whose gradual stripping produces the effect under discussion. For Stein, the dark night of faith is not merely the suspension of our natural cognitive capacities but a transition to a higher intellectual form, explicitly designated in the title of her work as the "science of the cross." Such an understanding is possible because, in the dark night, spiritual experience becomes a paradoxical intellectual form through which we can accept contradiction as a path to deeper meaning: the Logos. In suffering and purification, the intellect is not annihilated but illuminated from within. Even in the deepest darkness of the night of faith, human experience must remain what it is, retaining its intellectual form even as blindness and negation give way to a psychological state of utmost vigilance and an awareness of emptiness awaiting fulfillment. Carmelite spirituality therefore describes the dark night as a privation of the intellect's natural light, not as the annihilation of the intellect but as its elevation and passage to a further stage of development. The intellect itself recognizes the limits of its capacities. In this recognition, it performs reason's highest act: acknowledging the spiritual mystery contained in the incarnation of the Logos and the death of the Son of God on the cross.

4.6. The Unity of Being and Experience in Light of *Unio Mystica*

The unity of being appears to be an apt concept for describing the goal of spiritual experience in Stein, as expressed in her conception of the human person (Schulz 1994). In *The Science of the Cross* (Stein 2002b, 2003), the immediate goal of spiritual

experience is the soul's union with God, which the scholastic tradition can describe as the highest cognitive act. It is a form of *unio mystica*, in which the soul becomes united with God. Augustine's conception of illumination as a cognitive form may be understood as a philosophical expression of this union (Augustine 1991). Profoundly inspired by John of the Cross, Stein adopts his Augustinian and Thomistic interpretation of human cognition, centered on illumination: the enlightening of the intellect during the dark night, which purifies its form of all sensory and imaginative elements. The account of cognition in John of the Cross's work may be summed up by saying that to know God face to face is not an emotion but the intellect's complete fulfillment by the highest Truth. It fulfills, rather than abolishes, the intellect's natural striving for truth (John of the Cross 1991). In this mystical union, reason purified by faith attains its deepest passive receptivity, in which God communicates himself as Truth itself. Following the Carmelite tradition, Stein understands this experience as *connaturalis cognitio*: knowledge through assimilation in love (Thomas Aquinas 1948, *ST* II–II, q. 45, a. 2). This is not an irrational fusion but the highest act of the intellect seeking faith, in which reason opens itself to a light exceeding its natural capacities. The tripartite model of the mind inherited by John of the Cross from Augustine and adopted by Stein makes it possible to understand the logic and synergy of the cooperation between intellect, memory, and will. Illuminated in the process of union with God, these faculties attain the highest degree of knowledge through that illumination. Stein distinguishes this nocturnal, intuitive mystical knowledge from discursive philosophical knowledge. Like Thomas Aquinas, she sees it as a foretaste of the beatific vision: according to John of the Cross, dark contemplation infuses the soul with a light so intense that reason cannot reject it, making this act the summit of rationality fulfilled by grace.

This discussion brings the analysis to the conclusion that, for Stein—and within the entire tradition of Christian Platonism—spirituality is intellectual in character because its goal is Truth, and Truth is accessible only to the intellect. For Plato, the Form of the Good is the vehicle of cognition: the soul knows intellectually only when illuminated by the Good, just as bodily eyes are illuminated by sunlight (Plato 2013). In Christian spirituality, the Form of the Good becomes the personal God, who is both the Truth and the Good that make any human knowledge possible. Nonintellectual spirituality therefore stands in opposition to the entire Christian tradition. Stein accordingly teaches that the formation of the soul through the experience of God is a process of intellectual formation (*Bildung*), in which the image of God in the human being is restored to its original brightness. This ultimate cognitive experience is an intellectual form because it consists in understanding all things in God. It is the Christian counterpart of Far Eastern enlightenment, in which the intellect ceases to be an instrument and becomes Light itself.

Conclusion

The question of intellectual form as the essence of Christian spiritual experience has profound implications for both the phenomenon of human spiritual experience and the religious phenomenon of Christianity. An adequate account, however, requires that neither be reduced to an intellectual or an affective disposition, thereby collapsing the question of spiritual experience into the relationship between reason and feeling. Such a reduction produces the simplified perspectives of scholastic intellectualism or pietism, for which spiritual experience is self-evidently either an intellectual form or an emotional experience. The historical significance of the question posed in this article is evident in the work of Anselm of Canterbury, who examines the epistemological value of the act of faith by asking whether conceptual form constitutes its core or merely its outer covering. Framed in this way, the question yields not an obvious and simplistic answer but an awareness that we are dealing with a complex reality that neither of these two extremes adequately reflects. This awareness requires us to leave the question open insofar as spiritual experience in the Christian tradition has to do with faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). At least two substantial arguments can be advanced against the thesis that intellectual form is the absolute foundation of Christian spiritual experience. The first rests on the Gospel's primacy of love and personal relationship as the basis of all spirituality. The second draws on the Christian apophatic tradition—Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross—which suggests that authentic Christian spirituality is realized in the cloud of unknowing. At least two powerful arguments also support the thesis of intellectual form. The first is the primacy of the Logos in Christianity, grounded in the Gospel's revelation of the Word of God made flesh. The second concerns the criterion of discernment (*discretio spirituum*) and dogmatic identity: without conceptual form, spiritual experience degenerates into a kind of psychologism or an exclusively affective disposition.

Following Stein, this article emphasizes the importance of the Logos and intellectual form as the primary source of Christian spiritual experience without denying the significance of the Christian mystical tradition. Stein is not merely an intellectualist who reduces knowledge of reality to intellectual concepts. As a spiritual person, she understands that Christian spiritual experience also contains something before which philosophical reason must humbly pause, without thereby encountering a contradiction. This awareness is expressed above all in her critical engagement with John of the Cross's theology in *The Science of the Cross* (Stein 2002b, 2003). At its center lies the process of spiritual purification and the resulting capacity for a profound knowledge of God that is not exclusively intellectual but is also a kind of illumination and love in its evangelical sense of *caritas*. Three considerations are important here. First, spirituality devoid of intellectual form could make no claim to truth and would remain merely a subjective feeling. In *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950),

the intellect is therefore the form in which infinity leaves its imprint on the finite structure of the human soul. Second, in describing human interiority, Stein does not reduce it to the intellect. As a distinctive image of the Trinity, the soul presupposes primordial dispositions that, following Augustine, include not only intellect but also affect and will (Augustine 1991). Stein therefore also describes the profound unity of the human soul through the notion of its affectively attuned interior (*das gestimmte Innere*). This evokes the Christian mystical theology of such authors as Meister Eckhart (*Seelenfünklein*, *Seelengrund*) (Haas 2014; Patt 2024), John Tauler (*das Gemüt*), and John of the Cross (*el centro del alma*) (John of the Cross 1991). Third, as a phenomenologist, Stein assumes that human consciousness requires objects: it is always consciousness of something. The principle that objects exist independently of the mind can be related both to Husserlian intentionality (Husserl 1900–1901) and to the realist phenomenology of Husserl's Göttingen circle (Beckmann 2003). For Stein, the existence of the object of knowledge independently of the subject is a necessary condition of the realist epistemology she adopts in *Endliches und ewiges Sein* (Stein 1950). The human mind can know only when it encounters a reality independent of itself, which by definition rules out solipsistic confinement within one's own ego. This openness of the human intellect is also an openness to the possibility of transcendence and a natural capacity to reach beyond itself toward what Stein calls *ewiges Sein*.

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REVIEW

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Brad E. Kelle, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Hosea* (Oxford Handbooks. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024). Pp. 520. £125.00. ISBN 978-0-19-763959-7. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639597.001.0001

ANNA KUŚMIREK
Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, a.kusmirek@uksw.edu.pl

Reading the Book of Hosea confronts the interpreter with an unusual concentration of philological, historical, and hermeneutical problems. The brevity of the book by no means entails textual clarity or an unambiguous message. Its text is often obscure and philologically difficult, its imagery is forceful and rapidly shifting, the process of its composition remains uncertain, and its historical allusions allow for divergent datings. The greatest controversy surrounds the marital metaphor of Hos 1–3. Although it constitutes an important element of the book's theology, it portrays the relationship between God and Israel through images of humiliation, violence, and the subjection of the female body. Interpreting Hosea therefore requires the integration of philological and historical investigation with the history of religion, metaphor theory, and theology, while also demanding critical reflection on the ethical consequences of the interpretations adopted.

1. The Standing of the Series and the Volume's Methodological Program

The publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Hosea* should be considered in light of the distinctive character of the Oxford Handbooks series. Published by Oxford University Press, these volumes occupy an intermediate position between an encyclopedia, an academic textbook, and a multi-author research volume. Their purpose is not to present a single generally accepted position, but rather to provide a critical map of the current field of research: its history, dominant trends, major controversies, and questions requiring further investigation (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Individual chapters combine synthesis with original scholarly argument; the term "handbook," therefore, should not be understood to imply a neutral compendium of settled knowledge.

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The multi-author format is both a strength and a limitation of this model. It makes it possible to bring together different methods, scholarly traditions, and hermeneutical assumptions, but it also produces variations in the scope of material covered, the degree to which current research is taken into account, and the rigor of argumentation. Each volume not only describes a field but also helps to construct it: the selection of topics and contributors indicates which problems are to be regarded as representative. A volume in this series should therefore be evaluated not according to whether it develops a unified interpretation, but according to whether it correctly identifies the major debates, represents the diversity of scholarship fairly, and facilitates comparison among competing positions.

The volume edited by Brad E. Kelle exemplifies the far-reaching specialization of the series, since an entire multi-author work is devoted to a single, relatively short prophetic book. It is the first compendium on this scale devoted exclusively to the Book of Hosea, without subordinating it either to a general treatment of the Twelve Prophets or to the format of a verse-by-verse commentary. It thus complements the classic philological and historical-critical commentaries (Wolff 1974; Andersen and Freedman 1980; Macintosh 1997) as well as studies that interpret Hosea within the Book of the Twelve (cf. O'Brien 2021).

The volume consists of Kelle's introduction and 32 numbered studies. Carol J. Dempsey's programmatic essay precedes five main parts containing the remaining 31 chapters: history, text, and composition; interpretations of selected passages; theological and literary features; contemporary interpretive theories and approaches; and reception. Kelle deliberately refrains from imposing a single overarching reading of the book. The contributors do not agree on historical reconstructions, models of composition, the assessment of dialectal semantics, or the ethical value of the text. Readers are expected to compare the studies, identify tensions, and establish relationships among them for themselves. The handbook thus becomes a laboratory of methods rather than an exposition of a single scholarly school.

This program suggests three criteria by which the volume may be assessed: its representativeness in relation to contemporary Hosea scholarship, its ability to clarify the relationships among different types of argumentation, and its usefulness as a reference work. The programmatic polyphony creates space for approaches that were previously marginalized, but it does not relieve the editors of the responsibility to provide a comparative metalevel. The volume lacks a concluding chapter identifying the minimum degree of consensus achieved, the enduring points of disagreement, and the most urgent directions for future research. The fundamental question, therefore, concerns not the presence of plurality as such, but whether that plurality has been sufficiently organized and whether it genuinely represents the full spectrum of contemporary Hosea scholarship.

2. History, Composition, and the Selection of Key Texts

The greatest strength of Part One is its preservation of the tension between competing historical reconstructions. In his discussion of the history of the 8th century BCE, Shuichi Hasegawa emphasizes that the genre, imagery, and multilayered development of the text make it impossible to treat the book as a chronicle. Shawn Zelig Aster advances a bolder argument: he places specific statements in Hosea alongside the practices of the Assyrian Empire and demonstrates that the theology of loyalty to YHWH acquires socioeconomic significance when viewed against the background of imperial resource extraction and collaboration by local elites (pp. 37–53). Davis Hankins complements this picture with an analysis of the socioeconomic conditions of Israel (pp. 81–96). The problem, therefore, is not that economic issues are neglected, but that the findings of Aster, Hankins, and contributors dealing with political power are not integrated into a broader model of imperial, political, and economic violence.

Ehud Ben Zvi and Ian D. Wilson carefully articulate the tension between reconstructing the "historical prophet" and studying the "remembered prophet" preserved by the literati of Judah (pp. 54–64; cf. Ben Zvi 2005). The first procedure makes it possible to investigate northern Israelite institutions and prophetic practices, but requires the separation of a hypothetical core from the only form of the book that has actually survived. The second respects the final form of the text and the environment in which it was read, but restricts the possibility of making claims about the Hosea of the 8th century BCE. The authors rightly demonstrate that the two approaches answer different questions and should not be combined without acknowledging their distinct epistemological premises.

The studies on religion, redaction, and language are similarly productive. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer points out that Hosea's polemic should not be treated as a transparent description of an "idolatrous" Israel. The Israelites may have believed that they were worshiping YHWH, even though they did so in forms rejected by prophetic discourse (pp. 65–80). Susanne Rudnig-Zelt interprets the book as an evolving corpus whose successive transformations cannot be reduced to a single redactional program (pp. 97–109). Yet the flexibility of this model is also its weakness: the more transformations a reconstruction permits, the more difficult it becomes to determine what evidence could potentially falsify it.

Na'ama Pat-El's study of the alleged northern Israelite dialect of the book deserves particular attention (pp. 110–123). She challenges arguments that turn the historical probability of a northern linguistic variety into evidence for the dialectal character of particular forms. Her analysis warns against a hermeneutical circle: the book is assumed to be northern, its difficult forms are therefore classified as northern, and these forms are subsequently invoked as evidence of the book's northern provenance.

Mark Leuchter, in turn, demonstrates that the literary proximity of other prophetic writings changes the range of possible meanings available in Hosea (pp. 140–156). His study, the chapter on the remembered prophet, and Göran Eidevall's analysis of intertextuality could together form the basis of a theory of Hosea as a text preserved, juxtaposed with other texts, and repeatedly actualized. The editors, however, leave it to the reader to identify this convergence.

Part Two, "Key Texts: Established and Emerging Perspectives," covers Hos 1–3; 5:8–6:6; 7–8; 11; and 12–13. Marvin A. Sweeney revisits Albrecht Alt's hypothesis concerning Hos 5:8–6:6, Jerry Hwang analyzes the critique of kingship and political power in Hos 7–8, Jennifer M. Matheny reads Hos 11 in the context of trauma, and John Goldingay examines rhetoric and memory in Hos 12–13. The selection brings established problems into conversation with newer interpretive tools, but Hos 4; 9–10, and 14 receive no dedicated study. Particularly noticeable is the absence of a synthetic treatment of the knowledge of God in Hos 4 and of the language of repentance and restoration in Hos 14.

The greatest imbalance concerns Hos 1–3. The marital metaphor is the central focus of Amy Kalmanofsky's chapter and recurs in feminist and womanist readings, as well as in studies of masculinity, gender-based violence, reception history, and queer interpretations that challenge established categories of gender and sexuality (cf. Kelle 2005). This repeated attention is partly justified. The threats of stripping the woman, publicly exposing her nakedness, depriving her of the means of subsistence, and causing her to die of thirst (Hos 2:4–15) make the marital metaphor a subject that demands analysis from multiple perspectives. Yet the structure of the volume produces a paradoxical effect: while contributors criticize the dominance of the image of the "unfaithful wife" in the interpretation of the book, the frequency with which they return to the theme once again places it at the center of the reading of Hosea.

3. Literary and Theological Features and the Ethical Turn

Part Three is devoted to metaphor, intertextuality, the image of God, royal ideology, sin and punishment, repentance, and gender-based violence. It thus combines literary and theological issues with reflection on power, guilt, judgment, and the possibility of transformation. Less adequately represented, however, are several cross-cutting categories of major importance for the theology of Hosea: *daʿat ʾĕlōhîm* ("knowledge of God"), *ḥesed* ("faithfulness," "steadfast love"), covenant, priesthood, cult, land, and the language of restoration. Although these categories appear in individual studies, they receive no systematic treatment commensurate with their importance in the book.

Among the most valuable chapters are those in which contemporary interpretive tools remain closely connected with careful textual analysis. Mason D. Lancaster reconstructs networks of metaphors and traces their mutual transformations (pp. 229–45; cf. Lancaster 2023); Eidevall demonstrates how intertextual relationships contribute to the distinctive character of Hosea; and Bo H. Lim resists one-sided representations of God either as the embodiment of unconditional tenderness or as an angry patriarch. These analyses expose the irreducible ambiguity of the text: it may inspire liberating readings, but it may also sustain oppressive interpretations. This tension cannot be resolved through a single theological formula.

One of the volume's most distinctive features is its incorporation of ethical reflection into the exegetical process itself. Contributors do not restrict themselves to determining the meaning of metaphors in their original context, nor do they postpone questions concerning their effects until the stage of contemporary application. Dempsey presents this approach as one of the volume's principal methodological commitments (pp. 7–20). In her view, the exegete should identify structures of violence, exclusion, and domination present in the text and ask whether the text and its subsequent interpretations may perpetuate or legitimize them. Questions previously raised, among others, by Yvonne Sherwood (1996) and Renita J. Weems (1995) are thus moved from the margins to the center of Hosea scholarship.

In her analysis of Hos 1–3 (pp. 159–72), Kalmanofsky demonstrates that the relationship between God and Israel is represented through a model based on the husband's control over his wife's sexuality. She also draws attention to the danger of interpreting this metaphor in contexts in which women experience domestic violence. The text's later promises of reconciliation and restored relationship do not erase the preceding threats, humiliation, and violence.

Kirsi Cobb, by contrast, interprets the images of violence as expressions of traumatic experience (pp. 317–34). These metaphors may preserve the memory of harm suffered, but their repetition may also perpetuate that harm. At the same time, the tensions within the book make it possible to challenge interpretations that assign all blame to the metaphorical wife, that is, Israel.

Another example of the use of contemporary interpretive tools is Matheny's analysis of Hos 11 (pp. 198–210). Drawing on trauma theory and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, she examines the tension between painful memory, anger, and the desire to preserve a relationship. She does not claim to reconstruct the psychology of the ancient author or the "psychology of God." Rather, she employs a contemporary therapeutic model as a heuristic tool that helps to illuminate the movement within the text from the desire for retaliation toward action consistent with the preservation of an enduring relationship. This approach does not replace historical exegesis but allows new questions to be asked about the internal logic of the passage.

The incorporation of ethical reflection into exegesis is one of the volume's major achievements. These studies demonstrate that the image of the "unfaithful wife"

cannot be treated as a neutral symbol of apostasy, nor can the motif of public stripping be separated from the violence and humiliation it entails. Better coordination among the individual chapters, however, could have reduced repetition and more fully illuminated the connections between gender-based violence and economic exploitation, imperial domination, criticism of the priesthood, and the crisis of the "knowledge of God."

4. Contemporary Methods and the Status of Interpretive Claims

The section devoted to interpretive theories discusses feminist and womanist hermeneutics, masculinity studies, queer theory, postcolonial approaches, and ecological criticism as distinct research perspectives. The contributors ask who has the right to produce interpretations, whose body is used as a bearer of meaning, and how the text constructs norms of femininity and masculinity. They also examine whether the experience of imperial domination shapes the language of power and the image of God in Hosea.

The individual chapters, however, differ in the maturity of the approaches they propose, partly reflecting the current state of scholarship. Peter Trudinger describes his ecological study as *prolegomena*, that is, an introduction to further discussion, and concludes by asking whether a positive ecological reading of Hosea is possible (pp. 396–408). Jeremiah W. Cataldo, in turn, observes that sustained applications of a postcolonial perspective to the book remain relatively few (pp. 380–395). Both chapters are therefore primarily programmatic: they organize the major issues and indicate directions for future research, but do not constitute comprehensive syntheses of previous scholarship.

The chapter most likely to provoke debate is Jennifer J. Williams's contribution (pp. 364–79), in which she proposes reading the expression *ʾēšet zĕnûnîm*, "woman of prostitution," as referring to a transgender person engaged in sex work. This interpretation challenges the assumption that the text must be read exclusively within a binary understanding of gender and a heterosexual norm. At the same time, it introduces into the discussion the experiences of people excluded by traditional gender categories.

This is a deliberately constructed counter-reading that enables new questions to be put to the text rather than a reconstruction of the original meaning of the Hebrew expression. Its ethical and interpretive value should therefore be clearly distinguished from historical and philological argumentation. Williams's chapter illustrates particularly well the need to distinguish among different types of scholarly claims. Claims about the historical meaning of a text require a plausible reconstruction of its context, while philological claims require linguistic evidence. Heuristic readings should

be evaluated according to whether they enable new questions to be asked of the text, whereas constructive interpretations should be assessed in terms of the transparency of their assumptions, internal coherence, cognitive value, and ethical responsibility.

Failure to maintain these distinctions leads to two opposite errors: an innovative interpretation may be unjustly dismissed as lacking rigor, or its rhetorical force may be mistaken for evidence of the text's original meaning. Kelle announces in his introduction a dialogue among different perspectives, but he does not provide sufficiently precise criteria for comparing arguments that make fundamentally different kinds of claims.

5. Ancient Versions and the Reception of the Book of Hosea

Eric J. Tully's chapter, "Texts and Versions of the Book of Hosea" (pp. 124–39), provides a useful introduction to the textual history of the book. He discusses the Masoretic Text, the Qumran manuscripts, and four ancient versions: the Septuagint, Targum, Peshitta, and Vulgate. He notes that most of these witnesses reflect a Hebrew base close to the proto-Masoretic text and that translators often attempted to reproduce its difficulties rather than eliminate them. This is particularly significant in Hosea, since obscure syntax and rare vocabulary readily tempt scholars to propose textual emendations. A divergent translation, however, does not necessarily indicate a different Hebrew *Vorlage*. It may result from different segmentation of the text, vocalization, lexical ambiguity, translation technique, or interpretive clarification.

This approach nevertheless has clear limitations. Tully treats the ancient versions primarily as auxiliary evidence for reconstructing an earlier form of the Hebrew text and as witnesses to the ways translators dealt with its difficulties. This perspective is indispensable for textual criticism, but it does not fully acknowledge the independent interpretive value of the individual versions. The limitation becomes especially evident in a volume that contains a separate section devoted to reception.

The Septuagint of Hosea is not merely a repository of textual variants. Its lexical, syntactical, and theological choices produce a distinctive Greek representation of the book that significantly influenced its later Christian reception (Glenny 2013; Muraoka 2022).

Hosea 13:14 provides a good example. The ambiguous Hebrew text can be understood either as a promise of deliverance from death or as a sequence of rhetorical questions that in fact announce judgment. The Septuagint resolves this ambiguity: it renders the first part of the verse as a declaration of deliverance from the power of Hades and the following words as a challenge directed against death and Hades. In 1 Cor 15:54–55, Paul cites the text in yet another form and combines it with Isa 25:8. The relationship between Hosea and the New Testament therefore cannot be reduced

to a simple comparison between the Hebrew text and Paul's quotation. It involves successive stages of translation, semantic transformation, and reinterpretation (Popko 2019).

The Targum performs a similar interpretive function. In Tg. Hos. 1:2–3, the command to marry a "woman of prostitution" is replaced by an instruction to pronounce a prophecy against the inhabitants of an idolatrous city who persist in sin. Gomer recedes from the foreground, and the drama of the prophet's family is transformed into a direct accusation of the community and a call to repentance (Cathcart and Gordon 1990). The Targum removes from the foreground the literal dimension of violence directed against the female figure, while simultaneously transferring the accusation to the entire nation. It is therefore not merely a witness to the Hebrew text but also a witness to the Jewish history of interpretation (cf. Flesher and Chilton 2011; Joosten 2020).

The brevity of Tully's discussion of the Targum prevents him from giving fuller consideration to problems concerning its dating, provenance, and distinctive interpretive transformations. Similarly, the Peshitta and the Vulgate appear primarily as witnesses used in textual criticism rather than as translations that generated distinct Syriac and Latin traditions of reading Hosea. This limitation does not result from any lack of expertise on the author's part, but from the structure of the volume itself. A single chapter cannot simultaneously address textual history, translation techniques, and the reception of all the ancient versions. The volume would have benefited from separate studies on the Septuagint and the Targum in the reception section, or at least from a synthetic chapter devoted to translation as a form of interpretation.

The limitations of the adopted conception are particularly visible in Part Five, entitled "Reception." It contains chapters on the reception of Hosea in rabbinic literature and the New Testament, popular culture, the African American tradition, and Asian and Asian American interpretations. The thematic range is broad, but the principle governing the selection and organization of the material remains unclear. The first two studies address ancient reception; the chapter on popular culture concerns modern reception history; and the final two present modes of reading shaped by specific social and cultural experiences. The latter could therefore just as easily have appeared in the section devoted to interpretive methods. The section demonstrates the diversity of readings of Hosea, but it provides neither a chronological history of reception nor a clear typology of its forms.

The most persuasive contribution is Devorah Schoenfeld's study of rabbinic literature (pp. 411–25). She presents different understandings of repentance, identifying traditions in which not only Israel but also Hosea, and even God himself, undergoes transformation. Steve Moyise systematically examines the uses of Hosea in the New Testament. The case of Hos 13:14 and 1 Cor 15:54–55, however, demonstrates that such relationships require fuller consideration of the mediating role of the Septuagint.

Aaron D. Dorsey discusses the place of the Bible in the African American tradition: Scripture may function as a source of survival and an instrument of critique, but it has also been used to legitimize violence (pp. 452–67). Barbara M. Leung Lai, meanwhile, explicitly emphasizes that "Asia" does not constitute a homogeneous social context. Her study focuses primarily on diasporic settings and the experiences of Asian communities in North America (pp. 468–82).

The selective character of this section is understandable, but the criteria governing the choice of traditions should have been made more explicit. Patristic reception, crucial for the allegorical interpretation of the marital metaphor, the relationship between the Church and Israel, and the Christological reading of prophecy, is absent. Nor does the volume address the Syriac and Latin traditions or medieval Jewish and Christian exegesis. The handbook was not required to provide a complete reception history of Hosea, but it should have explained why these particular traditions were selected rather than others. The title "Selected Studies in the Reception of Hosea" would have corresponded more accurately to the actual scope of the section.

6. Reference Value and Final Assessment

The volume is carefully produced and clearly structured, and the individual chapters are accompanied by extensive bibliographies. Particularly valuable are the synthetic studies that concisely outline the history of a given problem, organize the major positions, and identify avenues for further research. The selection of contributors brings together established scholars and representatives of newer interpretive approaches. Consequently, the book does more than summarize earlier findings; it also documents ongoing methodological transformations.

For readers working outside the Anglophone academic context, the volume is especially valuable because equally comprehensive and methodologically diverse studies devoted exclusively to the Book of Hosea are often unavailable in other languages. It can serve as a useful resource for master's and doctoral research, literature reviews, lectures, and seminars. It also enables scholars working in non-English-language traditions to situate their exegetical research within the context of contemporary international debates.

The handbook demonstrates how far Hosea scholarship has moved beyond traditional questions of authorship, dating, and composition to encompass trauma, gender-based violence, empire, ecology, and the social location of the interpreter. Its extensive bibliographies facilitate access to English-language scholarship. They do not, however, replace familiarity with Polish and, more broadly, non-Anglophone scholarship on the book, which is represented only to a limited extent.

The usefulness of the book as a reference work is diminished by the absence of a general subject index. The volume contains an index of ancient sources (pp. 483–98) and an index of authors (pp. 499–520), but it does not allow readers easily to trace subjects such as *ḥesed*, Samaria, priesthood, sexual violence, parental metaphors, or translation techniques. Additional difficulties arise from the use of different systems of transliteration, different conventions for writing the divine name, contributors' own translations, and varying systems of verse numbering. A table of differences in versification, a glossary of key terms, and a brief note specifying conventions of citation and transliteration would have enhanced the functionality of the volume. Such measures would not have restricted its methodological diversity but would have made the book considerably easier to use, especially for readers outside the Anglophone academic world.

The volume's stated social and geographical diversity also remains incomplete. It includes a wider range of perspectives than traditional handbooks dominated by the historical-critical method, yet scholars associated with Anglophone institutions in Western Europe and North America continue to predominate. Scholarship from Latin America, Africa outside diasporic contexts, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe is less well represented. For Polish readers, the absence of substantial engagement with exegesis developed in Central and Eastern Europe is particularly noticeable. This limitation does not diminish the quality of the individual chapters, but it does call for caution when treating the volume as a representative picture of global and multilingual Hosea scholarship.

From the perspective of more traditional exegesis, some reservations arise from the shift of emphasis away from the historical and theological meaning of the book toward the social consequences of its contemporary interpretations. Newer hermeneutical approaches rightly expose previously neglected problems and the ethical consequences of established modes of reading, but they should not replace philological, historical, and literary analysis. Contemporary analytical categories should be brought into dialogue with the text rather than function as ready-made frameworks into which the text is forced.

This applies, among other things, to the metaphor of the "unfaithful wife." The images of humiliation, control, and violence embedded in it cannot be ignored, but neither should the metaphor be reduced exclusively to the problem of gender-based violence. Within the structure of the book, it also serves to express religious apostasy, the breaking of the covenant relationship, judgment, the call to repentance, and the promise of restored relationship. A critical assessment of the imagery employed should therefore go hand in hand with an effort to understand its function within Hosea's prophetic theology. Similarly, queer and postcolonial interpretations, as well as readings drawing on trauma theory, may open up new areas of reflection, but their heuristic value should not be equated with a reconstruction of the text's historical meaning.

From a classical and theological perspective, the gaps in reception history identified above are likewise significant. Patristic and medieval exegesis, together with the Syriac and Latin traditions, are not merely witnesses to earlier modes of reading. They helped shape the interpretation of covenant, sin, repentance, mercy, the relationship between Israel and the Church, and the Christological interpretation of prophecy. Their absence reinforces the impression that methodological novelty has been privileged at the expense of interpretive continuity.

The Oxford Handbook of Hosea nevertheless remains an important and much-needed publication. Its lasting achievement will probably not lie in any single reconstruction of the book's compositional history, but rather in its expansion of the range of questions regarded as relevant to its interpretation. The volume demonstrates that textual problems, the experience of imperial domination, the social location of the interpreter, violence embedded in metaphors, trauma, and the history of the Bible's uses and misuses all belong within a shared sphere of exegetical responsibility. At the same time, it reminds readers that methodological pluralism does not mean arbitrariness: every method has its proper object, employs a particular form of argumentation, and is subject to specific limitations.

Evaluated according to the criteria proposed above, the volume yields a mixed assessment. It accurately presents many contemporary debates, but it privileges Hos 1–3 and newer hermeneutical approaches at the expense of several fundamental theological issues and the diachronic history of reception. It brings together different types of argumentation without developing sufficiently clear principles for comparing them. It is a valuable reference tool, although the absence of a subject index and incomplete terminological coordination limit its functionality. Its most significant omission is the insufficient integration of research on the ancient versions with the history of interpretation.

Ultimately, Kelle's handbook should be read as a portrait of Hosea scholarship in the 2020s—above all, of course, Anglophone scholarship—and as an expression of the effort to broaden its methodological and ethical responsibility. Its polyphony makes visible conflicts and questions overlooked by earlier syntheses. Yet the volume remains a polyphony without an adequate coda: it lacks a concluding synthesis that would clarify the relationships among the methods and types of argumentation represented.

The next stage of research should combine the pluralism already achieved with a more consistent understanding of textual history as a history of interpretation, broader attention to the ancient versions and reception history, and sustained reflection on how different methods may complement and correct one another.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

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The International Ecclesiological Symposium "The Church Continually Coming to Birth / L'engendrement permanent de l'Église" (Paris, April 20, 2026)

ANTONI NADBRZEŻNY
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, antoni.nadbrzezny@kul.pl

ANDRZEJ NAPIÓRKOWSKI
The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, andrzej.napiorkowski@upjp2.edu.pl

The symposium was organized by the Chair of Ecclesiology at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow in cooperation with the Institut Catholique de Paris and Facultés Loyola Paris. It was the seventeenth symposium in the prestigious Cracoviensis Cogitatio Ecclesialis series, which brings together scholars studying the origins, nature, and mission of the Church. Eight academic and research centers from four European countries—Poland, France, Germany, and Vatican City—were represented at the symposium. In keeping with a long-standing European academic tradition, the organizers ensured that the event had both an intellectual and a spiritual dimension. Thanks to this, participants had the opportunity to celebrate Holy Mass at three symbolic locations in Paris: the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal on Rue du Bac, the restored Notre-Dame Cathedral, and the Church of St. Vincent de Paul, where his relics are kept.

The symposium was held under the patronage of Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education; Cardinal Grzegorz Ryś, Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow; Archbishop Rino Fisichella, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization; the Rev. Prof. Robert Tyrała, Rector of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow; and the Rev. Prof. Witold Ostafiński, Dean of the university's Faculty of Theology. The commemorative letters they sent for the occasion are included in the volume.

On the eve of the symposium, the participants met with Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Apostolic Nuncio to France, who received them at his residence. Archbishop Migliore, who received an honorary doctorate from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow in 2015, addressed the participants. He observed that the Church in France has moved from an "era of institutional support for faith" to an "era of engendering faith." This transition is reflected in a revival of living, beautiful, and fruitful faith, expressed in personal prayer, participation in the Eucharist and adoration, communal life, and the practice of solidarity and mercy toward the poor and those in need. It is also confirmed by the steadily increasing number of adults

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and young people being baptized, including converts from other religions. At Easter 2026, more than 21,000 adults and adolescents were baptized in France.

A volume prepared in connection with the symposium was published shortly before the event: Prof. Andrzej A. Napiórkowski, OSPPE, and Dr. Adam Sejbuk, CM, eds., *Rodzenie się Kościoła* (The birth of the Church) (Cracoviensis Cogitatio Ecclesialis 17; Tarnów: Biblos; Kraków: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, 2026; https://doi.org/10.15633/9788383701394). The volume contains thirteen articles devoted to various aspects of the nature and origins of the Church, in addition to a theological introduction. The contributions are written in Polish, French, and German. The official electronic edition was published on April 17, 2026.

The first essay, "Odnowa Kościoła w perspektywie duszpasterstwa parafialnego we Francji" (Church renewal from the perspective of parish ministry in France), was written by the Rev. Bogusław Brzyś, Rector of the Polish Catholic Mission in France. He reflects on the renewal of the Church in France through a return to the model of small domestic communities, which played a crucial role in the dynamic growth of Christianity during its first three centuries despite persecution and the absence of developed ecclesiastical structures. The author contrasts the remarkable expansion of the early Church—from a few hundred believers to several million—with the stagnation and secularization experienced by contemporary French parishes. He therefore asks why the Church is shrinking under conditions of religious freedom. One of the solutions currently proposed in France is the creation of *fraternités*—small household groups that integrate prayer, formation, and mission, including those established within the NewPastoral.net program. Brzyś recalls that the first national Congress of Pastoral Transformation was held in 2025. During the congress, Bishop Laurent Le Boulc'h of Lille emphasized that a living Church can arise only from authentic human relationships. This model does not represent a romantic return to the past, but rather a deliberate pastoral path—a transition from the territorial parish to the relational parish. Small domestic communities constitute the "genetic code" of Christianity. They embody Christ's promise of his presence among those gathered in his name (Matt 18:20) and offer a response to the anonymity and lack of missionary involvement that characterize many contemporary parishes.

The second essay is entitled "Ekumenia jako szansa na ukazanie wyjątkowości chrześcijaństwa. Perspektywa teologiczna, historyczna i kulturowa" (Ecumenism as an opportunity to reveal the uniqueness of Christianity: The theological, historical, and cultural perspective). Its author is the Rev. Prof. Zygfryd Glaeser of the University of Opole. According to Glaeser, the contemporary ecumenical movement should not be understood exclusively as an effort to achieve the institutional unity of the Churches. Above all, it offers a distinctive opportunity to reveal more fully the essence and uniqueness of Christianity. Authentic interconfessional dialogue, conducted with respect for difference, together with a shared Christian witness, makes

it possible to deepen the common deposit of faith, whose center is the person of Jesus Christ and his saving work. Glaeser examines this question in three dimensions: theological, in which ecumenism becomes a hermeneutic of faith and a school of Christocentrism; historical and spiritual, involving a return to the sources for the sake of restoring visible unity; and missionary and evangelizing, concerned with presenting Christianity credibly in a diverse world. He stresses that genuine ecumenical dialogue not only deepens Christians' awareness of their own identity, but also becomes, through its service to reconciliation, a living sign of eschatological unity. In this way, it reveals the most distinctive feature of the Christian message.

The third essay, "Quels apports de la tradition chrétienne pour penser la 'fraternité'?" (What does the Christian tradition contribute to the concept of "fraternity"?), was written by the Rev. Prof. Étienne Grieu, SJ, of Facultés Loyola Paris. The French Jesuit examines the Christian tradition's contribution to the understanding of fraternity, particularly in relation to its symbolic and ethical significance alongside liberty and equality. In Christianity, the term *adelphotēs*, or fraternity, originally denoted the community of the Church itself—a community founded on bonds stronger than blood ties and open to all people. The theological foundation of this fraternity is Christ, who, through the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, became the brother of every human being, thereby establishing universal solidarity and making possible a filial relationship with God the Father. At the same time, the biblical tradition realistically portrays the fragility of fraternity, as illustrated by the stories of Cain and Abel and of Jacob and Esau. Christian fraternity is therefore not an idyll but a task. It requires the rejection of violence and the recognition of solidarity, especially with those who are excluded, humiliated, or marginalized. Consequently, Christian fraternity has become an important ethical and political challenge today—it calls for the construction of a human family that transcends social and cultural divisions, with particular concern for migrants and marginalized people.

Sister Dr. Tereza Huspeková, CHR, of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, is the author of the fourth essay, "Kościół, który (nie) umiera. Eklezjologiczne inspiracje z twórczości Oto Mádra" (The Church that does (not) die: Ecclesiological inspirations from the work of Oto Mádr). Huspeková presents the principal ecclesiological themes found in the writings of the Czech theologian Oto Mádr (1917–2011), identifying in them possible sources of inspiration for contemporary reflection on the nature and mission of the Church. Her primary point of reference is the experience of the Czech "underground Church" and Mádr's distinctive theology of "the Church that does (not) die." Huspeková highlights the continuing relevance of his ecclesiology, which emphasizes the Church's spiritual vitality, its rootedness in the activity of the Holy Spirit, and its independence from external historical and social conditions.

The fifth essay was written by Msgr. Dr. Michael Kahle, a German theologian working at the Vatican Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the

Sacraments. It is entitled "Die Liturgie als Feier der einzigartigen Selbstoffenbarung Gottes in Jesus Christus und Quelle kirchlicher Erneuerung" (The liturgy as the celebration of God's unique revelation in Jesus Christ and the source of the Church's renewal). Kahle presents the liturgy as the privileged setting in which God's unique revelation in Jesus Christ is made present and as the fundamental source of the Church's renewal. Referring to Paul Claudel's conversion during Christmas Vespers at Notre-Dame and to Joseph Ratzinger's diagnosis of the emergence of "new pagans," the author argues that the present crisis of the Church arises primarily from an internal estrangement from the personal dimension of faith. In light of the Second Vatican Council's call for a return to the Christological foundations of ecclesiology, the liturgy is the *fons et culmen* of the Church's life and the sacramental presence of divine revelation. Kahle places particular emphasis on the liturgical reform, especially the introduction of vernacular languages, which he regards as opening up a space for an existential encounter with God and an authentic renewal of personal faith.

The sixth essay was written by the Rev. Prof. Antoni Nadbrzeżny of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. In "Kościół w procesie stawania się. Ujęcie personalistyczne" (The Church in the process of becoming: A personalist approach), Nadbrzeżny presents the Church from the perspective of the universalist personalism developed by Czesław Bartnik. From this perspective, the Church appears as a dynamic, developing, and personal reality. It is a social, or collective, person endowed with its own personal structures—subjectivity and consciousness—and it actualizes itself and matures in the course of salvation history. Nadbrzeżny identifies several factors that shape the development of the Church's self-awareness: Christian praxis, theological contemplation, the kerygmatic transmission of revelation in unity with the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*, and the activity of the Holy Spirit, who bestows upon the community the "sense of faith" (*sensus fidei*). He also emphasizes that conciliar ecclesiology continues to provide an important impetus for understanding the Church as a living and personal reality that is constantly coming into being.

The seventh essay, "Dynamika eklezjogenezy a duchowa płodność Kościoła" (The dynamics of ecclesiogenesis and the spiritual fruitfulness of the Church), was written by Napiórkowski of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. The author examines the relationship between ecclesiogenesis, understood as the multistage process by which the Church comes into being—from the intention of the Holy Trinity, through the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Resurrection, to Pentecost—and the Church's spiritual fruitfulness. He emphasizes that fruitfulness, understood in spousal and maternal terms, is a constitutive dimension of the Church's nature rather than merely one of its effects. This fruitfulness is realized primarily through the sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, which bring about the inner renewal of the faithful and bear fruit in missionary commitment. Napiórkowski criticizes attempts to reduce the emergence of the Church exclusively to the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He argues that only a comprehensive understanding

of ecclesiogenesis and ecclesial fruitfulness adequately explains the Church's capacity for continual revitalization, even in the face of contemporary crises.

The eighth essay, written by the Rev. Prof. Andrzej Proniewski of the University of Białystok, is entitled "Piotrowo-maryjne macierzyństwo Kościoła" (The Petrine–Marian motherhood of the Church). Proniewski discusses the maternal character of the Church in relation to the role of Mary and the mission of St. Peter. Through her complete assent to divine grace, Mary became the mother not only of the Son of God but also of all believers, and it is through her that the Church realizes its maternal dimension. The office of St. Peter and his successors complements this maternal character on the institutional and theological level. Proniewski bases his argument on the writings at Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the teaching of Pope Francis, and the addresses and homilies of Pope Leo XIV. In conclusion, he emphasizes that the Church's motherhood is realized harmoniously through a balance between the Petrine structure and the charismatic and Marian dimension, with Mary retaining a primary role as the original source of this motherhood.

The Rev. Jerzy Rutkowski, CM, of the Institut Catholique de Paris, is the author of the ninth essay, "Teologia polityczna: Francuskie społeczeństwo a Kościół" (Political theology: French society and the Church). Rutkowski analyzes the relationship between the Catholic Church and contemporary French society from the perspective of political theology. He understands the Church not as an institution that retains its former social dominance, but as a theological community of believers operating within a secular, pluralistic, and secularized state. Drawing on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, he stresses the need to redefine the Church's role by moving away from its former position of historical dominance toward a creative minority witness placed at the service of the common good. Rutkowski discusses the thought of three French theologians. Paul Valadier calls on Christians to accept their minority status and proclaim the Gospel creatively under new social conditions. Bernard Bourdin develops a vision of the Christian as a responsible citizen capable of combining faith with active participation in liberal democracy. Grieu, writing in the spirit of Pope Francis, proposes building the Church "from below" through encounters with the poor and through the "scandal of mercy" as a path toward political and social renewal. Rutkowski regards the French experience as an inspiring contribution to the debate in Poland, which is undergoing similar processes of secularization.

The tenth essay is entitled "Koncepcja rodzenia w myśli Christopha Theobalda. Między eklezjogenezą a duszpasterstwem" (The concept of engendering in the thought of Christoph Theobald: Between ecclesiogenesis and pastoral ministry). It was written by Sejbuk of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. The author presents the concept of the "pastoral ministry of engendering" (*pastorale d'engendrement*) developed by Christoph Theobald and other French-speaking theologians. In the context of the Church's exculturation, the Church is understood not primarily as an institution that transmits doctrine, but as a space in which faith is engendered as

a personal and relational event. This model is based on the conviction that the Gospel is the generative principle of the Church and that the task of pastoral ministry is to create the conditions in which God can bring forth faith in free and relational persons capable of receiving him (*capax Dei*). Sejbuk places particular emphasis on the primacy of the Word of God, the communal reading of Scripture, and the continuous ecclesiogenesis that takes place within concrete contexts of human life.

The eleventh essay, written by the Rev. Prof. Piotr Szczur of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, is entitled "Od arianizmu ku wierze nicejskiej – Jan Chryzostom jako duszpasterz Gotów" (From Arianism to the Nicene faith: John Chrysostom as pastor of the Goths). Szczur describes the Goths' transition from Arianism to the orthodox Nicene faith, paying particular attention to the role of St. John Chrysostom as Bishop of Constantinople. Against the background of the strongly Arian environment of the capital of the Eastern Empire, he discusses both the initial measures taken by Theodosius I and, above all, Chrysostom's multifaceted pastoral activity. This included assigning one of the churches to the Goths, establishing a "Gothic school" and a monastery, appointing clergy who knew the Gothic language, supporting missionary activity, and ordaining Gothic bishops. Chrysostom's Gothic friends and collaborators also played an important role, actively contributing to the conversion of their fellow tribesmen. Szczur emphasizes that the success of the mission depended on close cooperation among the secular authorities, the Church, and tribal leaders.

Sister Prof. Dominique Waymel of the Institut Catholique de Paris is the author of the twelfth essay, "La maternité de l'Église à la lumière de sa nature sacramentelle. Vers un dépassement de la catégorie d'instrument?" (The motherhood of the Church in light of its sacramental nature: Moving beyond the category of instrument?). Waymel examines the Church's motherhood in the context of its sacramental nature and asks whether it is possible to move beyond the category of the Church as an "instrument" in postconciliar ecclesiology. The French scholar observes that the concept of the Church as a "sacrament of salvation" has encountered resistance, particularly in ecumenical dialogue. Protestants are prepared to acknowledge the Church as a sign, but often have difficulty accepting the category of instrumentality. In her analysis of conciliar texts, Waymel draws attention to their openness to differing interpretations, including those proposed by Bernard Sesboüé and Jean-Marie Tillard. In view of the difficulty of defining the precise nature of the Church's instrumentality, she proposes "Marian cooperation" as a hermeneutical key capable of overcoming the impasse. Mary's cooperation with the Word of God makes it possible to understand more accurately the Church's mediating role. Ultimately, Waymel analyzes the category of instrumentality itself in order to clarify the role of mediation in God's plan of salvation, understood as an engendering into filial life.

The thirteenth and final essay in the volume was written by the Rev. Prof. Damian Wąsek of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. In "Dialog

Kościoła ze światem w świetle antropologii Soboru Watykańskiego II" (The Church's dialogue with the world in the light of the anthropology of the Second Vatican Council), Wąsek presents the Church's dialogue with the world not merely as a pastoral strategy, but as an essential dimension of its mission arising directly from the anthropology of the Second Vatican Council. According to the conciliar vision expressed especially in *Gaudium et spes*, the foundations of dialogue are the dignity of the human person, the human vocation to transcendence, and the social character of human existence, all viewed from a Christocentric perspective. Such an anthropology obliges the Church to discern attentively the "signs of the times," defend human rights, contribute to the humanization of the world, and promote peace and solidarity. Dialogue consequently becomes a constitutive element of evangelization, rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation and placed at the service of humanity.

The book unquestionably deserves a warm reception from a broad readership, including both professional theologians and readers from other fields who are interested in the life and mission of the Church. The volume makes a valuable contribution to the current of postconciliar ecclesiology that seeks new ways of articulating the Church's nature and mission in the contemporary world. The title itself, both intriguing and innovative, encourages readers to discover the living Church as a community of persons—a dynamic, growing, and dialogical reality, capable of inner renewal, responsible for the future of the world, rooted in the life of God, and deeply engaged in human life.