

THE IMPLIED DEFINITION OF THE PROPHET AND ITS MIDDLE PLATONIC TRAJECTORY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN *

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The definition of the prophet in the Gospel of John is implied in the narrative rather than stated, which fits with the literary genre of the Gospel: a faith-oriented biography rather than a philosophical treatise. Accordingly, the here taken method consists in reviewing the situations where Jesus is characterised as a prophet rather than starting from a given definition of the prophet. As a matter of fact, the definition of the prophet moves from one scene to another, for different prophetic features are applied to the Johannine Jesus. In the circumstances, Jesus is compared to the one anointed by Elijah *redivivus*, then to a king anointed by a prophet, then to a prophet himself, either to a new Elijah or to the prophet like Moses. These characterisations bring valuable features of the implied definition of the prophet: he maintains a balance between orality and “literacy”, he faces the past rather than the future, he grasps signs in the present, he makes signs to deliver the message from God. As far as the Johannine Jesus is concerned, the signs are related to self-revelatory words and prove particularly evocative within the context of widespread Middle Platonism. So it will be argued that Middle Platonism is a cultural pattern of the Fourth Gospel, yet not the only one, for Middle Platonic cosmology parallels rather than contrasts Jewish customs and Scriptural references. These motives will be studied according to the plan following.

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1. The witness of John as a narrative program
 - 1.1 Elijah anointing the Christ?
 - 1.2 The king anointed to die
 - 1.3 The prophet like Moses
2. Prophecy, orality and literacy
 - 2.1 A balance between the supposedly fixed word and the necessarily performed word
 - 2.2 Scripture and Voice
 - 2.3 The voice of the prophet facing the past
3. Prophecy, signs and words
 - 3.1 From a prophetic sign to a liturgical metaphor
 - 3.2 Widespread Middle Platonism
 - 3.3 From a metaphor to the τύπος or σφραγίς
 - 3.4 Signs from a prophet, signs from the saviour, signs from a believer
4. Conclusion
5. Works cited

At first sight these motives seem to be heterogeneous and indeed they only get their coherence from the way they are assorted in the Gospel. Horizontally, they allow a number of appraisals of Jesus as compared to high figures: Moses, Elijah, the Prophet-King... Vertically, these mere starting points are aimed at being overcome: if Jesus is compared to a prophet, then he will appear as the higher prophet and, at last, as being higher than a prophet. This progress fits with the “levelled hermeneutics” according to which a common expression of faith is interpreted in John so that it leads to a hidden meaning and finally makes the reader/ listener move from an elementary faith to what is an achieved faith from a Johannine point of view (Theissen 2000, 257-261). Admittedly, it is not a common expression of faith in the Gospel tradition that Jesus is a “mere” prophet. Yet it is through a literary structure similar to the “levelled hermeneutics” that John moves from a well-known cultural background that proves inaccurate, prophecy, to an unknown high Christology. It is a question of seeing the signs, hearing the words, acknowledging the Scripture, testifying of its

fulfilment in the Johannine Jesus' ministry. At least, this is what this paper intends to show.

1. The Witness of John as a Narrative Program

It is now widely agreed, namely from the prologue as a “reading pact” (Zumstein forthcoming) and from the first conclusion of the Gospel (John 20:30-31), that John addresses a reader (or a listener) already believing in Jesus, in order to shape his/her faith. It can reasonably be claimed that such an addressee knows of some Synoptic traditions, either written or oral, so that it is legitimate to compare John to the Synoptic Gospels in order to find out distinctively Johannine narrative intentions (Van Belle G forthcoming). As for the implied definition of the prophet, these intentions appear at the very beginning of the narrative, in the witness of John. Indeed the Johannine John seems to be deprived of major Synoptic attributes: he is not a new Elijah, nor is he called “the Baptist”, nor is he even said to have Jesus baptised! Admittedly, the Synoptic Baptist can be seen as a prophet, insofar as his baptising in water is a body prediction of Jesus' (and his disciples') baptising in Spirit (Hooker 2004, 26). Yet he is actually reduced in John to a mere witness (Hooker 2004, 36), whose greatness does not come from his high ethical standards, but from his being close to Jesus (Marchadour 2004, 32). For the Johannine Jesus does not need to be baptised, while John the Witness and the narrator both present him as the highest Baptist (Jesus baptises or at least his disciples do, John 4:1-2; anyway he baptises in Spirit, John 1:33). Within this context, it is not surprising that John the Witness denies to be “the Christ” and “the Prophet”, insofar as his denial implies that these titles should apply to Jesus. These titles are not synonymous, but their respective meanings seem to confuse with each other in the characterisation of the Johannine Jesus. Moreover, these titles will have to be understood in a particular way meaning that Jesus is the saviour of the world—this is the clearest title chosen by the narrator and the Samaritans who show the highest faith (John 3:17, 4:42). This progressive understanding raises the question of how *the* Prophet and other prophets are characterised so that they lead the addressee of the Gospel to high Christology.

1.1 *Elijah anointing the Christ?*

Each Synoptic in its own way presents John the Baptist as a new Elijah. Mark and Matthew underline that he is clothed with camel's hair (Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4), a feature which allowed king Ochozias to recognise that the man encountered by his messengers was Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). Luke, in his announcing the birth of John, explicitly states that he will go before the Lord God of Israel "in [the] spirit and power (ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δυνάμει) of Elijah, in order to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" (Luke 1:16-17). Turning back the hearts is the reason why Elijah will come back on earth before the dreadful Day of the Lord, according to a prophecy of Mal 3:23-24. Such an expectation seems to be linked to the coming of the Messiah in the dialogue between the disciples and the Matthean Jesus after his Transfiguration (Matt 17:10-13): the disciples notice that, according to the scribes, Elijah must come first (πρῶτον) and Jesus explains that Elijah has indeed come in the person of the Baptist, introducing the Messiah hereby identified as Jesus himself. Elijah *redivivus* and the eschatological Messiah even form an unbreakable couple according to Trypho, the eponymous Jewish character of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. In this apologetic dialogue, Trypho claims that the Messiah will have no power until he will be anointed by Elijah (*Dial.* VIII 4, XLIX 1). Of course we cannot be sure that Justin put a real Jewish tradition in the mouth of his Jewish character: he could well have this tradition invented from the Synoptic Gospels for the purpose of his apologetic work. Yet two things are certain. First, *it was consistent with former traditions to believe that the χριστός had to receive Elijah's χρίσμα*. Second, this was *the kind of consistency the Fourth Gospel undoubtedly wanted to get rid of!*

From a sociological point of view, Jesus probably appeared as a miracle-working prophet gathering disciples like Elijah, as well as a Deuteronomic prophet calling for the renewal of the covenantal Mosaic Law (Herzog 2005). From a literary point of view, the fact that the Johannine John denies to be Elijah can lead the addressee of the Gospel to think that Jesus better than John is the new Elijah, just like Jesus better than John can be called the Baptist. Indeed it is possible to find elements of comparison: Jesus raises Lazarus like Elijah raised a dead child, he infuses his disciples with holy spirit still much better than Elijah left a double part of [prophetic] spirit onto his disciple Elijah, he is taken to heaven like Elijah, but, unlike Elijah, Jesus ascends because he has first descended from heaven (Meeks 1972, 62-63).

Such comparisons do not consist in speaking ill of the prophets, but in praising more magnificently the Lord of the prophets, according to Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lecture XIV*, 16. Now Elijah and other prophets were keynote characters in the post-baptismal teaching, so we can assume that Cyril intended to relativize their dignity in relation to Jesus and his apostles, who remained the keynote characters in the history of salvation. Three centuries earlier, John did manifestly not share this concern. His concern was rather to prevent his addressee from thinking that John the Witness could have been a Baptist whose activity would have been seminal for the ministry of the Christ. From a doctrinal point of view, this is a manner of denying adoptionism: according to John, Jesus could not have been adopted, as is clear from the fact that he did not need any anointing.

Yet this raises the question in which way the Johannine Jesus is depicted as the Christ, that is to say, as explicitly stated, the Messiah, the anointed.

1.2 The king anointed to die

The theme of the king anointed by the prophet lead us as far back as 1 Sa 10:1, when Samuel introduces Saul, the one “asked for” (past participle לְשֹׂאֵל) by the people and allowed by the Lord. Once anointed, the king is predicted a series of events as the sign from God that he has been anointed by the Lord himself as a ruler over his inheritance (τὸ σημεῖον ὅτι ἐχρισέν σε κύριος ἐπὶ κληρονομίαν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἄρχοντα. By the end of the day, Saul effectively experiences these events whose climax is his encountering a company of prophets in prophetic ecstasy. Then he receives the Spirit of the Lord and prophesies with the prophets. The idea that the king anointed by the prophet according to the will of God gets a sign from God may have inspired Mark 1:9-11. Once coming up from the water, the Markan Jesus sees the Spirit of God coming down unto him like a dove. There is also a voice coming from heaven, saying: “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”. This occurs, not by the end of the day, but immediately (εὐθύς), as is characteristic of many events in the first part of the Gospel of Mark. If we turn to the Fourth Gospel, we read striking differences. First, as already noticed, the Johannine Jesus is not said to have been baptised. If he has, then his baptism is part of a “pedagogy” aimed at introducing himself to the virtual believers, not an anointing without which there would have been no Spirit in him. Second, the roles are inverted: it is John, not Jesus, who is

said to have seen the Spirit like a dove. This feature is consistent with the idea that John is a mere witness and further suggests that the Johannine Jesus does not need any sign to be confirmed his kingship. Third, the voice from heaven appears much later, in chapter 12—and this chapter provides actually a kind of second baptism scene.

Although the Johannine Jesus is not explicitly baptised by John in Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan (John 1:28), he is anointed by Mary in Bethany-next-to-Jerusalem (John 12:1f). The unknown Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan is traditionally taken to be (next to) Bethabara, at the opposite of Jericho, though other possible locations are discussed (Losch 2005, 46). Yet our current purpose is not Biblical geography, but Christological topology, that is the parallelism between Jesus' not stated anointing in Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan and his stated anointing in Bethany-next-to-Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, Mary anoints (verb: ἀλείφω) his feet and he accepts this gesture as an anticipated mark of respect and love for his dead body. Of course this "second anointing" is as "pedagogic" as the first one, for the body of Jesus is just a temporary medium for getting close to the saviour. Mary experiences it when the risen Jesus tells her not to touch him anymore (μή μου ἅπτου, negative present imperative). The time is come for being close to the saviour through the spirit and not through the body, which is confirmed by Jesus' words to the doubting Thomas: "Blessed are they that have not seen and have believed"—this is the verse preceding the conclusion of chapter 20. As for *the anointing*, it is *meaningful insofar as it is related, not to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but to its climax* according to the Fourth Gospel, that is to say "*the hour*". Like most of the episodes of the Johannine *Life of Jesus*, the anointing gets its Johannine meaning from taking place "under the shadow of the cross", a shadow that progresses backwards from the coming hour to the episodes preceding (Sevrin forthcoming). This idea, that the baptism is meaningful in John as far as it takes place "under the shadow of the cross", is confirmed by the fact that a second "baptismal" feature lies in chapter 12. Significantly, it is immediately after Jesus' brief monologue about his coming hour that there "came a voice from heaven, saying, "I have already glorified and I will glorify again"." (v28). While people wonder what they have heard, Jesus underlines that the voice has not come because of him, but because of them. Once again, *the "sign" is not for the "king", but for the witness(es)*. For the Johannine "king" knows the purpose of his terrestrial mission and thus

walks through his own life with a sovereign freedom which is either surrealistic or penetrating—if we ever have to choose.

Jesus' kingship is also expressed by the traditional imagery of the king leading his people like a shepherd leads his fold. Yet the tradition is here adapted to the theme of the king anointed to die, for the Johannine Jesus speaks of himself as of the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ τίθησιν) John 10:11). Actually the king is not only the shepherd, but also the door and the porter—this is as a well-known feature of the Johannine symbolism that Jesus compares to different elements of a whole system: Temple and victim, Moses and the snake, etc. As for our subject, it should be noticed that as a porter the Johannine king calls his own to go out, which is functionally identical to the office of a prophet calling his people back to God (Meeks 1967, 81). So the Johannine king is somehow a prophet as well. Better, he is *the* Prophet asked about to John the Witness (John 1:21 f), the uttermost Prophet who, rightly or wrongly, is usually identified as the prophet like Moses forecasted by Deut 18:18-22.

1.3 *The prophet like Moses*

In Deut 18:18-22, the Lord announces Moses that He will raise (LXX: ἀναστήσω) a prophet like him and give His words in his mouth, so that he will say what He will command him. This Deutero-Moses is carefully distinguished from the prophet who will eventually speak out of himself, lead the people astray, worship other gods. This could be the reason why the Johannine Jesus insists that he says what he has heard from the Father. As for Moses, Deut 34:10 concludes that “there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses (...) in all the signs and the wonders (LXX: σημεῖοις καὶ τέρασιν which the Lord sent him to do”. These are of two kinds. On the one hand, there are the signs and wonders performed by Moses either to acknowledge his prophetic ministry (changing his rod into a snake and back, making his hand leprous and back, changing water into blood, Exod 4:1-9) or to keep the sons of Israel alive in the desert (e.g. making water spring from a rock). On the other hand, there are the signs and wonder performed by God according to the word given through Moses to the sons of Israel (manna, bronze snake, etc.).

These nuances are taken into account for further allegory in Philo. Throughout the works of the Jewish philosopher, Moses does appear

- as the legislator, for he gets and transmits the Law
- as a prophet, for he is used to asking for oracles, getting them and applying them to the situations he has to cope with
- as a judge or/and a king (which meant also a supposedly enlightened Hellenized monarch), for he leads the group according to the oracles received (Decharneux 1988, 117-125).

Now Moses' "oracles" are also linked to the "miracles" following, as it is the case for the manna of Ex 16:1f (*Her.* 79-80, 191). The sons of Israel murmur against the Lord that they are starving, then the Lord says he will send them bread from heaven, then Moses transmits God's oracle and finally comes the manna. Philo insists that the oracle has become a miracle: the "word" of God has become a "thing" according to the semantic ambivalence of the Hebrew דְבַר. Moreover Philo highlights that Moses is in such a state of purity that he could mediate the oracle and the miracle. This is why he takes him to be the uttermost prophet (*Praem* 1).

So these "oracles and miracles" will be focused on in their Johannine set-up:

- in part 2, on how John relates prophecy to orality and literacy
- in part 3, on how John makes Jesus appear as a divine agent who reveals himself not by "signs and wonders" like Moses, but by signs and words.

2. Prophecy, Orality and Literacy

2.1 A balance between the supposedly fixed word and the essentially performed word

In Antiquity literacy was a very circumscribed phenomenon so that the formula "written in the Law or/and in the prophets" did not necessarily refer to any written version of the Law and the prophets, but only to the authority of Scripture (Horsley 1999, 143). So it would probably be more appropriate to speak of "essentially performed word" and "supposedly fixed word", from a historical point of view. Moreover, from a literary point of view, "what is said" is said by the characters of the Gospel, so that we are not facing performative orality but just orality as a narrative feature. Thus, my purpose here is only to study how John makes sense of the interplay

between orality and literacy as narrative features. The addressee's attention is first drawn on the subject by John the Witness, once again.

In Mark, the narrator takes John the Baptist as “the voice of the one shouting in the wilderness: “Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight” (...) as it is written in the prophets”—that is Isaiah. In the Fourth Gospel, John the Witness speaks of himself as of this voice, specifying “as Isaiah said”. The word which had been alive at the time of the Exile has become a Scripture waiting for its fulfilment (Marchadour 2004, 26). Even more, John the Witness quotes Isaiah orally and Isaiah himself is not said to have written this prophecy, but to have said it. So in the Fourth Gospel we do not have only a past Scripture correctly linked to a present religious event, we have a supposedly fixed word which is now alive again through its performance by John the Witness. Now John the Witness denies to be Elijah *redivivus*, but he quotes Isaiah. An oral prophet like Elijah has to come back himself, while a writing prophet like Isaiah can be present somehow when he is quoted or/and interpreted. This suggests that, *correctly linked to religious life, a supposedly written text becomes oral again*: as Isaiah said (John 1:23), another Scripture says (John 19:37), etc. The reinterpretation of past prophecies in John appears to be written orality flowing from the prophets, just like Spirit flowing from Christ.

The fact that literacy has to be complemented by orality can easily be understood from the fact that literacy is supposed to be fixed: “the Scripture cannot be untied”, says Jesus (οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἡ γραφή John 10:35), “what I have written, I have written”, says Pilate (Ὁ γέγραφα, γέγραφα John 19:22). What is written is potentially universal, but it can be misunderstood. Reciprocally, orality is impossible without a closeness between speaker and listener, but this kind of communication allows continuous explanation of what is said. This is why Plato was so cautious about the use of the written medium, that is “a remedy not for memory but for memorization” (οὐκ οὐκ μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον, *Phaedrus* 275 a). The ambivalence of the word “φάρμακον” and the ongoing dialogue (274c-277) allows to qualify Plato's thought: on the one hand, literacy is dangerous insofar as it is a remedy killing memory, that becomes dead thought; on the other hand, literacy can be helpful insofar as it is a remedy helping remembrance of an oral dialogue, that becomes living thought again. The rationale is not so different in John: it is important that “Scripture” should be made alive again by the oral word of a good

interpreter, the best interpreter being of course Jesus. That is why he says: “If you do not believe [Moses’] writings (γράμμασιν), how shall you believe my words (ῥήμασιν)? (John 5:46). However good Moses’ writings are, they need an oral application to religious concerns, otherwise they remain in a closed sphere of literacy which is insane according to John. Focusing on the Law of Moses only would be, so to say, an excess of literacy.

Yet an excess of orality could be possible too. This is actually what occurs when Caiaphas unwillingly prophesies that Jesus should die for the whole nation—probably including the *Diaspora* according to the narrator’s comment on the dispersed children of God (John 11:52). Who would consider Caiaphas a prophet? Contrary to other priests who also served as prophets, such as Samuel, Ezekiel and Zechariah, Caiaphas is not shown to live according to the high ethical standards which allow a prophet to be open to God’s Word. As a matter of fact, he is said to prophesy because he is in exercise of his priestly duty (John 11:51)—it will be argued in the last section that his liturgical dress implies a contrast between his being sealed as a high priest and the Johannine Jesus’ being sealed as the Christ. Besides, Caiaphas prophesies without any scriptural background, that is to say without any reference to the past, and this could well be the other reason why he is not aware of what he is saying. This does not mean that the Johannine Caiaphas appears in general as a priest ignoring the Law, which would be nonsense. It rather means that a real prophet according to John is someone able to utter the will of God and thus to predict the future, this skill implying an affinity with the past. Thus a balance is definitely needed between past and present, between Scripture and Voice.

2.2 *Scripture and voice*

These are two complementary ways from God to his people and backwards: on the one hand the supposedly written Scripture, on the other hand the performative and interpretative Voice. From a historical point of view, this conceptual pair probably echoes the use of orality around literacy in Antiquity: written texts studied by heart or read, performed orally, interpreted orally, etc. From a theological point of view, Scripture and Voice can lead to further elaboration, as it is the case in Philo. Throughout the very diverse works of the Jewish philosopher, we can distinguish something like a cosmology of revelation determined first by the transcendent θεός, then by

his mediating λόγος containing a series of λόγοι, which in the religious history of Israel appeared to be on the one hand incarnate in the νόμος, on the other hand delivered by the ἄγγελοι to the prophets (Decharneux 1988, 121). So the Philonic *Logos* here presents a twofold appearance: both incarnate in the Law (which is not so far from the Johannine incarnation) and uttered by the prophets. Among the prophets, the uttermost one, Moses, reveals the Law, so that later prophets have to apply, call back to, interpret the Law.

Now in the Fourth Gospel Jesus appears as the Prophet like Moses and even higher than Moses, making signs and interpreting the Law like no one else. Actually his role of enlivening Voice applies not only to Scripture, but also to mankind. This is the case for the spiritually dead: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice (φωνή) of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.” (John 5:25). It is the case as well for the physically dead: “He cried with a loud voice (φωνή), Lazarus, come forth!”. And he that was dead came forth” (John 11:43-44). Now what occurs when this enlivening Voice turns off?

The pericope of the so-called “cleansing of the Temple” (John 2:13-22) somehow answers this question insofar as it shows how the disciples’ understanding of the master changes along time.

While Jesus is **PRESENT** among them and defending his Father’s house, the disciples **REMEMBER** it is written: “The zeal for your house will eat me up”. Orality implies presence “in the flesh” and is here balanced with reference to literacy. So remembrance equates with linking Jesus’ performance to a supposedly written word, which means that remembrance contains a part of interpretation.

Once Jesus is absent, the disciples **REMEMBER** that he SAID: “Destroy this sanctuary and I will build it again in three days”, speaking of the sanctuary of his own body, according to the narrator. Here remembrance equates with linking Jesus’ saying to a further event, his rising from the dead. Once again, remembrance equates with linking a word to an event, which proves to be interpretative.

From a stylistic point of view, remembrance forms a chiasm between presence and absence, reference to a written word and reference to an oral word, so that the balance is maintained between literacy and orality. From a theological point of view, this balance finally grants Jesus’ word with “a comparable authority” to Scripture itself (Beutler 1996, 154), insofar as the

disciples BELIEVE equally in the Scripture and the WORD (λόγος) which Jesus said.

So the disciples have moved from a closeness *in praesentia* with their unrecognised master to a closeness *in absentia* with their risen master. Now the master's Voice does not consist anymore of *orality performed*, but of *orality remembered and interpreted*, while the addressee of the Gospel is further confronted to *orality written in the Gospel*. This is "writing as rhetoric" insofar as the interpretative echo of the Voice is expressed in the structure of the text as well as it points out how it addresses the reader/listener: not as an archive, but as a living memory of the past (cf. Thatcher 2005). This rhetorical and theological construction once again highlights that the balance between Scripture and Voice is also a balance between past and present.

2.3 *The voice of the prophet facing the past*

Indeed Scripture is a supposedly written text from the past to which the voice of a prophet like Moses refers in the present. To this respect, the prophet is not only expected to predict what is to come, but to explain what is going on with a reference to the past. He is not only expected to be a *willing vocal instrument for God's word*, but also a careful observer of his contemporaries, skilled in explaining history from a theological point of view. As Jacques Chopineau taught in Brussels, "*le prophète avance à reculons*": "The prophet moves from forward backwards" or "The prophet advances backwards". That is to say that the prophet advances to the future with us but, unlike most of us, at the same time carefully scrutinising the past and seeing signs where we only see events (cf. Chopineau 1986, 117). It can be further argued that the prophet develops a sense of temporality different from our common sense of temporality. Most of us look back to the past as to the route already travelled and look forward to the future as to the route still to travel. Yet we could consider the contrary, for the past is well-known, in front of us, while the future can only be guessed and actually appears from behind. So the prophet's job, so to speak, would namely consist in *searching signs in the past and in the present in order to warn us that an unexpected future might appear suddenly from our rear...*

3. Prophecy, Signs and Words

Till now this paper has been considering that the Johannine Jesus appears as the prophet like Moses and even higher than Moses. Now one more step should be taken into Johannine high Christology to show that Jesus is not higher than Moses because he is a better prophet, but because his relation to God is different. This can be seen from Jesus' "*signs and words*", that contrast with Moses' "*signs and wonders*".

3.1 From a prophetic sign to a liturgical metaphor

It is not unusual, for a prophet, to perform prophetic signs conveying the same message as his prophetic words, that is to say dramatic actions that proclaim the divine will and, once performed, cannot be undone (Stacey 1990, 260-82). Let us think, for instance, of Isaiah going naked and barefoot to mime Israel's coming shame (Isa 20), of Jeremiah breaking a pot to foreshadow the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer 19:1-13), of Ezekiel eating inferior bread and few water each day to evoke the terrible conditions of the coming Exile (Ezek 4:9-17). A prophetic sign can also depict the present situation that leads to the coming disaster, as it is the case when Hosea takes "a wife of whoredoms (...) for the land has committed great whoredom" (Hos 1:2). So significant gestures parallel the prophet's warnings about the future, albeit they can also refer to the present.

As for the Johannine Jesus, the match of the prophetic signs are the σημεῖα that he performs in the present of his ministry and that parallel the words by which he reveals himself. For example: on the one hand, Jesus speaks of himself as of the spring of "*living water*" (John 4:10, 11); on the other hand, he cures the paralytic unable to dive into the "*shaken water*" of the Pool of Siloam (John 5:7). He says he is the bread of life (John 6:35, 48) and feeds a numerous crowd with bread (John 6:1-15). He says he is the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5) and heals a blind man (John 9). He says he is the life and the resurrection (John 11:25) and raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45). From a literary point of view, this way of illustrating a word with a wonder can be seen as "a remains of homiletic technique". But above all, this is a "process of gradual metaphorisation" through which the tenor "Jesus" gets "additional meaning" from the frames "water", "bread", "light", "life", etc. (Kieffer 1989, 101-107). Now each sign justifies the metaphor drawn by the word. For example, the tenor "Jesus" can get

additional meaning from the frame “light” insofar as Jesus brings the blind man the light.

Now the additional meaning brought by the metaphor relies widely on cultural references that are often difficult to find out as far as the Fourth Gospel is concerned (Kieffer 1989, 101-102). It is largely agreed that one of these references is the Wisdom of God, who is the first creature (Prov 8:1), whose gifts are compared to wine and bread (Prov 9), who is trying to put up her tent among humans (Sir 24:8). Jonathan Draper convincingly argued that another reference was the liturgy of the Temple. Insofar as the Johannine Jesus appears to be the highest Temple for God’s Presence, it is coherent that Johannine Christology further uses Temple liturgy as a cultural background for its symbolism. So in our metaphor “Jesus is the light of the world”, the frame “light” refers namely to the numerous lamps lightened for the feast of Dedication or, better, to the ever lighting lamp in the Tabernacle (Exod 27:20-21). This implied cultural reference makes Jesus appear, not as a shining lamp—that is John the Witness (John 5:34)—but as the highest light. Likewise, the frame “water” refers namely to the ritual use of water during the feast of the Tents and makes Jesus appear as the spring of water (cf. Devillers 2005, ch. 3). Insofar as the signs are referred to Temple rituals, they appear as fulgurations of Glory draped in the highest Tent.

From a sociological point of view, the fact that the Johannine Jesus appears to be the Tent and the *Logos*, can be understood as a way, for the “Palestinian” Jewish Christians, to cope with the “apocalyptic” change that occurred with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. (Draper 2002). This is an example of how human thought is able to manage a historical event that puts it at risk. If the minor tradition was right saying that the real Tent was still to come, then the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple is more acceptable. Now the idea of the Temple, conflict-provoking core of Jewish thought, could be conserved and adjusted through a conceptual *bricolage* (handiwork) with the *Logos*. Indeed the *Logos* was the core of the Hellenistic culture, which was already pregnant in “Palestine” and was definitely imposed by Rome. This adjustment Temple/*Logos* is *bricolage* insofar as it satisfies a new requirement (coping with the destruction of the Temple) with tools already available (“Tent” and “*Logos*”)—on the contrary, engineering would consist in making new tools especially fitted to the new requirement (Levi-Strauss 1999, 39-40).

3.2 *Widespread Middle Platonism*

In Stoicism, the human *logos* is the particular way each human being is “inseminated” by the universal *Logos*. (for the sake of clarity the human *logos* is written with a minuscule and the universal *Logos* with a majuscule). Stoicism is a pantheism in which the *Logos* is a divine principle that penetrates the universe with its own substance and expresses itself as a cohesion in the objects and artefacts; cohesion and growing in vegetal beings; cohesion, growing and soul in animal beings; cohesion, growing, soul (ψυχή) and rational soul (ψυχή λογική or λόγος) in human beings. So each object, vegetable, animal and human being is “inseminated” by the universal *Logos* in a different way: actually they are supposedly produced by different “seminal reasons” (λόγοι σπερματικοί). Since the 2nd century BCE, Stoic philosophers had come back to some elements of Platonism while Platonic philosophers had integrated some Stoicism to improve their cosmology. This cross-philosophical stream is usually called “Middle Platonism” since J. Dillon’s works. In Middle Platonism, the Stoic λόγος was equated with the Platonic δημιουργός who, according to the myth of *Timaeus* (27c-f), had shaped the world by contemplating the “Ideas” or “essences” (in the singular: εἶδος or οὐσία). To express how the unique Idea “Human” relates to the multiple “human” beings, for example, Plato used namely the analogy of the τύπος (“seal” or “stamp”) which impresses wax with a mark both recognisable and each time slightly different. From this τύπος came the name “archetype” which designates the Middle Platonic synthesis of the Stoic “seminal reason” and of the Platonic “Idea” (Couloubaritsis 1998, 471-490). A Middle Platonic synonym for τύπος is σφραγίς; both of them expressed the unity of the intelligible world and its differing from the perceptible world. They also expressed the theory according to which each perceptible being bears the mark of the intelligible that is divine, so that the same way remained open to what we call “science” and “religion”.

Middle Platonic studies highlighted relevant points of comparison between Polytheist, Jewish and Christian authors who had been kept apart in research for a long time: Antiochos of Ascalon (first century BCE, Polytheist), Philo of Alexandria (first century BCE – first century CE, Jew), Paul of Tarsus (first century CE, Jewish Christian), Apuleius of Madaura (first century BCE.—first century CE, Polytheist), Plutarch of Cheroneia (second century CE, Polytheist), Numenius of Apamea (second century CE,

Polytheist). Beyond important nuances, these Middle Platonists indeed shared a hierarchical cosmology determined first of all by the transcendent deity (the gods, God, pantheism). Then comes the *Logos*, which is the agent of the deity, but seems to be considered as a second deity by the latest Middle Platonists (Plutarch and Numenius). At the same time, a similar trend to hypostasiate God's agent was condemned by the "orthodox" rabbis as "the heresy of the two Powers in Heaven". Their target was not the Hellenistic *Logos* but its Aramaic equivalent, the *Memra*: the parallel shows once again how interesting it is to consider the history of thought as a whole and not to split religions, languages and literary genres too hastily (Boyarin 2001). But let us go back to the *Logos*. Mediating the deity creating and keeping the world alive, it is like the container of the unique archetypes that inseminate the multiple terrestrial beings.

Such a cosmology implies a reversal of common ontology. In common ontology, the most real is whatever can be grasped by our five wits, while in the whole Platonic tradition the most real is the unique Idea or archetype which embodies a series of perceptible beings. Such a strange ontology could be thought of as an intellectual refinement for high-educated people. Yet Platonism was influential to a wide range of audiences and even reached popular audiences. Indeed Platonic motives from *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus* and the maybe apocryphal *Epinomis* were taught by [Middle] Stoic wandering preachers. These preachers were calling to a "philosophic kind of life" (Joly 1956) and were not so different from later Christian "wandering charismatics" (Theissen 1977). It has even been argued that Paul had to confront such Stoic or Cynic preachers (Malherbe J 1989), or that Jesus' teaching was close to theirs (Crossan 1992), but these theses fall outside the scope of this paper. What is important here is that Middle Stoicism/Platonism was not only a high-educated thought, but also a popular one. Even the technical image of the seal was evocative for a large audience, insofar as the seal was known to mark the power of a civil servant.

Now the Gospel of John contains several Middle Platonic features: admittedly and explicitly the mediating *Logos* whose originality consists in its bodily incarnation, but first of all and implicitly the continuous creation through "seals" and the peculiar appraisal of what is real.

3.3 *From a metaphor to the τύπος or σφραγίς*

Following the seminal works of C. H. Dodd (1998, 133-143), it will be suggested that what is now called “Middle Platonism” provides a cultural background to understand the gradual metaphorisation of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Such a “Middle Platonic” reading accounts for the fact that the metaphors used to characterise Jesus did not come from the author’s sole sensitivity, but from the cosmology he shared with his Hellenistic contemporaries from the 2nd century B.C.E. to the 2nd century C.E.

For cosmology differs from sensitivity. For example, when the poet says of a woman: “*elle est le grand soleil qui me monte à la tête*”, he points out a feeling of warmth or even drunkenness (in French we do not say: “wild with joy”, we say: “drunk with joy”). So this woman is metaphorised through the frames “sun”, maybe “alcohol” or “heady perfume”, but of course she is not of the same kind as sun or alcohol, for she does not have, for example, a pyric body enlivened by mysterious spirits. In this case the tenor and the frame are just linked by what is technically called “synaesthesia”, that is mixing sensations like love and warmth, whose causes, a woman or the sun, remain absolutely distinct. Actually the metaphor could be transformed into a mere comparison: “*cette femme est comme un grand soleil qui me monterait à la tête*”, it would just be a pity from a poetic point of view.

On the contrary, in the Gospel of John, the metaphors cannot be transformed into comparisons: the Johannine Jesus is not *like* the light of the world, he *is* the light of the world. So the semantic approach, which accounts for the process of metaphorisation, should be complemented with a cosmological approach, which accounts for the intern necessity of this process. From a Middle Platonic point of view, the seal “Light” embodies a series of terrestrial beings: the sunlight, the light through which human is able to see, the light of an oil lamp, a.s.o. Now the Johannine Jesus is a light higher than the temporary light of “a burning and shining lamp” that is John the Witness (John 5:35). The Johannine Jesus is also such a light that he overcomes the numerous oil lamps lightened for the feast of Dedication. At last, he is the only light able to enlighten (both meanings) a blind man. *From a Middle Platonic point of view, the Johannine Jesus bears the seal of “Light”, “Water”, “Bread”, because God sealed him directly.* Significantly, after feeding the crowd, Jesus enjoins them to work (ἐργάζεσθε), not for the food perishing, but for the food remaining in eternal life, the food given by the Son of Man, for God sealed

(ἐσφράγισεν) him (John 6:27). *God's σφραγις makes the Johannine Jesus, not a civil servant, but a celestial servant.*

This is the Hellenistic equivalent to the Jewish rules of agency according to which the agent represents his sender in such a strong manner that he can make some business abroad... or bring salvation on earth (namely Borgen 1968). The legitimate focus on the “Jewish side” of the Fourth Gospel should not obliterate its “Hellenistic side”. So I suggest that *Middle Platonism is, like Jewish customs, one of the cultural patterns used by John to address his readers or listeners, whatever their cultural background, to lead them to high Christology.* To take up the Johannine metaphors, there are numerous lights, kinds of water and loaves of bread, some of whose were used in Temple rituals, yet according to John there is only one light forever shining and exceptionally incarnate: Jesus Christ. This is coherent with the fact that the Johannine Jesus is the *Logos* incarnate; actually such Christological propositions “take their specific content and have their basis in the actions and events that form the substance of the text” (Hurtado forthcoming). So John hereby shaped a cosmology of its own, perfectly fitting its Christology, but in which two major cultural influences can nonetheless be found: on the one hand the Temple of Jerusalem and its liturgy, on the other hand the *Logos* and its seals.

The relevance of a Middle Platonic approach of the Gospel of John is confirmed by the implied definition of ἀλήθεια. This is one of the substantives that the LXX uses to translate the Hebrew אֱמֶת. It is often worth understanding the Johannine truth against the Semitic meaning of *fidelity*, reliability, loyalty, a.s.o. “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17). Here the Greek can be understood against a Hebrew background, as אֱמֶת וְחֶסֶד, that is to say benevolence (moral obligation) and fidelity to it. This reading fits with further developments which present Jesus both as the Law and as the Love forgiving rebellion against the Law (Boismard 1988, 103-5). This Semitic reading proves also interesting when the Gospel speaks about witness in a forensic sense.

Now in John we find a second meaning of “truth” or, more accurately, of “true”, which does not fit with the Semitic meaning of fidelity. For example, there is no contrast in fidelity between the manna given in the days of Moses and “the bread from heaven, the true one” (John 6:32). In such a case, “true” rather means “*real*”, “*essential*”, implying a contrast with “*phenomenal*” realities. Now the most “*real*” reality in Middle Platonic philosophy is the

unique and transcendent “seal” which determines a series of transient phenomenal beings. So John expressed its Christology through a cultural pattern which was current in Hellenistic thought by the 1st century (Dodd 1998, 72, 170-178). If we take this Middle Platonic like Christology into account, then we must consider the Johannine Jesus (John 1:9) *not* as “the true light, which lights every man [and] which was coming into the world” *but* as “*the true light, which lights every man coming into the world*”.

Moreover, this translation fits better with the grammatical structure of the sentence and the parallelism with vv 4 and 10 (Bultmann 1941, 31f n6). For once Dodd and Bultmann agreed with each other! Here the Johannine Jesus appears to be the seal which gives light to all human beings to prepare their birth as human beings, and this “true light” is contrasted with every other kind of light.

“Seal” and “light” are often related to one another in Philo (Arnaldez 1963). In Philo we also find contrasts between “true” meaning “essential” realities and “phenomenal” realities. Among numerous examples, the contrast between “essential” and “phenomenal” appraisal of the Scriptures will prove useful. “The Holy Scriptures [...] are more truthful than any other thing. [...] [Those who] dwell on the literal meaning only rather than on the content of the narrative, and teach and deal with the words and literal text are blind and thick-skinned. But they are unable to look into the inner meaning at the intelligible forms (πρὸς τὰ νοητὰ εἶδη)”. (*Quaest. Gen.* 4:168). So it seems that Philo would have agreed with the maxim according to which we have the choice between taking the Bible literally or... seriously. The “thick-skinned” characteristic probably refers to Philo’s depiction of Belphegor (the “Baal of Peor” of Nb 25:3) as a “mass of skin” (*Confus.* 57). It is worth noting that the mysteries of the god of Peor are alluded to as deeply rooted in the corporeality, in contrast with the spiritually oriented *Logos* (Decharneux 1994, 136). Here truth somehow appears to be the *content of belief* (Knight 1993, 592-595). This meaning explains the imagery of the converts surrounded by “the pure truth of their faith” as by an atmosphere (*Spec. Leg.* 1, 52). Now we also find this meaning in John: the one who hears Jesus’ voice is “from (ἐκ) the truth” (John 18:37) as if truth was his fatherland—actually he should still explore his fatherland under the leadership of the Paraclete that leads inside (ἐν) the truth rather than into (εἰς) it (John 16:13; Zumstein forthcoming). This exploration is a spatial expression of the temporal dimension of truth that,

“in the full meaning it has in John, is the revelation of Jesus always anew updated by the Spirit in the heart and life of the believers” (de la Potterie 1977, 471). This theme of the truth as a space to explore also provides a link with the Prologue, for Jesus says to the Father: ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθειά ἐστιν (John 17:17) before he identifies himself implicitly with truth (v 19). If the *Logos* is truth and if Jesus is truth too, then the *Logos* can be thought to be incarnate in Jesus. This is a way to the Prologue.

Despite similar uses of ἀλήθεια, it may be argued that John differs from Middle Platonists like Philo. As a matter of fact, it would be reckless, on the one hand, to claim that John relies on Philo. It will be better thought that both of them present a parallel acculturation. The fact that the Gospel does not use a technical vocabulary is coherent with the fact that it is first of all a literary text which plays with its addressee in place of using a definite vocabulary, like do some later Gnostic texts. This phenomenon of a literary text alluding to a philosophical system is not unparalleled in the history of thought. For example, the French philologist Jean Bollack showed some years ago that Sophocles’s *Oedipus rex* is best read against the background of Empedocles’ philosophy. Indeed Empedocles insisted on the process by which love as a principle grows until it becomes excessive and generates hate, which in turn grows up to love, a.s.o. Now Sophocles’s *Oedipus* depicts the end of a family whose nobility depended upon a principle of autochthony which became excessive and finally broke the whole family in a terrific mix of “fathers brothers-and-sons” and “women spouses-and-mothers” (vv 1405-1408). Likewise, John could have used Middle Platonic features freely, the more easily that he was not referring to a particular author, but to a whole cultural horizon.

On the other hand, it should be stressed that Paul, although his epistles were not narratives, used Middle Platonic features freely too. As a matter of fact, Paul did not use the term τύπος at the vertical level of the generation of beings, but at the horizontal level of events (Siegert 1996). Indeed he related events from the history of Israel to Christological topical events. These hermeneutics allowed Paul to allegorise an apparently insignificant event from the Scriptures in order to make an example out of it for the topical communities of believers. This is the case, namely, for the rock that the Hebrews used to carry in the desert, this rock from which Moses used to extract water: “(...) for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. (...) Now all these things happened unto them for

ensamples (τύποι): and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” (1 Cor 10:4-11). Yet Paul manifestly used the σφραγίς vocabulary in a more “vertical” way, for instance when he wrote of God as of the one who has sealed (ὁ σφραγισάμενος) them in their hearts by His Spirit (2 Cor 1:22). Here the seal expresses the link between deity and mankind, somehow like the signs performed by Jesus in the Gospel of John.

3.4 *Signs from a prophet, signs from the saviour, signs from a believer*

To conclude with signs, it must be pointed up that the Johannine Jesus is not higher than Moses or Elijah because he performs greater signs. For sure he does, insofar as he gives himself as the bread of eternal life, while Moses only announced that God would give temporary bread. To pick up another contrast: the Johannine Jesus raised Lazarus after four days, while Elijah raised the son of his hostess immediately after his death. Other instances can be found. Yet the reason why the Johannine Jesus is the saviour of the world and not only a prophet, even the greatest prophet, is that he bears the seal of bread, water, light, life, so that he is able to produce them both of terrestrial and celestial kind. “According to the narrative, Jesus’ public appearances spell a *creatio continua*” (du Rand 2005, 25). This narrative portrayal allows the prologue to introduce further the Johannine Jesus as the *Logos* incarnate, that is the agent of creation become flesh in order to improve dramatically his action in mankind. This dramatic action is not depicted as the restoration of the human likeness to God that was broken by Adam’ sin, which is more Pauline a view, but rather as the continuous creation of mankind. Through the Johannine continuous creation, each human being coming into the world gets the seal of the *Logos* and can be re-created by a further encounter with the *Logos* either incarnate in Jesus or testified of by the disciples and the Gospel. Therefore the continuous creation can be seen as the Greek philosophic equivalent to the Hebrew grammatical use that characterises God not only as “the one who created you”, but as “the one creating you” (present participle בְּרָאֵךְ, Is 43:1). Whether expressed in Greek or in Hebrew, the continuous creation is achieved in the advent of man that is salvation.

While on the subject, it is worth noting that the prophetic oracles of salvation in the so-called “Deutero-Isaiah” or “Book of Consolation of Israel” (Is 40-55) repeatedly use the verb בְּרָא that expresses the creative

activity of God in Genesis. Probably contemporary with the Babylonian Exile, Deutero-Isaiah considers salvation, namely the future come back from Exile and the past Exodus, in the light of creation. So this prophetic book links prophecy to creation; reciprocally, the fact that in Genesis God creates namely through his Word can be explained by reference to the prophetic tradition of Israel (Brooke 1987, 233, 236). These hints show that prophecy and creation motives are not so heterogeneous after all, albeit their Johannine trajectory, from Jesus compared to a prophet to Jesus agent of creation, is unparalleled as such. In John indeed, the creation motif related to Jesus as *Logos* bearing God's seal is one of the ways to express that *Jesus is in continuous intimacy with God, while a prophet is in temporary intimacy with God*.

As for someone prophesying unwillingly, like Caiaphas, he is actually in no intimacy with God. He utters God's Word like our vocal strings convey our voice: functionally. As John underlines it, Caiaphas prophesies only because of his function (John 11:51). Yet the high priest is supposed to be sealed by God too, for he wears the ephod whose shoulders bear two stones containing the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (Exod 28:9-12). These names are like the engravings of a seal (γλύμμα σφραγίδος) and constitute a memory (μνημόσυνον) of Israel towards the Lord. Yet they rely upon the "liturgical" art, the art of the engraver (ἔργον λιθουργικῆς τέχνης), whereas the Johannine Jesus' signs rely upon God's seal... So there could be an opposition in John between *the functionally sealed and unwillingly prophesying priest* on the one hand, *the ontologically sealed Jesus overcoming any prophet* on the other hand.

Be that as it may, it is certain that intimacy with God determines the greatness of the signs performed. This is the case, not only of the Johannine Jesus, but also of the Johannine believer. Indeed the Johannine Jesus says: "He that believes me, the works (ἔργα) that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do, because (ὅτι) I go unto my Father." (John 14:12). These ἔργα remind us of the imperative "ἐργάζεσθε for the food remaining in eternal life, the food given by the Son of Man, for God sealed (ἐσφράγισεν) him" (John 6:27). Now that Jesus has left the earth, it is up to the believer to act. Of course this could not mean that the believer is expected to make greater wonders than Jesus, such as feeding a whole nation or raising a dead man after a whole year. Some apocryphal miracles look this way, but in John the ὅτι clause points out that the believer, who is a

mere human being, will make *relatively* higher signs, insofar as Jesus, who was not a mere human being, won't be there anymore. And *these signs would be the highest possible ones for a human being, because the believer would have reached the highest intimacy possible with God through his faith in Jesus.*

Conclusion

At the end of this paper, a twofold conclusion can be drawn.

The definition of the prophet in the Gospel of John contains “regular” features, that are features acknowledged in other Jewish and Hellenic texts. Indeed the Johannine prophet appears to be a willing vocal instrument for God's Word, which allows him to predict the future, but he must also be skilled in the theological appraisal of the past in order to grasp signs in the present. To this respect, he is like a Voice that enlivens the Scriptures.

The definition of the prophet in the Gospel of John fits only partially with the character of Jesus. Admittedly, Jesus can be seen as the uttermost prophet: he is the best mediator to God, he enlivens Scripture and even mankind. Yet the Johannine Jesus is a strange prophet: he does not need to be anointed to receive God's Spirit, he is also a king who lays down his life, he does not need a sign neither as a prophet nor as a king to be confirmed that he is the chosen one.

Actually, he performs signs not only higher but also different from the signs of a prophet, for he was directly sealed by God. So the Johannine Jesus' signs bring mankind the “true” Light, Bread, Water, that are the heavenly seals determining the series of earthly lights, loaves, waters. This “seal” pattern explains why Johannine truth sometimes implies a hierarchy between heavenly and earthly beings. This pattern also highlights that John's metaphors do not only come from the sensitivity of a poet, but also from the cosmology of an educated Hellenistic Jew of the 1st century. It must be underlined that this is a matter of widespread Middle Platonism rather than of a peculiar author's works. At last, this shared cosmology provides a continuum between John's narrative and prologue, insofar as the Johannine Jesus can be seen as a “container” for the seals, which is one of the characteristic of the Middle Platonic *Logos*.

In this way, Middle Platonism appears to be one of the cultural patterns referred to by John in order to make Jesus accessible from different points of

view. So Middle Platonic studies could well improve our understanding of John's Gospel as a cross-cultural text, insofar as they can help us stick to the categories of the thought studied—this is an already old Structuralist dream. Besides, the here suggested “Middle Platonic” reading of John does not start from the Incarnation of the *Logos* to cast its shadow onto the whole Gospel: *on the contrary, it starts from the “seal” cosmology underlying Jesus’ “signs and words” to explain further development of the high Christology into the Logos theme.* From a methodological point of view, indeed, it seems careful to start from the “bottom”, in the circumstances from the character of the prophet, to go “up” to the *Logos*, then “down” again to see what has been gained. At the risk of practising Middle Platonic-like allegory, is it not the way shown in vision (John 1:51), not to say in dream (Gen 28:12)—an old dream once again—by the angels going up from the earth then back from heaven?

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