

Death and Suffering in the Bible

Dying in Love

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The perspective of this entire Congress invites us to clarify the title “Death and Suffering in the Bible” while focusing the subject on the moment of death, with suffering simply being here a corollary and not a principal element of reflection. To define the Biblical vision of death, and more specifically the arrangement of the subject in this final moment is the point of reflection concerning the end of life and its accompaniment. Our thesis is that the death of Christ not only transforms death, but it gives man the capacity to live death as an act of love. Socrates, through his free attitude in the face of death, knew to give it a meaning: to obey his conscience. Nevertheless, this death finds its completion in itself. At most, it has an exemplary value. The Christian, thanks to Christ, may make a preeminent act of charity through it.

Our reflection entails three points. First, to ask ourselves concerning the moment of death in Sacred Scripture implies at the outset understanding the meaning of death in Biblical Revelation. To this end, it is necessary to grasp how life is perceived, with death defining itself at the outset in opposition to it. Secondly, we will see how death is lived out in the Old Testament and how it already was able to be lived out by its subjects. We will see different types of death : natural deaths, suicides, and martyrs. Thirdly, the novelty brought about by Christ’s death on the Cross will capture our attention. We will observe in the beginning what the Gospels tell us concerning the death of Christ, and then we will see how Saint Paul translates this novelty within Christian life.

I. The Meaning of Death

1.1 Life as the Gift of God

Life is presented throughout Scripture as the gift of God. It is perceived essentially through the presence of *nepesh*, breath, also frequently associated with blood. The Creation narrative illustrates how the *nepesh* is the fruit of divine action. God breathes a “breath of life” into the nostrils of man (*nismat hajjim*), and it becomes a “living being” (*nepesh hajjiâ*) (Gn. 2:7)¹. This vision is taken up again more specifically in the legislation concerning blood. The latter must not be consumed “since blood is life” (Dt. 12:23), and life only belongs to God. Blood is shed on the altar in expiation “for blood is what expiates for life (*nepesh*)” (Lv. 17:11). The offering of life (*nepesh*) in an expiatory sacrifice is done by the suffering servant, implying this outpouring of blood.

This ban against drinking blood extends itself to all mankind (Gn 9:4), thus illustrating the universal value of life. God will render an account of the blood of each, that is to say, of the soul of man (Gn. 9:5), because he has been created in His image. This is why “he who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed ” (Gn. 9:6). Talion law develops in

¹ Concerning these anthropological notions, the reader should consult the following works that elaborate on this section’s theme: A. SAND, *Psyche*, in H. BALZ - G. SCHNEIDER (ed.), *Dizionario Esegético del Nuovo Testamento*, Ed. Paideia, Brescia, 1998 – H. SEEBAS, *Nepesh*, in G. J. BOTTERWECK - H. RINGGREN (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Ed. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977 – H.W. WOLFF, *Antropologia dell’Antico Testamento*, Ed. Queriniana, Brescia, 2002² – C. WESTERMANN, *nepesh ‘soul’*, in E. JENNI - C. WESTERMANN (ed.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Hendrickson, Peabody, 1997; J.B. EDART, « anima » ; « corpo », *Dizionario di Temi Teologici Biblici*, Milano, San Paolo, in press.

this way. Blood for blood responds to life (*nepesh*) for life (*nepesh*) (Ex. 21:23ff.). “Anyone who strikes down any other man will be put to death” (Lv. 24:17). In the same manner, the *nepesh* of an animal must be compensated for financially by virtue of the principle of “life for a life” (Lv. 24:18, 21).

However, life is a gift of God characterized by an appeal to freedom, symbolized by the two trees in the Garden and the interdiction against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Freedom is the logical correlative of the gift of life, the major work of God. This life is characterized as being in the image of God, and therefore, it does not have itself as its reference point. The recognition of its “being gift”, and thus the renouncement of disposing of it in an autonomous manner, is the condition for its blossoming. Life is the free and gratuitous participation in the gift of the transcendent God. The continuity of life after sin illustrates even more strongly how it is a free gift of God.

God’s commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge is the condition for receiving this gift and “living” it. Here, we have the integration of the ethic within the same conception of life, a fundamental given of Biblical thought. The Law of Israel is presented as the pathway for life: “13,14 ; 16,22”. It is identified with him who fears God (Pv. 14:27).

1.2 Death as the Fruit of Sin

Several consequences result from original sin. The first is a direct consequence inherent to sin : the appearance of fear. The others are the expression of divine judgment: the toil of labor, the pain of childbirth, the denaturing of the relationship between man and woman, the limited duration of man’s days, and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. All of these illustrate the condition of a creature severed off from its Creator.

The first element is the exposure of nakedness and of the shame linked together with it (Gn. 2:25). This notion goes beyond the question of modesty. It represents before all else the absence of defense in the face of the other or its defeat (Am. 2:16). Adam and Eve discover that they are without defense vis-à-vis one another, a possibility that they refuse in covering themselves with a loincloth. They conceal that which symbolizes their weakness in relationship with each other. Even before God appeared, the man and the woman have become a threat one towards the other. Death already has entered, in a certain way, within their relationship. Then, when Adam explains himself to God, he confirms: “I was afraid (*yara*) so I hid” (Gn. 3:8). To hide oneself illustrates the attempt to withdraw from the threat by making himself inaccessible to it. Having fear or shame expresses in a certain manner, therefore, the fact of being subjected to death (Ps. 44:8 : “You put to shame those who hate us”)². Man thus discovers that the sin he committed exposes him to death. Upon the introduction of death, the relationship between him and the woman corresponds with his relationship with God.

Death is the original place of fear for it is the destruction of the body. God is no longer perceived as the source of life, but as a menace against it. This fear takes man’s freedom away from him. Following from original sin, all of humanity is inhabited by this fear of death.

Divine judgment only renders the translating of this condition of fact in man’s life. The rupture of communion with God delivers man to his being a creature and deprives him of divine gifts, with the exception of life. This expresses itself in three dimensions: work, relationship between man and woman, and childbirth. These are the relationships with the garden (work), and between man and woman and with the life by whom they are touched

² B. COSTACURTA, *La vita minacciata, Il tema della paura nelle Bibbia Ebraica*, Analecta Biblica 119, Roma, PIB, 1988, pp. 94-123.

(childbirth). Work is that through which man (masculine) resembles God. This reality is from this time forward marked by suffering, as expression of a new disharmony with creation. In the same way, maternity is the most typical reality of the woman. Through her maternity, she participates in the gift of life brought to realization by the Creator. Now from this time forward, this connection of life also is marked by suffering. Childbirth even becomes the place of fear for the woman (Jer. 4:31), for she may die. This suffering becomes an obstacle between the desire for life and its realization. It is the anticipation of death. It touches upon the question of the meaning of life and becomes a possible calling into question of the desire to live.³

The last consequence is spiritual death. God drives man out of the Garden of Eden, a symbolic expression of communion with Him. Death then is understood not as a biological state but rather as a spiritual reality characterized by the absence of relationship with God. This vision of death as separation from God leaves its mark throughout the Old Testament. It appears clearly as the sanction of sin. Ben Sira clearly confirms it: “From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die.” (Sir. 25:24 (vulg. 33)).

The sages will insist upon saying that God has not created death (Wis. 1:13-15). Ben Sira underscores the goodness of creation and the human origin of evil. “God did not make death; He does not delight in the death of the living . . . For God has created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of His own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it” (Wis. 1:13; 2:23-24; cf. also 39:25-27; 42:22,25; 15:11-16). It is interesting to note that the Book of Wisdom, quite like Ezekiel (36:26-27; 37:14), does not distinguish physical and spiritual death⁴. The just one only dies in appearance, whereas the impious one already is in a state of death. The impious summon death “by their words and deeds” (Wis. 1:16).

1.3 Theology of Death

We have seen that life is a gift of God that is manifested by way of the presence of breath (the *nepesh*). At death, the *nepesh* is exhaled (Jer. 15:9), poured out as a liquid (Is. 53:12), images that are consequent of the connection between physical life, blood, and breath, signs of this life. The *nepesh* itself can know death (Nm. 23:10; Jg. 16:30; Jn. 4:8). “He did not exempt their *breath* from death” (Ps 78:50). But it does not concern a destruction of the soul⁵. It descends into the depths of the abyss (Ps. 49:16; Pv. 23:14). It goes to Hades (Wis. 16:14). In death, God no longer is able to be praised (Ps. 88:11; Is. 38:18ff.).

The soul in Sheol is separated from God. The dead inhabit the silence (Ps. 94:17; 115:17). If man disappears and is no longer (Job 7:8), if he no longer even may be found by God (7:21), it is because he is in Sheol from this time forward, the place *par excellence* of the absence of God, of oblivion away from God (Ps. 6:6). “For Sheol cannot praise you, death cannot celebrate you. Those who go down into the pit cannot hope for your truth. The living shall praise you as I do this day” (Is. 38:18).

³ The domination of man over woman does not enter directly into our reflection on death, and for this reason we do not treat this theme in our text. We will note simply that this anthropological experience of asymmetry in the relationship between man and woman becomes a source of tension and not of communion. Cf. B. OGNIBENI, *Dominare la moglie, a proposito di Gn 3,16*, Roma, PUL, 2002.

⁴ A. FEUILLET, “Mort du Christ et mort du chrétien d’après les épîtres pauliniennes”, *Revue Biblique* 66 (1959) p. 484.

⁵ This term must not be understood here in the dogmatic sense. The Biblical concept of *nepesh* prepares the development that will drive towards an elaboration of that of the soul, but it is not strictly identical to it. It concerns the principle of life here. Cf. J.B. EDART, “anima”, *Dizionario di Temi Teologici Biblici*, Milano, San Paolo, in press, op cit., ad loc.

II. The Death of Man

Death is present often in the Old Testament. It may be the fruit of an accident or of a violent act (murder, battle). It may be a divine chastisement, but it also is the conclusion of old age. Certain deaths are undergone without the subject's being able to appropriate his death. Others, on the contrary, testify of a commitment of the person at this final stage of his existence. Reflecting on the act of dying, it appears particularly interesting to us to see which meaning death has been able to accommodate in subjects who have been able to be confronted there by a certain freedom and conscience. This notion concerns two groups of persons: those who die "replete with days", and those who are killed or who kill themselves on the grounds of a superior cause.

2.1 Death in Old Age

If death is presented in Gn. 3 as the fruit of sin, the hagiographers testify that all deaths do not have the same value. They espouse different meanings in the function of the moment and the circumstances where the person trespasses. Man dies old naturally. Death after a full and happy life is a sign of benediction: "When Abraham had breathed his last, dying at a happy ripe age, old and full of years" (Gn. 25:8). The benediction of God manifests itself according to the prophet Isaiah in the absence of premature death and in the fulfillment of all lives: "There shall be no more an infant of days, nor an old man who has not filled his days; for the child shall die one hundred years old, and the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed" (Is. 65:20).

On the contrary, death in youth, or after an unhappy life, is perceived as a misfortune and the consequence of sin. It is announced to Elijah that "no one in your family will ever live to old age" (1 Sm. 2:31), a sanction imposed following upon his sin. Eliphaz recounts this fundamental rule to Job: "They [perverse men] were snatched away before their time; their foundation was poured out as a stream" (Job 22:16). This correlation between a precocious death and sin is the logical consequence of the connection between the Law and life. The Law is given in order to protect life. To transgress the Law exposes the sinner to the fragility of existence. Whereas Solomon asks for a wise heart in order to govern his people, in response God grants him not only this wisdom, but also a lengthening of his days to the degree that he tends to the laws and commandments of the Lord (1 Kg. 3:14).

Scripture presents us with different figures of personages at the twilight of their earthly existence. The account of these deaths bears not only upon the event of death in itself, but upon the attitude of the dying person and his last words.

The first of these personages is Jacob (Gn 48:1-22). His end was announced to his son Joseph, the one who comes to see him with his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob then makes the effort to seat himself on the edge of his bed (Gn. 48:2) and begins to speak. He welcomes the children on his knees, marking their adoption in this manner, and blesses them. This benediction is made in disagreement with the law that would have wanted the senior to be blessed on the right and the youngest on the left, but Jacob announces the changes to come and the particular benediction of which Ephraim will be favored. Joseph's reaction and Jacob's insistence confirm the intentional character of his act. All the same, he reunites all of his sons in order to announce to them that which will arrive upon them in the future (Gn. 49:1). His complete discourse follows: "He drew his feet up into the bed, and breathing his last was gathered to his people" (Gn. 49:33). The physical movement visibly sets an inclusion with Gn. 48:42 and underscores how much this death, inevitable as it is, is fully assumed.

We find the same motif again in the death of Moses (Dt 31-33). Like Jacob, Moses speaks of his forefathers before his death, of which he was well-informed by God. He blesses the twelve tribes and thus Joshua. His words have the power of giving form to the future. Equally for Joshua, while he is “advanced in years” (Jos. 23:1), he convokes all of Israel in order to hand down a final teaching on the times to come. If he himself is going “today the way of all the earth” (Jos. 23:14), it is not without establishing that all of the promises had been accomplished and announcing that God would bring to fulfillment all of his threats if the people were to be unfaithful. There also, death is a moment of final truth where the past is contemplated and the future is announced. Equally at the end of his existence, David (1 Kg. 2:1) recalls to his son Solomon the promise received (1 Kg. 2:4) and the conditions of its accomplishment. He also evokes the crimes endured and the sanction that had to strike the guilty.

We may notice that these men do not suffer their death, but it reveals itself at each time to be an extraordinarily rich moment where the meaning of the dying person’s existence reveals itself, evoking the work of God in his life. Death then is no longer suffered, but man may consent to it⁶. Yet further, these deaths are open to the future and become the place of benediction for their surroundings. In a certain manner, they are overtaken if not by the survival of the body, then at least by the benediction or the promise of God that passes from the patriarch or the king to his descendents.

2.2 *Death in the Face of Suffering*

In the face of suffering, dying may become desirable. Two persons express this notion: Job and Jeremiah. Revolt goes then beyond fear. Death is the expression of the contradiction perceived by man between the face of God revealed and his personal experience. The question of the meaning of existence and the soundness of suffering is posed. Man comes of it desiring no longer to live and aspires to nothingness. This idea puts itself forward vis-à-vis that the beginning (birth: Jer. 20:14-18; Job 3:2-23) may be the aspiration to attain the end of existence (temptation to suicide: Job 7:15).

The Book of Job covers a central place in its reflection on suffering and death in Scripture. It puts forward in the most acute manner possible the question of suffering in eminently modern terms, as suicide actually is presented as an eventuality. The author takes up again the questioning that has been present since the Sumerian and Accadian civilizations, two thousand years before Job⁷. From an old tale, the 5th-century author develops a reflection on the suffering of the just and, by way of it, on the suffering of all human life.

The suffering of Job touches upon all dimensions of the person. It is physical (19:20; 30:17, 27, 28, 30), psychical (30:16, 27; 7:3; 9:26), affective (abandonment by friends: 6:15; 19:2, 5), and spiritual (divine origin of suffering: 6:4,10; 22:10). It then is experienced as much in the person as within human relations or in relationship with God.

Three meanings of suffering are proposed: 1) a mechanical conception of retribution (the meaning of visitors); 2) an actual cause (meaning proposed by Job), but which drives to despair and toward disfiguring God, upon whom the constructions of an ill heart are projected; and 3) the transcendence of God beyond any created norm. God pursues a coherent design within the world notwithstanding the apparent contradiction of suffering (meaning proposed by the author in theophany).

⁶ E. JÜNGEL, *Morte [Tod]*, Queriniana, Brescia, p. 94.

⁷ For a presentation of Mesopotamian narratives, see J. LEVEQUE, “Le thème du juste souffrant en Mésopotamie et la problématique du livre de Job”, *Job ou le drame de la foi*, M. GILBERT and F. MIES (ed.) *Lectio Divina*, Paris, Cerf, 2007, pp. 37-51.

The book concludes itself with the silence of Job, not the dumbness of despair, but “an acquiescence of all being, the supreme homage of a free man toward the freedom of God”⁸. Job, in his revolt, had put himself in the place of God. He deemed himself as the norm of history and the world. Placed in the face of creation, he may enter into the mystery while taking back his place as a creature dependent entirely on the Creator.

The happiness of the epilogue, manifested finally by the tranquil death of Job full of days, then no longer appeared as a right legitimated by a life beyond reproach, but as a gracious gift of God⁹. Job accepted that God had the right to send suffering, but God proves that he also may give bliss.

2.3 *Death Chosen*

If death is welcomed habitually as coming from God, certain persons of the history of Israel choose to die either while giving death to themselves (only or when seeking the help of another) or while renouncing living in the face of a direct threat. The only case of true suicide evoked in the Old Testament is the death of Ahithophel (2 Sm. 17:23). The other cases are of warriors who give themselves death in order to escape an infamous death: Abimelech (Jg. 9:54), King Saul (1 Sm. 31:1-13), the king Zimri (1 Kg. 16:18), and Samson (Jg. 16:28ff.). The latter distinguishes itself from the others in that he sacrifices himself in order to kill the Philistines. The case emblematic of a death chosen in the face of a direct menace is the martyr, abundantly present in the Book of the Maccabees. We may touch on Eleazar (2 Mc. 6:19-20); the seven brothers and their mother (2 Mc. 7), who refuse to perjure themselves and die by torture, and Razis (2 Mc. 14:37-46).

1) Suicide

Ahithophel is one of the counselors of Absalom. He commits suicide because his counsel was not followed by Absalom. His death is touched upon extremely briefly: “When Ahithophel saw that his advice had not been followed, he saddled his donkey and set off and went home to his own town. Then, after having set his house in order, he hanged himself. He was buried in his father’s tomb” (2 Sm. 17:23). This death enters within a larger narrative framework. Ahithophel had given good counsel to Absalom, who would have permitted him to capture David; however, the redactor specifies in 17:14 that “Yahweh resolved to thwart Ahithophel’s shrewd advice and so bring disaster on Absalom.” This death thus indicates Absalom’s failure as well as the total divine mastery concerning the fate of David’s son, whose death is thus announced. No moral judgment concerning the suicide is expressed, as such was not called for by the editorial economy centered on the divine action. However, if it were not to have had a negative meaning, it would not have had any reason to be mentioned. It is his dishonorable character that justifies its presence in the account.

2) The Death of the Warrior

1 Sm. 3 is the sequence of 1 Sm. 28 where Saul has come to consult the necromancer. Saul is confronted by the Philistines at Gilboa. We are within an ensemble formed by 1 Sm. 27 through 2 Sm. 5, whose theme is the transition from Saul to David. The goal of these chapters is to give praise to David for while releasing him totally from the death of Saul and of his sons. From 1 Sm. 22, David passes his time running away ahead of the king, sparing the latter at several retakings. The narrative of 1 Sm. 28-31 demonstrates that the death of Saul is only the chastisement for the crimes he has committed. 1 Sm. 29-30 underlines how David succeeds at not entering into conflict with Saul and has no responsibility in his death

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 194.

⁹ J. LEVEQUE, “L’épilogue du livre de Job”, *Job*, p. 171.

when he finds himself on the side of the Philistines, having been welcomed by them in order to escape from Saul.

The composition of the narrative of Saul's death seeks one final time to discredit Saul so as to enhance the figure of David. Saul, frightened by the army of the Philistines, consults a necromancer in order to stir up the hardly deceased prophet Samuel (1 Sm. 25:1). Samuel announces to Saul his condemnation by God and his impending death (1 Sm. 28:19). The immediate reaction of the king is fear: "Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground. He was terrified by what Samuel had said" (1 Sm. 28:20). The next day, during combat, Saul, seeing himself directly threatened and his sons having already fallen, demanded of his squire to kill him in order to avoid those who were surrounding him not to make sport of him (1 Sm. 31:4). The squire refuses, so Saul throws himself upon his sword and dies. How should this death be understood? The narrative framework presents it as being the realization of the oracle received from Samuel. This death was wanted by God as chastisement for the disobedience of Saul. The precise circumstances of the death evoke another death, that of Abimelech, the son of Gideon. The latter had arrogated of himself the royal title. His undertaking falls through at the foot of a tower, where he is crushed under a grindstone flung by a woman. Wanting to avoid the disgrace of dying from the blow of a woman, Abimelech demands his squire to kill him. The latter obeys (Jg. 9:50-55). This death appears as the condemnation of Abimelech's claim to the royal title. The close parallel between the two deaths, the shame of an infamous death, the order given to the squire and the end of reign permits us to see here the same grounds for its being demonstrated. It concerns denying Saul his claim to the royal title at the same moment of his death¹⁰. The fact that Saul may have given himself death is not taken into consideration. Confronted by an inevitable death, the king chooses a mode that will avert him an additional humiliation.

3) The Martyrs

2 Mc. presents three narratives of the martyrs to us. These accounts enter into the perspective of the author of 2 Mc., who wishes to revive in the Jews of Alexandria the sentiment of belonging to the same community. The author underlines the importance of the Temple, observance of the Law, and prayer. The martyrs of Eleazar, of the mother, and of her seven sons draws divine grace upon the sinful people (7:37ff., 8:1-5, 27). They permit the victories of Judah over Antiochus IV and the consecration of the Temple. Equally, the final defeat of the persecutor Nicanor and the liberation of Jerusalem will not have their place until after the martyrdom of Razis (14:37-46)¹¹.

Eleazar is characterized in 2 Mc. 6:18 by his connection to the Law, his great age, and the nobility of his appearance, sign of knowledge of the Law: His hair is whitened in labor and not simply in the effort of years¹². He refuses to taste forbidden meats that people wanted him to swallow by force. His resolution goes as far as equally to refuse to feign eating the forbidden meats. This man is said to be "worthy...of the holy God-given law" (6:23). He is conscious of the duty "to leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws" (6:28). The narrative is entirely constructed to underscore the attachment to the Law as the reason for martyrdom. The staunch choice to prefer death by torture of the wheel is magnified and justified for it is the response to a superior necessity: the holiness of the Law of God. The freedom of Eleazar is underlined by his repeated opportunity to escape death and by the same word of the old man

¹⁰ J. CAZEAUX, *Saül, David, Salomon, La royauté et le destin d'Israël*, Lectio Divina, Paris, le Cerf, 2003, p. 156.

¹¹ *Introduzione all'Antico Testamento*, ed. E. ZENGER [Einleitung in das Alte Testament, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2004⁵], Ital. ed. by F. DALLA VECCHIA, Brescia, Queriniana, 2005, p. 492.

¹² F.M. ABEL, *Le livre des Maccabées*, Etudes Bibliques, Paris, Gabalda, 1949², p. 367.

upon the torture wheel: “To the Lord...it is clear that, though I might have been saved from death...” (6:30).

We again find the same vision in the account of the martyrdom of the seven brothers and of their mother (2 Mc 7). Faith in the resurrection here is proclaimed clearly and justifies the perseverance in respect for the Law. The will not to infringe upon it is reaffirmed by each of the martyrs. This heroic episode brings to light how hope in eternal life and in the resurrection may drive the choice of death through faith in God. It also is the occasion, by way of words of encouragement by the mother towards her persecuted sons, to call back to mind Biblical faith in the divine origin of human life (2 Mc. 7:22-23). Two remarks seem interesting to us. First, several sons die while threatening the king with divine vengeance wielded in eternal damnation (7:9, 14, 17, 19, 34-35). Their last words express their hope in God, but also their hatred of the persecutor: “You accursed wretch” (7:9); “Keep on, and see how His mighty power will torture you and your descendents” (7:17); “But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all men, do not be elated in vain” (7:34). Secondly, conformingly to the theology of the book, the last son attributes a redemptive virtue to their death: “Through me and my brothers[, may the Almighty] bring to an end the wrath which has justly fallen on our whole nation.” (7:38). These two elements will be interesting to recall at the time of our study of the death of Christ.

The death of Razis (2 Mc. 14) is situated within the historical context of the persecution of Nicanor against the Jews. An initial quick reading gives the impression of a suicide strongly similar to that of Saul. Attention to the narrative strategy permits us to see that, contrary to the king of Israel of whom the mode of death contributed to devalue him, our account is constructed in a manner so as to give valor to the greatness of Razis and of his attachment to the Law.

He is presented as “a man who loved his fellow citizens and was very well thought of and for his good will was called father of the Jews” (2 Mc 14:37). He equally was accused of Judaism during the first stages of the revolt. The king sent five hundred soldiers to arrest him. The disproportion of this number indicates the importance of this personage. The king had to expect that other Jews would take defense of this wise man of Israel. Verse 41 describes the assault against the tower where Razis had taken refuge. It seemed clearly that he no longer had any possible way out when he decided to assault his own life by striking himself with a sword. The narrator comments upon this gesture, affirming: “He preferred to die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth” (14:42). His abortive blow, he runs “bravely” on top of the wall where he hurls himself off. The narrator underscores the fervor of Razis, having escaped yet another time from death, and his courage that lead him to cross over the crowd, when he is wounded gravely, in order to tear away the entrails that he throws upon the crowd, before throwing himself into the void from a steep embankment and dying. Verse 46 specifies the fact that Razis is animated by hope in the resurrection: “He tore out his entrails, took them with both hands and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again. This was the manner of his death.” It did not concern a suicide properly speaking, but the choice to die in order to avoid a shameful death. Of what kind of dignity are we speaking specifically? This nobility is a religious motif. 2 Mc. 14:37 identifies the greatness of Razis with his Jewish faith. His death is a positive choice in order to avert it from reaching his nobility, that is to say his faith. Dignity here, therefore, is not a subjective dignity, but objective. Did he fear renouncing his faith under torture, where the Law would be turned over in derision through the treatments that would be inflicted upon him? We can know nothing about it, but it appears clearly that his death is a form of martyrdom, for it is the consequence of his faith.

III. The Death of Christ and of the Christian

Jesus in the Face of His Death

It is impossible to address this theme without taking into consideration the debate surrounding the conscience of Christ. Numerous exegetes place into question the notion that there are intimations of His Passion or of His conscience at the time of His agony in death. Certain exegetes narrow down the knowledge that Jesus could have had concerning His death to the normal capacity of a man confronted by a conflictual setting¹³. The philosophical or theological presuppositions founding this positions no longer need to be underscored; they come equally to be negated by elementary methodological principles. They often result from a negative *a priori* vis-à-vis any manifestation of the supernatural by reason of a radical historical positivism. The divine is thus excluded from humanity. Brown notes very precisely that “historicity is not determined by what we estimate to be possible or probably, but by antiquity and the reliability of indices; and as far as one brings it back to the surface, Jesus has left the memory of someone disposed with extraordinary powers”¹⁴. He concludes, by way of the events of the Passion, that a certain foresight was possible and that it “was very widely attributed to Jesus”¹⁵. While giving value to this knowledge of Christ, the evangelists underscored the freedom of His commitment to the will of the Father. Beyond the necessarily theologically sterile historicist vision, we will consider these different texts as revealing of the person of Christ and of His mystery¹⁶. This notion will not prevent us from integrating as well the redactionary perspectives proper to each Gospel account.

The death of Christ is the final moment of his mission on earth. Several words of Christ during His public life illustrate the meaning of this event and the manner in which He perceives it. In order to understand how Christ could face death, it is useful first of all to linger upon the different words through which he evokes his parting: The announcements of the Passion, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me” (Jn 10:17-18) and the introductory verse to the Passion in the Gospel of John (13:1). Then, a second time, it befits us to look at the words spoken and the deeds laid out by Christ in His Passion, and more specifically, at the moment of His death: His prayer at Gethsemane (Mt. 26:39 and parallels), His arrest, and His death on the Cross.

1) The Words of Christ in His Public Life

Knowledge of the Divine Project

On several occasions, Christ announces His passion. It appears as a necessity within the economy of Salvation. It seems interesting to us to develop this point in order to illustrate that perception Christ had of the Cross and of death.

A first group of texts is formed by all allusions of Jesus to His death¹⁷. None of these texts is sufficient in itself to confirm Christ’s foresight, but their accumulation is a factor that

¹³ The works of the *Jesus Seminar* are so emblematic of this tendency.

¹⁴ R.E. BROWN, *La Mort du Messie, encyclopédie de la Passion du Christ [The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave : A commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels 1994]*, Paris, Bayard, 2005, p. 1615.

¹⁵ R.E. BROWN, *La Mort*, p. 1637.

¹⁶ For deeper reflection on the Gospel accounts’ access to Jesus, we need only refer to the foremost proposal of BENOÎT XVI/J. RATZINGER, *Jésus de Nazareth*, Paris, ed., 2007, pp. 7-27.

¹⁷ Mk. 2:20; 9:12; 12:7-8; 14:8,21,27-28 ; Mt. 9:15; 17:12b; 21:38-30; 26:2, 12, 24, 31-32; Lk. 5:35; 12:50; 13:33; 17:25; 20:14-15; 22:22. The underlined references indicate words included in the Passion narrative.

must be taken into account in its favor, particularly if one considers that they concentrate themselves on the aim of Jesus' ministry. We have there a positive sign of their historicity. In effect, it is logical that the tension between Jesus and His enemies grow as needed for His preaching to unfold itself¹⁸.

The second group of texts is formed by the three announcements of the Passion¹⁹. We may join them to the three announcements in John²⁰. Brown notes the impossibility for redactional criticism to identify that which may be attributed with certainty to Jesus²¹, nor even to say whether there are one or three announcements. What may be said is that all of the Gospel accounts agree in recognizing that Christ announced His Passion. This announcement bears two important points: recourse to the figure of the Son of Man (Dn. 7) and to the Suffering Servant (Is. 53), and the announcement of the Resurrection²².

The Christ designates Himself as the Son of Man, an allusion to the mysterious figure of Dn. 7, a celestial being seeming to be an incarnation of the Glory (Ez. 1) or of divine Wisdom (Pv. 8:22-31; Sir. 24). This expression is very certainly from Christ Himself: he is the only one to employ it in all of the Gospel accounts, and the other New Testament authors do not take it up again (except Acts 7:36 and Rv. 1:13, 14:14). Through this usage, Jesus attests in veiled terms that He is the Messiah, all while testifying to His transcendence. The Son of Man has the power to remit sins. He is master of the Sabbath. He does not seem clearly to be the Messiah, the Son of David, the messianic figure awaited during this era. Since the confession of Caesar, this figure of the Son of Man is associated with that of the suffering servant in the three announcements of the Passion. The Son of Man is delivered (*paradidotai*) into the hands of sinners, quite like a servant (Is. 53:6, 12)²³. Feuillet notes correctly that "this new teaching that allots a similarly painful fate to the transcending and glorious Son of Man in Daniel is profoundly paradoxical and utterly abrupt; it is in vain that one sought corresponding thoughts to it in Judaism."²⁴ This notion militates very strongly in favor of the attribution of these words to Christ. The discretion of Scriptural references supports this idea, for a redactionary work would have been cited in a more explicit manner as verified frequently for example in Mt.

The announcement of the Resurrection also is an important element in favor of the historicity of these words. In effect, neither traditional messianism, fruit of the prophet Nathan, nor apocalyptic doctrine contain this idea. This could not be the fruit of a primitive community that will have recourse to Ps. 16 to evoke the Resurrection (cf. Acts 2:22-32; 13:34-35), proposing a typological reading of this psalm and showing it thus to be the fulfillment of the Scriptures by Christ. Jesus may have pressed himself onto the aim of the prophecy of the Suffering Servant: "He will be the light and will be filled"²⁵. Light

¹⁸ R.E. BROWN, *La mort*, p. 1622.

¹⁹ Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34,38,45; Mt. 16:21; 17:22b-23; 20:18-19,22,28; Lk. 9:22; 9:44; 18:31b-33. A presentation of the opinions on their origin is made by P.J. MAARTENS, "The Son of Man as a Composite Metaphor in Mark 14:62", in *a South African Perspective on the New Testament*, J.H. PETZER et al., ed. (Mélanges B.M. METZGER, Leiden, Brill, 1986), pp. 76-98.

²⁰ Jn 3:14; 8:28; 12:34.

²¹ R.E. BROWN, *La mort*, p. 1637.

²² We follow here A. FEUILLET, "Les trois prophéties de la Passion et de la Résurrection", *Revue Thomiste* 63, 1968, pp. 51-74.

²³ We meet again here the question of the awareness Jesus could have had on the meaning of His death. Certain authors think that Jesus was awaiting His death without perceiving the redemptive value of it for all of humanity. This position is only able to be the logical consequence of a positivistic reading excluding *a priori* all that the exegete judges, from his point of view, incompatible with human rationality. The texts affirm clearly that Jesus had an awareness of the meaning of His death. Cf. P. BENOIT, "Jésus et le Serviteur de Dieu" in *Jésus aux origines de la christologie*, Louvain – Gembloux, 1975, pp. 111-140.

²⁴ A. FEUILLET, *L'agonie de Gethsémani*, Paris, Gabalda, 1977, p. 120.

²⁵ We follow the Greek text confirmed by IQIs^a, "light" being absent from the Hebrew text.

designates life (Job 3:16, 20; 33:28-30; Ps. 49:19-20; Eccl. 11:7). Equally, the exaltation of the Servant in Is. 52:13 could be read as an announcement of the rising after death. The Book of Wisdom speaks of the exaltation of the just persecuted while making use of the *stêsetai* (Wis. 5:1, 15-26), which is not without touching upon the *anistasthai* of the Synoptic prophecies of the Resurrection of Christ. The announcement of the Resurrection, in the logic of recourse to Is. 53, witnesses to the originality of these prophecies of the Passion.

From these different elements, we are able to conclude that Christ knew what the outcome of His existence would be and what the divine plan was. This knowledge does not permit us to consider the condemnation to death as accidental. Christ was engaged in a full knowledge of the cause in this mortal process, and His anticipated description of His Passion and the announcement of His resurrection attest to it.

This conscience of Christ in the face of His destiny is placed in front of His necessity that seems to challenge the freedom of Christ. “The Son of Man must (*dei*) suffer many things...” (Mk. 8:31 and parallels). Mt. (17:22) and Lk. (9:44) say that the Son of Man must (*mellei*) be delivered over. How should this necessity be articulated with the freedom of the Son? This expression appears for the first time in an apocalyptic text (Dn. 2:28, 29, 45). Within this context, it translates faith in the domination of God over history. He directs the latter in order to permit the fulfillment of His design of salvation. These events are inescapable without calling the freedom of the person into question. The Passion is a necessity within the divine plan, and it is normal, therefore, that it be introduced by this apocalyptic “*must*” Within apocalyptic literature, “*must*” introduces judgment upon the world as fulfilled through the cosmic catastrophes characteristic of the end of days and of divine judicial interventions. At this stage then follows a stable and definitive peace. The Passion thus is not a failure of the divine plan, but rather the decisive divine intervention for the achievement of salvation. This necessity shows through the necessity of the fulfillment of the Scriptures (for example, Lk. 24:26-27). The necessity situates itself not at the level of the freedom of Christ, which remains whole, but at the level of the fulfillment of the divine plan as expressed by the prophets.

“I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me”

This verse from Jn. 10:17-18 illustrates the total freedom of Christ as fruit of his love for the Father. A study of the immediate context and its philological analysis permit an underscoring of the point that Christ chose to die.

These verses are a small commentary of verses 11 and 15. “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” “I lay down my life” (*tithêmi tèn psychên mou*) is typical of Jn. This expression signifies “lays down his life” and cannot be comprehended otherwise²⁶. The gift of His life in sacrifice and His Resurrection are the fulfillment of the Father’s commandment for Christ. The expression “in order to take it up again” is not a weakening of the gift made by Christ. In John’s theology, the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension constitute a single act of salvation that leads to the Father²⁷. In the same manner, in 12:24, the grain dies in order to come back to life. Jesus takes up his life again Himself (and not the Father who resurrects Him as in the phraseology of the New Testament) because the Father and the Son possess the same power (10:28-30). This capacity to take up again His life

²⁶ R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Il vangelo di Giovanni*, II. [*Das Johannesevangelium*, II., Freiburg, Herder, 1971], Commentario teologico del Nuovo Testamento, Brescia, Paideia, 1977, p. 494. J. LAGRANGE translates “lays down his life”, introducing a sacrificial connotation (M.J. LAGRANGE, *Evangile selon saint Jean*, Etudes Bibliques, Paris, Gabalda, 1925, p. 279). Equally, see A. FEUILLET “Deux références évangéliques cachées au Serviteur martyrisé (Is 52,13-53,12)”, *Nouvelle Revue de Théologie* 106 (1984), p. 561, because of the allusion hidden at Is. 53:10: “*Si posuerit (sacrificium) pro peccato animam suam*” (translation from the Vulgate). This death is clearly sacrificial, which justifies the translation of “poser” by “lay down”.

²⁷ R.E. BROWN, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)*, New York, DoubleDay, 1966, p. 399.

responds to His obedience to the Father, expressing thus the reciprocity of Their love. “The two ideas are indissolubly united between them and positioned dialectically one in front of the other. Obedience and power of the Son do not exclude each other, but they are united one with the other through the communion of the Father with the Son”²⁸. The Resurrection also belongs to the mission entrusted by the Father to Jesus (v. 18c).

In fact, Jesus’ freedom manifests itself above all in this capacity to take up again His life. Verse 18 focuses itself upon the point expressed in an antithetical parallelism. It begins by affirming negatively that nobody may take up his own life in order then to confirm positively that He has the power to lay it down and then to take it back up again. The freedom of the Son is received by the Father (cf. 8:36). The gift of life is then already a power (*exousia*). Jesus is free in the face of death. But His real power is this capacity to take up His own life again in the same manner that He laid it down. The stylistic construction expresses the fact that Jesus’ death and resurrection are a unique event of which only the Son has the capacity²⁹.

Introduction to the Passion

“Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing (*eidôs*) that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were His in the world, loved them to the end [temporal meaning] (another translation: “until the end” [qualitative meaning])” (Jn. 13:1).

Knowledge bears upon the hour. La Potterie underscores that the divine knowledge of Jesus is strongly marked for this specific hour: He “knows” that the hour is there (13:1), but also “that the Father had put everything into His hands, and that He had come from God and was returning to God” (13:4). He knows, at the moment of His arrest, “everything that was to happen to Him” (18:4). On the Cross, He “knew” that all had been accomplished (19:28)³⁰. Jesus’ knowledge is expressed with *oida*, a verb translating into absolute, certain knowledge³¹. It is not an acquired, progression knowledge that normally would be signified by *ginôskô*.

The second part of the verse links together this knowledge to the act of loving “until the end”. The first verb to love, as a participle, considers love already manifested through all of the ministry of public life. The second verb, in the aorist, indicates “a defined act, a detailed gift of which the preparations and the realization will be decreed from this time forward”³².

The precision of “until the end”, *eis telos*, a Johannine hapax, originally has a temporal meaning. But the peculiarity of this end, death on the Cross, invites the interpretation of this expression in a qualitative sense³³. That which follows is the greatest proof of love that could ever be given by Jesus.

This introduction illustrates not only the knowledge and freedom of Christ but witnesses the fact that Christ gives meaning to His Passion, into which He enters resolutely: It is the greatest possible act of charity. Death on the Cross will be the paroxysmal and final expression of this charity. The act of dying will be, for Christ, the most perfect expression of His love for man. Maritain, commenting upon Jn. 10:18, translates this notion in terms that

²⁸ R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Il Vangelo di Giovanni*, p. 501.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 502-503.

³⁰ I. DE LA POTTERIE, “*Oïda et ginôskô*, les deux modes de la connaissance dans le quatrième évangile”, *Biblica* 40 (1959) pp. 716-717.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 715.

³² C. SPICQ, “Note d’Exégèse Johannique, la charité est amour manifeste”, *Revue Biblique* 65 (1958), pp. 361-362.

³³ C. SPICQ indicates several manuscripts from 113 av. J.-C. where the qualitative sense also is present. *Op. cit.*, p. 362, note 1.

merit being reported here. He goes equally even further, seeing in love itself the cause of the death upon the Cross, this love provoking the separation of the soul and the body:

In this holocaust, Christ wants it *through love*, through love for His Father and through love for men. There is no greater love. At this moment, the charity of Christ that is still *viator* crosses over the abyss that separates the finite and the infinite, it is born to a degree of supreme and insurpassable (asymptotic) perfection where the charity of Christ turns out as *comprehensor*, it *becomes infinite in its order*; it is the love to the highest conceivable degree in a created nature ... but this time by so complete and powerful a ravishing of God's soul that human nature is not able to support, and it tears the soul from the body. Otherwise said, it is by an extasy of love that Christ has died on the Cross, in fulfilling the freedom of wanting, and has lain down His soul into the hands of the Father.³⁴

2) The Deeds and Words of Christ in His Passion

The Prayer of Gethsemane

It is at Gethsemane that the freedom of Christ manifests itself with the most force in the gift of His life. It is the moment of decision, of no going back. This hour is particularly important for our reflection for, if the preceding texts also were illustrating Jesus' freedom in the gift of His life, those which relate His prayer during the night of His agony give instance to His agony, an emotion characterizing sinful humanity confronted in death. Christ at Gethsemane is thus particularly near each man because, confronted directly by death, he experiences all of the drama of the human condition. It is here that His human freedom shows through with the greatest force, and it is here that we may most easily identify ourselves with Him.

“My Father,” He said, “if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it” (Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42).

It is not for us here to render an account of all of the details of His prayer and of His circumstances. The apparent hesitation of Christ is the point that must hold our attention, for it is there that Christ's freedom manifests itself in this hour. The difficulty is connected to the fact that, in many exchanges, Jesus has expressed his knowledge of the necessity of the Passion (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; Jn. 10:18; 14:31). Now, He seems to hesitate faced with trial!

The object of His prayer is the distance of the cup, a demand subordinated to a much broader condition: that the will of the Father would happen before anything else. This cup at the outset reflects the cup of the Last Supper, announcing the sufferings of His Passion. It is the cup proposed to James and John (Mt. 20:22). This cup also reflects the cup of anger evoked in the Old Testament (Jer. 25:15-29; 49:12; Is. 51:17-22; Ez. 23:33, and Ps. 75:9) and in Revelation (Rev. 14:10; 15:7; 16:19; 18:6), with Jesus being the servant who accepts the taking upon Himself of the chastisement that men merit³⁵. Drinking the cup, Christ accepts confronting death, speaking as it is the sign of sin, and thus of separation from God. To drink the cup leads to entering into the solitude of the sinner.

³⁴ cf. J. MARITAIN, *De la Grâce et de l'Humanité de Jésus*, œuvres complètes, vol. 12, Fribourg – Paris, Ed. Universitaires – Ed. saint Paul, 1992, p. 1170-1171. Italics are within the original text.

³⁵ It is not necessary to oppose the two interpretations one with the other, as they do not necessarily mutually exclude each other. R.E. BROWN, in *La mort*, begins by denying this interpretation (p. 210), in order then to recognize that “one may find a part of the classical connotation of the cup of wrath or chastisement in Mark, not because Jesus would be the object of anger, but because His death will take place within the apocalyptic context of the great battle of the end times” (p. 211). He does not consider the parallel with the Suffering Servant, who favors identification with the cup of divine wrath.

The solitude of the Son at that moment is not psychological. He experiences in His humanity the solitude of man marked by sin and cut off by God. Death is the moment and the final place of this solitude. In order to conquer death, Christ must confront the latter in all of its spiritual reality³⁶. Blaise Pascal is sensitive to this solitude specific to this hour when he affirms, “Jesus looks for companionship and for relief on behalf of man. This is unique in all of His life, it seems to me”³⁷.

Three figures of the Old Testament clarify the nature of this solitude and the meaning of Christ’s trial³⁸: Jonah, Elijah, and the Servant of Isaiah. Jonah also is overwhelmed with sadness and wishes death: “I am right to be angry, even to death” (Jonah 4:9). Elijah, burdened, desires death. An angel then comes to comfort him (1 Kg. 19:4-5). Each of these prophets is discouraged in the face of the apparent uselessness of his efforts. Is. 49:3-4 proposes an even more interesting parallel. The Servant underscores the contrast between the divine promise: “And he said to me, You are my servant; Israel, in whom I will be glorified” and the failure of his enterprise: “But I said, ‘I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.’” The contrast between the fullness of the price to pay and an apparent uselessness of which Christ could become knowledgeable at that moment, such could be the reason for Jesus’ prayer.

The object of temptation with which Christ is confronted, in contrast, brings out the entire commitment of His freedom. “Powerful is suffering when it is as voluntary as sin!” Violaine says to Mara³⁹. Only a radical commitment of the human freedom of the Son of Man could tear humanity from sin.

The Arrest at Gethsemane

The arrest is the first stage of the Passion; Christ submits Himself to human action. Matthew and Luke compose their narrative in three stages: the kiss of Judas (Mt. 26:47-50 // Lk. 22:47-48); the blow of the sword (Mt. 26:51-52 // Lk. 22:49-51); the address to the crowd (Mt. 26:55-56 // Lk. 22:52-53). Mark alone retains the first (14:43-47) and third stage (14:48-51), with the blow of the sword being integrated into the first stage. John proposes a specific version (Jn. 18:1-10) coherent with his Christology.

In Mk. and Lk., Jesus’ reaction to Judas’ kiss permits us to confirm that Jesus had knowledge of the criminal intentions of the latter. In Mt., this knowledge shows through in the understood irony with the use of *hetairios* “friend, companion”. Mt. uses it in two other passages: in the narrative of the workers in the final hour (Mt. 20:13) and in the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt. 22:12). In each of these texts, he who speaks is very effective. Its speaker would have had to witness an amicable attitude in response to this good action. But, he does not do it. Thus he still is with Judas⁴⁰. The associated expression, “this is why you are here”, indicates that Jesus knows why Jesus is there.⁴¹ The hour is no longer in hypocrisy or in falsehood. It must pass over to acts. Mt. suggests in this way that Jesus is the master of the situation.

In Lk., Jesus also knows the meaning of the kiss: “Judas, are you betraying the Son of man with a kiss?” (Lk. 22:48) The reference to the “Son of Man” is coherent with the Lukan announcements of the Passion (9:44; 18:31-33) and with the phrase from the Last Supper

³⁶ X. LÉON-DUFOUR suggests that the sadness of Christ comes from the fact that Jesus “will die without having been able effectively to establish the kingdom of God on earth.” This conclusion is the logical consequence of historical reading, of the negation of all foreknowledge of Christ through the rapport with His death and with its meaning. *Face à la mort, Jésus et Paul*, coll. Parole de Dieu, Paris, Seuil, 1979, p. 142.

³⁷ BLAISE PASCAL, *Œuvres Complètes, Pensées*, 736 [87], coll. La Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 1312.

³⁸ Concerning this point, we rejoin FEUILLET, *L’agonie*, p. 211.

³⁹ P. CLAUDEL, *L’Annonce faite à Marie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1938, p. 136.

⁴⁰ A. FEUILLET, *L’agonie*, p. 305.

⁴¹ S. GRASSO, *Il Vangelo di Matteo*, Roma, Dehoniane, p. 627.

(22:22: “on the path which was decreed”), evoking in this way the inescapable character of what Judas is in the midst of doing. The Jesus of Luke has entered resolutely into the divine project. He situates the betrayal of Judas within this perspective.

Jn. relates a very different version of the arrest. Jesus goes in front of the troop and the traitor. He goes outside of the garden, taking the initiative to speak to the former. The presence of Judas is attested, but Jn. does not relate the kiss. The account is constructed in such a manner as to underline the divine identity of Jesus and His complete freedom.

Jesus asks: “For whom are you looking?” Throughout the Gospel of John, the Jews have been looking for Jesus in order to kill him, without succeeding⁴². This pursuit finally finds its success because Jesus permits it. The double response of the interlocutors, “Jesus of Nazareth”, alternates with that of Jesus: “I am” (“*Ego eimi*”). The fall of the opponents at the exposition of this response illustrates that we have here the manifestation of the divine name. To fall is a reaction frequently attested at the time of divine revelation (Dn. 2:46; 8:18; Rev. 1:17). The enemies of God recoil and fall down (Ps. 56:10 (9); Ps. 27:2; Ps. 35:4). Until there, no person could lay hands on Jesus and arrest Him, and equally the guards sent for this purpose (Jn 7:30,44-46; 8:20b, 59; 10:39). The troop does not have the power except that given by Jesus. Jesus will say to Pilate: “You would have no power over me at all if it had not been given you from above” (Jn 19:11). This authority of Jesus at the time of His arrest finally is shown in the reaction in front of Peter’s attempt to defend his master: “Will I not drink of the cup that the Father has given Me?” Jesus invites the apostle to enter into the logic of gift and fidelity according to the will of the Father⁴³.

The Death of Judas

The death of Judas is at the margin of the Passion narrative. It is the occasion for us to come back briefly to the question of suicide in Scripture. We have seen the figure of Ahithophel and how this suicide was a literary means to discredit the character of Absalom relative to that of David. We find again here the verbe *apagchesthai* (“takes himself”), which only appears in 2 Sam. 17:23 and Tob. 3:10. This death is commented upon negatively in Acts 1:20 by a quote from Ps. 69:26: “Reduce their encampment to ruin, and leave their tents untenanted” Independently of Matthew, Luke attests that Judas’ suicide is a dishonor for him and the expression of God’s judgment in his regard.

This negative attitude vis-à-vis suicide finds itself within Judaism. Joseph Flavius⁴⁴ relates the capture of Iotapata, where it was captured by the Romans. Certain defenders suggest suicide in preference to surrender. Joseph rises against this proposition:

It is noble, he says, to give himself death. Well to the contrary, it is despicable according to my way, for on my part I see as the last of cowards the captain on the brink who, out of fear of bad times, deliberately sinks his boat before the storm. However, suicide especially is contrary to the nature of all living beings without exception, and with respect to God Who has created us, it is impiety.”

According to him, suicides know a more somber Hades, and God chastises their descendents. The bodies must stay “without a tomb until the setting of the sun, just as one sees as the normal thing to do equally for the funerals of enemies.” A final judgment: “Other peoples”, necessarily pagan, have “ordered the amputating of the right hand of cadavers of similar men, who have been armed against themselves. It is within the thought that, in this

⁴² Jn 5,18 ; 7,1.11.19.20.25.30.34 ; 8,21.37.40 ; 10,39 ; 11,8.

⁴³ R. FABRIS, *Giovanni*, Roma, Borla, 2003² p. 696.

⁴⁴ FLAVIUS JOSÈPHE, *Guerre des Juifs*, Books II-III, text established and translated by A. Pelletier, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1980, III, 368-369, p. 165.

fashion, as the body has shown itself to be a stranger to the soul, the hand also may be so to the body.”⁴⁵

Jewish tradition will take this repugnance up again vis-à-vis suicide. One does not rent his garments for them, he does not shave his head, and he does not lament publicly.⁴⁶ Ahithophel has no part in the world to come.⁴⁷

The Death of Jesus

The final episode of the Passion in the Synoptic Gospels is marked by the final word (Lk. 23 :46) or cry on the Cross (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34). They permit us to understand how the evangelists perceived this moment. The specificity of John’s narrative (Jn. 19:28-30) invites us to consider it independently.

+ The Synoptic Gospels

Only Mark and Matthew relate the cry of Jesus on the Cross. “Eloi, Eloi⁴⁸, lema sabachtani”. This dramatic cry does not bring in the perspective of the character of Jesus in Luke, giving him too dramatic an appearance that is incoherent with the sovereign Christ described throughout his Gospel account. The interpretation of this passage often has led to toning down his tragic character. Considering the words as being the first of Ps. 22, the interpreters focus upon the praise of the last part of the psalm in order to soften the violence of the first expressions.

Now, it is important to preserve all of the force of this cry in order to understand well its significance. The cry of Jesus has different complementary meanings with each other. It expresses the drama of the Passion lived since the night of Gethsemane, and it makes the connection with this agony. The battle begun in the Garden is completed on the Cross. This cry echoes the abandonment by the disciples. “His ‘why’ is that which has touched the bottom of the abyss and feels itself surrounded by the powers of darkness.”⁴⁹ The tragic is underscored by two details. It is the only time in the Gospels where Jesus calls His Father “God”. He calls upon Him three times in His agony while calling Him “Father”. The silence obtained in return drives Him to rejoin humanity in its ignorance of the character of God and uses the term common to all men. The second detail is uniquely in Mk. Jesus employs Aramaic, His mother language, as a sign of His extreme distress.

This cry also is the beginning of Ps. 22. This psalm expresses the cry of the just man who, persecuted, turns himself toward God as his only hope. Jesus thus is described as the just man who, oppressed by His enemies, invokes divine help. This identification between Jesus and the just man is confirmed by the vinegared sponge that is presented to him. The just man sees through the offer, in Ps. 69:22, of the vinegar while he is thirsty. This invocation, therefore, is not the expression of a despair, but on the contrary, it is the sign of the time of distress and trust of Jesus. This confidence also is suggested by the use of the possessive pronoun in the first person singular: *my* God.⁵⁰ In Mt., God’s response happens immediately after the death by way of the earthquake, a divine sign in apocalyptic literature (Rev. 8:5; 16:18-19), the opening of the tombs and the tearing of the temple veil. This divine response arouses the faith of the centurion and soldiers present who recognize the identity of Jesus as Messiah, precisely at the moment where He seems abandoned by the Father. In Mk., the manner in which Jesus dies suffices for the centurion to proclaim his faith.⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, III, 375-378, p. 166-167.

⁴⁶ *T. Semahot* (‘Ebel Rabbati) 2.

⁴⁷ *Mishna, Sanhédrin*, 10,2.

⁴⁸ We give here the text of Mk. Mt. takes up the Hebraic form again, closer to Ps. 22:2: “Eli, Eli”.

⁴⁹ R. BROWN, *La mort*, p. 1150

⁵⁰ X.-LEON-DUFOUR, *Face à la mort*, p. 149.

⁵¹ By “manner of dying”, we will consider Christ’s words and not the fact that it prompts a great and just cry before dying. The absence of eschatological signs, with the exception of darkness, is probably due to the

Lk. 23:46 also situates Jesus' death within an apocalyptic context. The darkness and the tearing of the veil right before the death of Jesus show God's judgment on those people who have derided Jesus in 23:35b-39. Luke, in his description of Jesus' death, underlines the master of the latter until the end. Jesus does not "cry out" (*boan* in Mt. and Mk.), but He "says" (*phonein*). Luke chooses Ps. 31:6 while modifying somewhat the formulation of the LXX: the verb passes from the future to the present, and "Father" is integrated within its citation. One has, as in Ps. 22, the theme of the liberation of the just from his enemies, but expressed without the tragic cry of Mt. and Mk.

The scribes and Pharisees sought to lay hands on Jesus (20:19; 22:53). Jesus announced that the Son of Man would be "delivered" (*paradidonai*) into the hands of sinners (9:44; see 24:7). Death is the moment where Jesus says that He consigns (*paradidonai*) His spirit into the hands of the Father.⁵²

+ Saint John

"Then, knowing that all had been accomplished (*tetelestai*) so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled, Jesus said: I thirst. There was a vessel there filled with vinegar. They dipped into it a sponge onto which they had set a stem of hyssop and moved it near His mouth. Jesus said: 'It is finished (*tetelestai*).' He lowered His head and yielded His spirit."

We are within the same dynamic as Jn. 10:17-18 and 13:1. The present participle of the verb "to know" assures the reader, in a crucial moment, that Christ keeps lordship over the development of the action. The triple affirmation of accomplishment witnesses to John's insistence in showing that Jesus dies after having fulfilled His mission. Nevertheless, we bring up an interesting peculiarity. The use of *teleioun* in Jn. 19: 28a, 30a to speak of the fulfillment of Scripture is only in Jn. He usually uses *pleroun* (12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24). *Teleioun* forms an inclusion with *telos* used in 13:1. The death on the Cross is the expression of this love "until the end".

Following the studies, this accomplishment might be understood only from what precedes it⁵³, the episode with Mary and the beloved disciple, and it also may be from what follows it⁵⁴. In the first case, the retaking of *teleioun* underlines: "I thirst" and "He yielded His spirit", expressions put into parallel. The soldiers' reaction then is a lack of understanding, an attitude present in several passages in Jn. (Nicodemus in Jn. 3, the Samaritan woman in Jn. 4), preludes to a more profound revelation. The remittance of the Spirit thus appears as an explicit rendering of Jesus' thirst. The verb *dipsô*, "to be thirsty", always has a spiritual meaning, with one exception. In Jn. 7:37-38, thirst is the expression of a desire that is the fruit of faith in Jesus. The rivers of living water that quench designate the Holy Spirit not yet given, Christ not having been glorified, that is to say, raised from the earth upon the Cross. The convergence with the Passion is significant. This spiritual usage of *dipsô* must be associated with another Johannine mechanism: the reversal of situations. Saint Augustine expresses this notion beautifully in commenting on the meeting with the Samaritan

narrative strategy of Mk. and to the function assumed by the centurion in his Gospel account. The apocalyptic manifestations did not enter into this perspective. They thus did not have any reason to be present. The confession of faith by the centurion is brought out all the more.

⁵² R.E. BROWN, *la mort*, p. 1074. The same act of dying is described with the verb *ekpnein* in Mk. and Lk. This verb has a neutral connotation and means simply to expire. Mt. utilizes *aphienai* ("allow to go, yield, let go of"), a term used in a neutral manner in the LXX for dying (Gn 35:18; 1 Esdras 4:21). "Matthew thus is satisfied maybe to say that Jesus lets go of His life force or His last breath, a resigned act that consists in no longer opposing His staying power, even though this does not transmit exactly the image of a voluntary death" (p. 1189). No other specific conclusion, starting from these two verbs, seems possible to us on the nature of Jesus' death.

⁵³ C. BAMPFYLDE, "John XIX, 28. A case for a different translation?" *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1969), pp. 247-260, taken up again by I. DE LA POTTERIE, *La Passion de Jésus selon l'évangile de Jean*, coll. Lire la Bible 73, Paris, Cerf, 1986, p. 150.

⁵⁴ R.E. BROWN, *La mort*, p. 1178.

woman: “He who before was *asking* to drink, had thirst for the faith of this woman. He *asks* to drink, and He promises to *give* to drink. He tests a need, as someone who looks forward to receiving, but it is in abundance as someone who may satisfy.”⁵⁵ The reversal of relations takes place also at the Cross. From “I thirst”, the text passes to “He gave the Spirit.” The promise of Jn. 16:7 in this way comes true: “If I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you.” Jesus’ thirst, beyond the physical plausible reality, is the expression of the coming of the Holy Spirit so that the history of salvation may carry itself forward. This notion is confirmed by the expression “gives the spirit” (*paradidōmi to pneuma*). This expression finds no other recurrence, in the sense of dying, in Antiquity. It thus is legitimate to think that John wanted to signify a meaning other than the immediate material sense of these terms. John, like with Nicodemus (3:1-24), plays on the polysemy of *pneuma* (“wind”, “breath”, “spirit”). Jesus many times has announced the coming of the Spirit, underlining the necessity (Jn. 14:26; 16:7, 13). At His death, he opens the time of the Spirit’s coming.

In the second case, “I thirst” is understood as an allusion first to Ps. 22:16⁵⁶ and a possible secondary reference to Ps. 69:22 by way of the soldiers’ reaction. Hyssop, a plant normally unable to bear a sponge, would be an allusion to the paschal lamb (Ex. 12:22). The judgment at midday, the hour of the beginning of sacrifice of the lambs and the unbroken bones (Ex. 12:10, 46) would be other indicators in favor of this allusion. The death on the Cross in this way would be interpreted as the fulfillment of the prophecy of John the Baptist, who designated Jesus as “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). By way of this “I thirst”, Jesus thus fulfilled the work confided in Him by the Father. This notion also would explain the precision of Jn. according to which Jesus drinks the vinegar, a detail that is not indicated by the other evangelists. In 18:11, Jesus declares His wanting to drink the cup. Having absorbed the vinegar, He was at the end of His commitment taken on at the beginning of the Passion. The Verb made flesh has become the Lamb of God. This is what “it is finished” would illustrate. “In as much as He is the ‘lamb of God’, He has taken away the sins of the world, thus fulfilling the role of the paschal lamb within the theology of the Old Testament.”⁵⁷ Brown, in reading Jn. 19:30 in parallel with Jn. 7:37-39, also sees an allusion to the gift of the Holy Spirit in the expression “He handed over His spirit”. However, he does not connect this gift directly to the identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

In these two interpretations, Jesus’ death is shown as the final fulfillment of the mission entrusted Him by the Father. Death did not appear simply as an element exterior to the will of the Father. It is an expression completed in it, the greatest testimony of charity. The first interpretation underscores how the gift of the Spirit is the fruit of Christ’s death. He is thirsty to see the Spirit spread within the hearts so that salvation is realized.

Each of the Gospel accounts brings a specific enlightenment concerning the death of Jesus. Mt. and Mk. underscore the tragic character of it. Jesus, emblematic figure of the Just One in front of God, dies in a stand of complete abandonment. Christ’s distress is underscored by the invocation of the Father as God and the use of Aramaic in Mk.

⁵⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Traité sur Saint Jean*, 15,11-12 (PL 35,1514).

⁵⁶ X. LÉON-DUFOUR relates a hypothesis permitting us to understand historically the genesis of different versions of the last words of Jesus on the Cross. H. SAHLIN (*Biblica* 33 (1946), pp. 62-63) and T. BOMAN (“Das letzte Wort Jesu”, *Studia Theologica* 17 (1963), pp. 103-119) have proposed a hypothesis that is worthy of consideration. The retroversion in Aramaic of “Elijah, come!”, cries out that certain listeners believed to hear, “*Elia’ ta’*”. Jesus would have cried out in Hebrew “*Eli’atta*”, or “My God, it is You!”, the confusion then being perfectly possible with the Aramaic expression of the same tone. The Hebrew expression finds itself six times in Scripture: Is. 44:17; Ps. 22:31, 63, 118, 140. Pss. 22, 31 and 63 are precisely the three psalms behind in the background of Jesus’ cries respectively in Mk., Lk., and Jn. Jesus thus very well has been able to proclaim this word that attests not only His trust in His Father, but more profoundly, that the alliance with God is not destroyed despite appearances. *Face à la mort*, p. 160-161.

⁵⁷ R.E. BROWN, *La mort*, p. 1185.

Nevertheless, this dereliction is accompanied by an indestructible confidence. The confession of the Roman soldiers and that of the centurion are the immediate fruit of it, illustrating the first fruits of Christ's offering on the Cross. The apocalyptic manifestations announce the new age: The end of time has arrived. The death of Jesus in Lk. expresses at the time His trusting abandonment in His Father, but also His full acceptance and conformity to the design of salvation desired by Him. Jesus gives to the act of dying the value of a handing over of self to the Father⁵⁸. This death may be given as an example for Christ's disciples. The death of Stephen will be described in the same terms (Acts 7:59-60). Justin, in his *Dialogue with Tryphon*, also considers this death as a model to imitate⁵⁹. Saint John does not insist at all on the dramatic character of the torture of the Cross. He brings to light the death of Christ as a fulfillment of the Father's will that is destined to permit the gift of the Holy Spirit. The remittance of the Spirit of love is the fruit of the Son's love for men that has been lived until the end, until its paroxysm.

The Christian

Our reflection is not able to perform the role of the economy of Pauline theology. It develops the Christian vision of death in connection with the Passover of Christ. It would not be a question of developing here all of the theology concerning death in Saint Paul⁶⁰. We will make a quick synthesis of it, something indispensable in order then to reach what is specific to the act of dying. Two passages are usually retained with just cause by exegetes: 2 Cor. 5:1-10 and Phil. 1:22-24. In the first passage, Saint Paul is led to touch upon how the Christian considers death (2 Cor. 5:6-8). In the second, confronted himself by death, he testifies of the transformation worked by Christ (Phil 1:22-24).

1) Death in Saint Paul

Saint Paul takes up again traditional elements from the sapiential theology of death that he articulates with the novelty of Christ. Death is the direct fruit of sin (Rm. 5:12-14)⁶¹, and it is the "wages of sin" (Rm. 6:23). We have there an echo of Wis. 2:24. Physical death is the sign of spiritual death in man. This death is personified (Rm. 5:14-21). It has the power to subdue man. It will be the last enemy destroyed by Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-55).

Christ, while identifying himself with humanity and accepting of living out physical death, detaches the latter from spiritual death. Physical death then changes in meaning. It becomes the means for acceding to God and to the resurrection. This death, the sign of God's love for sinful man (Rm. 5:6-8), tears itself from the hold of sin and reconciles it with God (2 Cor. 5:19-20). Christ, just accepting the chastisement of injustice, dies for our sins and to sin in our place and position (Rm. 6:10). It is the New Adam and all of humanity who, dying in Him (1 Cor. 15:22), escape the power of sin and spiritual death.

This participation in the death of Christ is realized through baptism (Rm. 6:3-6). A reversal occurs. It no longer is simply His death that is similar to ours, but it is our death that becomes similar to His (Rm. 6:5). Death is redefined starting from the person of Christ. Dying and coming back to life with Christ through baptism, we are united to Christ dead to sin and living in God. Physical death is not eliminated, but rather transformed. The death of

⁵⁸ G. ROSSÉ, *Il Vangelo di Luca, commento esegetico e teologico*, Roma, Città Nuova Editrice, 2001³, p. 987.

⁵⁹ JUSTIN, *Dialogue with Tryphon*, n. 105.

⁶⁰ See for example the beautiful studies of X. LEON-DUFOUR, *Face à la mort*, A. FEUILLET, "Mort du Christ et mort du chrétien d'après les épîtres pauliniennes", *Revue Biblique* 66 (1959), pp. 481-513, upon which we rely for this part. See also J.D.G. DUNN, *La teologia dell'apostolo Paolo*, Brescia, Paideia, 1999, pp. 144-147.

⁶¹ For the interpretation of this passage, cf. S. LYONNET, "Le sens de eph'ô en Rm 5,12 et l'exégèse des Pères grecs", *Biblica* 36 (1955), pp. 436-456.

Christ is the supreme manifestation of His love (Rm. 5:8; Gal. 2:20). He permits men to enter into this same movement of charity in living out themselves that same manner of death (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

Dead to sin and escaping its power, the Christian thus is called to live the same death as Jesus, that is to say in the same manner, as an act of love. It is thus that all of the hardships are perceived by Saint Paul as an anticipated death at the same time as a prolongation of that of Jesus: “I face death every day”, writes the Apostle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:31). Saint Paul expresses the desire always to be more “moulded to the pattern of his death” (Phil. 3:10). His life is called to be a spiritual sacrifice (Rm. 12:1), a prolongation of the sacrifice of Christ. The Apostle has knowledge of suffering the “hardships of Christ” (Col. 1:24). This expression does not reflect the sufferings of Christ at His Passion, but rather the trials of the Apostle⁶². They are said of Christ because the latter lives in him and prolongs in him His enlivening death. The Christian is “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19).

It is he who has begun to die with Christ. As he says in 2 Tim. 2:11-12: “If we have died with Him⁶³, then we shall live with Him.” Baptism, while freeing us from sin, gives us power with Christ to die progressively through love, until complete union in the evening of our earthly existence. Feuillet concludes with accuracy: “They already hasten to leave from there that such a man does not die in the same way than someone who has refused Christ.”⁶⁴

It is necessary to bring some explanations to bear here concerning the expression “fallen asleep through (*dia*) Christ” encountered in 1 Thes. 4:14 and “fallen asleep in (*en*) Christ” in 1 Cor. 15:18. It was frequent in the Greco-Latin world to use this euphemism in order to designate death⁶⁵, and the authors of the New Testament also had recourse to this expression⁶⁶. Death is thus understood as sleep⁶⁷. “Fallen asleep through Christ” is an unusual formula whose meaning is very much argued⁶⁸. The order of the terms and the incongruity that would provoke the joining of “through Christ” to that which follows, we would have thus “to bring (the dead) through Jesus with Him”, leads us to prefer the joining of *dia Iêsou* to that which precedes it, the participle *tous koimêthentas* (“those who are asleep”) to make “through Christ” depend on “asleep” (*koimêthentas*). “Through Christ” then may be understood as an elliptical formula. “Dying through Jesus” may then be understood as “while passing through Him speaking as mediator of the goods of salvation.” This notion involves the confession of faith⁶⁹. This expression then is completed by 1 Thes. 4:16, “the dead in Christ” (*hoi nekroi en Christô*), with the power of salvation of Christ continuing to exert itself over the dead. Without permitting the detailing of the nature of the state

⁶² The meaning called for by the order of words within the Greek sentence: “He who lacks the tribulations of Christ in my flesh”, and not “he who neglects the tribulations of Christ in my flesh”. J.N. ALETTI, *Saint Paul, Epître aux Colossiens*, Etudes Bibliques NS n°20, Paris, Gabalda, 1993, p. 135.

⁶³ Improperly translated “if we die with Him”. The aorist is inchoative. It signifies the beginning of an action that one prolongs.

⁶⁴ A. FEUILLET, “Mort du Christ, mort du chrétien”, p. 495.

⁶⁵ See for example HOMÈRE, *Iliade* 11, 241; CALLIMAQUE *Ep.* 11,2; SOPHOCLES, *Electre*, 509. In the Jewish tradition, see *Test. Juda* 26,4; *Test. Joseph* 20,4; *Test. Zabulon* 10,6.

⁶⁶ Mt. 27:52; Jn. 11:11-12; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thes. 4:14-15; 2 Pt. 3:4.

⁶⁷ Numerous authors, often Protestant, see in the usage of this expression a clue in favor of the negation of the survival of a personal spiritual principle after death. It is an abusive interpretation. Théodoret saw in it a comfort for the listener, and an awakening logically following having been put to sleep (PG 82,648).

⁶⁸ For a complete exposé of all of the propositions, see E. BEST, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, BNTC, London, Black, 1977², p. 188ff.

⁶⁹ With S. LEGASSE, *Les épîtres de saint Paul aux Thessaloniens*, coll. Lectio Divina commentaires 7, Paris, Cerf, 1999, pp. 252-253.

immediately after death, these expressions indicate that the Christian, in his death, is called to be united to Christ. The expression in 1 Cor. 15:18 does not say anything else⁷⁰.

2) Paul in the Face of Death

Two passages permit us to understand how Paul conceived the immediate proximity of death: 2 Cor. 5:1-10 and Phil. 1:21-25.

In 2 Cor. 5⁷¹, Paul sets out the attitude of all Christians in the face of death. In metaphorical terms, the Apostle evokes death ("our earthly house comes to be destroyed") and the transformation then is lived. We have an eternal dwelling that awaits us in heaven. Paul uses an unusual expression: "the building of a tent" (*en oikôi tês skênês*). The only parallel may be found in 1 Chr. 9:23 and designates the tent of witness: *en oikôi kuriou* (the house of the Lord), *en oikôi tês skênês* (the house of the tent). This proximity permits us to think that Paul, in 1 Cor. 5:1, wanted to refer himself to our body as temple. This hypothesis is all the more interesting if we consider Mk 14:58, where the expression "not made by the hand of man" (*acheiropoiêton*) appears in order to designate the definitive sanctuary: "I will destroy (*katalusô*) this Sanctuary made by the hand of man and, in three days, I will rebuild (*oikodomêsô*) another that will not be made by the hand of man (*acheiropoiêton*)." In apocalyptic literature, the eternal and celestial realities are definitive eschatological realities called to substitute themselves for the rough sketches of the past (Dn. 12:2; Hen 9:15). Paul applies the words of Christ concerning the subject of the temple to the Christian body. This usage is coherent with 1 Cor. 6:19-20 and 2 Cor. 6:16. This last citation is particularly interesting because Paul makes reference to Lv. 26:11-12⁷² and Ez. 37:27⁷³, showing in this way that he applies to Christians what the Old Testament said concerning the sanctuary of Jerusalem.

These elements lead us to see within the dwelling not made by the hand of man that we possess since now the glorious body of Christ in heaven. For Paul, our mortal body is corruptible. It comes from the first Adam. Our glorious body comes to him from the second Adam, the Christ. For this reason, when the Apostle speaks of the resurrection, he does not hesitate to affirm that it is the work of the Father accomplished in the Son⁷⁴. The Resurrection of Christ prefigures and already contains the germ cell of all Christians⁷⁵. The Christian, at death, is thus integrated in the glorious body of Christ as much as it virtually includes the glorious bodies of all Christians.

Here it is that that Christian aspires to put on this dwelling so as not to be found naked. To be found naked comes from the philosophical tradition to which Paul borrows many concepts in this passage. This notion means to be bared from one's body by death⁷⁶. The meaning of this verse is: "We would wish to be transformed without passing through death,

⁷⁰ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, "In Christ' for one designates either those who are dead in faith or those who have died for Christ, those who have confronted many dangers, who have endured hard trials, who have walked through the narrow way." *Hom. In Ep. Ad Cor.* 39 (PG 61,335) (personal translation).

⁷¹ We rely here on the interpretation of A. FEUILLET, "La demeure céleste et la destinée des Chrétiens, Exégèse de II Cor. 5,1-10 et contribution à l'étude des fondements de l'eschatologie paulinienne", *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 44 (1956), pp. 161-192, 360-402.

⁷² "I shall fix My home among you and never reject you. I shall live among you; I shall be your God and you will be My people."

⁷³ "My tent also shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

⁷⁴ 1 Thes. 4:14; 2 Cor. 4:14.

⁷⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 49.

⁷⁶ PLATO, *Gorgias*, 524 d; *Cratyle*, 403 b II, 59. The point of these verses is not the freedom of the soul from the prison of the body, as philosophical tradition conceived it, but the fact of dwelling with the Lord. Here, Paul does not adopt a Hellenistic eschatology, as he only appeals for rhetorical reasons to certain concepts that he does not hesitate, besides, to transform completely in the passage.

receiving in our mortal bodies the likeness of the glorious Christ, for once received, we no longer would have to fear losing our bodies, and we will become immortal.”

Saint Paul uses three verbs to describe the attitude of the Christian in the face of this transformation: “groan” (*stenazô*) (v. 2:4), “have confidence” (*tharreô*) (v. 6:8) and “to delight, pass good judgment” (*eudokeô*). The groaning thus does not have a negative connotation, as it is an expression of desire. We find again the verb “groan” in Rm. 8:23 within a similar eschatological context: “We groan in waiting for the redemption of our bodies” in the same manner that creation groans. It thus concerns a metaphorical expression destined to render an account out of an ardent desire that which confirms the use of the verb “to desire” (*épipotheô*) at the end of v.2. In contrast, this desire underscores how death is not natural to man.

The second verb translates the attitude in the face of death. The Christian waits and desires the final resurrection, but his confidence pushes him, in spite of everything, to desire to leave his body in order to be with the Lord. This trust rests at the outset on the gift of the deposit of the Holy Spirit. “Therefore” (*oun*) in v.6 sends us back to the precedent verse. The second reason is expressed in v.8. Walking along this earth implies staying far away from the Lord. To die means to go and dwell close by the Lord. Paul touches here on the intermediary state of believing after death, in awaiting the resurrection. The attitude in the face of death is the fruit of faith in union with Christ that is initiated at baptism, through which the deposit of the Spirit is given, following from death into the incorporation within the resurrected body of Christ and who will find his fulfillment at the time of the resurrection at the Parousia.

In Phil. 1:21-24, Saint Paul, imprisoned, makes it known to his addressees the alternative to which he has been confronted. He brings this deliberation into the scene, narrating it in the present and so accentuating its dramatic character. His trial may lead him to death. According to the defense that he will implement, he may favor a fatal outcome, or on the contrary, hope to find freedom again and work anew for the Gospel. Certain authors, motivated by the life/death option and the echo of these verses within philosophical literature, have posed the question of suicide. In effect, Saint Paul takes up again the formulation typically commonplace among Greek philosophers⁷⁷: “death as a gain”. This comparison is all the more convincing that the Stoic tradition presents death as a choice possible in certain circumstances, contrary to the Greek literature for which death is a fruit of the hard condition of our world:

“When several things are according to nature, his duty is to remain in life; when several are contrary to him or seem to ought to be, his duty is to depart life... For the virtuous man, it is not necessary to remain in life through virtue, for whoever lacks virtue, it is not necessary to research death. And very often, it is appropriate for the Wise to abandon his life at the moment where he knows very great happiness, if an occasion renders it possible. For they (the Stoics) think that happiness, which is to live in harmony with nature, is the opportunity to seize the right moment.”⁷⁸

The philosopher knows happiness when he is in harmony with nature. It is then, according to the Stoics, the moment adequate to die, that is to say in confronting death with

⁷⁷ The essentials of the references cited by modern commentaries have been brought out by J.J. WETSTENIUS, *Novum Testamentum cum lectionibus variantibus, nec non commentario pleniore*, II, Amsterdam, Dommeriana, 1752. D.W. PALMER, “To die is gain (Philippians i 21)”, *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975) pp. 203-218, giving a recent and updated list. Cf. J.B. EDART, *L'Épître aux Philippiens, Rhétorique et Composition Stylistique*, Etudes Bibliques NS 45, Paris, Gabalda, 2002, pp. 97-102. Suicide often is perceived as liberation from the hard condition of existence. The Stoics motivated suicide differently.

⁷⁸ CICÉRO, *De Fin.* 3,60-61 (personal translation).

courage and while accepting it⁷⁹. Paul comes to affirm in v.18 that he is in joy. The moment of dying seems, therefore, to be quite opportune. It would be the occasion for him to be with Christ. In spite of these common points, the eventuality of suicide, considered positively by Stoa, is not pertinent here. Paul reasons within the framework of his trial. The allusion to an alternative life or death is in the prolongation of his hope to express himself with full assurance. As we have said, Saint Paul may influence the outcome of the trial by the nature of his defense and utilize this fact, known by the Philippians, in order to manifest his attachment to them⁸⁰.

Death is considered as a gain for it would permit being united to Christ. We find here again the same positive judgment vis-à-vis death as in 2 Cor. 5:8. There also, dying, the same before the resurrection, permits being with Christ. These verses affirm implicitly the survival of the soul beyond physical death. This notion is enabled by union with Christ. Paul there rejoins a typical intertestamental position of Jewish theology that frequently confirms that the souls of the just are close to God⁸¹.

The attitude of the Apostle in the fact of death is determined by Christ's Resurrection and by the hope that it brings. Physical death has become the way of access definitive union with God. The loss of the body is a temporary evil, but it remains relative by relationship to the gain that represents union with Christ. We have the assurance after death of having a dwelling in heaven, with the glorified body of the Savior. This faith is the source of assurance. Paul touches upon sadness in the face of the eventuality, from this time forward past, of the death of Epaphrodite (Phil. 2:27). It would have as its origin not the final fate of the latter, but the separation of a friend. Phil. 3:10-11 underscores that death is the final place of identification with Christ. Saint Paul aspires to be, literally, conformed (*summorphizomenos*) to His death. This stage appears as the fulfillment of a process of identification begun at baptism, the supreme manifestation of agapè that has been worth life in the world. The death of the Christian is, for Saint Paul, the moment of greatest communion with Christ.

Conclusion

The perception of death in Scripture rests upon a primary act of faith: Life is a gift from God and belongs to Him. Death is the fruit of sin. It is the sign of rupture of the alliance with God and the expression of a chastisement. Within this perspective, to put a limit onto one's own days is not conceivable. Nevertheless, a nuance with regard to death exists. As an inevitable event of human existence, death has a different significance according to whether it intervenes early or late. With the patriarchs, we see that it also may be assumed and may become the moment of a benediction for generations to come. The development of sapiential theology, with faith in immortality, and the question of the death of the just change the look on death. Although always considered contrary to human nature, it begins to be perceived as a transitory stage. The example of the martyrs of 2 Mc. witness abundantly to it. It is possible to choose death in order to defend the dignity of the Law and in order not to offend God. Hope in the resurrection and the distinction between the fate reserved for the just and the unjust in the beyond drives us to relativize earthly life and death.

⁷⁹ J. LAFFITTE, "Ars Pagana, Ars Christiana moriendi", *Anthropotes* 13/2 (1997), p. 279. Recourse to a formulation that was consonant with Stoic philosophy, very popular in this region in this era, has a rhetorical function. It sustains the paths of discourse and establishes the methods of Paul, identifying it implicitly with the upstart sage at the acme of his existence.

⁸⁰ J.N. ALETTI, *Saint Paul, Épître aux Philippiens*, Etudes Bibliques NS 55, Paris, Gabalda, 2005, p. 91.

⁸¹ Cf. M. GILBERT, "Immortalité ? Résurrection ? Faut-il choisir ? Témoignage du judaïsme ancien", *Le judaïsme à l'aube de l'ère chrétienne* », XVIIIe congrès de l'ACFEB (Lyon, Septembre 1999), Paris, Cerf, 2001, pp. 271-297.

The death of Christ completely transforms the nature of death. By His free acceptance and through love of the Father's will, Jesus destroys spiritual death. He reconciles man and God. Christ assumes death speaking as separation from God. Through filial abandonment into the hands of the Father, He transforms death. He radically changes the face of it. Each of the words and deeds of the Son of God illustrate freedom in the face of death. This freedom is founded in His love for the Father. The "to die for" with Christ becomes the sign of even greater love. He has transformed death while living it as an act of love.

Through baptism, we are made participants in the death of Christ. We then are included objectively in the death of Christ, the new Adam. His death is our death, which is why Saint Paul desires to be identified with Christ in His death. The latter becomes the door of life. The act of death becomes the moment where the dignity of the human person expresses itself in the strongest way possible, and this notion applies whatever age a person may be. Death is the instant of ultimate fulfillment where the sinner, through Christ, offers himself to God in an act of unique and definitive filial abandonment.