

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

Scripture

THE QUARTERLY OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME VIII

APRIL 1956

No 2

OLD TESTAMENT SIGNS

The Editor has asked the present writer for an article on the use of various simple signs in the Old Testament, as focal points for the faith of the Israelites, and as illustrating the divine condescension to man's longing for external signs. I therefore venture to present to the reader some very simple considerations on certain signs of which mention is made in the Old Testament, choosing amongst many one or two which may be of special significance in relation to the Christian doctrine of the Sacraments. It will readily be understood, however, that even these few examples cannot be fully treated within the limits of this article.

The use of signs or tokens pervades the whole of human life, in our day as in the past, though the identity or nature of those signs may differ according to the time or the place. Broadly speaking, a sign is an action or a thing which has a meaning for us, differing from the action or the thing taken by itself. The Middle Ages used to express this clearly when its philosophers said that a sign is a thing by which we may know something else. Taken like this, signs may be natural or conventional: natural when they have a natural connection with that of which they are a sign; thus smoke is a sign of fire, and footsteps in the snow signs that someone has passed that way; conventional, when there is no such relation and the sign has been chosen at random to mean something else. For the most part signs are not chosen completely at random, because the human mind wishes to see some similarity between the sign and its meaning. But this similarity is not necessary, and is often completely lacking when a sign has been used over a long period. Nevertheless we may say that the distinction between conventional and natural signs is rather a distinction between different types than an essential one; transitional forms are possible and a sign may be partly natural, partly conventional. It belongs to the perfection of the human mind that it can invent and use signs, but the very use of them shows a certain imperfection, for if the mind could easily grasp things as they are in themselves signs would be superfluous.

The most common signs among men are the words they speak. Most words have now become purely conventional signs, but originally

many were more than this. Words have always been the sign *par excellence* for making known one's ideas to other people. Among the ancient Hebrews the word or name of a thing was thought to be something more than a purely conventional sign; the name was closely connected with the thing and almost a part of it, often expressing one of its characteristic qualities. Thus we read in the story of Paradise that the first man gave names to all the animals and that God stood by to see what he would call them. This was no idle or arbitrary game, for it thereby became clear that no animal could be the help God desired to give to Adam. The highest of all names was that of God: Yahweh, that mighty, awe-inspiring name which in later times the Jews feared even to pronounce.

Words spoken in solemn circumstances, such as words of blessing or cursing, and especially the word of God, were thought to be instinct with power. This primitive idea has not yet completely disappeared. A Dutch proverb says that he who speaks of the devil steps on his tail, which means that if you pronounce a person's name he may suddenly appear. There are many who still fear to pronounce the name of certain diseases, lest they be struck down by them. It is difficult to say by what mental or psychological mechanism words are thought to be so closely connected with things or events, that they are credited with power over them, or with a share of the power of those who pronounce them; but it is certain that the connection was felt by the ancient Israelites as a very strong one.¹ When Isaac had blessed his son Jacob in error for his elder son Esau, the effect of the blessing could not be taken away (Gen. xxvii.33).² In *Isaias* lv.10-11 we read that as rain and snow do not return to heaven but drench and fertilise the earth, producing fruits from it, so the word which proceeds from the mouth of God shall not return idle to its lord, having achieved nothing; but it shall fulfil and execute the will of God. A late text illustrates this as follows: "Whilst a deep silence surrounded everything, and the night rapidly reached the midst of its course, thy almighty word came forth from heaven, from the royal throne, as a grim warrior in the midst of the land doomed to destruction; as a sharp dagger it carried thy irrevocable command; whilst it stood it filled every thing with death; it touched heaven, walking on the earth" (Wisd. x.14-16). Thus a word, though essentially a sign, could

¹ The reason might be that the word is closely connected with the image of the thing, and in primitive thought the image is partly or even wholly identical with the thing itself. cf. J. Maritain, "Signe et symbole chez les primitifs", *Revue Thomiste*, 1938, pp. 299-330.

² If we interpret this story as a part of the whole book of *Genesis*, it seems clear enough that the author sees divine providence at work, choosing Jacob, i.e. the people of Israel, in spite of the sins and shortcomings of Jacob and his mother. It is nevertheless clear that in the old folk-tale the power of the blessing played its part.

be more ; it could be instinct with power, and bring to pass what it symbolised.

There were many signs and symbols beside those belonging to language, though language very often accompanied them as their complement. There was, for instance, the covenant. When a covenant was made, a sign was chosen to be its token. The sign was like a silent witness, continually recalling the covenant. In Babylonia no contract was valid unless it had been written on a tablet and duly sealed. People like Laban and Jacob acted in a more primitive way : having concluded a treaty they heaped up stones and called the crude monument "the heap of witness" (Gen. xxxi.47). This heap of stones was to remind later generations of what had taken place. When God made a covenant with men, signs of that covenant were determined. But before speaking of these signs we must speak of what "covenant" meant for the ancient Israelites.¹ It must be explained in relation to the social customs of the world in which the patriarchs and the people of Israel lived. Amongst the nomad tribes of the Arabian Desert there was, and perhaps there still is, a state of latent war, or more exactly of absence of peace. Within the family, clan or tribe (and clan and tribe were thought of as big families) ruled the ties of kinship. Here there was a solidarity which obliged everyone to help his "brother", and it was considered normal that the individual should share the fate of the community. Within the totality of the family there was peace. But there was no such peace in their relations with others unless a covenant had been made with them. The stranger was always the enemy, real or potential, and in many languages the word for stranger or foreigner is the same as that for enemy.² It is abundantly clear that in the world in which ancient Israel lived, or had lived in still earlier times, and which was afterwards considered as an ideal one (just as the civilised modern Arab idealises the life of the Bedouin in the desert), the absence of peace between tribes and peoples was considered normal. Only a pact or covenant could change this ; it established a solidarity and a common interest between those who had previously nothing in common, not even the same human rights. There was, moreover, the possibility of a man having to flee from his

¹ Modern theologians often explain the word in accordance not with Israelite ideas, but with their own, and sometimes go so far as to clothe it with modern existentialist thought. For modern man it is strange that God should conclude a covenant or treaty with men, since to our mind this can only be concluded on a basis of a certain equality. There is no equality between God and man, and when God manifested His will, as He did when offering a covenant to the Patriarchs or to Israel, they were physically free to refuse, but morally bound to accept.

² In Hebrew *nokri* means stranger, but the related *nakru* in Accadian means enemy ; the Latin word *hostis* originally meant stranger, but more commonly signifies enemy.

own family or clan or tribe ; if he lived in the desert alone he would be like Cain after he had killed his brother ; as a stranger to everybody, his life and his possessions would be at anybody's mercy. In order to avoid this miserable state so like to death, he would seek the protection of a powerful man. He would take refuge in his tent and protection would normally be granted him ; then a covenant could be made by which the refugee became, quite artificially, a member of the family of the protector. He would be obliged for his part to accept the rules and customs of the community of which he had become a member. This explains the type of relationship which God established with men when He made a covenant with them. Israel did not flee to God, but God came to their rescue ; He offered His covenant and the people freely accepted it.

The first covenant mentioned in the Bible is that which God made with creation after the great flood. God had destroyed humanity, because men had separated themselves from God and thus the state of peace which had existed in Paradise had come to an end. After the flood He is represented as resolving to do this no more ; to assure humanity of this He made a covenant, by which an end was put to the enmity between God and men which had caused the flood : "I establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the water of the flood, neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. ix.9-11). The covenant had also a sign, the rainbow, which links heaven and earth, the abode of God and that of men, and which appears in the clouds after the storm. From now on the rainbow had the character of a sign ; it was a reminder of this covenant. This is probably a theological reflection of a later time, expressing in the form of a covenant the theological truth concerning what had happened, with the rainbow as a very apt sign of it.

The second covenant mentioned in the book of *Genesis* is that of God with Abraham, the first and ideal ancestor of the Israelites. This covenant, first mentioned in *Genesis* xv.18 (J) and then in xvii.2 (P) is presented as a unilateral promise made by God and accepted by Abraham who believed in God. The covenant contained moreover a commandment, which was also its sign. Abraham must be circumcised with all his descendants, and even the male slaves belonging to them. Circumcision was to be a fundamental law in the society of which God was the father and protector. The Israelites knew that it was practised by other peoples such as the Egyptians. But among the people of God it acquired a new meaning, that of a divine command expressly given to Abraham and through him to the whole of Israel ; of its nature it was also an apt token of the indestructibility of the

bond between those who were His by covenant and promise. Much has been written about the original meaning of circumcision. It seems probable that among many peoples or tribes it is an initiation ceremony by which a boy attains the status of manhood; this may have been its original signification among the early Semites. But in Israel it was performed when the child was only eight days old, and this was perhaps peculiar to the Israelites.¹ Its special practice in Israel on the eighth day was at the same time a token of the covenant. Was it also the token of a special relationship set up between God and the individual? This question seems out of place in the Old Testament, for the covenant with Abraham and his offspring who formed the people of Israel, was not with the individual as such. Though each individual had to observe the commandment of circumcision (cf. Gen. xvii.10), the people formed a unity, or corporate personality as it has been called, and it was with the people as a unity that the covenant was made. If any individual refused to observe the commandment, and if he were not, for this refusal, cut off (killed or eliminated) from the community, then the whole community was responsible for breaking the covenant. So the covenant was made with the individual in and through the group, not with the individual directly. Thus it is quite superfluous to ask why girls were not circumcised, as they are in certain savage tribes. Only the males represented the people in the covenant with God, and circumcision as a sign of the covenant of the whole people with God was not necessarily imposed on every single individual. In the dispensation of the New Testament circumcision no longer exists, because it was the sign *par excellence* of the old Law, and a positive commandment of it.

In the book of *Exodus* we read of another covenant concluded between God and His people at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses built an altar and erected twelve stones beside or round about it, in accordance with the number of the tribes of Israel (Ex. xxiv.4). That such an altar could have served as a token is well proved by the story related in *Josue* xxii.10ff., and that the stones could have had that meaning is clear from their very number. Their primary purpose was for worship, but they were also to be perpetual witnesses of what had happened once in the past. A second sign to confirm the covenant is the singular rite with the blood of animals, mentioned only in *Exodus* xxiv.5ff. Half of the blood was for Yahweh and was sprinkled on the altar, half of it on the people, and *between* those two acts (if we

¹ The Israelites greatly scorned the Philistines because they were not circumcised, with the suggestion that uncircumcised meant impure. This is an additional explanation of why circumcision was so important.

may interpret the text strictly in this way) the book of the Law was read. Thus the sprinkling of the blood and the reading of the Law were closely united and formed one sacred ceremony. It has been said that the sprinkling of the blood on the altar and on the people was done after the pattern of a blood-ceremony, which established kinship between two persons, clans or tribes,¹ and there may be some truth in this statement. Of course real kinship between Yahweh and his people was impossible, but strong ties were to keep both together, or rather to keep the people united with their God, and this unity was symbolised by the ceremony. It established a real bond between God and His people, and though the bond was before everything a moral one, which could be both broken and repaired, the ceremony of the sprinkling of the two parts of the blood was a sacred act which was not without effect of itself. By it Israel was in a certain sense consecrated to God and acquired a special holiness.

Other important signs are the many sacrifices of the old Law. According to the Old Testament sacrifices were offered from the beginning and they are thought by many scholars to have been a feature of every religion.² Certainly its origins are deeply rooted in human nature. But it is not certain that all the ceremonies which are classified as sacrifices are expressions of one and the same fundamental idea; however, we need not examine this here. We wish to confine ourselves to the idea of sacrifice as it is found in *Leviticus* I-VII, chapters whose ultimate formulation is to be regarded as the result of a long development, certainly as far as details are concerned, and perhaps also in some important ideas. That which is offered is always food, either animal or vegetable. This, however, does not necessarily imply that it is always offered precisely as food, or that the final author of *Leviticus* regarded it as such; it is with his intention, rather than with the primitive meaning of such sacrifices that we are concerned here. Clearly it cannot be doubted that the author of this book shared the belief expressed in *Psalms* L.13, where God asks: "Shall I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?"³

¹ cf. W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, new edit. 1903, London, p. 59ff.

² This is however denied by so eminent an author as W. Schmidt, s.v.d., *Ethnologische Bemerkungen zu theologischen Opfertheorien*, Wien 1922, p. 21ff.

³ In *Leviticus* I.9ff. the sacrificial substance is called 'iššēh, which is generally translated as "offering made by fire"; but some link it with the root 'nš, to be friendly. Recently it has been translated by H. Cazelles as "mets consumé" (*Le Lévitique: Bible de Jérusalem*, Paris 1951, p. 13 etc.), though he concedes that the Israelites actually linked the word with 'ēš, fire. This concession makes his translation doubtful, at least in *Leviticus* I-VII, since in a given context a term is not to be translated according to its original or etymological sense, but according to the meaning attached to it by those who use the word. We have therefore no proof that the material of the sacrifice is called the food of God in *Leviticus* I-VII, and it is certain that it was not thought of in this way.

The priestly author first distinguishes three kinds of sacrifice : the holocaust, the meal offering, and the sacrifice of communion ; then two other kinds are added : the sin offering and the guilt offering. Of the holocaust, the sin offering and the guilt offering it is explicitly stated that they are offered to obtain expiation. The smoke of the sacrifice, even of the meal offering and the sacrifice of communion, is called the soothing or tranquillising perfume.¹ The old versions, Latin, Greek, Syriac and Aramaic, ignore the sense of "soothing" and translate the expression by sweet odour, or, according to Onqelos "that which is favourably received". But the Hebrew word means literally "causing to rest", and therefore "appeasing". Possibly this meaning had been lost by the time the Greek version was made, or it may have been considered too anthropomorphic. Anything may be soothing or placating for two reasons : it averts the anger of God which has been roused, or it prevents it from being roused. In one of these two senses all the sacrifices mentioned in *Leviticus* I-VII are thought by its final author or redactor to be soothing. But if we try to penetrate more deeply into the exact meaning of the different sacrifices, we find it difficult to give adequate explanations. The meaning of a sign may vary according to the time when it is used. We have to keep in mind that such very old signs and symbols as sacrifices may have had an original meaning which was replaced by another later on. Many religious ceremonies, as we know from our own practices, are performed simply because they are traditional and have been handed down from generations long past. Those who perform them do what they have seen done by others as acts of religion, to honour God, to fulfil His will and to implore His favour. For the Israelite, the Law was above all the expression of the will of God ; if the later Jew offered sacrifices, it was first of all because God had ordered him to do so ; if he did it of his own initiative, he had to do it according to the precise rules which had been laid down for him in the Law. But this does not mean that sacrifices had no further meaning. The particular significance of the sin offering and the guilt offering is clearly indicated by their very names, though it surprises us to find that the "sins" for which such sacrifices must be offered, were sometimes unconscious infringements of the Law (cf. Lev. v.17). This must not, however, lead to the conclusion that the legislator had no strictly moral concept of sin, a conclusion clearly at variance with many other places in the Old Testament. The idea in *Leviticus* I-VII is rather that the holiness of God is so great that every offence, even an inadvertent one, committed

¹ *rô'h nîhô'h* : "soothing, tranquillising odour" (BDB), "*parfum d'apaisement*" (Cazelles) ; Zorell hesitates, translating the second of the two words by *placans, pacans, Deo placens*.

against such holiness, ought to be repaired. Violations of the Law which were not considered as violations of the covenant¹ could be repaired by sacrifices, which took away the consequences of ceremonial uncleanness. Thus they were a means of preserving the correct procedure to be observed in the worship of God, and served to emphasise the strict rights which God enjoyed by reason of His sanctity.

The sacrifice of the holocaust is probably much older than the two mentioned above, and consequently its meaning is less clear in the Law. According to *Leviticus* i it seems to have been offered to expiate for sins and to obtain the general favour of God. The sins are not limited to any specific examples, and the holocaust was probably considered the highest ritual act of religion. By it the complete dependence of man on God was recognised. Hence it belongs to the daily service. It was offered to God by Noe after the flood, by kings before a battle, and so on. It is nowhere stated that by virtue of this sacrifice sins disappeared, and the prophets protested against the idea that man could win the favour of God merely by external acts such as sacrifices. So it is not clear precisely what efficacy was attached to the sign. They were external acts by which man could show his submission to God, and they emphasised the need of winning God's favour. The Israelite believed that by offering sacrifice with a pure intention, he had at least ameliorated his relations with God. What was the exact role played by the sacrifice? It seems to have been considered as more than a mere sign, but how much more? The prophets were strongly opposed to the more or less magical conception many Israelites had of the efficacy of sacrifice. But the author of *Leviticus* i-vii was much more interested in the exact ritual of sacrifices, than in the idea which lay behind them; and because the whole Law stressed so much the fulfilment of the will of God, it is reasonable to suppose that the idea of the lawgiver was fundamentally the same as that of the prophets.

In the case of the meal offering the prevalent idea was that of offering a gift to God in His sanctuary. Nobody would dare to appear before a great personage to ask his favour or simply to speak with him, without offering a present. It is understandable, therefore, that gifts were presented to God in the same circumstances. The giving of the first fruits to God is a custom found even among such primitive peoples as the Pygmies, and the purpose is to recognise His dominion.

¹ When an individual had transgressed the covenant he had to be eliminated, usually by death. The Law possessed no system of greater or lesser penalties, such as we find for instance in the Manual of Discipline of the Covenanters of Qumran, or in a modern penal code. Death was practically the only true penalty, and it is not considered as a punishment in the modern sense of the word. This penalty could not be commuted by the imposition of sacrifices in its place. cf. J. van der Ploeg, "Studies in Hebrew Law", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1951, pp. 166-9.

The Israelite peasant, who had to give a good part of his harvest to the landlord, was not surprised that he had to give the first fruits to God ; they belonged to God, and it was by His permission that man could make use of them. The sacrifice of communion was followed by a sacred meal in which man ate, as it were, with his God. To eat and drink together is a sign of peace ; if anyone enters the tent of a Bedouin and eats the slightest morsel of food with him, or drinks only a cup of coffee, he knows that he will suffer no harm, and the lord of the tent is bound to protect his guest against every enemy. Hence the sin mentioned in psalm *XLII.10*, and later committed by Judas, could hardly be more heinous. The sacrifice of communion then, combined with the sacred meal in the House of God, was a token of intimate friendship. It presumed that the participants were fulfilling the will of God, and behaving in their daily lives as His friends. It was because the contrary was all too frequent in practice, that the prophets hated such sacrificial ceremonies, for when sinners participated in them, they were lying mockeries. The sacrifice of communion was moreover offered privately in fulfilment of a vow (cf. Ps. *XXII.23-27*). When God had granted what had been asked and thus shown himself the good friend of the one who had taken the vow, it was natural that the latter should eat and drink with God.

It is therefore clear that some kinds of sacrifices had a special significance because of their resemblance to the customs of everyday life. But regarding the holocaust and sin offerings it is difficult to say much more than that the later Israelites and Jews knew them to be in accordance with the will of God.¹ Animals for sacrifices, except those for the sacrifices of the poor, were costly, and this also made clear that the favour of an offended God was not easily regained ; to sin against God was indeed a serious crime. It is not easy to say how far the sacrificial animal was thought to be offered in place of the person who presented it. That the idea of vicarious suffering was not unknown is clear from *Isaias LIII*, but we have already seen that generally speaking, true violations of the covenant could not be repaired by sacrifices.

Finally something must be said about two other very important rites—purification with water and anointing with oil. The symbolic meaning of the first seems clear ; as water washes away the impurities of the body, so it may also take away ritual uncleanness. But what is such uncleanness ? From later rabbinic discussions we may conclude that it was something quasi material which could be contracted by the slightest contact with impure things. Its opposite was holiness, and

¹ cf. O. Schmitz, *Die Opferanschauungen des späteren Judentums*, Tübingen 1910, p. 119.

of this also, *mutatis mutandis*, the same may be said. Thus clothes which were worn by the priests in the sanctuary were holy, because they had been in contact with the holy objects of the holy place. Though it was dangerous to come into close contact with holy things, it was not dangerous to become unclean. The idea of uncleanness was originally a merely ritual one, and had in itself nothing to do with morality, though it could be a consequence of immoral deeds. In later times ritual and moral uncleanness were confused and even identified, as is not surprising, since most people find it easier to identify things which are similar rather than to distinguish between them. Various things, considered disgusting to God, were unclean ; but within this category were included also the exercise of very vital functions, such as of sex and childbirth. It cannot be doubted that very primitive ideas and taboos are at the root of all this, but it is very hard to say how far these actually influenced the idea of uncleanness in later times.

Uncleanness made a person ritually unfit to take part in the cult. Only holy persons, in the widest sense of the word, could approach God, because He Himself is holy. Uncleanness could be removed from a person or thing in various ways, and most commonly by a complete or partial bath. As in the case of sacrifices, we do not know precisely how the water removed the uncleanness. In later times the legislation on ritual purity and the means whereby uncleanness was to be removed, were considered simply as the expression of the will of God. As God had created all things, He had also instituted the means of purification. The Law taught the Israelites that God is so great that even certain material conditions are required, in order to approach Him in worship. Moral cleanness was of course required first. But in dealing with the great ones of the earth, the observance of certain external ceremonies is necessary ; to teach the Israelites that God is greater than the most exalted on earth, the Law required them to be clean, even in the ritual sense of the word. If rightly understood, this requirement also taught them purity of heart. A particular ceremony of purification was that which was done with a kind of holy water (Num. xix), made for special purposes and in a special way. Because of the way in which it was prepared, it was certainly thought to be more powerful than ordinary or even "living" water, though nothing of this is stated in the Law. The command to use it was again an expression of the will of God ; the origin of the custom is probably quite primitive.

A custom of which the primitive origin has not yet been explained is that of anointing with oil. Oil was poured out on holy stones or even rubbed into them ; kings, prophets and priests were anointed

with it, and also holy objects (Ex. xxx.26ff.). It may be that in early times oil was used for reasons not altogether unlike those for which blood was used in different circumstances. The blood was thought to be the seat of life, or even life itself (Deut. xii.23), in the vague way the ancient Israelites used to speak. Similarly the fat of an animal seems to have been considered as a vital part of it, and the seat of life. The oil of the olive may have been considered in a similar way, as the spirit of life, and therefore the unction may have been regarded as a means of giving life or more life to the person anointed. Later on this idea was lost; the holy oil of *Exodus xxx.22-5* was prepared in a special way, and it was forbidden for lay-people to use the holy recipe, on no less a penalty than death, since it was sacrilege (Ex. xxx.23).

Anointing with sacred oil conferred holiness, in the sense defined above. It brought the person into closer contact with the divine, because in Israel Yahweh alone was the Holy One, and the source of all holiness. Several times prophets who had the spirit of God anointed a man as king. Samuel took oil and poured it over David, and from that day "the spirit of Yahweh rested on David" (1 Sam. xvi.13). From this it might be inferred that the pouring of oil on the head of the elect was a sign of the giving of the spirit, and produced this effect in some mysterious way. But in the history of Saul we read that he was first anointed, and only afterwards, though probably the same day, did the spirit of Yahweh come over him (1 Sam. x.6). The anointing of Saul by Samuel had been accompanied by powerful prophetic words which were to produce what they expressed. The unction of Jehu was also accomplished by a prophet, and accompanied by a word of Yahweh: "Thus says Yahweh: I have anointed thee king over Israel" (2 Kgs. ix.3). In *Isaiah Lxi.1* a prophet says: "The spirit of the Lord Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me"; this recalls 1 *Kings xix.16* where we read that Elias received the command to anoint Eliseus. Thus we see that a primitive custom, the first scope of which may have been to strengthen and confer a new vitality, is later used as a symbol which indicated the transfer of the mysterious quality of ritual holiness, or even of the spirit. In Israel the spirit of God was not transferred by oil and unction, though a certain connection remains; it is God who gives the spirit or the spirit itself which comes upon a person. Solemn and powerful words had to accompany the anointing.

These examples taken from the daily life of the Israelites show abundantly the paramount significance of signs and symbols in their religious practice. It is also clear that in the true religion of Yahweh those signs and symbols lost more and more of their original, primitive

and quasi-magical significance, to a point where they became simply expressions of the will of God. But even as such they were thought to have, by the will of God, some mysterious power, the character of which cannot be determined. Being signs and symbols of the old dispensation, they were also shades of things to come. The new dispensation which has come through our Lord Jesus Christ is considered by the Christian as a continuation, an amplification and a fulfilment of the old one. In this supernatural order of things it is only to be expected that various signs which guided the faithful in the time of the old covenant should have been taken over with a more perfect meaning in the new. But these new meanings are not wholly new ; they are the "fulfilment" of the old and in harmony with them. The people of God has become the Church, gathered from all nations ; and its holy signs are the Sacraments.

J. VAN DER PLOEG, O.P.

University of Nijmegen

BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The history of Christian Baptism takes its origins from the mission of John the Baptist. In our day, when that saint has long since ceased to hold the prominent place in Christian popular devotion which he occupied until the close of the Middle Ages, we are perhaps in danger of underestimating his significance in the story of Christianity, and specifically, the part he played in pointing out the meaning of the future sacrament of Baptism. It is sad to recall that the age-old, universal Christian cultus enjoyed by John appears to have terminated, at the time of the Reformation, in what might be called an act of misguided veneration. Zwingli, Calvin and, eventually, Luther, declared that Johannine baptism had the same efficacy as the Christian sacrament, an erroneous view which the Council of Trent defined as heretical.

Yet in any discussion concerning Baptism in the New Testament, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the place of special honour which each of the canonical Gospels reserves for the Baptist. St Mark considers John's work as "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God" (Mk. 1.1). In order to grasp the meaning of John's role in the Christian revelation, it is helpful to keep in mind the various characterisations of him suggested by the evangelists. Broadly speaking, we may say that there are two distinct presentations of him in the New Testament. In the Synoptic Gospels he appears as *Elias redivivus*, as a prophet who announces the imminent coming