Salt of the Earth? (Mt 5:13/Lk 14:34f)

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loaves, no fish, a hundred men) in the formulation of the New Testament narrative. No concrete number of participants is even hinted by these exegetes, and in any case would be wholly irrelevant to our inquiry, since the fellowship-meal as a (very probably, says Maier) historical event is shown as standing in no relation at all to any long session of teaching and auditory experience.[20]

We end up unable to exclude the possibility that Jesus is in general portrayed as making himself heard by some twenty, or at any rate hardly more than two hundred; and the fringes of such gatherings commonly enough scarcely hear what is being proclaimed. As a matter of simple human interest, from sympathy or advantage Jesus must have been aware of how difficult it was to make himself heard by a normally large crowd, even if rarely as many as two hundred. His ability to use on occasion a very loud voice warrants comparison with known political and other leaders. It also warrants conclusions with regard to his own personality: *noverim me, noverim Te.*

Short Articles and Comments

Salt of the Earth? (Mt 5:13/Lk 14:34f)

However much the metaphors of Jesus attract our attention, they are never easy to interpret. They tease our minds, as Dodd has said,[1] more than they inform us. They invite our insights but refuse to let us settle for a single meaning. Yet that settling is often what interpreters have done with the metaphors of Jesus: a single meaning becomes entrenched and perpetuated, as is the case with the metaphor of the salt of the earth in Matthew 5:13. Translations likewise follow the same conventional, entrenched meaning. Here is the NRSV rendering of Matthew 5:13:

> You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot

Commentary after commentary recites the same meaning of 'salt' in this little metaphor of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.[2] Sermon after sermon repeats conventional thinking with little variation. The underlying assumption is that 'salt' in this text is the white granular chemical, sodium chloride, in the salt shaker used mostly to add flavour to foods. Thus we find, for example, the title of a book taking off from this conventional assumption, as though the meaning of the metaphor were established absolutely: *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World.*[3] Neither 'salt shaker' nor 'world' appear in the text of Matthew 5:13, nor is it a foregone conclusion that 'salt' (*halas*) in the text is sodium chloride, table salt.[4] Furthermore, when the 'table-salt' meaning is extended out of the metaphor, as in the title of the aforementioned book, the sense scarcely measures up to the exegetical demands of the text, much less to the scope of the vision of Jesus. The significance of the 'table-salt' metaphor, so it is said, is possibly two-fold. Disciples of Jesus are (1) to add zest (flavour) to an otherwise insipid human existence,[5] or (2) to preserve the good in society that would otherwise devolve into evil – as good meat becomes putrid without the preservative sodium chloride, 'salt'.

One might ask, first of all, if this interpretation of the metaphor fits well with the larger vision of Jesus to redeem those already lost, those without life.[6] I think the interpretation does not fit well at all. Jesus was creating something new out of the old, a new order of life and community out of one that had lost its power to give life to its members. And he committed the same mission and ministry to his disciples, a mission and ministry of giving God's life back to those who had lost it in a malaise of meaninglessness and oppression in Roman occupied Palestine. If that reading of Jesus is correct, then the interpretation of 'salt' as sodium chloride (table salt) that preserves the good already present, or adds extra flavour to food already good in itself, falls far short of the vision of Jesus for himself and his disciples.

More compelling evidence comes from a close reading of the Greek text of Matthew 5:13. The metaphoric substance is said to be *to halas tēs gēs*, 'the salt *of the*

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[20] H. Van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (NovTSup 9, (Brill, 1965), (619–)637): a 'messianic' (S. Berkelbach van der Sprenkel) or communal meal, historical except for 'all were sated'; not a show-off feat (*Schauwunder*), though we remain uninformed where the food came from.

[1] C. .H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Rev. edn., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 5.

[2] The number of commentaries that treat *halas* as sodium chloride used for flavour or preservative are legion. The following is a sampling: Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Word Books, 1982), 120–121; Floyd Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (A. & C. Black, 1960), 79; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1956), 71; F. W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Harper & Row, 1981), 136; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans, 1959), 150–155; A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Baker Book House, 1980), 55.

[3] R. M. Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism As a Way of Life* (IVP, 1979).

[4] Despite the pleading of Friedrich Hauck that 'in the ancient world salt [as sodium chloride] has a religious significance . . . Its purifying and seasoning (Job 6:6) and preserving qualities . . . is a symbol of endurance and value', in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed, *TDNT*, I (Eerdmans, 1964), 228–229.

[5] See esp. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies*, 154.

[6] E.g., Lk 19:10, 'For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost'. Cf. also Jn 10:10, *et al.*,

earth'. The genitive here ('of the earth') is attributive and objective: 'the earth' qualifies 'the salt' and is the object to which the salt properly belongs. That is, whatever this *halas* (salt) substance is, it is for the earth. Earth here does not mean 'world' (*kosmos*), as in human society.[7] 'Earth' (*gē*) is part of the metaphor before the extended meaning. 'Earth' is the geological earth, as in land or soil. Right away we are steered away from the notion of sodium chloride (table salt), because sodium chloride is bad for the land.[8] What farmer or gardener would contemplate for a moment mixing a good dose of table salt in the soil prepared for vegetables? That kind of salt would kill the vegetation of the earth/land!

Another question to consider from our reading of the text is one that a student in Greek class asked me in 1980: When does salt lose its taste? The student went on to demonstrate his knowledge of chemistry, and thereby implicitly called into question the translations and traditional interpretations of this well-known metaphor of Jesus. Salt never loses its taste, not when it is dissolved in water, not at boiling point, not when it is frozen, not under any condition it seems. The Greek word (*mōranthē*), translated 'lost its taste', is not usually related to taste at all. The basic idea of *mōranthē* is to make foolish, as in Romans 1:22 (cf. the English derivative 'moron'). In the context of this metaphor in Matthew 5:13 *mōranthē* carries the sense of losing strength or effectiveness. The idea of *halas* losing its taste enters only after judging that *halas* is table salt. Contrary to the translations and the myriad commentaries – that salt can lose its taste – table salt does not lose its taste. Nor is it sufficient to say that the metaphor is hypothetical, i.e. let's say it does lose its taste. The hypothetical way of reading the text would rob the metaphor of its power. The simple answer to the quandary is that this metaphoric substance called *halas* is not table salt at all but some kind of earth salt, as the text makes clear. And this earth salt can lose its potency, its effectiveness as 'salt' for the earth.

The metaphor concludes with the image of this *halas* substance rendered good for nothing but to be thrown out and trodden under human foot. The *halas* loses its intended purpose for the land (*gēs*) and becomes instead material fit only for a barren path where nothing grows. (There may be a subliminal message here about the holy land of promise becoming overrun by Roman foot soldiers by virtue of the powerlessness of the Jewish leaders of the time.[9]) Disciples of Jesus, in contrast to the current religious leaders in Palestine (note the emphatic 'you' – *humeis*), are warned in this metaphor that they could lose their potency as bearers of goodness in the land.[10]

We turn now to the parallel metaphor in Luke 14:34, which reads in the NRSV: 'Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away.' The translators of this text become even more absurd in their translation of *halas* in Luke's context. The substance *halas* is still, according to the translators, *tasteful* table salt that can lose its *taste*, even though the rest of the text boldly contradicts this notion: the *halas* substance is good for 'soil' (*gē*) and a 'manure pile' (*kopria*), but can lose its *potency* (*mōranthē*), not its taste as the NRSV states.

What then is this *halas* in Matthew 5 and Luke 14? It must be a kind of 'salt' material that is good for the land (*gē*), perhaps potash, phosphate or ammonia. These *halas* elements were available in abundance in and around the Dead Sea[11] and were apparently used for fertilizing the land and enriching the manure pile, which was then spread on the land, as Luke 14:34 confirms. This way of understanding the *halas* of the metaphor changes the sense of the text significantly. Disciples of Jesus are not merely keepers of the good society, neither are they merely pleasant folk, adding flavour to the good already present. More powerfully and positively, disciples of Jesus are life-bringers in an otherwise sterile culture. As a result of their life-giving presence, of their word and deed in the spirit of Jesus in the world, new life emerges among the people, and that more abundantly (cf. Jn 10:10).

This interpretation of the metaphor of the salt of the earth in Matthew 5:13 matches well the force of the twin parable of light in the verses following, Matthew 5:14–16. The light dispels the darkness and *gives light to all in the house*, as the fertiliser gives life to the soil that produces food for the hungry. Followers of Jesus ought to see themselves as carriers of the life-giving spirit of God, like fertilizer of the land in a world plagued still by indifference, oppression, violence and death.*

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[7] *Contra* Guelich, *Sermon*, 121.

[8] As McNeile rightly affirms ('Salt has no beneficial effect upon soil; salty land is unfruitful', Dt. xxix.23, Ps. cvii.34), but then misguidedly confines the metaphor to 'salt' (*halas*) without the genitive, 'of the earth' (*tēs gēs*), 55.

[9] The late Ben F. Meyer made this comment to me when I first mentioned the idea of *halas* as fertilizer for the land in the early 1980s.

[10] The emphatic *humeis* ('you') may be related to the previous verses where the disciples can expect persecution and reviling: in such a situation they could lose their fervency. They, the persecuted ones, are declared life-giving 'salt of the earth'; so Guelich, *Sermon*, 120; similarly Plummer, *Matthew*, 72.

[11] Note the reference to Dead Sea 'salt', etc., in Hauck, *Theological Dictionary*, 229. See also the allusion in Willard M. Swartley, 'Unexpected Banquet People' in V. George Shillington, ed., *Jesus and his Parables* (T&T Clark, 1997), 184.

* The thesis of this article was first presented in the form of an expository sermon at a denominational convention in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1981. Other than a brief reference to the point in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today* (T&T Clark, 1997), 10, 184 n. 16, I have not written the interpretation for publication until now.

Jesus's Last Passover: The Synoptics and John

There is an inherent contradiction in the timing of the Passion Passover in the Synoptics and in John. The Synoptics make it clear that Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with his disciples, while John's Gospel says that the Passover was celebrated the following day when Jesus was crucified.

The Synoptics say that the Last Supper was on 'the first day of unleavened bread, when they sacrificed the Passover' (Mk 14:11//Mt 26:17; Lk 22:7). The term 'first day of unleavened bread' would normally refer to the 15th Nisan, which was the first day on which unleavened bread was not permitted in the house, but it can also refer to the 14th when the unleavened bread was removed from the houses. The second phrase, 'when they sacrificed the Passover', clearly points to the 14th, on the afternoon of which the Passover sacrifices were slaughtered. According to scripture this occurred in the evening, but in practice they sacrificed them from 2 pm in order to process them all at the Temple. John omits this time reference before the Last Supper, but says that the priests who visited Pilate the next day 'entered not into the Praetorium, that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover'.[1]

There have been many attempts at explaining this difference, which have all been summarized well by Jeremias in his *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*.[2] There have been many unsatisfactory explanations, the most common of which is that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal. The term 'Paschal' or 'Passover' occurs four times in Mark's account of the preparation of the meal, though it occurs nowhere in the account of the meal itself. This has led some to assume that two separate accounts have become linked, and that the Last Supper was not a Passover celebration. Jeremias, however, gives details concerning fourteen features of this meal which indicate that it was a Passover celebration.[3] The two most satisfactory solutions have been those of Billerbeck and Pickl.

Billerbeck[4] argued that in the year of Jesus's death the Sadducees and Pharisees disagreed about the date of the new moon, so that their calendars were different by one day. The Pharisees celebrated Passover on one day and the Sadducees on the next. This is a reasonable explanation which Jeremias finds it difficult to refute, except to say that it lacks evidence. It is well known that there were disputes about the start of the lunar month, but there is no evidence that this ever resulted in two dates for celebrating the Passover. Billerbeck also fails to explain how the Pharisees would be able to get their sacrifices processed by the mainly Sadducean priesthood.

J. Pickl[5] on the other hand said that it was a regular occurrence for Galileans to sacrifice Passover sacrifices on the 13th while those from Judaea kept to the normal 14th. Part of his argument was based on Josephus, which Jeremias shows to be false, but his most important evidence comes from a curious passage in Mishnah: 'In Judah they did work on the eve of Passover up to noon, but in Galilee they did not do so at all' (mPes. 4.5). Mishnah gives no explanation for this variation in custom. Pickl suggested that the Galileans forbade work on the day before Passover ('the eve of Passover') because they sacrificed their Passover lambs or goats on this day. The reason for this would presumably be that there was not enough time to process all the sacrifices on one day, so the Temple priests let some bring them a day early. Jeremias concludes that the conjecture of Pickl is reasonable, but there is no evidence that the Galileans or anyone else ever brought their Passover sacrifices on the 13th.

Both of these hypotheses have been given added weight by a recent argument in Maurice Casey's book on the *Aramaic Sources of Mark*.[6] He points to a rabbinic debate concerning a Passover sacrifice which had not been designated as a Passover sacrifice by the person offering it:

> The Passover which one slaughtered on the morning of the 14th [of Nisan] not for its own name ['under some other name'] – R. Joshua declares valid, as if it were slaughtered on the 13th [of Nisan]. Ben Baterah declares invalid, as if it were slaughtered at twilight [of the 14th].
> Said Simeon ben Azzai, 'I have received a tradition from the seventy-two elder[s], on the day on which they seated R. Eleazar b. Azariah in session, that: 'all animal offerings which are eaten, which were slaughtered not for their own name, are fit, but they do not go to the owner's credit in fulfilment of an obligation, except for the Passover and the sin offering' (mZeb. 1.3).

Casey argues that although Joshua and Ben Baterah are Yavnean scholars whose teachings date from after 70 CE, it is likely that this debate took place before 70 CE because they were unlikely to invent ways in which the cult had been carried out wrongly. This argument is unsafe, because the whole context of the debate indicates that it took place at Yavneh after 70 CE. However, it is

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[1] Other records of the date are found in the Gospel of Peter 2:5, which says that Jesus's trial and crucifixion took place 'before the first day of Unleavened Bread', and bSanh 43a, which may or may not refer to Jesus: 'on the Day of Preparation, Jeshu was hanged'. Both of these support the Johannine date.

[2] Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. by N. Perrin from the German 3rd Edition, *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu* with the author's revision to July 1964 (SCM Press, 1966).

[3] *Ibid.*, 26–88.

[4] Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Beck, 1922–61), vol. II, 847–853.

[5] Jeremias, *op. cit.*, 24.

[6] Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* (SNTSM 102, CUP, 1998). These conclusions were first published as 'The Date of the Passover Sacrifices and Mark 14:12' (*Tyndale Bulletin* 48, 1998, 245–247).

likely that they were correct in their knowledge of pre-70 CE customs, and the tradition which they are discussing dates back to the previous generation.

What this passage shows is that some Jews were bringing Passover sacrifices to be sacrificed on the afternoon of the 13th, and they were calling them something else, perhaps a Peace Offering, so that the priest would process them without question. Casey suggests that some people brought sacrifices early in order to avoid the rush, and that the priesthood and the Pharisees turned a blind eye to this for the practical purposes of getting all the sacrifices processed.[7]

Casey himself does not use this to explain the contradictions between the Synoptics and John. He says that Mark used the phrase 'first day of Unleavened bread' to emphasize that Jesus was celebrating on the scripturally correct day, and that this could not be taken for granted because some Jews sacrificed on the 13th, as seen in mZeb. 1.3. Indeed, Casey thinks that John's account is plainly false and driven by a theological agenda. He criticizes the attempts at harmonization by 'fundamentalists, whose absolute convictions in the truth of the whole of scripture would be infringed if John were wrong'.[8]

However, Casey's new insight does help to solve the contradiction between John and the Synoptics, because it gives us the evidence which was lacking in the arguments of Billerbeck and Pickl. Both of these arguments suggested that some Jews brought Passover sacrifices on the 13th, but neither brought any evidence that this had ever happened. The debate in mZeb. 1.3 provides this evidence because it shows that rabbis at the end of the first century knew that Passover sacrifices were sometimes brought on the 13th.

Billerbeck and Pickl had completely different suggestions for the reason why sacrifices were brought on the 13th. Pickl, like Casey, thought it was simply because there were too many sacrifices to process in one day. Billerbeck thought that it was because some people genuinely felt that the 13th was actually the 14th, because of a dispute about the beginning of the month. This same uncertainty is seen in the debate in mZeb. 1.3. Both Joshua and Ben Baterah accept that one could bring a sacrifice on the 13th, but they disagreed about the reason. The test case for this debate is the morning of the 14th. If it was a matter of processing all the sacrifices, the morning of the 14th would be acceptable, but if it was a matter of regarding the 13th as the 14th, only the afternoons of the 13th and the 14th would be acceptable.

The debate, as recorded in Mishnah, started with the earlier tradition in mZeb. 1.1 that sacrifices offered with the wrong designation were still valid, except for Passover sacrifices offered on the afternoon of the 14th. Why should anyone offer a Passover offering at the wrong time and with the wrong designation? Both Joshua and Ben Baterah assume that the answer lies in the habit of some people who brought their Passover sacrifice on the 13th instead of the 14th. Their debate in mZeb. 1.3 concerns the reason why people should do this. R. Joshua gives the first opinion, saying that the morning of the 14th is valid because people were allowed to bring offerings on the 13th, presumably to avoid the rush on the 14th. Ben Baterah says that a sacrifice on the morning of the 14th would not be valid because it would be offered outside the permissible time-frame. Ben Baterah accepts the afternoon of the 13th as being the correct time, because as far as the offerer is concerned it is the afternoon of the 14th. In other words, Ben Baterah sides with Billerbeck, saying that people can bring an offering on the 13th if they think that it is the 14th. R. Joshua sides with Pickl, saying that people can bring an offering any time between the afternoon of the 13th and the afternoon of the 14th, so that the priests can process all the sacrifices.

Personally I think that Billerbeck's argument is much stronger. The passage cited by Pickl, about when people stopped work for the Passover, looks simply like a difference in holiday customs. There is nothing to indicate that they celebrated Passover any earlier. It also fits better with the Synoptic account which clearly states that the Last Supper was on the 14th, or on the day that Jesus and his disciples were celebrating as the 14th. John records the time reference of the priests, for whom the month started a day later, so that the following day was the 14th.

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[7] *Ibid.*, 223–225.

[8] Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (Routledge, 1996), 20f.

Body Language in Worship and Prayer

Throughout the whole Hebrew Bible there is no single word used for 'body', and yet in Old Testament and New Testament alike the body holds a very important place indeed in the understanding of human life and its relationship with God. Bodily expression is inextricably bound up with spiritual experience. Human personality is to be understood, not in terms of an 'immortal soul', but rather in terms of an 'animated body'.[1] In scripture (as in modern medicine) emphasis is laid on the unitary character of human life which finds expression in physical identity and bodily integrity. Body, mind and spirit are not three separate entities but form one integrated whole. This is reflected, for example, in the Old Testament rites (and rights) of burial (2 Sam 21:8–14) and in the New Testament teaching concerning

[1] H. Wheeler Robinson, 'Hebrew Psychology', in A. S. Peake, ed., *The People and the Book* (Clarendon Press, 1925), 362.

the sanctity of the body as 'a Temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 6:19). Survival beyond death comes to be seen, not in terms of soul-survival, but in terms of bodily resurrection (Dan 12:2). The precise nature of the 'resurrection body' is unresolved (1 Cor 15:35ff), but its bodily expression remains. Resurrection into 'the communion of saints' may indeed break through the limitations of 'egoity'; but identity and integrity are confirmed, for body matters.

This is particularly marked in the offering of worship where body language is a frequent accompaniment of the spoken language of devotion. In the teaching and practice of scripture, and in the experience and tradition of the Christian church, bodily expression complements and reinforces the outpouring of heart and mind.

Thus, both the central and the peripheral organs of the body take it upon themselves, each in its own way, to 'give voice' to the prayers and aspirations of the whole person. They are not simply 'physical' entities; they are, each one, 'a unit of vital power' or (in current terminology) 'a psychophysical organism'.[2] True, they are not to be thought of as 'possessing a quasi-consciousness of their own' as has sometimes been asserted,[3] but rather as representatives or 'embodiments' of the whole. Thus, in the Book of Psalms, the whole heart offers praises to God (9:1), rejoices in his goodness (13:5), meditates day and night (19:14) and expresses trust in him (28:7). Likewise the liver, the kidneys and the bowels show the emotions of pain (Lam 2:11), grief (Ps 73:21) and trouble (Lam 2:11) as the devout worshipper engages in communion with God.

More obviously involved are the peripheral organs of which, according to an ancient *Midrash*, there are no fewer than 248 through which 'the whole body is vivified'.[4] Each limb or member, in its own distinctive way, complements the others in the offering of praise and prayer. Spiritual exercise involves physical expression; the two belong together as one. This is well illustrated in Nehemiah 8:5f, where Ezra the scribe rises up to read the Law of Moses: 'and all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen", lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.' Feet, tongues, hands, heads and faces have all their part to play in thanksgiving for the law and in receiving the blessing of Ezra. Elsewhere it is the knees that bow (Eph 3:14) and tongues confess (Phil 2:11); faces and eyes, which are here directed to the ground, are raised to heaven (Jn 17:1) or turned towards Jerusalem (Dan 6:10); the head, bowed in reverence, is lifted up towards God (Lk 21:28); the ear receives the word of God's mouth (Ps 78:1), and the mouth proclaims his praise (Ps 51:15). The whole physical frame unites to commune with the great Creator in the knowledge that we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps 139:14). The human body which is a vehicle of praise and prayer is at the same time a gift from God and a miracle of his creation:

> My frame was not hidden from you
> when I was being made in secret,
> intricately woven in the depths of the earth (Ps. 139.15).

Body language has an eloquence of its own which can sometimes speak more convincingly and more powerfully than words. This is true of human contact and conversation, where the glance of an eye, the gesture of a hand, or the slightest movement of the body makes clear the inclination of the mind or the intention of the heart. It is instinctive and spontaneous speech, at its most eloquent when uncontrived. It comes more naturally to some than to others, and is practised more frequently in some cultures and traditions than in others. (Who can listen to an Italian in full flow without 'listening' with our eyes as well as our ears?)

So it is also with divine communication. Body language matters – eyes are closed before the blinding glory of God's presence; heads are bowed in humble reverence; tongues are employed in singing God's praise; hands are stretched out in penitence and petition, or laid on in confirmation, ordination and blessing; arms are held high in celebration of God's goodness; fingers are raised in blessing; knees are bowed in lowliness and contrition; bodies are prostrated in complete surrender or stand erect in honour of the reading of the glorious gospel of God. These and their like are more than 'mere symbolic gestures'; they are 'acted words' which not only 'represent' but also help to 'actualize' the spoken word.

But body language, be it in the service of human relationships or divine encounter, can quite easily become contrived in such a way as to become a mechanical expression, an empty symbol, an artificial reproduction of 'the real thing'. Artifice is no substitute for reality. Habitual use can have a corrosive and erosive effect on even the most sacred act and the most noble intention. Practice can indeed make perfect, but custom oft repeated can inhibit the soul. When mere performance is the thing that matters more than what the act itself signifies, it is in danger of becoming, at best, an empty ritual, and, at worst, a quasi-magical act. Faith is reduced to fetish, and religion to mumbo-jumbo. Familiarity, it is said, breeds contempt. The danger of mechanical performance is ever present, be it for the priest who pronounces the blessing, or the penitent who kneels at the table or altar, or the footballer who crosses himself as he runs onto the pitch, or the boxer as he climbs into the ring! Body language, to be true to its message, must be true to itself. If this is so for 'the man or woman in the pew', it is even more so for

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[2] A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of the Old Testament* (University of Wales Press, 1949, rev. edn. 1964), 88/87.

[3] H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1946), 72.

[4] *Midrash Rabbah* on Exod 27:9.

those who officiate at worship week by week in Christ's name. To 'go through the motions' is to run the risk of emptying the body language, and so the proclamation of the gospel, of its real meaning and to substitute for it an unknown or even a deceitful tongue (Jer 9:8, Rom 3:13)!

Body language, though universal in its usage, shows many variations, and reflects many different cultures and traditions. I first encountered this when, as a young man, I participated in my first international and ecumenical gathering, the World Youth Assembly in Amsterdam in the summer of 1939. Worship each morning was led by representatives of different national groups ranging from Americans to Japanese, and from many church traditions from Russian Orthodox to Black Pentecostals! The music and the prayers differed from one to another. So also, I observed, did the body language, from the familiar to the strange, from the subtle to the extravagant. Since then I have worshipped with fellow Christians in many lands and many cultures and have witnessed the same phenomenon. It is easy for the outsider to criticize and condemn what is foreign and strange. Such criticism may be justified if the body language concerned has been 'corrupted' by unworthy elements inimical to the gospel, be they from the secularist culture of the West or the fertility cults of the East. But in the multicultural body language of the world-wide church we can surely see something of the many-faceted wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

Differences in body language appear, of course, not just between different national or cultural groups, but also between different churches and even congregations within the same denomination, differences which can all too readily become a cause of disagreement and even division; for what is appropriate for one may be inappropriate and even unacceptable for another. Thus, Free Church worshippers may react against the bowing and genuflecting of their Roman Catholic and High Church friends, whilst they in turn may look askance at those who sit for prayer! Or there is the body language used in some forms of charismatic worship where pent-up emotions are released, hands are raised to heaven, eyes become glazed, and bodies are 'stricken by the Spirit'. Such expressions of worship may mean a great deal to the people concerned, but it is not surprising that, when transferred to a quite different kind of congregation, or even more so when actually imposed upon them, there is danger of division among the people of God. 'All things are lawful', writes Paul, 'but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up' (1 Cor 10:23). Body language, like 'the spirits' to which the apostle refers, must be tested 'to see whether they are from God' (1 Jn 4:1), and for the 'edifying' of the church of God (Rom 15:2). Understanding is called for, but discernment must remain.

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The Anointed One

The title 'Messiah' or 'Christ' is so familiar to Christians that it is almost a cliché or understood as a second name for Jesus. As a result, the question, 'When was he anointed?' rarely seems to be asked. Most people who think about it would probably answer: 'At his baptism' by John the Baptist (Mk 1:9–11). Perhaps this is why Western Christian art so often depicts Christ standing in the water, and John pouring it on his head, often from a higher point on the riverbank. Luke certainly interprets the baptism as God's anointing with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). In favour of interpreting this event as his 'anointing' is the agency of John, a prophet, continuing in the tradition of Samuel (1 Sam 10:1ff; 16:1ff), and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Against such an interpretation is use of the wrong element, water rather than oil, and John's own description of his activity as a 'baptism in token of repentance' rather than as anointing. The word 'baptize' was a secular word meaning 'immerse or dip'.

Even if God anointed Jesus as Messiah directly, where does human agency come in? It was obviously important to Jesus that human beings confessed him Messiah (Mt 16:16–17 and par.), so it seems at least likely that an anointing with oil by a human would also be important to him.

The only recorded anointing of Jesus is that by an unknown woman, described in Mark 14:1–9. Was this the point when he was physically anointed as 'Messiah or Christ'? Against such an interpretation is the agent, a woman, rather than a prophet or High Priest (1 Kgs 1:39). In favour of it are the fact that Jesus personally and directly accepts the title 'Messiah' only after this event (Mk 14:61–62), and the importance he attaches to what the woman has done 'Truly I tell you: wherever the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world, what she has done will be told as her memorial' (Mk 14:9 REB). Since Jesus is proclaimed as 'Messiah', then the woman's act in actually performing his anointing is integral to the gospel itself, whereas an advance preparation of his body for burial is not.

Mark begins his passion story with the account of a blind man, Bartimaeus, who proclaims Jesus 'Son of David'. The crowds who enter Jerusalem with him, by implication his supporters, shout for 'the kingdom of our father David which is coming!'. Significantly, Mark, unlike Matthew and John, does not refer to the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9–10). Is it possible that the inspiration for Jesus's entry lies with 1 Kings 1:32–40, when Solomon is proclaimed king in succession to his father David in the course of a mounted procession in Jerusalem and its environs, culminating in an anointing? The beast concerned was a mule, half-donkey rather than a pure-blooded beast, which may count against this interpretation. However, Solomon was literally 'Son of

David', and accepted as a son by God too (2 Sam 7:12ff, esp. 14) and called God's beloved (2 Sam 12:24–25) (cf. Mk 1:11; 9:7), and the donkey is associated with the royal tribe of Judah in Genesis 49:8ff. If on Palm Sunday, Jesus was deliberately re-creating the public affirmation of a son of David as king in Jerusalem, he could not expect to be met and anointed by the High Priest! Perhaps he hoped his disciples would step in. But they, including Peter who had declared him to be the Messiah (Mk 8:29), either failed to understand, or failed to act upon his cue and anoint him publicly as Messiah. This represents yet another failure of the disciples, a prevailing theme of Mark. And as in so many other cases, such as Simon of Cyrene and Joseph of Arimathea, their failure is made good by someone outside the twelve, the woman at Bethany a couple of days later.

The quotation from Zechariah provides an Old Testament 'proof text' for the early Christians, briefer than the story from 1 Kings, and avoiding the disappointment of the missing anointing. If, as seems quite possible, Zechariah's prophecy refers to ancient coronation ritual of the Davidic kings, then there is no contradiction with the interpretation we suggest.

There is, of course, great irony and a Kingdom-reversal re-writing of the whole understanding of what it means to be Messiah, if Jesus is the sort of Messiah who is publicly acclaimed by a blind beggar, and anointed, for death (Mk 14.8) by an unknown woman, rather than by a High Priest or prophet for an immediate earthly reign.

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Correcting Nicodemus (John 3:2, 21)

Jesus's talk with Nicodemus folds much interesting matter within a plain envelope. One correction of Nicodemus has escaped notice.[1] The latter said, 'No one can do these signs which you do, unless God is with him'. The expression, God is 'with' the actor is common in the Old Testament.[2] It fails as a piece of flattery. Jesus does not 'do' miracles because God is 'with him'.

John knew Jesus expected miracles to be 'done' by his pupils, some acts greater than any Nicodemus had heard of (1:50; 14:11–12), even giving eternal life (5:21, 25, 28; 4:14). How are such miracles to be understood?

Miracles are done in the light of day, if the Serpent in the Wilderness is a paradigm. The Serpent provided light, by day or night.[3] 'Signs' are 'works' (*ma"šīm*) done by the pious (9:33).[4] The Serpent cured the penitent (Num 21:7). The cure was provided by Moses (Num 21:9): a work done by God through Moses.

Jesus's last words here are these: 'He who does the truth comes to the light, in order that it may be made clear that his works are done in God'. The phrase 'in God' is no elegant variation of 'with God'. Another Old Testament expression, it means that the actor is God's agent.[5] When God is 'with' X, X functions with God's aid, not, e.g., a demon's; but Jesus and his disciples 'do' miracles not with God's aid, but as his functionaries.

The distinction fits the occasion. The status of the miracle-worker is high if he is God's agent. If God does miracles using Jesus, Jesus's status is raised, not least because students of his may hope to be chosen as God's means to teach and to perform signs and wonders. Their credibility, like his, hangs in the balance. If they 'do' miracles merely 'with God's aid' they remain responsible for the results, whatever these might be. We may compare John 9:3 with 11:40, 42 and 12:10–11. The distinction, though subtle, is real. John insists that Jesus neither taught nor did signs independently of God (Jn 4:34; 7:17–18; 10:37; cf. Acts 7:22). He did not act on his own initiative (7:28). To act 'in God' is, virtually, to be his implement. Only sorcerers try to make God theirs.

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[1] The REB at 3:21, 'God is in all they do', like the NEB, is misleading. The NJB, 'done in God', is correct. 'Done through God' (NIV) wrongly assimilates *en theō* with *meta theou*.

[2] Gen 21:20; Acts 7:9; Gen 26:24; 28:15; 31:3; Exod 3:12; 17:11; Deut 31:8, 14, 23; Jos 1:5, 9, 17; 6:27; Jdg 6:12, 13, 18; Jer 1:8, 19; Hos 11:12; 1 Sam 14:45; cf. 17:37; Lk 1:66*c*; 2:35. Targums render '*imkā*, 'with you' by *b'sa'adāk*, 'to help you'. Cf. Xenophon *Cyr.* 2.4.7; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.103, 251 for Greek usage with *meta*.

[3] Num 21:7–9. J. D. M. Derrett, 'The Bronze Serpent', *EB* 49, 1990, 311–329, repr. *Studies in the New Testament* VI (Brill, 1995), 78–96.

[4] *Mishnah*, Sukk. 5:4; Sot. 9:15. On Ḥanînā see *Mishnah*, Ber. 5:5.

[5] *Byhwh* or *b'lhym* (LXX *en tō theō*). God is principal, not agent: Hos 1:7. Cf. Deut 33:29; 1 Sam 23:16; 2 Chron 25:8; Ps 3:3[2]; 18:30[29]; 56:5[4], 11[10]; 60:14[12]; 108:14[13]; Isa 26:13; 45:17, 24, 25; Jer 3:23; Zech 10:12; 12:5.