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The Baptismal Raising of Lazarus A New Interpretation of John 11

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Abstract

Though well hidden, the theme of baptism informs the whole story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11). The note about Jesus' sojourn at the very place where John the Baptist had previously been active (John 10:40-42) forms the introduction to the Lazarus story. Just as a musical clef dictates pitch, this passage announces the theme: baptism. Once readers are set on this track, they cannot miss the hidden point. Ritually, the person being baptised is pushed into the realm of death, so that he can emerge to a new life.

Keywords

Baptism, gospel of John, implicit commentary, Lazarus, mystery religions

In John, the evangelist says a great deal without actually saying it.
– R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 151.

1 Introduction: Four Dimensions of Genre – Form, Content, Message, Function

Lazarus was one of the friends of Jesus. He lived near Jerusalem in a village called Bethany. He had two sisters by the names of Mary and Martha. He died, presumably early in life, was buried, and, at the request of his sisters, was brought back to life by Jesus. Told in the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John, the story is a miracle story; in view of its contents, we may call it a resurrection miracle, because we learn of someone's return from death. But we may also call it an epiphany miracle, because it places the miracle worker at the centre – he reveals to his audience his divine nature and mission in an epiphanic event. The episode told in the gospel of John (John 11) includes all the elements of form that critics require of a proper miracle story. "A miracle story," they explain,

is a factual (rather than fictional) narrative that consists of several units. It tells how a miracle worker acted upon humans, objects, or in nature, producing a tangible and visible change that defies normal explanation. Textually and/or contextually, the change is attributed to the intervention of divine power. The miracle amazes the onlookers or provokes unease, challenging them to moral or behavioural change and/or to bestowing new insight.¹

¹ R. Zimmermann, "Frühchristliche Wundererzählungen – eine Hinführung," in idem, ed., *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen* (2 vols.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013-2015) 1:5-67, p. 30 (my paraphrase).

While all New Testament miracle stories conform to this definition, they actually come in a variety of literary forms. The Lazarus story differs greatly from the much shorter, and more formulaic, miracle reports found in the synoptic gospels, especially in the gospel of Mark. Its incorporation of a number of subsidiary genres is the most striking feature of the Johannine account of the Lazarus episode. As a genre mosaic, the Lazarus story includes commentary (John 11:2,5,13,30), didactic dialogue, prayer, and what Bultmann² terms “revelatory speech” (Offenbarungsrede) – the self-revelation of the Saviour in the form of an “I am”-saying. “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). This complexity has prompted some commentators to reconstruct an earlier, simpler, more primitive and pure, non-mosaic form of the account that the Johannine author knew and expanded.³ The passage as we read it “has behind it a traditional narrative shaped in the course of Christian teaching and preaching,” and was “then remoulded by our evangelist to convey his own special message.”⁴

In this introductory section, we will offer elements of a genre analysis of John 11. We will leave the subsidiary genres aside and focus on the miracle narrative as a whole. The four dimensions of form, content, message, and function of the story can easily be discerned, understood, and described in their specificity.

The *form* (1) of the Lazarus story includes the three essential elements that normally feature in New Testament miracle stories as their beginning, middle, and end:⁵ request for help (the exposition), performance of the miracle, and response of the witnesses.

The central element, the performance of the miracle, is particularly elaborated: the miracle worker approaches the relevant location and gives preparatory instructions; someone present points out the problem with the announced act of raising – Lazarus is *really* dead; his corpse is beginning to smell. The account of the miraculous act culminates in the utterance of the wonder-working words: “Lazarus, come out.” The response of the witnesses after the miracle is duly recorded: “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him” (John 11:45).

What makes the *content* (2) – the report of Lazarus’s miraculous return from death to life due to the intervention of Jesus – so special is that the miracle itself is exaggerated

² R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941) 307.

³ W. Wilkens, “Die Erweckung des Lazarus,” *ThZ* 15 (1959) 22-39.

⁴ C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 232.

⁵ R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931) 236-241.

almost beyond belief. In other biblical accounts, the person brought back to life has just died, so that the day of his death is also that of his return; by contrast, in the Lazarus case, the deceased person is said to have been dead for four days, so that the suspicion of apparent death – *Scheintod* – is excluded, at least on the narrative level. Can we trust this story? Some early-modern commentators denied the actual death of Lazarus, inventing as they did imaginative scenarios of somnambulistic sleep (a sort of deathlike trance) or even pious fraud.⁶ While such interpretations are no longer considered by serious scholarship, they still seem to appeal to a popular audience. Serious scholars accept the story as it stands.

How about the *message* (3)? The reader of the Lazarus chapter is immediately confronted with the typically Johannine image of Jesus: he is an all-knowing divine figure. Informed about the illness of Lazarus – who apparently was a friend, possibly someone whose hospitality he has enjoyed on previous occasions⁷ – and called upon to help, Jesus allows two days to pass before he sets out. Meanwhile, Lazarus dies – and Jesus knows this, although no one has told him. Undismayed by this fact, Jesus welcomes an occasion to show his power over death by raising Lazarus. Accordingly, the story serves to demonstrate the divinity of Jesus in a dramatic way. Genrewise, the Lazarus chapter belongs to those miracle stories in which the miracle worker is central (rather than the person who is healed or resurrected), and it is through his mighty act that the thaumaturgist’s divine nature is revealed to the witnesses. Gerd Theißen suggests calling this type of miracle story an “epiphany” or story of divine disclosure.⁸

⁶ Two examples: (1) According to Ernest Renan, the episode reflects an act of pious fraud: Lazarus was never dead; he and his sisters staged the miracle – the latter placed Lazarus in the tomb chamber, in order to have him freed by Jesus. (2) Lazarus, as seen by Rudolf Steiner, was initiated into the mysteries by Jesus: the novice was first brought into a state of “somnambulism,” a state characteristic of temple incubation; then Jesus called him out of this state by uttering the initiatic call “Lazarus, come out.” See E. Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Lévy, 1863) 360-362; R. Steiner, *Christianity as Mystical Fact and the Mysteries of Antiquity* (Bristol: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992) 103-112.

⁷ When Jesus says to his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep” (John 11:11), the reference may not be to a particularly affectionate personal bond; instead, one may think of a more formal relationship, that of guest-friendship. Lazarus must have offered hospitality to Jesus and his disciples on earlier occasions in his home in Bethany. On the subject of hospitality in the gospel of John, see M. Theobald, “Gastfreundschaft im *Corpus Iohanneum*: Zur religiösen Transformation eines kulturellen Grundcodes der Antike,” in *Narrativität und Theologie im Johannesevangelium* (ed. J. Frey and U. Poplitz; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012) 171-216 – though this author does not discuss the case of Lazarus.

⁸ G. Theißen, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten* (StNT 8; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1974) 94-125.

According to the most likely interpretation, the Lazarus episode is not history reported but theology dramatised. Earlier in the gospel, in chapter 5, we find the following assertion: “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21). What here merely is asserted, is developed as a story and visualised in the Lazarus chapter: Jesus can actually raise the dead; he demonstrates it. Visualising as it does a theological statement, the Lazarus story is nothing but a freely invented story of didactic intent.

The *function* (4) of the Lazarus episode within the Fourth Gospel is clear enough: the miracles told in the gospel of John form a series that is arranged in ascending order, so that the post-mortem raising of dead Lazarus forms the culmination and completion. Now that Jesus has demonstrated his power over death, there should be no doubt about his divine mission. The function of the Lazarus passage as a key text is underlined by its central position within the text of the gospel. Ten chapters precede it, ten chapters follow. The first ten chapters deal with the life of Jesus (John 1–10), then we have the Lazarus chapter (John 11) as the account of the culmination of the Lord’s public ministry, and the subsequent ten chapters tell the story of how he lost his life (John 12–21).

2 A New Approach to Meaning: “Implicit Commentary”

On all of this, most recent commentators agree. Yet, I am not fully satisfied with the traditional description of the miracle story’s message. It needs more critical attention, and help comes from a theorem of literary criticism – the theorem of “implicit commentary.”⁹ Its opposite, explicit commentary, is no doubt better known. The latter adds an explanatory gloss to a name or a story, or even takes the form of an elaborate hint introduced for instance by “dear reader,” a conceit typical of nineteenth-century fiction.¹⁰ In our biblical passage, an explicit commentary occurs near the beginning, where the name of Mary is glossed as follows: “It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill” (John 11:2). Later, another explicit commentary explains that when Jesus spoke of Lazarus having fallen asleep, he actually referred to his death, and not to his taking a sound rest (John 11:13). But at least today, most authors resort to a more subtle, indirect technique of guiding the reader – that of silent communication through implicit commentary. Through this device, the author conveys meaning without actually spelling it out. By using certain codes and giving hints,

⁹ R. Chambers, “Commentary in Literary Texts,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978) 323-337.

¹⁰ G. Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

he or she sends hidden messages to the reader in the hopes that the reader will be able to decode them. As a consequence, the resourceful writer needs an equally resourceful reader who must take care to look for the quiet, implicit commentary intimated by the author. Detection of an implicit commentary helps the reader to penetrate the secret, subtle sense of a saying, an entire narrative, or an episode within it.

All commentary, whether implicit or explicit, rests upon, and invokes, a shared extra-textual world or framework that is accepted – or at least recognised – by both the author and the addressee of a text. Commentary, moreover, “designates a ‘world’ to which the text is relevant.”¹¹ It does not necessarily attempt to exercise full control over the interpretation; it may simply be content to act as an invitation to interpret things in a particular way.

In his *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, Alan Culpepper¹² borrows the term “implicit commentary” from the “secular” literary critic Ross Chambers and demonstrates its usefulness in Johannine studies. One example of implicit commentary in John is his repeated use of light symbolism. Thus in our text, Jesus says, “If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world” (John 11:9). What looks like a self-explanatory proverb, actually refers to Jesus who is the “light of the world.” The implicit commentary may consist in just one item – such as the word “light,” but it may also consist in a cluster of hints that all point in the same direction.

Certain hints may actually be cross-cultural, and, as we shall see in what follows, this is the case with the motif of “the tomb chamber from which someone escapes alive.” We will start to explore this in an ancient novel.

3 The Story of Callirhoë

Callirhoë is the eponymous heroine of an ancient Greek novel that dates from the mid-first century C.E.¹³ Unfortunately, we know nothing but the mere name of the author, Chariton of Aphrodisias. The story begins with the familiar “Romeo and Juliet” motif: the children of two rival families fall in love with each other. But due to circumstances of no relevance for our analysis, they manage to get married, at the very beginning of the novel. Nevertheless, not all is well. Lured by jealousy into anger against his beautiful wife

¹¹ Chambers, “Commentary in Literary Texts,” 331.

¹² R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 149-202.

¹³ Chariton, *Callirhoe* (ed. and trans. G.P. Goold; LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Callirhoë, Chaereas hits her, apparently causing her death. She is buried forthwith. However, a pirate opens the tomb chamber to rob it, finds her alive, takes her on board his ship, and later sells her as a slave. At the very end of the story – in book eight – the two are happily reunited.

In order to understand the tomb episode, we have to consider the issue of premature burial. In a time and a climate in which the funeral followed as quickly as possible upon the death, cases of premature burial may indeed have happened, but people were aware of the problem. According to one ancient source, those buried in caves were inspected on three consecutive days for signs of life to ensure that the incarcerated body was actually defunct.¹⁴ In the case of Callirhoë, either no one cared about inspecting the tomb, or the burglar happened to be the first to do so.

Episodes that involve apparent death and an empty tomb are quite common in ancient Greek novels. In almost every ancient novel, the author has “his hero or heroine die and rise again.” Later, “one comes to realise that the dead person was only thought dead, or that a different but similar looking person died, or that the death was only apparent; nevertheless, the person found alive was greeted as someone who has returned from death.”¹⁵ Death in the novel can only be an imagined death, because the novel “consistently stands with both feet on the firm ground of sober plausibility.”¹⁶

¹⁴ The source is Jewish but indicates that it reflects wider practice: “One may go out to the cemetery for three days to inspect the dead for a sign of life, without fear that this smacks of heathen practice. For it happened that a man was inspected after three days, and he went on to live twenty-five years; still another went on to have five children and died later.” Tractate Semahot 8.1, see D. Zlotnik, *The Tractate ‘Mourning’* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) 11, 135. On the subject of *Scheintod* or “apparent death,” see also the thematic survey in H. Klein, *Das Lukasevangelium* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006) 278.

¹⁵ K. Kerényi, “Tod und Auferstehung” in idem, *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962) 24-43, 25. – For discussions of the motifs of empty tombs and resurrection in ancient novels, see also G.W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 99-119; R.M. Price, “Implied Reader Response and the Evolution of Genres: Transitional Stages between the Ancient Novels and the Apocryphal Acts,” *HvTSt* 53 (1997) 909-938; C.P. Thiede, *Ein Fisch für den römischen Kaiser: Juden, Griechen, Römer – die Welt des Jesus Christus* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1998) 127-34; N.T. Wright, “Cheating Death: The *Scheintod* Motif in Novels,” in idem, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003) 68-76; A.M. Reimer, “A Biography of a Motif: The Empty Tomb in the Gospels, the Greek Novels, and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*,” in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* (ed. J.-A. Brant, C. W. Hedrick and C. Shea; Atlanta, Ga.: SBL, 2005) 297-316; S. Tilg, *Chariton of Aphrodisias and the Invention of the Greek Love Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 59-65. Several of these authors comment on the

Stereotypical plots such as the one found in *Callirhoë* may bore the modern reader, because he fails to understand their *twofold* religious meaning. On the surface, they indicate that the novel's heroes are accompanied by the gods; these protect the pious and guide them through their adventures to a happy ending. In the case of *Callirhoë*, the heroine's singular devotion to, and protection by, the goddess Aphrodite is particularly striking.¹⁷ But this is not the end of it, for the ancient readers also pick up the *deeper meaning* of such scenes. For them, they imply a reference to the ritual movement from death to life in the context of the mystery initiations.¹⁸

Reinhold Merkelbach¹⁹ has memorably likened the ancient Greek novel to a house that consists of a ground floor and an upper storey. The continuous narrative is set on the upper floor of the building – the realm of imagination, which is always removed from mundane reality, at an elevated level. The story includes episodes that point as it were downstairs, to the street level floor upon which the upper level rests. The ground floor represents the mundane level – the actual life of the people, especially their ritual acts. For shorter or longer periods, the fictional story departs from the underlying ritual structure. But the poet includes an occasional reference to the lower level, indicating those moments of the ritual to which the novel's episodes that are being related actually refer. There are also remarks that interrupt the flow of the story – on the first floor of the edifice; yet they are intentionally placed where we read them. They are meant to remind us of the street level, the deeper meaning that keeps resonating through the whole story.

Merkelbach's theory applies to at least some episodes of *Callirhoë*. Thus when the heroine emerges from the tomb, the ancient author speaks pleonastically of her "second,

possible relationship between Chariton's empty tomb and the Christian empty-tomb accounts; according to Bowersock, Thiede and Reimer, the gospels or pre-gospel oral traditions may have influenced Chariton, while Tilg would give priority to Chariton. As everyone agrees, the 'empty tomb' is a compelling literary motif, though we cannot really be sure who brought it up first.

¹⁶ Kerényi, "Tod und Auferstehung," 24.

¹⁷ M. Biraud, "La dévotion à Aphrodite dans le roman de Chariton," in *Hommage au doyen Weiss* (ed. M. Dubrocard and C. Kircher; Nice: Université de Nice, 1996) 137-146.

¹⁸ R. Petri, *Über den Roman des Chariton* (Meisenheim: Hain, 1963) lists numerous echoes of the mysteries in Chariton's novel, though he fails to understand their religious implication. He rashly asserts that they are all meant ironically, an assumption based upon the misleading idea that Chariton was a "secular" author; Petri's study must be corrected in the light of Biraud, "La dévotion à Aphrodite dans le roman de Chariton," and D.A. Edwards, "Pleasurable Reading or Symbols of Power? Religious Themes and Social Context in Chariton," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (ed. R. F. Hock et al.; Atlanta, Ga.: SBL, 1998) 31-46.

¹⁹ R. Merkelbach, *Die Hirten des Dionysos: Die Dionysos-Mysterien der römischen Kaiserzeit und der bukolische Roman des Longus* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1988) 138.

new birth” (δευτέραν παλιγγενεσίαν), an expression associated with mystery religion.²⁰ The word παλιγγενεσία means “return from death to life,” but also, in the mysteries, “renewal to higher existence,” the equivalent of what our religious language calls the “new birth.”²¹

Unfortunately, our ancient sources on mystery religions tell us very little about how the “second birth” was ritually staged, for initiates were required to remain silent about it. Nevertheless, some hints found in ancient sources give an indication. The magic papyrus of Paris provides a good example.²² Around eleven o’clock in the morning and in the presence of the magician, the candidate is supposed to mount the roof of a house and spread out a piece of cloth. Naked he places himself upon it. His eyes are blindfolded, the entire body wrapped like a mummy. With closed eyes turning to the sun, he utters a spell that addresses the god Typhon, king of the gods. The spell is pronounced three times, anticipating a divine sign. When this occurs, possibly in the form of a draught of air felt by the candidate, the latter stands up. He dons a white garment, burns incense and again utters a spell. The rites completed, he descends from the roof. Now he knows that he has acquired immortality. Similar rites and symbolic representations of death and resurrection can be found in all ancient mystery cults. “When the candidate of the mysteries of Isis applies for initiation, he chooses the ritual death in order to gain true life,” explains Reinhold Merkelbach.²³ In fact, according to the ancients, *each* initiation ritual involves the death of the old and the birth of a new person; there are no exceptions.²⁴

Ancient initiation rituals served to enhance and transform someone’s life by killing him symbolically and then resurrecting him to a new life, one that could no longer be touched by death. This applies well to the tomb episode placed near the beginning of the story of Callirhoë: those of the ancient readers who were interested in, and cognisant of, hidden meanings, knew well what Chariton had in mind when placing his heroine in the tomb: he indicated her mystery initiation. Making her immune to the forces of death, the initiation

²⁰ Chariton, *Callirhoë* 1.8.1. For the terminology and notion of “new birth” in mystery contexts, see K.E. Hammer, *Disambiguating Rebirth: A Socio-Rhetorical Exploration of Rebirth-Language in 1 Peter* (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2011) 183-209.

²¹ F. Büchsel, παλιγγενεσία, *TWNT* I, 685-688.

²² PGM 4.154-285, text and translation in *Papyri Graeci Magicae – Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (ed. K. Preisendanz; Leipzig: Saur, 2001) 76-81; H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 40-43. See the commentary in M. Smith, “Transformation by Burial,” in idem, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 2:110-129, 128.

²³ R. Merkelbach, *Isis regina – Zeus Sarapis: Die griechisch-ägyptische Religion nach den Quellen dargestellt* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: Saur, 2001) 343.

²⁴ Merkelbach, *Die Hirten des Dionysos*, 100.

enabled her to survive the many trials that the long story told by Chariton had in store for her.

4 The Story of Lazarus

The theme of mystery initiation has led us to understand an episode included in Chariton's novel in a new way, and, as we shall see, the same theme will help us decode the meaning of the Lazarus story. In this case, we can rely on detailed information on the ancient rite – that of baptism.

Early-Christian baptism divides the lives of those baptised in a sequence of three phases. In the first phase, the human being is enslaved to sin and the world. The second phase means death: the baptismal candidate is killed – symbolically, but not actually drowned by being forced under water. This “drowning” is the actual rite of baptism; the Greek word βαπτίζειν means, quite simply, “to dip something in a liquid,” usually water. The Baptist is the one who performs the ritual: the dipper. After dipping or immersion follows the third phase: the resurrection to new life – the Christian life under the guidance of the divine spirit with which the new human being is endowed. The entire procedure is accompanied by instruction, so that the candidate understands what is happening. The interpretation of baptism as the symbolic death of the baptismal candidate is well attested in early-Christian sources. According to Paul and the letter to the Colossians, each believer experiences in baptism a burial and a subsequent resurrection (Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:12); both passages are so brief that they can be read as indicating a well-known fact. The words that were spoken to the baptismal candidate at baptism, or their echo in an early-Christian song, are known:

Awake, o sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you,
the sun of resurrection,
begotten before the morning star,
who gives life by his very own rays.²⁵

The one who is called out of the sleep of death (= the symbolic death of the baptismal candidate) and the night of death stands up; enlightened by Christ, the sun, he begins a new life.

²⁵ The first three lines are from the letter to the Ephesians (Eph 5:14), the rest is transmitted by Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 9.84. A few lines after the quotation, the author of Ephesians exhorts his readers to quote and sing hymns and spiritual songs – reason enough to take the quotation itself as such a hymn.

There are good reasons for considering the Johannine Lazarus story a story of baptismal initiation. *Baptism*, we will argue, *is the key to this story*. Baptism forms, as it were, the double bottom below the surface of the narrative, the sounding board; or, in other words, the reality behind the text.

A first hint at baptism can be discerned in the introduction to the Johannine Lazarus story. This story does not actually begin with the sentence “A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany” (John 11:1), but several lines earlier. The introduction reads as follows:

He [Jesus] went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising at first, and there he remained. And many came to him. And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man [Jesus] was true.” And many believed in him [Jesus] there. (John 10:40-42)

Here Jesus is compared with John the Baptist. John had baptised, but not worked any wonders. He had not caused any miracles to happen. Immediately after this passage, the Lazarus episode is told. Now Jesus delivers his most spectacular sign: the raising of a dead man. Those who are familiar with the Johannine literary style are quick to understand the implication of this sign: far from being the opposite of baptism, it is actually identical with the baptismal rite. The introduction does not tell us the name of the place where John baptised; the reader, however, knows this name from the very first chapter of the gospel: “Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptising” (John 1:28).²⁶ It is not by coincidence that Jesus acts at another place, the village near Jerusalem that is also called Bethany; the identical name is intentional. For the attentive reader a telling toponym, Bethany serves as a code word that points to baptism. With this code word and with the entire introduction the author of the gospel sets the reader or listener of the Lazarus episode on the right track to fully understand the story of the miraculous raising.

Hidden hints such as the one given by the place name Bethany, i.e. hints from below the surface of a text, belong to the story’s “implicit commentary.” As a matter of fact, the Lazarus story is full of implicit commentary – of allusions, or possible allusions, to the rite of baptism. Summarised in *Table 1*, they are easy to discern.

²⁶ The exact location of this Bethany is debated. Riesner suggests the equation Bethany = the region of Bathanaea east of the Sea of Galilee, while Brown (2003) locates it east of Jericho. See R. Riesner, *Bethanien jenseits des Jordan: Topographie und Theologie im Johannes-Evangelium* (Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 2002) 71-73; S.G. Brown, “Bethany beyond the Jordan: John 1:28 and the Longer Gospel of Mark,” *RB* 110 (2003) 497-516.

<i>story of Lazarus</i>	<i>baptism</i>
(i) Bethany	the place of baptism
(ii) Lazarus, friend of Jesus	baptismal candidate, friend of Jesus
(iii) illness	state before baptism = deficient existence
(iv) “Let us also go ...”	request of baptism
(v) Who believes in Christ will live despite his death.	instruction of the candidate
(vi) death and burial of Lazarus	several days of fasting, stripping of the candidate and candidate’s immersion in water
(vii) raising of Lazarus: “Lazarus, come out!”	the baptised person’s birth to new life
(viii) festive meal, Jesus is anointed	the baptised person is anointed, concluding festive meal

Table 1. The story of Lazarus (John 11–12) includes several features that can be understood as echoing the preparation and performance of the rite of baptism.

We have already analysed Bethany, the emblematic location of baptism (i). Let us look at the other echoes of baptism in some detail:

Lazarus represents the baptismal candidate; those who apply for membership in the community are already friends of Jesus (ii). Existence before baptism can be characterised as an imperfect, deficient existence, as a kind of illness (iii). The ill person himself requests baptism (iv). In the Johannine text, this feature is only hinted at. When Jesus sets out to travel to Bethany, Thomas, one of the disciples, speaks up: “So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). Thomas exhorts his fellow disciples to go with Jesus, in order to die together with Lazarus²⁷ – and of course in order to be raised like him. The subsequent instruction of the baptismal candidate (v) is echoed in the dialogue between Jesus and Martha. The candidate must remember the key sentence: who believes in Christ will live despite his death. The actual ritual (vi) involves the symbolic death of the candidate, indicated by several days of pre-baptismal fasting (one, two or three days²⁸), followed by the naked candidate’s complete immersion in water. The Johannine text emphasises the completeness of death – for four days is Lazarus in his tomb, and the body is beginning to decompose.

²⁷ J.R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010) 624.

²⁸ One or two days, according to the Didache (Did. 7:4); the case of Paul (Acts 9:9,19) seems to imply three days of pre-baptismal fasting.

The ritual culminates in the candidate's resurrection (vii) or – to use Johannine vocabulary (John 3:3) – rebirth to a new life, initiated by the call to leave the tomb (or to rise). The call, no doubt spoken by a presbyter, is understood as being uttered by Christ: “Truly, truly, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25, alluded to in 11:25). The hour of which Jesus speaks is the hour of baptism. After coming out of the tomb, Lazarus is freed from the linen strips with which his arms and feet were bound. This unbinding may actually echo an idea dear to the Egyptian culture and depicted on the lid of an ancient sarcophagus:²⁹ the resurrected human person stands erect, with outstretched arms from which the strips dangle, with which the dead body had been wrapped. The Egyptians wrapped the body with strips of cloth just for the transition period or travel from this world to the other world; once the person has arrived in the next world, the wrapping was taken off. The resurrected Lazarus, one may assume, also belongs to a new world – that of the Christian community.

The final rite (viii) is a joyous celebration. In fact, Lazarus is present at the celebration staged by Martha and Mary (John 12:2). The baptismal candidate is also anointed, as people in antiquity generally anointed themselves, or were anointed, after taking a bath.³⁰ The anointing of the believer takes on a special meaning, however: he is an anointed one, *χριστός*, and therefore similar to Christ. In the Johannine story, the anointing of the baptismal candidate Lazarus is only indirectly alluded to; the story is more concerned with the anointing of Jesus.

We must not exaggerate the force of the allusions to baptism. The allusions exist, but they remain allusive and discreet. They gesture toward baptism without turning the

²⁹ This third-century C.E. sarcophagus is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (museum no. 1989.75).

³⁰ The first clear references to post-baptismal anointing are Theophilus of Antioch, *Apology to Autolytus* 1:12 (ca. 180 C.E.) and Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1:14,3 (207/208 C.E.); from this evidence scholars generally conclude that the rite dates from the second half of the second century, see E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009) 247. This is a possibility. While the gospel of John (of uncertain date; no later than ca. 150 C.E.) does not directly attest the practice, John 12:3 (and 1 John 2:20) may be hints. – Post-baptismal anointing is not the only interpretive option for the historian. Certain ancient sources refer to, or imply, the practice of a *pre-baptismal* anointing charged with theological meaning; see G. Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (ed. M.E. Johnson; Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press, 1995) 58-81; T.K. Seim, “Baptismal Reflections in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (ed. D. Hellholm et al.; 3 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 1: 717-734, 731.

Lazarus story into an allegorical narrative of which each feature has a double meaning. The story is full of hints, but these do not add up to a full-fledged allegorical tale.

Once the reader has discovered the web of the allusions to baptism, he is able to understand the Johannine Lazarus story in the light of baptism, and, conversely, he can see baptism from the perspective of the story of Lazarus. Baptism and the Lazarus story permit mutual interpretation, and they have the very same message: the one who is baptised is no longer as he has previously been; he is a new, and a different, person. He is already raised from the dead. Jesus himself has given him new life. This new life comes from Jesus. In Johannine thought, Jesus is the one who actually baptises, and his disciples only perform the rite for him.³¹

Accordingly, the Johannine Lazarus story can be understood along the lines suggested by Merkelbach: the miracle story is set at the upper level, while at the lower level, the knowing reader recognises the familiar baptismal rite and its theology.

One question remains to be answered: why is the baptism of the Lazarus pericope so concealed in this “lower level” that it has escaped most interpreters? Why does the gospel of John conceal the message of baptism, rather than openly discuss it? The reason may be seen in the ancient custom of ritual secrecy, a rule that was observed by all members of the ancient mystery cults. One did not speak openly about the sacred acts, and certainly did not write about it in literary texts. Apart from the directions given in the magical papyri, the allusions found in the ancient novels are particularly revealing. Not least the striking novelistic character of our passage from the gospel of John – many personal names, an elaborate plot, the reference to emotions, including those of Jesus – reflects the world of the ancient novelists who were deeply interested in the mysteries.³²

Read in the light of the Lazarus pericope, the gospel of John appears as a writing that shows more than a merely passing interest in baptism. It may well be that the story permits

³¹ According to the gospel of John, only the expected Saviour can baptise properly (John 1:25), and “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John – although Jesus himself did not baptise, but only his disciples” (John 4:1-2).

³² This is not to say that the Johannine Lazarus episode should simply be equated with the Callirhoë story analysed at the beginning of this study. Lazarus is dead, Callirhoë is not. But, interestingly, there is an apocryphal story, also set in Bethany, in which Jesus opens and enters a tomb chamber to free a young man who, by mistake buried alive, was enclosed in it and drew attention to himself by making noise. This striking case of apparent death was presumably not as singular as it may seem to us. If the apocryphal story represents an early version of the Johannine story, its protagonist (at this stage) and Callirhoë would share the fate of premature burial. For the apocryphal story from Secret Mark, see Scott G. Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005).

us a glimpse of the theology and the situation of the Johannine community in the early second century, the time when the gospel of John was written. In this period there may have been Jewish believers who, like Nicodemus, accepted Jesus as “a teacher come from God” (John 3:2), though preferring to keep this conviction to themselves.³³ They refrained from taking the decisive step of having themselves baptised. Addressing such persons the gospel of John asserts that one must be born of “water and spirit”; otherwise, the kingdom of God remains closed to them (John 3:5). The expression “water and spirit” refers to baptism; performed as a water ritual, it fills the candidate with the spirit, i.e. the power of Christ and also, possibly, knowledge and insight.³⁴ Thus the gospel of John opposes the hesitant, unbaptised Nicodemus with the believing and baptised Lazarus, the true friend of Jesus.

5 Conclusion

Let us summarise our findings. The story of the raising of dead Lazarus requires commentary and elucidation. At a first reading, it appears to be a straightforward report about a spectacular miraculous event – an event that creates faith in Christ. On closer study, when attention is paid to its “implicit commentary” – i.e. to the hints the text itself provides about that which remains unsaid but is implied – it turns out to be a story with hidden meanings. One basic, though well-hidden point or theme can be discerned, a theme that informs the whole story. The note about Jesus’ sojourn at the very place where John the Baptist had previously been active (John 10:40-42) forms the introduction to the Lazarus story. Just as a musical clef dictates pitch, this passage announces the theme: baptism. Once readers are set on this track, they cannot miss the hidden point. Ritually, the person being baptised is pushed into the realm of death, so that he can emerge to a new life. “Lazarus, come out” or similar words are spoken to each neophyte who leaves the baptismal font.

Nobody will object to identifying the episode of the raising of Lazarus, told in the gospel of John, as the account of a miracle that involves the bringing of a dead person back

³³ I follow C.H. Cosgrove, “The Place where Jesus Is: Allusions to Baptism and Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel,” *NTS* 35 (1989) 522-539. Cosgrove does not consider the Lazarus episode in his article.

³⁴ According to Kneubühler, baptism in the Fourth Gospel is best understood as a Hellenistic-style initiation rite that conveys knowledge; see Ph. Kneubühler, *Theologie des Wortes und Sakramentenlehre im Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen: Francke, 2013) 35-86 on John 3:1-11. This author also offers a lucid survey of recent opinion on the status of the sacraments in Johannine thought (17-22).

to life. But there is more to this story. As the present paper argues, the Lazarus story differs from all the other miracle stories told in John or, perhaps, from all the other miracle stories told in the New Testament, in its message and therefore also in its genre. The story may be termed a “miracle story with hidden mystagogic teachings.” Here, as often, “the Fourth Gospel has transformed an already flexible and subtle genre into something at once complex and yet simple,” to borrow the words of Harold Attridge.³⁵ As Attridge has shown, the gospel of John delights in playing with literary genres, and the gospel shows virtuosity in doing so.

My tentative search for other early-Christian miracle reports with hidden mystagogic meanings produced one post-biblical example: In the *Acts of Peter*, a work dating from around 200 C.E., the apostle is reported to have thrown a *sarda* – a dried herring or a salted tuna fish – into a water basin, and the dead fish came alive, to the astonishment of those who were present.³⁶ In the context of the story, the miracle provides evidence of Peter’s miraculous power, but according to one recent commentator,³⁷ the episode also alludes to the bath of baptism that brings the baptismal candidate from death to life in Christ.

The Fourth Gospel as a whole is clearly a mystagogic work. Its prologue introduces the theme: humans must be born anew. This happens ritually through baptism, but also through reading and meditatively pondering the teachings of the Johannine report, the pivotal event of which is the resurrection of Lazarus in chapter 11. The mystagogic character of the Fourth Gospel has often been recognised, less often the central position in it of the Lazarus episode, and rarely the import of this episode’s hidden baptismal theme.³⁸

³⁵ H. Attridge, “Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 121 (2002) 3-21.

³⁶ Acts Pet. 13; see R.F. Stoops, *The Acts of Peter* (Early Christian Apocrypha 4; Salem, Ore.: Polebridge, 2012) 62-63.

³⁷ E. Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (WUNT II.247; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 149.

³⁸ M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973) 174: “The Lazarus story, in both its Johannine and [Secret] Markan forms, was connected with baptismal resurrection.” M. Smith is the only one who has recognised the baptismal meaning of the Lazarus story, though he does not elaborate the point. Otherwise, I found only two casual references to the theme of baptism in the literature about John 11: (1) John 11:25-27 may echo a ritual dialogue that formed part of the baptismal liturgy; M. Labahn, *Jesus als Lebensspender: Untersuchungen zu einer Geschichte der johanneischen Tradition* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999) 422. (2) “I make no claim that the performance of John 11 was linked with baptism; but the story must clearly be brought into relation with Romans 6:1-11,” R. Griffith-Jones, “Apocalyptic Mystagogy: Rebirth from Above in the Reception of John’s Gospel,” in *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic* (ed. C.H. Williams and C. Rowland; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 274-299, 294 n. 48. – Finally, mention must be made of T.J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991) 203-214 who, on

To paraphrase Ross Chambers³⁹ on whose theorem of the implicit commentary we have relied: the Fourth Gospel is like a gift that comes with its price-tag attached in the form of commentary – and to which, through interpretation, we endlessly strive to restore the value and the meaning it has lost.

the basis of M. Smith's *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, explores the possibility of connecting the "Lazarus Saturday" of Eastern Christianity with a commemoration of Jesus as the baptiser of one of his disciples.

³⁹ Chambers, "Commentary in Literary Texts," 337.