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### He Who Came by Water and by Blood - A Summary and Critique of the Major Interpretations of 1 John 5:6

F Peter Brinkman

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir\_brinkmanf@csel.edu

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"HE WHO CAME BY WATER AND BY BLOOD"  
A SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE OF THE  
MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS OF 1 JOHN 5:6

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Exegetical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

by

F. Peter Brinkman

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Approved by:

Victor Bartling

Advisor

Friedrich W. Danker

Reader

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	Page
1	1
7	7
26	26
34	34
53	53
88	88



CHAPTER I

SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFICULTIES

It has been said that 1 John 5:6 is "the most perplexing passage in the Bible" and one of the most perplexing in the New Testament. It is perplexing, if for no other reason, for the variety of interpretations that have been offered.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFICULTIES . . . . .	1
II. THE NATURE OF THE ERROR . . . . .	7
III. REPRESENTATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF 1 JOHN 5:6 . . . . .	26
IV. SOME EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS . . . . .	44
V. THE INTERPRETATION OF 1 JOHN 5:6 . . . . .	53
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	56

while partially give rise to most everything that has been written on the passage.

Under the symbolical and the purely sacramental interpretation of this passage must be considered. For the very words "water" and "blood" seem to suggest to many that there are a little other references here to the the sacraments, baptism and the eucharist, instituted here on earth by our Lord Jesus Christ. Also to be considered is the view that the "water" and the "blood" refer to the two kinds of purification and sanctification.

## CHAPTER I

### SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFICULTIES

It has been said that 1 John 5:6 is "the most perplexing passage in the Epistle and one of the most perplexing in the New Testament." It is perplexing, if for no other reason, for the variety of interpretations that have been offered. This variety, in turn, hinges on many factors beyond the text itself.

The phrase "He who came by water and by blood" has been interpreted mainly within two circles of thought. The first is concerned with the symbolical meaning of the words; the second is more intent on establishing the historical setting and meaning of the passage. And within these two ranges of thought arise many variations and combinations. They can, however, be narrowed to four most significant lines of thought which generally give rise to most everything that has been written on the passage.

Under the symbolical view the purely sacramental interpretation of the passage must be considered. For the very words "water" and "blood" seem to suggest to many that there can be little other reference here than to the two sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist, instituted here on earth by the Lord Jesus Christ. Also to be considered in this area is the view that the "water" and the "blood" refer to general scriptural themes of purification and redemption. On the surface

both seem rather likely possibilities; but both are seemingly at least one step removed from any actual historical reference.

In the case of the remaining two general interpretations of the passage, much more stress is laid on the textual and grammatical considerations which turn the attention to the historical setting and, more specifically, to historical events in the life of Christ. It will be shown that it is the less acceptable view that connects the "water" and the "blood" with the effusion from the pierced side of the Savior on the cross. Furthermore, it will become evident that the view that has been more generally accepted holds that the "water" refers to the baptism of Christ, while the "blood" clearly refers to His death. Both interpretations seem to satisfy the grammatical indication of reference to definite historical events. They also avoid the philological pitfalls, especially the reference of "blood" to the Eucharist in the sacramental view for which there is no parallel in the New Testament.

It is significant that these two views specifically refer to the death of Christ. This augurs well for those who contend that the error of the day was the denial that the Christ remained with the man Jesus through the passion, although it was allowed that the Christ had descended upon Him at His baptism. In this setting the Baptism-Crucifixion view lends more meaning to the passage by setting up the contrast which the errorists had tried to maintain and then by emphasizing that He did not come only by the "water," but by the

"water" and the "blood."

Rarely is any but the latter view presented independently of the others. Once beyond the Baptism-Crucifixion reference, variations and combinations are many. The differences stem mainly from two major causes. First, there is a frequent failure to understand or refusal to acknowledge the importance of the historical situation as it can be reasonably determined. Secondly, the grammatical and philological implications of the text itself are too often ignored. Working outside the historical and textual factors that are essential to thorough exegesis, any number of plausible interpretations present themselves. Within them, on the other hand, the possibilities for variation are greatly reduced; and it is possible to render an intelligent conclusion with regard to the best possible interpretation of the passage.

Consequently, it is of some value to attempt to gather the historical data, the most representative views on the passage, and the textual factors in one place. In this way one may readily evaluate, on the basis of the historical and textual findings, the evidence which each of the variant views adduces. It is then possible to make some specific suggestion as to the preferable interpretation of the passage.

The value of this summary and critique depends on several basic considerations. The historical setting, including the theological atmosphere of the day, possible opponents of the writer of the Epistle and the likely polemical aim of the Epistle, must be established as accurately as possible. The

presentation of the major interpretations of the passage with a comparative critique is essential. And attention must be directed to the most significant textual matters, that is, to those factors that seem especially helpful for a correct interpretation. From these items must be drawn a summary conclusion as to the most likely and accurate interpretation of the verse in question.

The presentation of such a summary and critique necessarily requires that the widest possible range of the most representative commentaries and journals must be consulted. Only in this way will it be possible to compare and evaluate the various interpretations that merit attention.

And although the writers consulted do not represent a complete review of all that has been written on the problem, it can be maintained within the limitations of the materials studied that the representative interpretations of the passage provide an accurate picture of the lines of interpretation which have been followed generally.

The resultant conclusion at the same time grows out of the comparison of the variety of interpretations that have been offered and places the various possibilities in a comparative relationship that serves to point up their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Historically, it will be agreed that the error of Cerinthus, maintaining that the aeon Christ descended upon the historical Jesus at His baptism, but left Him before His death, might well be the error to which 1 John 5:6 is the

orthodox reply. But it is also possible that some interpreters have limited the meaning of the passage by this narrowing of the likely opponent to this one man's false teaching. For it will also be demonstrated that the current Gnostic attempt to undermine the Christian teaching that Jesus Christ, whose ministry began with His baptism in the Jordan, suffered the death on the cross as the Christ is quite well documented in history. Whether this error can be refined to mean specifically some form of Docetism or Cerinthianism is questionable. It is safe to say that the statement of verse 6 is the orthodox reply to the attempts of the writer's day to separate the historical Jesus from the Christ in any way.

That a comparison of the major interpretations of the passage definitely favors the Baptism-Crucifixion view is hardly accidental. To apply the "water" to Christ's baptism and the "blood" to His death satisfies the historical situation as outlined above as well as the grammatical and philological considerations of the text. What sacramental or symbolical overtones, if any, were or are conveyed by the use of the terms "water" and "blood" is a matter of conjecture. The grammatical considerations definitely point to historical events in the life of Christ; there are no other events in the ministry of Christ that fit the terms so well as the baptism and the crucifixion. Furthermore, it must be noted negatively that none of the other interpretations which will be considered so adequately fulfills both the historical and

textual requirements.

After careful consideration of the evidence, it will appear that it is hardly possible to adopt any view but the one that refers the "water" to the baptism of Christ and the "blood" to His death on the cross.

Little it is evident even from a casual reading of the First Epistle of John that he is dealing with certain forms of error that were evidently invading the domain of the Church (1:19-2:27; 4:1-5:13). It is not an easy matter to define this error either historically or theologically. In any attempt to establish the error of which and to which St. John might have been speaking, three factors inevitably come to the fore. They involve the person and message of St. John, the historical development of the prevalent errors, and the errors themselves.

On the least of these factors is the personality and approach of St. John himself. Indeed, this consideration has prompted some to contend that the heretic is not identified in nature at all. St. John is characterized as the theologian as opposed to one like St. Peter; he is depicted as the quiet master of the spiritual life; he stands as the calm, strong, unshakable one who excludes error by reconstructing truth.<sup>1</sup> This characterization of St. John is certainly on the point. But it does not really contribute significantly to the

<sup>1</sup>William Alexander, *The Principles of St. John*, in *The American Bible* (New York: Loewy & Alexander, 1911), p. 9.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NATURE OF THE ERROR

#### Polemical Orientation of 1 John

While it is evident even from a casual reading of the First Epistle of John that he is dealing with certain forms of error that were evidently invading the domains of the Church (2:18; 2:22-25; 4:1; etc.), it is not an easy matter to define this error either historically or theologically. In any attempt to establish the error of which and to which St. John might have been speaking, three factors inevitably come to the fore. They involve the person and approach of St. John, the historical background of the prevalent errors, and the errors themselves. Not the least of these factors is the personality and approach of St. John himself. Indeed, this consideration has prompted some to contend that the Epistle is not polemical in nature at all. St. John is characterized as the theologian as opposed to men like St. Peter; he is depicted as the quiet master of the spiritual life; he stands as the calm, strong controversialist who excludes error by constructing truth.<sup>1</sup> This characterization of St. John is certainly to the point. But it does not really contribute significantly to the

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<sup>1</sup>William Alexander, The Epistles of St. John, in The Expositor's Bible (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), p.9.



consideration of the polemical nature of the Epistle. It rather serves as the background for understanding the objectivity and methodology of his approach, which, in turn, is of great significance in understanding the apologetic thrust of his theses.

Bishop Westcott spends many words in demonstrating the objectivity of St. John's approach, almost to the exclusion of any polemical thrust in the Epistle.<sup>2</sup> But he also allows that "the pursuit of such a theme necessarily involves the condemnation and refutation of corresponding errors."<sup>3</sup> This fact points to a unique methodology. For the objective of St. John is to confute all manner of error "by the exposition of the truth realised in life."<sup>4</sup> This approach immediately makes the polemical thrust of the Epistle less obvious. Consequently, his "object is polemical only so far as the clear unfolding of the essence of right teaching necessarily shews all error in its real character. In other words St. John writes to call out a welcome for what he knows to be the Gospel and not to overthrow this or that false opinion."<sup>5</sup> Westcott's insight sounds the alert against all who would pinpoint the error too quickly; it is a reminder that the

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<sup>2</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (Third edition, 1892; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. xxxix.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

presentation is such that it stands to condemn and confute any error of any time or place that seeks by any means to muffle the clarion call of the Gospel. Nonetheless, there is abundant proof that the popular heretical philosophy of Asia Minor struck Christianity precisely in these vital places which so clearly stand out in the Epistle. It denied the incarnation; this denial resulted in a refusal to acknowledge and accept the redemption won for man in Christ; this, in turn, emptied the sacraments of their significance and efficacy.<sup>6</sup> This points primarily to the influences from without which were pervading the theological atmosphere of the day and undercutting the underpinnings of the Christian faith. Dodd underscores the reference to these same influences in contending that "at the beginning of the Christian era there was a movement or tendency within paganism towards a purer, more reasonable and more inward piety."<sup>7</sup> This tendency evidently found some satisfaction in various aspects of the Christian life and piety; but it also brought with it a rationalistic and philosophical attitude that too often proves attractive even to the Christian.

Whence came these aberrations? The pat answer has often merely attributed them to "Gnostic influences." In the past,

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<sup>6</sup>Alexander, op. cit., p. 273.

<sup>7</sup>C. H. Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, in The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. xvi.

Gnosticism has been largely assigned to the peculiar Hellenistic pagan and philosophical thought world in which the Christian Church found itself at this time. More recently, however, scholars have advanced the opinion that what is called Gnosticism in connection with the New Testament writings has its roots much deeper in Judaism than has heretofore been allowed.<sup>8</sup>

Such is the theological atmosphere of the world without. But both the Gospel of John and the First Epistle give us a further clue as to the actual situation to which St. John wrote. The Gospel is addressed to those who do not believe (John 20:31) in order that they may have life; the Epistle is written to those who do believe (1 John 5:13) in order that they may know that they have life. There is strong indication that the purpose of the latter writing is to reassure the faithful in a situation in which they stand in danger of being shaken from their belief.<sup>9</sup> There was apparently no all out struggle between the Church and the forces without. Rather the forms of error that seem to have been prevalent at this time were making subtle inroads into its hallowed circles.

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<sup>8</sup>No consideration of the Gnostic problem as such is contemplated here. Two recent works deal extensively with all of the complexities of Gnosticism: R. M. Wilson, The Gnostic Problem (London; A. R. Mowbray & Company, 1958) and Jean Doresse, The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics (New York: The Viking Press, 1960).

<sup>9</sup>J. A. T. Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of the Johannine Epistles," New Testament Studies, VII (October, 1960), 56.

Westcott carries the point to a doubtful extreme by contending that "the main temptations are from within," claiming that there is no trace of any recent or impending persecution.<sup>10</sup> The false teachers had evidently once at least claimed to be part of the Church (2:19), but now they are reported to be "coming" subsequent to their departure from the assembly. (2:18).

Although it is doubtful that the problem to which St. John writes arose completely within the Church, it may be granted that the period of apparent peace and tranquility in which the Church now found itself became a prime seed bed for the errors that filled the air. Thus Westcott is right when he draws attention to the fact that "the world was indeed perilous; but it was rather by its seductions than by its hostility."<sup>11</sup>

To say as much as possible without speculating is to point to the traditions of the rise of heresy in connection with attempts that were being made about this time to "divide Jesus Christ into the human Jesus on the one hand, mortal and imperfect as other men, and the Christ, a Divine aeon or emanation, that descended upon Jesus and was associated with Him from His baptism till the hour of His death."<sup>12</sup> With

<sup>10</sup>Westcott, op. cit., p. xxxiii.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. xxxvi.

<sup>12</sup>George G. Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), p. 219.

every effort, in view of this atmosphere of the day, to pinpoint more closely the specific sect or variation of teaching to which St. John addressed himself comes the danger that the full thrust of the full exposition of the Truth is weakened. "The separation of Jesus, the Son of Man, from Christ, the Son of God, is constantly made to the destruction of the One, indivisible Person of our Lord and Saviour."<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, it is necessary to endeavor to determine as accurately as possible, and as specifically as possible, the probable false teachers against whom St. John might have been writing. Dodd somewhat categorically attributes the difficulty at this time to "Hellenistic mysticism," "higher paganism," and "Gnosticism."<sup>14</sup> Practically every commentary will admit to this; for there is every reason to believe that the objective statement of the Truth as we have it in 1 John was made with the very errors of the Gnostics foremost in mind.

But what is far more important for the understanding of the Epistle is at least to attempt to discover the source of what came to be known as Gnosticism. For with Dodd's opinion, as noted above, it is possible to arrive at a somewhat academic and scholastic conclusion, attributing the polemic in 1 John to a philosophical struggle against the invasion of

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<sup>13</sup>Westcott, op. cit., p. xxxvi.

<sup>14</sup>Dodd, op. cit., p. xx.

"Hellenistic paganism." Schnackenburg identifies the error with a source much closer to the Christian teaching by connecting the false teachers and John's statement on ethical-practical grounds, stating that "these Gnostics think they do not need the forgiveness of the blood of Jesus (1:7; 5:6; 2:2; 3:8; 4:10,14).<sup>15</sup> This scholar is not content merely to ascribe the error to philosophical and pagan inroads into the Christian teaching, but rather allows the possibility that the errorists had at least enough of an understanding of the Christian teaching to allow them to twist it to suit their own purposes.

In summary, there is evidence that the Epistle is at least polemically orientated; that the theological atmosphere of the day lent itself to the error that seems to be exposed; that the opponents probably fit into the general category of Gnosticism, although the sources of this system of thought are not so clearly defined as to allow immediate narrowing of the opponent to one specific error or group.

#### Unity Or Variety Of Opponents

Before looking at the possible opponents individually, it will prove helpful to consider briefly whether St. John is writing to one specific error in every part of the Epistle

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<sup>15</sup>Rudolf Schnackenburg, Die Johannesbriefe, in Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder & Company, 1953), p. 19.

or to a variety of errors in various passages. Subsequent to this, it will also prove helpful to consider the situation specifically at 1 John 5:6, the passage with which we are here concerned. A. E. Brooke has rendered invaluable service along these lines by drawing together most of the major arguments and evidence with regard to the probable errors and their respective proponents.<sup>16</sup>

The exact nature of the false teaching with which St. John deals in this Epistle is a matter of dispute. There is little agreement among any of the interpreters, a fact that may serve to explain the variety of explanations that have been set forth on the difficult passage, 1 John 5:6. Brooke reports that "the opponents have been held to be Jews, or Judaizing Christians, or Gnostics, Judaizing or heathen, or some particular sect of Gnostics, Basilides, Saturninus, Valentinus or Cerinthus. Some have supposed the chief error denounced to be Docetism, others Antinomianism."<sup>17</sup> At the same time he calls attention to the fact that "a majority of interpreters still perhaps regard Cerinthianism, or teaching similar in character and tendency, as the main object of the writer's denunciation."<sup>18</sup> But this view has also been

<sup>16</sup>A. E. Brooke, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Johannine Epistles, in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), pp. xxviii-xlix.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. xxxviii.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. xxxix.



seriously challenged, especially by men like Wurm and Clemen,<sup>19</sup> largely on the basis of 1 John 2:23 ("No one who denies the Son has the Father. He who confesses the Son has the Father also.").<sup>20</sup> Those who appeal to this passage contend that it limits the doctrinal differences between John and his opponents to questions of Christology and that it demonstrates that with regard to the doctrine of the Father their views must have been identical, at least divided by no serious difference of opinion. This virtually excludes the Cerinthian view in that what we know of the teaching of Cerinthus seems to indicate that his doctrine of the Father was hardly more correct than his Christology.<sup>21</sup>

The unity of the false teaching seems to be accepted by the majority of writers on the subject. Brooke feels that there is a sense in which this can be properly understood. Judging from St. John's exposition of the Truth, the views which can be attributed to his opponents would be generally consistent. This is demonstrated in the Christological presentations of chapters two, four and five, where one could hardly argue that he is attacking the Christology of several different sects or groups. Furthermore, the writer seemingly does not denounce the Christology of one party and the ethical

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>All Biblical quotations are from the RSV, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>21</sup>Brooke, op. cit., p. xxxix.



shortcomings of another.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, there are a number of expressions in the Epistle which certainly suggest variety. In chapter 2 the writer characterizes the Antichrist as the one who "denies the Father" (2:22); but at the same time, he has already warned the readers that "now many antichrists have come" (2:18). Also in chapter 4 there seems to be reference to a variety of opponents in such phrases as "test the spirits" and "many false prophets" (4:1); and the reference to "every spirit" (4:2,3) further suggests that there were actually many who did not confess Jesus Christ. Brooke argues that the burden of the message throughout is that "truth is one, error is manifold."<sup>23</sup> He concludes rather convincingly that the Epistle is directed against various forms of teaching, although he still makes allowance for the fact that the writing may have been prompted by one special type of false teaching or one special event or incident in the history of His Church in connection with it.<sup>24</sup> This cautious approach is also represented by Büchsel, who refuses to limit the false teaching to that of the Docetists or Cerinthus, maintaining that the letter is addressed to anyone who denies the Person of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. xxxviii f.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. xl.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. xli.

<sup>25</sup>Friedrich Büchsel, Die Johannesbriefe, in Theologischer

If there is one passage or section, however, in which the writer seems to narrow his concern to one specific error or teaching, it is at 1 John 5:6. For here the opponents seem not only to be questioning the person of Christ, but there seems to be a special problem involved with regard to the way in which He came. Thus the writer carefully spells out that "this is He who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ," and underscores the assertion by adding emphatically "not with the water only but with the water and the blood." Whatever error is involved at this point, it is evident that it denied that Jesus, the Son of God, came by both water and blood, that both His sufferings and death were essential parts of His Messianic work of salvation. One can concur with Brooke's caution that "this passage should not be allowed to outweigh the impression left by the earlier chapters,"<sup>26</sup> but the fact still remains that in this passage the writer seems to deal with a much more specific problem. Whether or not this fact is admitted will largely determine the interpretation of the passage.

#### Major Possible Opponents

Generally, the suggested opponents for St. John's statements in the First Epistle fall into two main categories,

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Handkommentar Zum Neuen Testament (Leipzig: D. Werner Scholl, 1933), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup>Brooke, op. cit., p. xl.

Judaism and Gnosticism. In this categorization Judaism is usually spoken of as a somewhat unified opposition, whereas Gnosticism, as the term is used in connection with New Testament writings, is far more diversified. Such suggestions as Docetism and Cerinthianism are actually specific errors that preceded or grew out of the broader system of Gnosticism.

If it were granted that the writer had one single enemy in view, it cannot, of course, be the Jews who have never accepted Christianity. He could hardly have spoken of those who "have gone out from us" in connection with people who were never members of the Church.<sup>27</sup> Schnackenburg calls the contention that the Epistle is directed against Judaistic Messianic heresies impossible.<sup>28</sup> Equally improbable is the link that some interpreters have attempted to establish between this Epistle and the historical situation of the Jews at this time. Supposedly, since the Jews had been overrun and Jerusalem lay in ruins, the time was ripe for the Jews to lure back to the fold those who had defected to Christianity because of the fact that it had now become obvious that the Messiah to whom they clung was not really going to return at all, that they were mistaken in supposing that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of their nation.<sup>29</sup> It is hard to

the latter idea that the material world, on account of its

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. xli.

<sup>28</sup>Schnackenburg, op. cit., pp. 14f.

<sup>29</sup>Brooke, op. cit., pp. xlii.

conceive of the idea that some of those who had actually professed Christ to be the true Messiah would still have such a completely false hope with regard to His rule and kingdom. There is little doubt that it was those who denied that Jesus is the Christ (2:2) who are the foremost opponents in the Epistle. But Findlay rightly observes that this is "not the denial of Jewish unbelief, a refusal to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah; it is the denial of Gnostic error, the refusal to admit the Divine Sonship of Jesus and the revelation of the Godhead in manhood through His person."<sup>30</sup>

Thus Gnosticism is set in opposition to the view that the opponent at which the writer is aiming is Judaism. Even to attempt to reconstruct with any degree of accuracy the system or tenets of Gnosticism at the time 1 John was written is practically a hopeless task. We can, however, point to several rather general principles of Gnosticism which lend credence to the assertion that it was probably the object of whatever is polemical in 1 John.

Plummer points to two great Gnostic principles which produced opposite results in ethical teaching: ascetism and antinomian profligacy. These two principles are "the supremacy of knowledge and the impurity of matter."<sup>31</sup> Especially the latter idea that the material world, on account of its

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<sup>30</sup>Findlay, op. cit., p. 218

<sup>31</sup>A. Plummer, The Epistles of St. John, in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1883), p. 20.

manifest imperfections, is assumed to be evil runs through almost all Gnostic teaching. Consequently, the incarnation becomes incredible; it would mean that the Divine Word must have consented to be united with an impure material body. It is this difficulty which led to Docetism, the theory that Christ's body was not a real one, but a phantom which only appeared to exist.<sup>32</sup> Robinson has alerted us to a further development, calling attention to the lack of any reference to the Gnostic redeemer in the Epistle. It might well have been that St. John's opponents "denied the need of any mediator; they claimed direct knowledge of God, to have the Father without the Son."<sup>33</sup>

This leads to another erroneous teaching of the Gnostics. They claimed a metaphysical dualism which locates evil in matter rather than in moral choice. This is, in fact, a denial of the reality of sin, of the need to do anything about sin, of the incarnation, of the efficacy of Christ's suffering and death. "Alternatively, because it denies the reality and goodness of matter, it denies the fact that Christ came in the flesh; and if one denies the Incarnation, one denies the Atonement; Christ did not come 'with the blood.'"<sup>34</sup> Such a denial makes the knowledge of both God the Father and Jesus

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 19

<sup>33</sup>Robinson, op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

Christ as Son impossible. Findlay's brief summary of the effects and essence of Gnosticism is worth quoting here:

The incarnation, the miracles, the resurrection, the ascension--what are they but a beautiful poetic dream, a pictorial representation of spiritual truth, from which we must extract for ourselves a higher creed, leaving behind the supernatural as so much mere wrap-page and imaginative dress! This rationalism loudly asserts today; and this the Gnosticism of the late apostolic age was already, in its peculiar method and dialect, beginning to make out.<sup>35</sup>

The peculiar Christological emphasis of 1 John 5:6 can hardly be directed against any other known error of the day. Its clear presentation of the full person of Jesus Christ in the context of His Messianic work militates directly against the Gnostic mutilation of these very foundations of the Christian faith.

Consequently, there is hardly a question as to whether or not Gnosticism is involved in the Epistle, especially at 1 John 5:6. But the problem still revolves about the kind of Gnosis or Gnosticism which is involved, whether Docetism, or that which is concretely connected with the teaching of Cerinthus, or another. Since these individual considerations have some bearing on the interpretation of the passage under consideration, they must also be briefly considered.

There are those who have claimed Docetism as the error to which St. John addressed himself, especially in relation to the general atmosphere of the day.<sup>36</sup> Still others consider

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<sup>35</sup>Findlay, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>36</sup>Alexander, op. cit., pp. 39ff.

it beyond question that the peril against which the Epistle was intended to arm the Church was the spreading influence of Gnosticism, but, more specifically, the Docetic form of Gnosticism.<sup>37</sup> What is, perhaps, more evident is the simple observation that this Docetism is a more limited error as opposed to the more complete system of error involved in Gnosticism as such. Whether it preceded or grew out of Gnosticism need not be a concern for the consideration at hand. Docetism thought a true incarnation unthinkable, mainly because of its view of the universe in which all matter is impure. It would be impossible to think of the Divine Word as united with an impure material body. This meant that the Human Nature of Christ and the incidents of His earthly career could be little more than an illusion.<sup>38</sup>

There is little doubt that the Epistle, especially at 5:6, stresses the vital significance of the incarnation for redemption. A Docetic Christology that so seriously affected the true life and work of Jesus Christ left men very little in the way of a Redeemer or a salvation. One is almost inclined to believe that this faction was more interested in reconciling the facts with its philosophical views on the separation of the finite and infinite and the absolute separation of God from the world than in reconciling its own

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<sup>37</sup>Robert Law, The Tests of Life (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), p. 26.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 32.



finite existence with the infinite God about whom they philosophized. Findlay correctly notes that "Christ Jesus the Lord was, from the outset, to them a non-reality; the critique of their philosophy dissolved the facts about Him into a play of the senses, a Docketic spectacle."<sup>39</sup>

But even those who stress that the major opponent at which the Epistle is directed must be Docetism narrow the opposition at 1 John 5:6 to a specific Docetic tenet that the aeon Christ descended upon Jesus at His baptism and departed again from Him at His passion.<sup>40</sup> Of this specific tenet of Docetism Cerinthus is said to have been the prime exponent.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, although the quotations adduced are somewhat brief and it is difficult to evaluate their objectivity, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus and Epiphanius point to this type of teaching. And especially the latter two cite particularly the opinions of Cerinthus.<sup>42</sup>

Briefly stated, the Cerinthian error denied that Jesus was the Christ; it asserted that there was only a temporary and incomplete association of Jesus with the Christ.<sup>43</sup> Apparently, these false teachers acknowledged the baptism of Jesus, but would not acknowledge the suffering and death in

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<sup>39</sup>Findlay, op. cit., pp. 219f.

<sup>40</sup>Law, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>41</sup>Westcott, op. cit., p. xxxiv.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. xxxivf.

<sup>43</sup>Law, op. cit., p. 94.



humanity.<sup>44</sup> It appears that the passion was not considered an essential part of the Messianic work of salvation, for while they admitted that His baptism by John was a real mark of His Messianic career, a means by which He was fitted to carry out His work for men, these opponents of Christian orthodoxy refused to see a similar mark in the crucifixion. He came by water, but not by blood.<sup>45</sup>

The ultimate source of this error need not be explored here. It appears at this point that the false teachers are still concerned with a problem faced at a very early stage of Gnosticism, that is, with the relation between the real man Jesus of Nazareth and the higher power with which He was brought into temporary union.<sup>46</sup> Recent discoveries, especially at Qumran, indicate that the eventual development of the second century Gnostic system probably has its deepest roots in Judaism itself.<sup>47</sup> Thus the common conclusion that Judaism and Gnosticism are mutually exclusive is hardly

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<sup>44</sup>Schnackenburg, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>45</sup>Brooke, op. cit., p. xlvi.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. xlv.

<sup>47</sup>For treatment of the most recent discoveries and theories see the following: Raymond E. Brown, "The Qumran Scrolls and The Johannine Gospel and Epistles," Catholic Biblical Quarterly, XVII (July, 1955), 403ff. A. M. Hunter, "Recent Trends in Johannine Studies," Expository Times, LXXI (June, 1960), 164-167. E. Haenchen, "Neuere Literatur zu den Johannesbriefen," Theologische Rundschau, XXVI (January, 1960), 1-43. J. A. T. Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of The Johannine Epistles," New Testament Studies, VII (October, 1960), 56-65.

valid. In fact, their close connection might well serve to explain much of the common terminology, even the possibility of such an intricate Christological error as is evidently in the mind of the writer at 1 John 5:6.

A. E. Brooke concluded that "a majority of interpreters still perhaps regard Cerinthianism, or teaching similar in character or tendency, as the main object of the writer's denunciation."<sup>48</sup> In general, this conclusion is still valid today. Whatever has arisen in the form of question to this conclusion can best be explained by a statement of Westcott published considerably before Brooke's work:

The main questions of debate are gathered round the Person and Work of the Lord. On the one side He was represented as a mere man (Ebionism): on the other side He was represented as a mere phantom (Docetism): a third party endeavoured (sic) to combine these two opinions, and supposed that the divine element, Christ, was united with the man Jesus at His Baptism and left Him before the Passion (Cerinthianism).<sup>49</sup>

The likely opponent, even at 1 John 5:6, should be limited to Cerinthianism only as it stands in the complete context of its day and only as it has been identified with any "ism" for all time that has in any way attempted to encircle, elude, or eradicate the full person and work of the Savior Jesus Christ.

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<sup>48</sup>Brooke, op. cit., pp. xxxviiiif.

<sup>49</sup>Westcott, op. cit., p. xxxiv.

### CHAPTER III

#### REPRESENTATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF 1 JOHN 5:6

##### Summary Of The Major Interpretations

Of the various interpretations which have been proposed for this passage, most fall into two very general categories. Either the water and the blood are referred to facts or events in the earthly career of Jesus as the Messiah; or they are taken to be symbolic of certain mysteries. In fact, the four interpretations that deserve consideration on the basis of the frequency with which they have been suggested are evenly divided as to these two categories. Those which look to the historical facts or events consider the water and blood either to be the baptism and crucifixion of Christ or the water and blood which flowed from His side on the cross (John 19:34). Those that take the water and blood symbolically apply them either in a general way to purification and redemption or specifically to the sacraments of Baptism and of the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup>

It must be mentioned at the outset, however, that of the four interpretations referred to, only the one which sees in the water and the blood a reference to the baptism and crucifixion of Christ is held exclusively by any number of

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<sup>1</sup>A. Plummer, The Epistles of St. John, in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1883), p. 158.

representative commentators. The preponderance of interpreters hold to some sort of "combination" view which leans more or less to one of the suggested meanings, depending upon the personal inclination of the individual.

This illustrates and explains to some extent why the sacramental view, although it obviously appeals to many, is held exclusively by none of the representative commentaries which were consulted. Even Alexander, although he seems to come out exclusively for the sacramental interpretation, leaves himself an area of retreat. For he speaks of the water and blood as ever witnessing.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, he must either trace the water and blood back to their historical institution as sacraments or to the particular historical events from which they take their efficacy or to some other origin. There are other pitfalls, some of which will be considered below, but this single example should serve to indicate why so few have been able to come out for an exclusively sacramental view.

Much the same applies to the view that holds the water and blood to be symbolic of purification and redemption. It is a view that can hardly be held exclusively and is most often thought of in "combination" with other suggestions. In this case Haupt would be an outstanding example. The idea

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<sup>2</sup>William Alexander, The Epistles of St. John, in The Expositor's Bible (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), pp. 28f.

that the water and blood symbolize the purifying and reconciliation effected through Christ appeals to him greatly. From this point of view, he sets out to find at least one passage of Scripture that will support the idea, and he finds the passage for which he is looking in a manifestly historical event (John 19:34), and even allows that "this symbolical interpretation of the water and blood by no means excludes the possibility that the sacraments are also included in these expressions."<sup>3</sup> Thus he has drawn into his interpretation all of the four suggested interpretations except the most likely one, probably because it is the one that would contradict most strongly his bent for interpreting the passage symbolically.

In the case of the third possibility, in spite of the fact that it comes as the result of a quest for an historical event with which to connect the water and blood, there is scarcely an interpreter who holds exclusively to the view that the water and blood can only refer to the blood and water from Christ's pierced side on Calvary (John 19:34). Here again one commentator makes a rather strong case for the absolute connection between 1 John 5:6 and John 19:34, but he cannot constrain himself to omit a suggestion that the water and blood also allude to the sacraments as confirming

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<sup>3</sup>Erich Haupt, The First Epistle of St. John, translated by W. B. Pope (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), pp. 304ff.

symbols.<sup>4</sup> This connection with John 19:34, it must be added, is found in nearly every "combination" view, whereas it is the one interpretation that is least likely to be found as an exclusive view.

An interesting observation can be made in connection with the first three suggested interpretations. In each case where the writer contends for either of the symbolic or the John 19:34 views or any combination of them, there is a conspicuous lack of any attempt to link the passage with the historical setting to which St. John had probably addressed himself. This failure to make at least some historical contact allows the exegetical imagination to wander uncontrolled. And this brings us to the most tenable of the four suggestions.

As might well be expected, Brooke's excellent historical introduction allows him to lead the way in setting forth the interpretation of the passage which best fits the historical problems as they have been considered. He contends that Christ's only purpose in coming to earth was to fulfil His Mission as the Messiah. In connection with this Mission he holds two events to be most prominent: "the Baptism by which He was consecrated to His Messianic work, and the Passion by which He completed His work of atonement and propitiation."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Robert S. Candlish, The First Epistle of John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 460ff.

<sup>5</sup>A. E. Brooke, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Johannine Epistles, in The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 131.

In His baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus was declared to be the Son of God; the same is true of His death, for it was not like that of any other man.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Jesus Christ was both baptized and crucified is absolutely essential to any faith in Him; taken together they mean that Jesus is the Christ or Son of God incarnate and that as such He is the Savior of the world and not merely its Enlightener,<sup>7</sup> as the Gnostics may have contended.

This Baptism-Crucifixion view has remained the most tenable explanation of the passage down to the present time. In fact, there is some evidence that it becomes the more favorable as time wears against the less historically oriented interpretations.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, even though it stands as the most tenable solution and as the one possible interpretation that can at least ideally be held exclusively, few writers have failed to draw in lessons from the other views and to make for themselves a "combination" view also in connection with this suggestion.

Bengel seems to have been one of the first to connect the reference to the baptism and death of Christ with the Christian sacraments, although he does not go into a great

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>7</sup>C. H. Dodd, The Johannine Epistles, in The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 130.

<sup>8</sup>Rudolf Schnackenburg, Die Johannesbriefe, in Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder & Company, 1953), pp. 231ff.



amount of detail in forming the combination.<sup>9</sup> It is almost as though no explanation were necessary; he writes as though it were an obvious and self-evident connection. As a better example of this method of combining the common view with the sacramental, C. H. Dodd's comment at this point is most noteworthy:

The baptism and the crucifixion are authenticated facts in history, and as such bear witness to the reality of the incarnate life of the Son of God: but further, the Church possesses a counterpart to the baptism of Christ, in the sacrament of Baptism, and a counterpart to His sacrificial death, in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Both sacraments attest and confirm to believers the abiding effect of the life and death of Christ. It seems likely that our author is thinking of these two sacraments as providing a continuing witness to the truth of Christ's incarnation and redemptive death. Their value as evidence lies precisely in their being concrete, overt, 'objective' actions, directly recalling (or 're-presenting') historical facts of the Gospel, while at the same time they are vehicles of a supra-historical life in the Church. As verba visibilia, they confirm the prophetic Word inspired by the Spirit. Thus the apostolic faith is authenticated against all false teaching by a threefold testimony: the living voice of prophecy, and the two evangelical sacraments; and the three of them are in accord.<sup>10</sup>

This appears to be the most common combination of views.

But it is Plummer who calls attention to the fact that commentators like Bede and Westcott have combined the reference to the baptism and death of Christ with the reference to the blood and water at John 19:34. Indeed, Westcott thinks that this additional reference in the passage is "beyond

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<sup>9</sup>John Albert Bengel, Gnomon, translated by Charlton T. Lewis (Philadelphia: Perkinpine & Higgins, 1862), p. 806.

<sup>10</sup>Dodd, op. cit. pp. 130f.



question."<sup>11</sup> It is Westcott who also speaks of "sacramental overtones" in the passage, first giving the impression that his view is completely aside from any sacramental interpretation, then subtly introducing it.<sup>12</sup> Haenchen, in a recent article, says that the reference in the passage is first to the baptism and death of Jesus but that "by a displacement of thought" the author speaks also of the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and of the Holy Spirit which acts in them.<sup>13</sup>

To summarize, there are four commonly espoused interpretations of the passage: that which refers the blood and water to the general areas of purification and redemption; that which refers them to the Christian sacraments; that which holds them to be references to the pierced side on the cross from which flowed blood and water (John 19:34); and that which refers them to the historical events of Christ's baptism and death. Combinations of two or more of the suggested explanations are most common. The following brief critique will show that of the four, only the view that holds the water and blood to refer to Christ's baptism and death is able to stand independently.

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<sup>11</sup>Plummer, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>12</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (Third edition, 1892; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), pp. 181ff.

<sup>13</sup>E. Haenchen, "Neuere Literatur zu den Johannesbriefen," Theologische Rundschau, XXVI (January, 1960), 1-43, passim.

### A Critique Of The Interpretations

At this point we offer a general critique of the most significant interpretations of 1 John 5:6 listed above in order to assess their comparative validity. For this critique the view that the water and blood refer generally to a purifying and redemptive process can be omitted. Properly understood, it becomes part of the Baptism-Crucifixion interpretation; understood apart from this explanation, it has practically no validity whatever. In addition, it is the least significant of the major expositions of the passage. A word will have to be added, however, on the possibility and significance of "combination" views. Often the most improbable view thrives in combination with one of better standing.

Law, in calling attention to its inadequacy, claims that an interpretation based on a supposed reference to the sacraments was inevitable, and notes that Lutheran commentators generally have leaned in this direction.<sup>14</sup> He himself seems to feel that the writer with the words "water" and "blood" was using a kind of verbal shorthand with which he was recalling the exposition of the themes with which the readers were already very familiar.<sup>15</sup> This explanation is hardly more adequate than the one he tries to eliminate. Neither is

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Law, The Tests of Life (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), p. 95.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

Haupt's argument any more valid that because the Epistle can never go beyond the Gospel and because, as he feels, every use of water or blood in the Gospel is symbolical, there can be no direct reference to the sacraments here.<sup>16</sup>

Far more pertinent for the elimination of the possibility of a reference to the sacraments in this passage is the fact that water and blood are here emphasized in opposition to each other and that the aorist participle ὁ ἐλαδών ties them to historical events in the past.<sup>17</sup> In opposition to this assertion, Büchsel is probably in error in allowing that the sacramental interpretation is grammatically possible.<sup>18</sup> With the aorist participle, the writer is looking back and is not thinking of the sacramental or liturgical life of the Church. In conjunction with this statement, Schnackenburg finds the sacraments rather in verses 7f.<sup>19</sup> If there is a place in the Epistle where the sacraments are referred to concretely, it would be in the succeeding verses, where the water and blood are called witnesses, rather than designated as the means by which Jesus Christ came to carry out His Messianic mission.

A rather recent treatise by Wolfgang Nauck speaks to

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<sup>16</sup>Haupt, op. cit., pp. 300f.

<sup>17</sup>Schnackenburg, op. cit., p. 231.

<sup>18</sup>Friedrich Büchsel, Die Johannesbriefe, in Theologischer Handkommentar Zum Neuen Testament (Leipzig; D. Werner Scholl, 1933), p. 83.

<sup>19</sup>Schnackenburg, op. cit., pp. 231f.

this very point. He too claims that the ἕδωκεν in verse 6 makes it impossible for the water and blood to refer to anything but the baptism and death of Christ.<sup>20</sup> But he then proceeds to develop at length the sacramental character of the succeeding verses. Perhaps Büchsel suggested this course by his hypothesis that in view of the apparent errors, this might well have been a congregation without the Eucharist, some kind of Baptism sect.<sup>22</sup> For it is from this point that Nauck proceeds in a study that eventually takes him into a consideration of the various sacramental rites and their parallels which seem to have been current at this time.<sup>23</sup> But it has little direct bearing on the interpretation of verse 6 and does not merit consideration here.

As a further consideration, if the interpretation which applies the water and blood to the Christian sacraments is allowed to stand, one must think of the ἕδωκεν as referring to Baptism and the ἔδωκεν to the Lord's Supper. One familiar with New Testament terminology might think immediately of Baptism in connection with the ἕδωκεν, although even this is not absolutely certain; but the ἔδωκεν would at best only remotely suggest the Eucharist, would much sooner remind of the

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<sup>20</sup>Wolfgang Nauck, Die Tradition und der Charakter des ersten Johannesbriefes, in Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957), p. 147.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-182.

<sup>22</sup>Büchsel, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>23</sup>Nauck, op. cit., pp. 147-182.

shedding of the Savior's blood for the sins of mankind.<sup>24</sup>

By far the most challenging and sensible suggestion with regard to the sacramental view comes from Findlay. He feels that the verse stands in much the same relation to the Christian Sacraments as the related teaching of chapters 3 and 6 in the Fourth Gospel. It can hardly be disputed that in neither case does the writer make any direct allusion to the ritual ordinances; but in both instances there seems to be a clear analogy of meaning. The two sacraments may well symbolize the facts and truths assumed by John in either place. But the sacramentarian in effect paraphrases the verse to read not in Baptism only, but also in the Eucharist. In doing this, he substitutes the signs for the things signified, and puts the sacraments into the place which belongs to Christ alone.<sup>25</sup> Properly understood, the thought gives opportunity to claim a place for the sacraments even in verse 6; but Findlay's reference to the sacraments merely as "signs" is not a happy situation; their efficacious power must be underscored.

The effort to connect the water and blood at 1 John 5:6 with the blood and water flowing from the pierced side of the Savior in John 19:34 has proved especially fruitless. To be sure, this view has the advantage of an historical event which satisfies the requirements of the aorist participle. One

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<sup>24</sup>Brooke, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>25</sup>George G. Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), pp. 384f.

might even excuse the inversion of the terms by assuming that it was done intentionally in the Epistle to emphasize the blood. But this incident could hardly be thought of as the means whereby He accomplished His work.<sup>26</sup> This incident, actually taking place after the death of Jesus, could hardly satisfy the portrayal of His historic ministry, His coming by water and by blood.

This view is held very early by St. Augustine, of whom Plummer reports that he is the one who asserted that "in these two passages alone, of all Scripture, are blood and water placed together." It is also Plummer who notes that even if this were true, it would still amount to nothing more than a presumption that the one passage could be connected with the other, and the assumption would at once be weakened by the change in the order of the words.<sup>27</sup> The statement, of course, is not true (cfr. Leviticus 14:52; Hebrews 9:19). Furthermore, it is quite improbable and incredible that St. John would speak of effusions from the dead body of Christ as the Son of God coming by water and by blood.<sup>28</sup> Finally, if this interpretation is followed, it is most difficult to determine the precise meaning of the emphatic additional reference to the fact that He came "not in the water only, but in the water and the blood."

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<sup>26</sup>Brooke, op. cit., pp. 132f.

<sup>27</sup>Plummer, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

On the one hand, Büchsel flatly denies that John 19:34 in any way clarifies the problem in 1 John 5:6;<sup>29</sup> on the other, Law is a bit more lenient in allowing that the passage in the Epistle may serve to explain the symbolical meaning which is apparently attached in the Gospel to that incident of the Passion, but he also makes it plain that the incident in the Gospel sheds no light upon the passage in the Epistle.<sup>30</sup>

Whenever the link between the two passages is attempted, it results in reaching for what must of necessity be nothing more than a speculative symbolic or emblematic connection of which neither passage says or implies anything. It results in something like the conclusion of Findlay, when he says that John's witnessing of the blood and water from the pierced side "became in his eyes emblematic of the double efficacy of Christ's salvation."<sup>31</sup> As implied above, the real objection to this view is the difficulty of seeing how that incident could be regarded as characteristic means by which the "coming" was accomplished. Brooke's conclusion well states the case:

It (John 19:34) may well have suggested to the writer the peculiar significance of two aspects of the coming, but can hardly be regarded as an event by means of which the coming was fulfilled. On the other hand, the Baptism and Crucifixion were both important factors in the

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<sup>29</sup>Büchsel, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>30</sup>Law, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>31</sup>Findlay, op. cit., p. 384.



carrying out of the Mission which He came to fulfill, and in this light they stand out more prominently than any other two recorded events of the ministry.<sup>32</sup>

The interpretation which holds that the two great events of the ministry of Jesus Christ are referred to by the water and the blood is doubtless the most valid interpretation. The terms used in 1 John 5:6 direct one to look for definite historical events in the history of His ministry by which it can be said that His Mission was accomplished, His coming effected. The Baptism and the Crucifixion, standing at the beginning and the end of His ministry respectively, are the only events in His life that fulfill these requirements.<sup>33</sup>

One such term, directing us to look for the definite historical events, is the ἐλθών. The aorist participle is taken by the majority of commentators to refer to a definite historical event. In addition, they usually indicate that "coming" when spoken of the Christ includes the notion of His mission (John 1:15,27,30; 3:31; 6:14; 7:27,31,41, etc.). Consequently, when the text reads that the Son of God "came by means of water and blood," it is reasonable to understand that He fulfilled His mission by the Baptism with which His public work began and the bloody death with which He finished it.<sup>34</sup> And these two events, the Baptism and the Crucifixion, both serve to underscore the fact that He is the Son of God. At

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<sup>32</sup>Brooke, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>34</sup>Plummer, op. cit., p. 159.

His Baptism this very thing is declared; His death was not like that of any other man.<sup>35</sup> The Baptism and the death form the complete circle of His work in redeeming mankind. At the same time they demonstrate that He is truly the Son of God and also that He is true man, God in man made manifest.

This is a roadblock for all who would try to separate the Christ from the historical man Jesus; and just for this reason this interpretation has found wide acceptance. It connects so closely with the historical situation as we have come to see it. St. John would hardly have gone to the trouble of formulating verse 6 so carefully, of adding the emphatic "not in the water only, but in the water and in the blood," had there not been at least some danger of misunderstanding or denial of this truth. This is the only interpretation which allows that the historical situation of the day lay behind the terminology and emphasis of the verse, most likely of the whole Epistle. Its insistence upon the water and the blood as the means whereby the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came is certainly understandable when compared to the basic Docetic tenet that the aeon Christ descended upon Jesus at His baptism and departed again from Him before His passion. The heresy taught that the Christ came by water, the baptism, but denied that He came by blood also, the passion.<sup>36</sup> One

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<sup>35</sup>Brooke, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>36</sup>Law, op. cit., p. 96.

need not even go so far as to identify this specific error with the teaching of Cerinthus (some, indeed, have contended that a complete identification is hardly possible); it is still quite obvious that it is this type of false teaching which was facing the Church at that time.<sup>37</sup>

To go beyond this apparent connection, it should be noted that this very reference (1 John 5:6) has been used as the clue to the definition of the heresy and its background. For it gives every evidence of being the orthodox reply to the very type of error that was traced in chapter two and of which the interpreters who adopt the Baptism-Crucifixion view are so certain. What this error would absolutely not acknowledge is that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, could actually have died. This violated their concept both of the Messiah and of God. They would acknowledge that Jesus was the Christ by virtue of His baptism, but they could not allow that He had been put to death as the Christ. To this error John replies that He is the Christ only insofar as He came both by water and by blood, by virtue of His passion, as well as His baptism.<sup>38</sup> The logical conclusion with regard to a view which so carefully takes into account both the grammatical and historical factors in arriving at its end would be that it could hardly be found in combination with any of the

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<sup>37</sup>Schnackenburg, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>38</sup>J. A. T. Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of The Johannine Epistles," New Testament Studies, VII (October, 1960), 62.

previously mentioned suggestions. But this is not the case. Bengel, who backtracks to include the baptism and crucifixion in his suggestion that "water" and "blood" refer to John 19:34, feels that at His baptism Christ undertook to fulfill all righteousness, this He completed by the shedding of His blood; and when this was done, blood and water flowed from the side of Jesus Christ, being dead on the cross.<sup>39</sup> Even Plummer, who has one of the finest expositions of the Baptism-Crucifixion view, cannot resist calling attention to an early reference of Tertullian to the sacramentally symbolic meaning of the blood and water in this passage:

He had come by means of water and blood, just as John had written: that He might be baptized by the water, glorified by the blood; to make us in like manner called by water, chosen by blood. These two baptisms He sent out from the wound in His pierced side, in order that they who believed in His blood might be bathed in the water; they who had bathed in the water might likewise drink the blood.<sup>40</sup>

This example will suffice to show how even this most common and, presumably, most correct interpretation is seldom left to stand alone, but is also usually connected to one or the other of the interpretations under the influence of "over-tones" or an "apparent displacement of thought."

From this additional information on the major interpretations of 1 John 5:6, some summary conclusions can be drawn. Of the major views, only that which refers the "water" and

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<sup>39</sup>Bengel, op. cit., p. 807.

<sup>40</sup>Plummer, op. cit., p. 159.

the "blood" to the definite historical events of Christ's baptism and death satisfies both the textual and historical requirements. Apart from the grammatical and historical moorings which dictate this view, the remainder of interpretations usually are found in some "combination" view that holds several references to be possible, depending on what importance one attaches to the sacraments and to the symbolical significance of blood and water in the New Testament. The careful wording and emphasis of the passage suggest that it is the orthodox reply to some insidious error that was invading the Church at this time. The passage perfectly repels the Gnostic, Docetic, possibly Cerinthian view that the Christ had joined the man Jesus at His baptism but had left Him before His death, a denial of the full incarnation and of the saving death of the Messiah. Few commentators avoid completely any reference to the sacraments or to the incident recorded at John 19:34.

Essential to a correct interpretation of this passage, these philological and grammatical points demand careful consideration. Thus they are set off and explained in the succeeding paragraphs, although they have been treated in the interpretations of some of the commentators in the previous chapter. The crucial nature of these matters in interpreting the passage demands their further consideration even at the risk of seeming unduly repetitious.

Most important in establishing the true meaning of the passage is the proper use and understanding of the use of the active participle with the article. Many grammarians have gone to

## CHAPTER IV

### SOME EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### The Terms Used in 1 John 5:6

It is hardly accidental that the interpreters who have presented the most tenable solution to the verse under consideration have also gathered together most of the historical and exegetical data relative to the passage. One can hardly arrive at a correct interpretation of the passage without an understanding of what is known of the historical situation in which it was written, the theological atmosphere, the current errors. And it is impossible properly to relate the passage to this historical situation without a consideration of some of the most telling philological and grammatical points.

Because they are so essential to a correct interpretation of this passage, these philological and grammatical points merit special consideration. Thus they are set off and expanded in the succeeding paragraphs, although they have been included in the interpretations of some of the commentators in the previous chapter. The crucial nature of these matters in interpreting the passage demands their further consideration even at the risk of seeming unduly repetitious.

Most important in establishing the true meaning of the passage is the proper understanding of the use of the aorist participle with the article. Many grammarians have gone to

great pains to explain the fact that the aorist participle is essentially timeless. Two things evolve from this discussion which are essential to the interpretation of the ὁ ἔλθων. One concerns itself with the result of this essential timelessness; the other leads to an additional point with regard to the special use of the aorist participle with the article in the New Testament.

One of the emphases that comes out of the discussion of the timelessness of the aorist participle is that it is most properly never used of a situation where the action is in progress, or where there is an existing result, but always of a simple fact.<sup>2</sup> It is always used of an action conceived of as a simple event;<sup>3</sup> thought of, not as in progress, but merely as a simple fact or event.<sup>4</sup> This would immediately preclude any merely symbolical reference on the part of the writer. He must be thinking of the fact that this Jesus had His coming effected by a simple event or fact, in this case two events characterized and conveyed by ἦδωκε and ἔλθε. This observation alone would seem to rule out any other than antecedent time. For a "coming," as would have to be the meaning if the participle is allied with the ἔσσει, would

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest De Witt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek (Third edition; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955), pp. 59-63; 68-70.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 68.



necessarily involve a series of facts or events.

In addition, it can now be quite definitely demonstrated that the aorist participle with the article is not really timeless at all in actual usage. A long list of examples from the papyri shows that when the aorist participle is used with the article it regularly refers to past action, much the same as a sentence with the aorist indicative.<sup>5</sup> It can also be shown that this is the New Testament usage, that there are innumerable cases where this very usage is clear (John 3:15; 5:13; 11:2; Revelation 1:5; Luke 8:36; Acts 9:21; Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 5:10).<sup>6</sup> From this one can only conclude that the aorist participle with the article definitely refers to past time, including the normal reference to simple fact or event.

One other aspect of the ὁ ἔλθων needs consideration. Some have connected this with the ὁ ἐρχόμενος, the coming one, apparently a standing name for the Messiah who would here be recognized as the Son of God (Matthew 11:3; John 1:15,27; Hebrews 10:37; Revelation 1:4,8).<sup>7</sup> ὁ ἔλθων might well be a clear reference to this technical sense of "He that cometh" (Matthew 11:3; Luke 7:19f.; John 1:15,27;

<sup>5</sup>Edwin Mayser, Grammatik der Griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter & Company, 1926), II, 1, 172f.

<sup>6</sup>Victor Bartling, "The First Sunday After Easter," in Sermonic Studies (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), I, 296f.

<sup>7</sup>George G. Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 382.

6:14; 11:27; 12:13). Westcott concludes that this would make ὁ ἑλθών the equivalent of "He that fulfilled the promises to the fathers, as the Saviour sent from God."<sup>8</sup> But it must be remembered that the emphasis is not so much on the "coming" as it is on the means whereby He has come. In this verse the "coming is in the past; the special significance lies in the fact that it has been accomplished, specifically accomplished by water and by blood.

Also these terms, ῥέμα and αἷμα, have been dealt with quite extensively in connection with this passage. Both have a rich background of meaning in Biblical and extra-Biblical usage. This is, perhaps, the very thing that prompted Haupt to come out so strongly for a symbolical interpretation of the passage, centered in the general idea that the water stands for purification, the blood for redemption.<sup>9</sup> But there are factors within the passage which make such explorations somewhat irrelevant to the meaning of the verse. It must be realized that the sense of ὁ ἑλθών, which distinctly points to a past historic fact, determines that these terms also have an historic meaning, and refer to definite events characteristic of the manner in which the Lord fulfilled His office upon earth. ῥέμα and αἷμα

<sup>8</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (Third edition, 1892; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. 181.

<sup>9</sup>Erich Haupt, The First Epistle of St. John, translated by W. B. Pope (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), pp. 302f.

contributed in some way to reveal the nature and fulfillment of His work.<sup>10</sup> What is most important is to determine of what two events the ἵδωμ and the αἶμα are the means by which "He came." Only the Baptism and the Passion of the Lord Jesus Christ meet these requirements. To go beyond the requirements of the verse itself and load the terms with every other possible emphasis of Scripture is just as serious as failing to extract the full meaning of the text.

There is also some question along these lines with regard to the full title Ἰησοῦς Χριστός and its meaning here. Some have suggested that by this time the term had become nothing more than a simple appellative. Others have failed to mention the insertion of the Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. Neither approach is justified. If it had assumed its purely appellative form by this time, it would not have been possible to use it in any other form; it would occur only in the combination Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. But St. John uses Ἰησοῦς alone at 1:7. And he seems to begin to point toward this combination already at 2:22, when he asks, "Who is the liar but he who denies that Ἰησοῦς is the Χριστός?" And at the beginning of the fifth chapter the emphasis is on the "one who believes that Ἰησοῦς is the Χριστός." Findlay calls the Ἰησοῦς Χριστός in this verse "a solemn reassertion and summation of the Christian creed in two words."<sup>11</sup> It is safe

<sup>10</sup>Westcott, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>11</sup>Findlay, op. cit., p. 361.

to conclude that the official designation of the Lord had not by this date so far coalesced with His personal name that it would be natural to read the two as a single subject of definition; it was still a matter of controversy whether, and in what sense, Ἰησοῦς is Χριστός.<sup>12</sup>

Two things stand out in the use of the full title here. First, it gives the denial of the false Gnostic conception of the Person of Christ a triple thrust. "He came by water and blood," He is Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, and He came "not with the water only, but with the water and the blood." In every phase of His work on earth, He was fully the man sent from God, God-incarnate, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. Secondly, this placing of the full name ascribes to Ἰησοῦς Χριστός a place which could not be occupied or held by any other person or object. It is Ἰησοῦς Χριστός alone to whom this demonstrative formulation applies, "this is He who came by water and blood."<sup>13</sup> This is the essence of the one saving and conquering faith, to behold in the crucified Nazarene (Ἰησοῦς) the Son of God seated at the right hand of power (Χριστός).<sup>14</sup> It remains only to consider the two prepositions used in the related phrases of the verse, ἐν with the genitive and ἐν with the dative. It is rather important to the

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>13</sup>Rudolf Schnackenburg, Die Johannesbriefe, in Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder & Company, 1953), p. 230.

<sup>14</sup>Findlay, op. cit., p. 219.

interpretation of the passage to determine whether the change of preposition is purely stylistic or whether some fine shade of meaning or peculiar emphasis is intended.

Plummer goes to some length to differentiate between the prepositions and their respective shades of meaning. He feels the  $\delta\iota\omega$  must refer to the "means by which" the coming was accomplished, the  $\epsilon\nu$  to the "element or sphere in which" it came about. Thus Christ's Baptism and Death were in one sense the means by which, in another sense the spheres in which His work was accomplished.<sup>15</sup> Plummer lists a number of examples with which he supports this categorization; but the division is largely the result of the somewhat artificial classifications of the standard grammars.

The contention that the change in the preposition from one phrase to the next can only be a stylistic variation is probably more correct.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it is just as plausible that both  $\delta\iota\omega$  and  $\epsilon\nu$  denote attending circumstances and here designate the essential marks of Christ's historical coming and mission, both best translated "with."<sup>17</sup> Moule supports this suggestion by pointing out that the "dividing line is very thin" and by suggesting a number of passages in which

<sup>15A</sup> Plummer, The Epistles of St. John, in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1883), p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Schnackenburg, op. cit., p. 231.

<sup>17</sup> Bartling, op. cit., pp. 302f.

the idea of attendant circumstances seems likely.<sup>18</sup> Finally, if there were a difference in meaning like that outlined above, it would mean that the writer switched from "means" in the initial statement to "circumstances" in the emphatic addition. This would detract appreciably from the intended emphasis. It is best taken as a stylistic variation.

What is more, the stylistic variation in connection with the preposition underscores the precise nature of the emphatic addition (οὐκ ἐν τῷ ἕρσει μόνον, ἀλλ' ἐν τῷ ἕρσει καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι); the emphasis is placed on the importance of the historical events to which the water and blood refer. It is most essential to note the peculiar emphasis on the αἶμα (especially in connection with the incident at John 19:34, where the water is the surprising thing). It is the peculiar purpose of this verse to point out clearly that the coming is not "with water alone" (a fact in itself which the errorists probably acknowledged), but that it is "with water and with blood."

Taking all of the above into consideration, 1 John 5:6 is best rendered as follows: "This is the same one who came with water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water alone, but with the water and with the blood."

Any interpretation of the passage apart from its philological, grammatical and historical moorings is not faithful

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<sup>18</sup>C. F. D. Moule, An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), pp. 57f., 80.



to the text. The emphatic nature of the verse implies that it was the antidote to some form of error. The grammatical structure refers to historical events for the evidence. There are no events in the life of Christ more parallel to the terms ἵδωμ and ἀΐμα than His own baptism and crucifixion, the circumstances under which He began and ended His work of redeeming mankind.

But what of the "overtone" and the "displacement of thought" to which so many interpreters refer? It is impossible to determine what additional meaning the writer had in mind for the ἵδωμ and the ἀΐμα in composing the passage. It is just as impossible to determine precisely what the terms suggested to the readers of his day. Of one fact we can be unmistakably certain. Without these two cardinal events in His historical ministry, the Baptism and the Crucifixion, all of the "overtones" that have been emphasized by so many through the years would be little more than meaningless noise. It is certainly valuable to call attention to the many possible connections of thought and terminology. But it is most important for the efficacy of all of Scripture to see first the reference to His great work of redemption from which all else takes its beginning.



## CHAPTER V

### THE INTERPRETATION OF 1 JOHN 5:6

Although numerous and various interpretations have been offered for the passage in question, the above critique of these interpretations, together with the textual considerations, point unmistakably to the view that holds the "water" and the "blood" to be references to the baptism and death of Christ respectively. To underscore this conclusion, there is the sheer weight of the evidence as set forth by the commentators in behalf of this interpretation. But more important is the evident faithfulness with which this view deals with the text itself. And its correlation to the historical setting of the day seems to provide the anchor which guards against drifting away from the sure mooring of the text.

Grammatically, the aorist participle is crucial to the meaning of the passage, especially with the article. It is hardly the construction that would be expected if a sacramental or symbolical meaning were the primary intent. As it stands, on the other hand, it must refer to definite, simple events in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. This rules out every major interpretation except the Baptism-Crucifixion view and that which sees in the verse a reference to John 19:34, the blood and water flowing from the pierced side of the Savior.

The latter view is most improbable philologically. The

inverted order of the words "water" and "blood" and the explicit use of the full title "Jesus Christ" point to a double emphasis hardly in keeping with the phenomenon on the cross. This becomes more clear as it is shown that the emphasis in the words relating to this phenomenon is on the water, whereas in the passage here the writer emphasizes the fact that He came "not by water only, but by the water and by the blood." The only evident correlation between the "water" and the "blood" in terms of definite historical events in which the full person, Jesus Christ, is involved is with the baptism and crucifixion of Christ, the events with which He began and ended His mission on earth in redeeming lost mankind.

Historically, no other view or combination of views treats the prevailing situation of the writer's day so completely. Whether or not one is willing to run the risk of narrowing the probable opponent to Cerinthus--this necessarily limits the scope of St. John's polemic, possibly unduly--it is apparent that the theological atmosphere of the day greatly challenged the Christian teaching regarding the person of Christ. There was general concession that the Christ had descended upon the historical man Jesus at His baptism, but it would not be allowed that this Christ also suffered and died. Apparently, it is to this situation that the writer addresses himself in insisting that Jesus Christ came both by "water" and by "blood."

There is hardly room to allow more or less in

interpreting the verse. Beyond the definite contacts between the text and the historical situation as it can be reasonably reconstructed, any other interpretation immediately casts off and sets itself adrift in the sea of conjecture and speculation.

To insist on the coming of Jesus Christ through both His baptism and His ignominious death on a cross is to hold fast the confession of the faith in Jesus Christ in the face of any rationalizing or mysticizing attempt of any kind or of any time.

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