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## THE SEMIOTICS OF REPENTANCE AND ATONEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Karol Wojtyła (at present the Pope John Paul II), while still Cardinal of Cracow, said during the Lenten retreat he gave in the Vatican in 1976, „The right to administer and receive purification is part of the very depth of human existence and also marks the deepest paths of reflection on human life and the life of whole societies”<sup>1</sup>. The process of human moral purification is undoubtedly complex and of many aspects, involving the rational as well as the volitive and emotional faculties and also external attitudes. Repentance and atonement are at the centre of this process of purification<sup>2</sup>.

The object of semiotics is to arrive at „a formal descriptions of that which we call meaning, which is immanent in the text and therefore not directly perceptible”<sup>3</sup>. My aim being the representation of a thematic panorama on the subject of repentance and atonement in the Old Testament<sup>4</sup>. I shall restrict myself to an outline of (1) terminology, (2) penitential liturgy, (3) the

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<sup>1</sup> *Znak, któremu sprzeciwiać się będą* [A Sign of Contradiction], Poznań—Warszawa 1976, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> See R.J. Sklba, *The Call to New Beginnings: A Biblical Theology of Conversion*, „Biblical Theology Bulletin” 11:1981 p. 67—73; W. Kasper, *Die Gnade des neuen Anfangs. Versöhnung und Busse*, Freiburg 1983; J. Blank, J. Werbick (Hg.), *Sühne und Versöhnung*, Düsseldorf 1986; Ch. Duquoc, *Le pardon de Dieu*, „Concilium” 204:1986 p. 49—58.

<sup>3</sup> J. Calloud, *A Few Comments on Structural Semiotics: A Brief Review of a Method and Some Explanation of Procedures*, „Semeia” 15:1979 p. 51—83 (see p. 53). For a fuller discussion see: *Groupe d'Entrevernes. Analyse sémiotique des textes. Introduction — théorie — pratique*, Lyon 1979 (1985); A. Hénault, *Les enjeux de la sémiotique. Introduction à la sémiotique générale*, Paris 1979; Idem, *Narratologie, sémiotique générale, les enjeux de la sémiotique II*, Paris 1983; O. Genest, *Analyse sémiotique et Bible*, „Laval Théologique et Philosophique” 36:1980 p. 115—128; J. L. Ska, *„Our Fathers Have Told Us” Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Subsidia Biblica 13), Roma 1990.

<sup>4</sup> I continue to use the expression „Old Testament” because it is traditional (cf. already 2 Cor 3,14) but also because „Old” does not mean „out of date” or „outworn” In any case, it is the permanent value of the Old Testament as a source of Christian Revelation. See *Dei Verbum*, 3 and 15; *Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, June 24, 1985*, [in:] *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue 1970—1985*, Rome—Vatican 1988, p. 308. See also: E. Zenger, *Das Erste Testament. Die jüdische Bibel und die Christen*, Düsseldorf 1991, ch. VI.

teachings of the prophets, (4) the psalms of repentance, (5) the wisdom literature, and finally (6) attempting to make a few generalised observations.

### *Terminology*

In the liturgical language there are noteworthy expressions such as „to seek the face of Yahweh” (eg. 2 Sm 21,5; Hos 5,15); „to seek Yahweh” (eg. Am 5,14); „to humble oneself before Yahweh” (eg. 1 Kgs 21,29). However, the special term expressing the idea of repentance in the Hebrew Bible is the root *šub*, to which M.W. Holladay has devoted a separate monograph<sup>5</sup>. The verb *šub* appears 1060 times in the Hebrew Bible, chiefly in the Qal (683 times) and in the Hifil (360 times). All the Semitic languages share a common root, *twb*; for example, it appears

— on the Akkadian tablets bearing inscriptions of Aramaic names from the times of Hammurabi;

— on the Sinai inscriptions, dated by W.F. Albright as 15th century B.C.;

— in the Ugarit texts (34 times as recorded by C.H. Gordon in the material collected by him);

— the related Aramaic verb, *tub*, occurs in Aramaic texts from the Assyrian ostrakons right up to the biblical texts of Daniel and Ezra.

Characteristically, the root *sub* was rendered in the Greek translation of the Bible by 79 different words, which shows on the one hand the dynamic nature of this Semitic expression, and on the other hand the changes of orientation in the later reception of this idea especially by Hellenistic Judaism. The related nouns, such as *šubah*, *šibah*, *mešubah* and *tešubah*, and the adjectives *šobab* and *šobeb* are rare. However, in Judaism the term *tešubah* became a technical term meaning repentance<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Root šubh in the Old Testament*, Leiden 1958. See also: D. Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law*, Cambridge 1947 (=New York 1969); K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia. A Comparative Study* (Studia semitica neerlandica, 22), Assen—Maastricht 1985; R. Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law* (Cahiers de la Revue biblique, 26), Paris 1988; E. Otto, *Rechtsgeschichte der Redaktionen im Kodex Ešnunna und im „Bundesbuch“ Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche und rechtsvergleichende Studie zu altbabylonischen und altisraelitischen Rechtsüberlieferungen (OBO 85)*, Freiburg/Schweiz—Göttingen 1989.

<sup>6</sup> For more details, see: H. Heinz, K. Kienzler, J.J. Petuchowski (Hg.), *Versöhnung in der jüdischen und christlichen Liturgie* (Quaestiones disputatae 124), Freiburg—Basel—Wien 1990; L. Klenicki, *Tešuvah: pokuta i zadośćuczynienie we współczesnym judaizmie* [Tešuvah: Repentance and Atonement in Jewish Tradition], [in:] *Żydzi i chrześcijanie w dialogu* [Jews and Christians in Dialogue]. *Materiały z Międzynarodowego Kolokwium Teologicznego w Krakowie-Tyńcu 24—27 IV 1988* [Papers presented at the International Colloquium in Kraków-Tyńiec, April, 24—27, 1988] pod red. W. Chrostowskiego, Warszawa 1992, p. 194—221.

In the religious context the word *sub* meant a turning away from evil, a turning towards God. We thus have two elements of repentance as understood in this way: (a) an external change in lifestyle that is easily noticeable and (b) an inner turning away from evil and towards God. With time new Hebrew terms appeared to express these two aspects: the inner and external aspects of repentance. For example, the word *nōham* means contrition, a state of inner regret for having committed sin, whereas terms derived from the roots *spd*, *bky* and *hyl* are characteristic of penitential rituals.

The semantic evolution of the expression for repentance was determined by the development of the concept of sin in biblical tradition. The interiorisation of this concept, in other words the more and more profound understanding of the essence of sin from the inner human aspect undoubtedly had an effect on the interiorisation of the concept of repentance: inner attitudes became more important than the outward signs. In the Greek Bible two mutually complementary semantic fields developed to express the Hebrew terms for repentance: the verb *epistrephein* meaning a change in the pattern of behaviour, hence the external aspect of repentance, and the verb *metanoein* and noun *metanoia* denoting a change in the way of thinking, the inner aspect<sup>7</sup> This was later to be reflected in the terminology of many modern languages, for example the English words „repentance” and „atonement”, and the French „pénitence” and „pardon”

### *Liturgy of Repentance*

The entire religious culture of biblical Israel was founded on the concept of God's Covenant with His people<sup>8</sup>. This Covenant extended into the life of the whole community (the communal covenant), but also (later) into the individual life of every member of that community (the individual covenant). Whenever the community failed to keep the obligations required by the Covenant and a period of adversity in national life ensued, the idea re-emerged of expiation, repentance and atonement for the transgressions and wrongs committed. The Book of Judges may serve as an example of the original theology of repentance in the Old Testament (cf. Jgs 2,4; 10,10; and 20,26). A series of signs or gestures denoting repentance came to be practised: the tearing of one's garments, the wearing of penitential sackcloth, fasting, lying in the dust, uttering cries of anguish, weeping, lamenting, and the offering up of expiatory prayers and sacrifices. As regards prayers, a noteworthy point is the prayer of intercession offered up by the national leader or prophet,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. Haudebert, *La métanoia, des Septante à Saint Luc*, [in:] *La vie de la Parole. Mélanges offerts à P. Grelot*, Desclée 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. E.W. Nicholson, *God and His People. Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*, Oxford 1986.

eg. by Moses in Ex 32,30 ff or by Solomon in 1 Kgs 8,22—53<sup>9</sup>. The latter in particular contains certain phrases typical of Israel's early penitential literature in the period of the Kings:

When you hear, forgive... And forgive your people who have sinned against you... May your eyes be open to your servant's plea and to the plea of your people Israel, and may you listen to them whenever they cry out to you.

In the course of time penitential liturgy underwent a development, and after the period of captivity became fairly widespread, with the involvement of prophets. Some exegetes put forward the hypothesis that certain parts of the prophetic scriptures (eg. Jer 14; Hos 6; and Amos) are as it were liturgical „libretti”; and even that some of the prophetic scriptures, such as Habakkuk, Joel or Nahum, may be interpreted using a liturgical „key” The debate on the so-called ritual prophets, initiated by S.Mowinckel against the adherents of Wellhausen who saw the prophets in contradistinction to the priests, has been widely publicised and is by no means closed yet<sup>10</sup>.

These liturgies may readily be connected with the psalms of lamentation and are referred to or quoted in Neh 9; Is 63,7—64,12; Bar 1,15—3,8; Dn 9,3—19; Hos 6,1 ff; 7,14; 14,2 ff; Jl 2,15—18; and Jon 3,7 f. They are submitted to criticism by the prophets as merely external symbols of repentance with no interior change of disposition. An expression of such symbolism was the ceremony for the Day of Atonement (*yom hakippurim*), when the High Priest, laying his hands on a scapegoat, admitted the sins of the whole nation, subsequently having the goat driven off into the desert to Azazel (cf. Lv 16)<sup>11</sup>. The prophets endeavoured to purge the idea of repentance of the external formalities, bringing it back to the interior dimension.

### *The Traditions of the Prophets*

The focus of the penitential and expiatory teachings in the Hebrew Bible is to be found in the prophets, who could thus aptly be called the preachers

<sup>9</sup> Cf. E. Aurelius, *Der Fürbitter Israels. Eine Studie zum Mosebild im Alten Testament* (Coniectanea Biblica, OT Series 27), Lund 1988.

<sup>10</sup> For an evaluation see: J. Thompson, *Penitence and Sacrifice in Early Israel Outside the Levitical Law*, Leiden 1963; E. Lipiński, *La liturgie pénitentielle dans la Bible (Lectio divina 52)*, Paris 1969; J. Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience. The asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, 18), Leiden 1976; J. Chmiel, *Un kérygme prophétique ou une liturgie de repentance en Osée 6,1—6? „Analecta Cracoviensia” 15:1983 p. 99—104*; A. Schenker, *Versöhnung und Sühne. Wege gewaltfreier Konfliktlösung im Alten Testament. Mit einem Ausblick auf das Neue Testament* (Biblische Beiträge, 15), Freiburg/Schweiz 1981; Idem, *Versöhnung und Widerstand. Bibeltheologische Untersuchung zum Strafen Gottes und der Menschen, besonders im Lichte von Exodus 21—22* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 139), Stuttgart 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. R. Girard, *Le bouc émissaire*, Paris 1982.

of repentance. The prophets were the voice of Israel's true repentance. While not denying the value of the symbols of penitence they called for an inner change of disposition, for the total rejection of evil and return to God. The „search for (the face of) God” was to rest not in the carrying out of ritual, but in a genuine transformation of inner disposition and lifestyle.

Chronologically, the prophet's exhortations to repentance begin in the Scripture with Nathan's mission to bring the adulterous king David to repentance (cf. 2 Sam 12). The prophet's teaching is addressed directly to the king, who is to lead the whole nation in penitential rituals. Hence an important point: repentance is a social phenomenon involving the social élite, too. Nobody is exempted from participation, not even the sovereign. An analogous instance of this occurs in Jonah's mission to the inhabitants of Nineveh: „The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust” (Jon 3,5 f).

The 8th-century prophet Amos speaks of repentance in the context of punishment (4,6—12), reiterating the harrowing refrain, „yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord” Conversion is a necessity: „This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: Seek me and live” (5,4). Conversion also determines a more profound sense of religious practice (cf. 5,21 f)<sup>12</sup>.

The prophet Hosea links the concept of repentance with *hesed*, the concept of love (cf. 6,1—6)<sup>13</sup>. In his final mission Hosea describes genuine conversion in the future (14,2—10): „Return, o Israel, to the Lord your God... Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins’”

The preaching of repentance by then prophet Isaiah can be understood in the context of his calling and the Remnant of Israel theology. The description of his calling in chapter 6 (which may be seen as influenced by 1 Kgs 22,19—24) contains elements of repentance and purification. The prophet is aware of his sins, his own transgressions but also — and perhaps chiefly — those of the community of which he is a member: „For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (6,5b). But he experiences purification: „your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (6,7c). The word *kapar* means not merely the covering up, but the erasure and removal of sin<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. E. Zenger, *Die eigentliche Botschaft des Amos. Von der Relevanz der Politischen Theologie in einer exegetischen Kontroverse*, [in:] E. Schillebeeckx (Hg.), *Mystik und Politik. Theologie im Ringen um Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Johann Baptist Metz zu Ehren*, Mainz 1988, p. 394—406.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Chmiel, art. cit. (see note 10); D. R. Daniels, *Hosea and Salvation History. The Early Traditions of Israel in the Prophecy of Hosea* (BZAW 191), Berlin—New York 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. B. Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen. Studien zur Sühnetheologie der Priester-*

The prophecy of Isaiah denounces the sins of „a sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption” (1,4). This situation cannot be changed by divine worship that is merely superficial and formalistic (cf. 1, 10—15), but only by repentance: „Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!” (1,16b—17a). This is the first stage of Isaiah’s prophecy.

But already in the second stage of his teaching we have the drawing of conclusions from the calamities afflicting the nation and the return to God, the search for the Lord (cf. 9,12f). The experience of the sacred, of the holiness of God leads to repentance and creates the possibility of salvation: „This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength’” (30,15).

The theological concept of the Remnant of Israel became for Isaiah a springboard to the subject of conversion. The symbolic name of Isaiah’s son, Shear-Yashub (meaning: „A remnant will be converted” or „will return”), is evidence of this: „A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God” (10,21)<sup>15</sup>.

The prophet of the need for repentance and conversion was Jeremiah, who earned the title of „doctor of conversion”<sup>16</sup>. For Jeremiah *šub* became a favourite word, well nigh a motto for his preaching, occurring 112 times (at the root *sub*) and additionally 9 times in the substantive form *mešubah* and the adjectival forms *šobab* (twice) and *šobeb* (once). Jeremiah even indulged in word-play using *šub* (cf. 3,12; 14,22; 15,19) and could be called a master in „the art of *šub*”

Apart from expressions for repentance adopted from earlier prophets, especially from Hosea, Jeremiah used a whole series of new phrases, such as „mending one’s ways”, „turning away from the paths of evil”, „circumcising the heart”, „purifying the heart”, „serving Yahweh”, „giving glory to Yahweh”, and numerous expressions using the verb „to listen”

The starting point in the process of repentance and conversion is the rejection of sin by the human seeking contact with God, asking about God, acquiring a knowledge of Him and serving Him. We shall examine a few verses from Jeremiah on repentance and conversion.

In Jer 3,12—13 the idea is brought up of the possibility of Israel’s conversion providing she acknowledges her guilt. The prophet makes a strong

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*schrift und zur Wurzel kpr im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (WMANT 55), Neukirchen 1982.

<sup>15</sup> On the teaching of Deutero-Isaiah see: E. Farfan Navarro, *El desierto transformado. Una imagen deuteroisaiana de regeneración* (Analecta Biblica 130), Roma 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. D Bourguet, *Des métaphores de Jérémie* (Etudes Bibliques, N.S. 9), Paris 1987; W Przybyś, *Teologia nawrócenia w księdze proroka Jeremiasza* [The theology of conversion in Jeremiah], „Analecta Cracoviensia” 20:1988 p. 265—288.

appeal based on the word-play *šubab mešubab yisrael*: „Return, faithless Israel” The motivation for conversion is provided by the fact that God is merciful — *hasid* (this word occurs only twice in conjunction with the word „Yahweeh” in the Hebrew Bible; cf. Ps 145,17). Similarly in Jer 31,20 the man returning to God may count on the mindfulness (*zakar*) and mercy of Yahweh: „I have great compassion for him” (*rahem 'arahamennu*) — an absolute infinitive, a Hebrew term that is virtually untranslatable.

In Jer 3,21—25 the conversion of the people must begin with inner repugnance and shame for the sins committed: „Let us lie down in our shame and let our disgrace cover us”

In Jer 4,1—4 the hearts of those returning to God must, as it were, undergo circumcision. It is thus a thoroughly internal aspect of repentance. Similarly in Jer 24,5—7 conversion is the gift of a new heart from God: „I will give them a heart to know me...they will return to me with all their heart” (v.7).

In Jer 7,3—11; 11,1—6; 31,31—34 real conversion comes about as a return to keeping faith with the covenant through a new covenant: „Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them” (11,6). „The time is coming...when I will make a new covenant” (*berit hadašah* — 31,31). This new covenant will consist in God’s putting His law in their minds and inscribing it on their hearts (31,33). The culmination and conclusion of the process of repentance and conversion will be the forgiveness and forgetting of sins: „For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (31,34). Assessing Jeremiah’s theology of repentance as a whole, we may say that he saw the process of conversion as the bringing up to date of the covenant, which was to be personal and internal in nature.

The prophet Ezekiel also stressed the personal character of conversion: everyone is called, yet each person individually has to carry out the process of renewal within himself (see Ez 18; 33,10—20): „I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways” (33,11)<sup>17</sup>.

### *The Psalms of Repentance*

Those psalms in which the spirit of repentance is voiced are also a significant part of Israel’s prayer<sup>18</sup>. They are supplications for a return to God both of the whole community and of individuals. The word *šub*, which occurs very frequently in other parts of the Old Testament, is rarer here. Ho-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. M. Joyce, *Individual Responsibility in Ezekiel 18?* (Studia Biblica 1978), Sheffield 1979, p. 185—196.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. E. Beaucamps, *Israel en prière* (Lire la Bible 69), Paris 1985.

wever, there are exhortations to a inner return to God, to the admission of one's sins and contrition. Renewal means new creation: „Create in me a pure heart, a God” (Ps 51,12). The prayer of the penitent community is known as the lamentations, a group of psalms beseeching God to bestow His grace on His people and keep dangers away. Those psalms that emphasise the communal aspect of repentance include the collective lamentations such as Ps 79,1—5; while perhaps the most noteworthy individual lamentation is Psalm 51, *Miserere*, a psalm of human remorse, so characteristic of the spirit of internal and individual repentance.

From the thematic point of view, the psalms of repentance contain a variety of penitential themes. Some entail the admission of one's sins (Psalms 40; 41; 65 and 90), whilst others are prayers for forgiveness (Psalms 25; 39 and 79), and still others are built round the observation that God has forgiven sins in the past (Psalms 65; 85; 86 and 103).

In Christian tradition there is an established set of the so-called Seven Penitential Psalms (*septem psalmi poenitentiales*: Nos. 6; 31; 37; 50; 101; 129; 142 — according to the numeration in the Vulgata). The expression „penitential psalms” is first to be come across in Possidius, who was a friend of St. Augustine of Hippo and his first biographer, who wrote that St. Augustine prepared for death by reciting the penitential psalms. Cassiodorus in the 6th century enumerates precisely 7 penitential psalms, on the grounds of the symbolic meaning of seven. Since the early Middle Ages the Seven Penitential Psalms have been treated with a great deal of respect and associated with a traditional piety.

### *The Wisdom Literature*

In the Greek books of the Old Testament repentance and atonement are seen in the framwerk of the earlier books. In this respect the Book of Ben Sirach is characteristic. Repentance is the forsaking of sin (Sir 48,15). Postponement of repentance runs the risk of sudden destruction (Sir 5,7). One has to beg forgiveness for one's sins (Sir 21,1). No-one should be ashamed of admitting their sins (Sir 4,26a) and no-one should hinder anyone else who wants to turn away from their sins (Sir 8,5).

Enoch is a pattern of repentance (Sir 44,16). This is a midrash on Gen 5,22—24; since all mankind before the deluge was wicked (see Gen 6,5), Enoch must have been repentant. A new element is introduced in Sirach 17,24 and Wisdom 11,23; 12,10—17; it is God who gives repentance or the way of repentance, leads men to repentance, gives an opportunity of repentance by judging only a little.



## Conclusions

The following points may be drawn in conclusion from the foregoing brief outline of the subject of repentance and atonement in the Old Testament:

1. The subject of repentance and atonement plays an important part in the Old Testament, already in its early traditions. Penitence was presented in a framework of ritual and in this way there arose the liturgies of repentance.

2. With the passage of time the penitential liturgies became very formalised and rigid, restricted merely to the external manifestations, an expression of which was the institution of the „scapegoat”

3. The teaching of the prophets are a reaction against the rigidity of the penitential rituals of Israel. The prophets preach the necessity of inner repentance as the renewal of the covenant with God and the gift of a new heart from Him. The process of repentance and atonement culminates in God's forgiveness and forgetting of sins.

4. The institution and preaching of repentance and atonement played an important socio-religious role in biblical Israel. Repentance involved all social classes and meant the renewal of the relationship between the individual, the community and God. It was thus as it were the socio-religious regulator of the life of the community and the individual.

5. The individual decision to do penance could be inspired and facilitated by the memory of the bad consequences of the lack of repentance and forgiveness — a series of personal and national disasters. The prophets emphasised the aspect of awareness of evil consequences.

The goal of semiotics is achieved with the aid of models of the text. Models are to discover how meaning functions. The model best suited for this purpose appears to be the semiotic square<sup>19</sup> In the semiotic square of the Old Testament the fact of God's forgiveness was indisputable. In Christian tradition divine forgiveness is given a human dimension<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> For a fuller discussion of the model of the semiotic square in the biblical exegesis, see: J Chmiel, *Un approche sémiotique de rhm*, „Analecta Cracoviensia” 16:1984 p. 389—393; R.C. Culley, *Exploring New Directions*, [in:] *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*. Ed. D.A. Knight and G.M. Tucker, Philadelphia 1985, p. 167—200; P.J. Milne, *Vladimir Propp and the Study on Structure in Hebrew Biblical Narrative* (Bible and literature series, 13), Sheffield 1988.

<sup>20</sup> For the horizon of forgiveness in the New Testament, see my article: *The Semiotics of Forgiveness in the New Testament*, [in:] *Essays in honour of A. Jankowski OSB*, Kraków (in the press).