

# Michał Wojciechowski

---

## Symbolic Acts of Jesus

---

Studia Warmińskie 51, 151-162

---

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Michał Wojciechowski  
Wydział Teologii  
Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie

## Symbolic Acts of Jesus

**Słowa kluczowe:** czynności symboliczne, czynności prorockie, Jezus historii, cuda, sakramenty w Biblii.

**Keywords:** symbolic acts, prophetic acts, Jesus of history, historical Jesus, miracles, sacraments in the Bible.

**Schlüsselworte:** symbolische Handlungen, zeichenhafte Handlungen, Jesus der Geschichte, Wunder, Sakramente in der Bibel.

### I. Introductory remarks

#### 1. The notion of the symbolic act

There are some difficulties on an introductory level which have to be resolved before we begin a closer examination of the symbolic acts of Jesus. The symbolic acts of Jesus were never recognized as an important category, neither inside the Gospels nor in the thought of modern commentators. Symbolic acts were rarely perceived as one category even though contemporary interest in symbolism should have led to their appreciation.

The notion of a symbolic act is not a biblical one and it seems necessary to describe its proposed understanding. The idea of a symbol is not applied here to words or images, but to gestures, deeds and planned situations which serve as an announcement, cause, part or just image of the represented state of things (a situation symbolizing another situation). The contributions of Ricoeur and Tillich towards the understanding of a symbol could be mentioned since the notion of a symbolic act could be subject to further philosophical analysis. Although, we shall limit ourselves to its applications in the Bible.

The symbolic acts of Jesus are obviously not the only ones we know about. In the Gospels, we find some actions performed by other people, but commented on by Jesus. Jesus even submitted himself to other people's significant acts. There are also some symbolic acts mentioned elsewhere in the NT. They occurred in contemporary Judaism (Zelotes) and even accompanied healing activities of Hellenistic magicians.

An even larger number of symbolic acts can be found in the OT; they help us to better understand both the general properties of the acts of Jesus as well as their particular features, discerning them from the OT background. The most important and the most discussed are the symbolic acts of prophets<sup>1</sup>, but we should also mention the liturgical symbolism in gestures used for communication and miracles.

More than 30 symbolic acts of prophets are described in the Bible. They are an important element of the prophetic mission. Most often they serve to illustrate or to announce some events from the life of a nation, usually disasters. Older narratives (1-2 Kings) contain a description of the act and its interpretation, later ones (Hos, Isa, Jer, Ezek) are formulated rather as an "instruction" from God to prophet, detailing the way the action should be performed as well as describing its meaning.

Nobody doubts the historicity of the prophetic acts. Their descriptions, despite some theological elaboration, belong to the historical genre; the acts were performed in public in well-defined circumstances; they are remarkably varied, original and sometimes shocking. Only 1 Kings 13 and Ezek 24:1-14 seem to be pieces of allegorised fiction; doubts about other texts are not important. The prophetic acts were performed consciously and intentionally.

The symbolic acts in the OT are quite varied and numerous. Nevertheless, we can discern their main features. An action marked by a symbolic meaning adds dramatic appeal and strength to the word, in particular to the word of prayer and to the word of God proclaimed by the prophets; the biblical symbolic acts are both "communicative" and "theological"<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes they were also credited with producing far-reaching effects. Although, properly speaking, God himself decides about the events announced by the symbolic act.

---

<sup>1</sup> Especially G. Fohrer, *Die symbolische Handlungen der Propheten*, Zürich 1968. Wider approach: M.I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East*, Studia Pohl 12/1-2, Rome 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore they are compared to parables, cf. E. Arens, *Kommunikative Handlungen: Die paradigmatische Bedeutung der Gleichnisse Jesu für eine Handlungstheorie*, Düsseldorf 1982.

## 2. The interest of this category

This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation in Polish, dating from 1986<sup>3</sup>. It pertained to the symbolic acts of Jesus. I do not return to this problem only in order to present my work in a foreign language. I wish to offer a modified interpretation of the problem.

My dissertation was primarily exegetical, concentrated on tradition and redacting the history of the texts as well as their meaning. From my present perspective, I see better the consequences of this research for the problem of the historical Jesus. Therefore in this article I shall reuse much of previous material, but present it in a new light. I presented the essential elements of this paper at a conference on the historical Jesus in Prague (2009), but it has remained unpublished.

Symbolic acts of Jesus could be seen as a relatively neutral sample of the traditions about his life, which can be studied without many presuppositions. Why? First, this notion itself was not known to the biblical authors – therefore they were not aware of it. It seems that they could not and they did not offer an interpretation of the symbolic acts of Jesus. They constitute a cross-section through other categories. Next, this category was never used in the theological traditions of Christianity. Judgements about it are not related to any doctrine. If we deal with miracles or even with the teachings of Jesus we are more biased. Modern scholars have studied the symbolic acts of Jesus, but not much. Therefore, we have no fixed idea about them.

## 3. Principles of analysis

For this presentation, I have chosen those acts of Jesus whose symbolic meaning is crucial for the interpretation: those that can be explained only as symbolic acts. Hence, there are neither miracles among them (only some healing gestures), nor christophanies, deeds bringing salvation or decisions concerning the disciples and the community.

Too many deeds of Jesus had deeper meanings to include them all into the category of symbolic acts. Therefore, other acts of Jesus that possess wider and more complex meanings or are aimed at some practical results will not be mentioned; the same concerns the acts whose symbolic meaning seems secondary or doubtful. All deeds of Jesus can be considered meaningful, so we must focus our attention on the typical symbolic acts – otherwise, their particularities would be effaced.

---

<sup>3</sup> Published as M. Wojciechowski, *Czynności symboliczne Jezusa*, Studia z Bibliistyki 6, Warszawa 1991. If compared with this book, footnotes and bibliography in this article are very selective; I omit multiple commentaries and general works, indicating only important articles.

I shall look for the oldest form of the tradition concerning the given symbolic act. Next, the historicity of the event as described in the primitive tradition has to be discussed and its elements confronted with parallels or illustrations taken from the environment, from the OT and other sources. After such preparation we are able to identify the meaning of the act according to its nature and the comments made by Jesus himself.

As our attention is focused solely on the symbolic acts of the historical Jesus and not on the later theological developments, any additions due to the editorial work of the authors are to be eliminated. Only in some cases, a later interpretation of the story requires an extensive commentary.

Only few scholarly works concerning the symbolism of the acts of Jesus deal with more than one event; even though they often treat the problem in an inadequate manner. Any single article or chapter written on such a wide subject is inevitably too short, superficial and selective. Some authors insist on messianic, eschatological or sacramental aspects. The symbolic acts of Jesus are given names which are too general (“meaningful”) or inadequate (“prophetic”; “comparative” or “parabolic”).

Let me mention the only monograph on this subject, written by Maria Trautmann<sup>4</sup>. She has provided an extensive analysis of some symbolic acts of Jesus described in the synoptic Gospels and quite correctly presented the whole category, but her choice of eight “meaningful acts” seems at least doubtful and the conclusion that all such acts were related to the salvation of Israel must be rejected.

The above remarks illustrate the difficulty of the problem. Nevertheless, it is possible to select the most important symbolic acts of Jesus and analyse them with constant reference to their complex background. Moreover, I have been able to come across several interesting explanations of particular events and have proposed some general conclusions concerning the nature and importance of the symbolic acts of Jesus.

## II. Particular symbolic acts and gestures of Jesus

**1. Eating with tax collectors** (Mk 2:15-17 par.; cf. Lk 19:1-10)<sup>5</sup>. I assume that the vocation of Levi did not belong to the same primitive tradition, but

<sup>4</sup> M. Trautmann, *Zeichenhafte Handlungen Jesu*, Forschung zur Bibel 37, Würzburg 1980 (it was her doctoral dissertation). She had incorporated earlier attempts of various scholars.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. R. Pesch, *Das Zöllnergastmahl (Mk 2,15-17)*, in: *Mélanges bibliques en hommage de R. P. Beda Rigaux*, ed. A. Descamps, Gembloux 1970, p. 63–87; B.M.F. Van Iersel, *La vocation de Lévi*

the original story could contain his name. Some details can be attributed to the redaction: *for there were plenty who followed him* (v. 15b)<sup>6</sup>; the phrase anticipating the question in v. 16 (*when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors*); the words “sinners” in v. 15 and “tax-collectors” in v. 16b. The kernel seems authentic and historical (social position of the tax-collectors, surprising behaviour of Jesus, his friendship for public sinners confirmed by other texts).

Whilst eating with the tax-collectors, Jesus gave them a visible sign of his friendship with an allusion to the eschatological salvation (the image of the banquet!). It should have led them to conversion. In the two-part saying from Mk 2:17 Jesus declared directly that he came to heal and to call (= invite) sinners (and not the just people – probably because he denied their existence, everybody has sinned).

**2. Laying on hands and touching**<sup>7</sup>. The tradition about Jesus healing with hands is certainly historical; the Gospel abounds with mentions about such events and about the public interest provoked by them. Using hands for healing was virtually unknown in the OT and contemporary Judaism; Jesus probably followed the Hellenistic paramedical practices.

The authors of the Gospels do not call these kinds of healings miracles (*dunameis*) or signs. For the witnesses they appeared as more or less natural, so that Jesus simply passed for a doctor. Whatever we would think about the natural explanation, in the Gospels laying on hands and touching were signs leading to the extraordinary healings through a gesture reputed as medically effective. There was a symbolic association between the act and its effects. Moreover, other biblical texts about laying on hands suggest some link with the sphere of the liturgy.

**3. Touching of the leper** (Mk 1:40-45 par.)<sup>8</sup>. A literary and theological remodelling of the text can be discovered in the formulation of the request of the leper (v. 40), in the description of the results of the gesture (v. 42: see Mt 8.3 with a more simple and primitive expression) and in the elements of the ending typical for Mk (vv. 44a, 45). The classical difficulty concerning the words witness-

(Mk 2,13,17 et par.): *Traditions et redactions*, in: *De Jésus aux Evangiles: Tradition et redaction dans les Evangiles synoptiques, donum natalicium Iosepho Coppens*, ed. I. de la Potterie, BETL 25, Gembloux 1967, p. 212–232.

<sup>6</sup> Biblical quotations are from RSV.

<sup>7</sup> Touching is usually overlooked (absent in ThWNT). J. Coppens, *L'imposition des mains et les rites connexes dans le NT et dans l'Eglise ancienne*, Wetteren 1925.

<sup>8</sup> M. Wojciechowski, *The Touching of the Leper (Mk 1,40-45) as a Historical and Symbolical Act of Jesus*, BZ 33 (1989), p. 114–119; with further references.

sing that Jesus acted in anger can be resolved if we refer to their Aramaic counterparts proposed by some authors. *Orgistheis* corresponds to *'tr'm* (the easier version “moved with pity” = *splanchnistheis* = *trhm!*) and *embrimesamenos autō* to *t<sup>e</sup>qef lah*. Both Aramaic verbs designate an internal commotion, which could result in a violent and passionate behaviour (there is nothing mild in touching the leper!). It is quite conceivable too, that Jesus threw out the cured leper, sending him to a priest immediately. The primitive form of the narrative does not seem to be a typical “miracle story” and has features of an early, historical tradition.

Touching a leper voluntarily was something quite unheard of. It should have resulted in making Jesus unclean but paradoxically it appeared to have a cleaning effect. In the Gospels, his touch had the power to make clean attributed by the OT to God and to things sanctified by him. It throws a light both on the power of Jesus and on his self-consciousness.

**4. Spitting and laying on of hands** to restore sight and hearing happens three times<sup>9</sup>: Mk 7:31-37 (v. 31 – maybe another source; vv. 32-33a: standard form introduction; vv. 33b-34: fully authentic; v. 35: older description of the results rewritten in a more elaborate form of triple parallelism; vv. 36f: typical ending); Mk 8:22-26 (independent from Mk 7:31-37; some influence from the redaction in vv. 22 b and 26a; a more elaborate form in v. 25 b); Jn 9:1-7 (the source contained v. 1, the dialogue from vv. 2-3a, vv. 6-7; possibly also 8:59b and 9:8). After the elimination of the secondary developments we obtain a primitive tradition, which does not follow the patterns of “miracle stories”. They have some very original features, which are difficult to interpret theologically. On the other hand they fit in with our knowledge about the milieu, its beliefs and capacity to understand Jesus.

Jesus used gestures, believed by some in the Hellenistic milieu to be medically effective, as signs leading to a miraculous healing (saliva, hands, mud). He could conceive these deeds as a proclamation of the coming of the Messiah (cf. Mt 11:5 = Lk 7:22: the saying that summarizes some previous deeds). An allegorical interpretation on the redacted level is obvious: Jesus heals spiritual blindness and deafness.

**5. Blessing the children** (Mk 10:13-14,16: v. 15 is a separate saying; Mk 9:33-37 seems to depend on the above text)<sup>10</sup>. Both the contents and the

<sup>9</sup> Commented either as miracles or stories; rarely as symbolic acts.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. J. Sauer, *Der ursprüngliche „Sitz im Leben“ von Mk 10,13-16*, ZNW 71 (1981), p. 27–50. Often quoted in books and articles on children in the Bible.

form of the story have original and primitive features (even Bultmann accepted that it had a historical basis). As a matter of fact, Jesus showed friendship towards servants, the poor and also children – in spite of the negative opinion about them, current in the Antiquity.

The gesture of the imposition of hands (*tithemi* in Greek, not *epitithemi*) resembles paternal blessing (cf. Gen 48:6,14). As it is coupled with the promise of the Kingdom, it would also contain an announcement of salvation. According to Mt 19:13-15 the blessing prefigures the laying on of hands associated with the baptism (it uses terms *epitithemi* and *proseuchomai*, both related to the baptism in Acts).

**6. The triumphal procession towards Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-11 par.)<sup>11</sup>.** Mk reproduces a text enlarged by some additions compared to the probable primitive version (reference to Bethany; *on which no one has ever sat*; an authentic conversation from v. 3 presented as a prediction; vv. 4-6 – secondary, absent in Mt; perhaps *garments on the road*; v. 11). Nevertheless, the core remains untouched. The differences found in Mt and Lk can be explained by their theological interests. Luke, however, introduced a fragment from another source (in Lk 19:37). Jn 12:12-15 confirms the main facts in an independent manner, but the text also shows some theological preferences (crowds from Jerusalem? palm-branches?). His OT quotations come from the synoptic tradition.

The context and the date of the entry are not quite sure. The mention about the branches or rather the cut off “rests” (*stibades*) from the fields (Mk 11:8), suggests the winter or an early spring, after the pruning of the olive-trees.

According to Mark, the entry lacked publicity – Jesus simply came to Jerusalem with some disciples and pilgrims; the ovation took place on the road. However, the untypical behaviour of Jesus allows us to guess the intended deeper meaning of the event. The use of an ass can be interpreted as an allusion to the messianic prophecies from Zech 9:9 and Gen 49:10 (both widely exploited in Rabbinic literature). Next, Jesus permitted the crowd to give him an ovation – him, who always refused by such honours. The hymn sung by the crowd sounds like a targumic paraphrase of Ps 118 and contains no Christian features, but only Jewish ones (Davidic Kingdom!).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. W. Schenk, *Passionsbericht nach Markus*, Gütersloh 1974, p. 166–175; H. Patsch, *Der Einzug Jesu in Jerusalem: Ein historischer Versuch*, ZTK 68 (1971), p. 1–26; R. Jacob, *Les péripécies de l'entrée a Jerusalem et de la preparation de la Cene*, Eglise nouvelle – Eglise Ancienne. Etudes Bibliques 3/2, Paris 1973.



**7. Looking for figs** (Mk 11:12-14 par.)<sup>12</sup>. The language of vv. 20f suggests they were formulated by Mark himself (cf. Hos 9:16). Some minor repetitions and explanations during the narration can also be attributed to a redactor. The theories opposed to the historicity of the whole story are as numerous as unconvincing (etiology, miracle legend – *Strafwunder*, allegory, transformed parable, expanded eschatological saying). Besides, they are mainly concerned with the withering of the tree, which is not of primary importance for the message contained in Mk 11:12-14.

Looking for figs most certainly represents an unsuccessful search for just people in Israel (Jer 8:13; Mic 7:1). The choice of season when no figs could be found stressed the symbolism of this act. In the OT and in early Judaism the figs designated the chosen people (often unfaithful), but the fig-tree itself never served as an image of Israel. Rather, it symbolized well-being and abundance (promised or lost). The judgement of Jesus deprived the people of the fruit of the tree and was not openly directed against its existence. This judgement seems to paraphrase Gen 3:22 or rather its targumic version (*Tg. Neof., Ps.-J., Frg.*), which permits the identification of the Tree of Life with the eternal Law. Jesus proclaimed an oracle that Israel unfaithful to God would lose the fruit of the Law as the first people had lost Paradise. This act bears some similarity to the classical prophetic acts.

**8. Expelling the merchants from the Temple** (Mk 11:15-19 par.)<sup>13</sup>. Vv. 15f are primitive, but the saying from v. 17 was added from a different source to replace the original and similarly structured saying known from Jn 2:16b. Jn 2:(13),14-16 contains an independent description of the same event (with some redacted developments in detail).

The act of Jesus was unexpected and original. Considering the dimensions of the temple and also the absence of any clash with priests or guards, Jesus probably emptied only a part of the outer court where he wanted to teach; he also forbade the merchants there to carry anything out (*skeuos*). Therefore, he gave an example of what should be changed in the temple.

<sup>12</sup> M. Wojciechowski, *Marc 11.14 et Tg.Gn. 3.22 – les fruits de la Loi enlevés à Israël*, NTS 33 (1987), p. 287–289; cf. e.g. W.R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree*, JSNT Supplements 1, Sheffield 1980; K. Romaniuk, *Car ce n'était pas la saison des figes... (Mk 11,12-14 parr.)*, ZNW 66 (1975), p. 275-278; R.H. Hiery, *Not the Season for Figs*, JBL 87 (1968), p. 394-400.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. E. Trocmé, *L'expulsion des marchands du Temple*, NTS 15 (1968/69), p. 1–22; R.J. Campbell, *Evidence for the Historicity of the Fourth Gospel in John 2:13-22*, StEv 7 = TU 126, Berlin 1982, p. 101–120; V. Eppstein, *The Historicity of the Gospel Account on the Cleansing of the Temple*, ZNW 55 (1964), p. 42–58.

To justify his intervention against the trade and money-changing, traditionally admitted in the temple, Jesus appealed to the messianic and eschatological prophecy from Zech 14:21. He acted however in his own name, calling God his Father. Besides, any action in the temple demanded at least a prophetic dignity.

**9. Washing the feet of the disciples** (Jn 13:1-20)<sup>14</sup>. The statistics of the vocabulary and style permits the reconstruction of the primitive tradition (vv. 4-5; the dialogue found in vv. 6, (8a?), 8b, 9; vv. 12, 17a); the redactor also used some separate sayings taken from other sources: vv. 10a (shorter text), 13, 16, 20. The primitive narration was symmetrically arranged around v. 8b.

The course of events is highly probable (the reactions of Peter!). The act of Jesus is surprising and quite impossible to invent since some traces of this event can be found in Lk 12:37; 22:27; Phil 2:7.

Washing the feet was first of all an act of both humble service and extraordinary hospitality. The explanation given by Jesus himself (v. 8b) proves that it was moreover an exceptional act similar to the sacraments, aimed at assuring the disciples their "part" with Jesus, which implies salvation (cf. *Tg. Gen* 15.1). We could also include in the explanation an invitation to the eschatological banquet and a preparation for the Eucharist.

A later redactor joined to the text an interpretation of the washing of the feet as an example for the disciples (vv. 14-15), some separate saying of Jesus and references to Judas. The narrative he constructed, vv. (1a), 2, 4-18, belonged to a draft Gospel, which was in due course completed by the last redactor, who added some theological reflections.

**10. The refusal of wine** (Mk 14:25; 15:23)<sup>15</sup>. During the Last Supper Jesus said he would not drink again *from the fruit of the vine*. This announcement resembles the vow of a Nazirite as described by Num 6:3-4. Jesus fulfilled this vow refusing to drink wine mixed with myrrh (only a later piety and theology attributed to him a will of suffering more consciously).

According to Num 6:2-11 the naziriteship designates a state of special holiness (*qdš*) and consecration to God (*nzr*). From the Last Supper onwards, Jesus turned entirely to his Father and as the "saint of God" he accepted the Passion and death.

<sup>14</sup> M. Wojciechowski, *La source de Jean 13.1-20*, NTS 34 (1988), p. 135-141; cf. e.g. F.F. Segovia, *John 13,1-20: The Footwashing in the Johannine Tradition*, ZNW 73 (1982), p. 31-51; A.J. Hultgren, *The Johannine Foot-Washing (13.1-11) as a Symbol of Eschatological Hospitality*, NTS 28 (1982), p. 539-546; G. Richter, *Die Fusswaschung im Johannesevangelium. Geschichte ihrer Deutung*, Regensburg 1967.

<sup>15</sup> M. Wojciechowski, *Le naziréat et la Passion (Mc 14,25a; 15,23)*, Biblica 65 (1984), p. 94-96.

**11. Giving the Holy Spirit through a breath (Jn 20:22)<sup>16</sup>.** The brief and primitive description of this event corresponds neither to Johannine nor Lucan concept of the Spirit. A later reflection of the same fact can be found in Acts 1:8. V. 23 (=Mt 18:18) witness an attempt of explanation (cf. Acts 2:38 etc.).

The verb “breathe” (*emfysao – nph*) describes a physical act and at the same time contains an allusion to God’s breath (LXX!). However, the breath of Jesus is not conceived as the breath of life, following Gen 2:7, but as a gift of speech – similarly to the targumic version of Gen 2:7 (Neof., Ps.-J., Onq.), which informs us about the understanding of this text in the Palestine of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The Spirit manifested himself indeed in the speech; the Pentecost helped to understand the intentions of Jesus.

### III. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article I could only propose to apply the notion of a symbolic act to the Bible. Now we can learn more about the symbolic acts of Jesus and their distinctive features.

#### 1. History

The symbolic acts of Jesus are quite varied and include: healing gestures; acts with spiritual (salutary) effects for persons or groups; acts showing who Jesus was. Hence the symbolic acts of Jesus significantly differ from the prophetic acts, whose purposes and effects were of another kind. The prophets acted on an express order from God, Jesus behaved as if he himself had his authority. The symbolic acts of Jesus did not follow the OT patterns. On the other hand, their form and contents can often be explained by OT notions and symbols, and sometimes by ideas taken from contemporary Judaism (Targums) and from Hellenism (healing gestures).

The authors of the Gospels do not manifest any special interest in the symbolic acts. Rather, they tend to fit their descriptions into other patterns. They do not underline the symbolic meaning – except for the messianic interpretation; they are also interested in the deeper meaning of the miracles following the symbolic gestures.

Nevertheless, the influence of the “post-resurrectional” look on the body of the tradition proves to be secondary (especially in Mark) for the redactors

<sup>16</sup> M. Wojciechowski, *Le don de l’Esprit Saint dans Jean 20.22 selon Tg. Gn. 2.7*, NTS 33 (1987), p. 289–292.

and communities who were not particularly interested in the symbolism of actions. The literary analysis has enabled me to separate the later elements of the narratives (introductions, endings, more elaborate descriptions of the same facts, influences of the Septuagint, conclusions and commentaries made by the authors of the Gospels, saying of Jesus artificially related to the main story and also – in John – the elements dependent on the synoptic Gospels).

Our main source is Mark, and some parallel texts (9 texts), but good examples are also found in John. The primitive traditions appear very closely to the time of Jesus and fulfil the criteria of historicity. It seems that the descriptions of symbolic acts in the Bible belonged to the historical genre, even if afterwards they were sometimes remade according to other patterns. Their historical occurrence cannot be doubted.

The category of symbolic acts was absent from the minds of ancient authors; it may be seen as relatively neutral. It could not have carried a particular theological meaning; it was not used or introduced intentionally. Therefore, we have no reasons to think that the features of this category were a literary creation. Their study contributes to the knowledge about historical Jesus and to establishing the historical and biographical value of the Gospels. They can indeed be treated as a good sample in this respect.

## 2. Theology

In the Gospels, Jesus performed symbolic acts from his own initiative, consciously and intentionally. The effects of his acts are to be seen as quick and assured, not only announced. The symbolic acts are important for the whole mission of Jesus. Looking for them allowed us to better understand many events from his life. The search for the symbolic meaning of his acts is a useful hermeneutical principle.

The sacramental gestures can be described as symbolic acts. Like the sacraments, a number of symbolic acts of Jesus had salutary effects. The Eucharist and baptism were certainly not only visible acts performed by Jesus, but intended to have spiritual consequences. Nevertheless, the sacraments of the church do not continue any symbolic act we have examined. If so, Jesus would have given an example of a multiform sacramental activity and the Church would establish its continual forms. It is also possible that some sacramental practices found in the primitive church were related to symbolic acts of Jesus not preserved by the Gospels (laying hands on the disciples? anointing with oil? – cf. Mk 6:13). Next, blessing of the children could influence confirmation; healing gestures – the idea of “Extreme Unction”; washing the feet – the baptism.

The relation of the symbolic acts to the idea of salvation is quite diversified. Some acts have mainly direct, visible effects, some announce or prepare the salvation, and others proclaim the Saviour. Eschatological and soteriological perspectives help to understand their meaning, but provide no universal explanation of the symbolic acts of Jesus. Their impact is mainly christological: the symbolic acts reveal directly or indirectly who Jesus really is. He acted as the Saviour with the power and authority of God. He pointed clearly at his messianic dignity, holiness and the exceptional relation to his Father.

## CZYNNOŚCI SYMBOLICZNE JEZUSA

### (STRESZCZENIE)

Czynności symboliczne Jezusa można potraktować jako przejaw różnorodnych tradycji w postrzeganiu Jego życia. Ich badanie jest stosunkowo niezależne od uprzednich założeń, gdyż kategoria ta nie jest uwikłana w spory doktrynalne. Nie była znacząca ani dla koncepcji teologicznych autorów biblijnych, ani dla teorii hermeneutycznych autorów współczesnych. W przykładach omówionych w tym artykule można znaleźć historyczne rdzenie tradycji (Mk 2, 15-17; 1, 40-45; 10, 13-14. 16; 11, 1-11; 11, 12-14; 11, 15-19; 14, 25; 15, 23; J 13, 1-20; 20, 22; nakładanie rąk, dotykanie, użycie śliny). To potwierdza, że w Ewangeliach można znaleźć wiele wiarygodnych tradycji na temat Jezusa historii i jego intencji.

## SYMBOLIC ACTS OF JESUS

### (SUMMARY)

Symbolic acts of Jesus could be seen as a neutral sample of the traditions about his life. Their study is relatively free of presuppositions, because this category has not been involved in doctrinal discussions. It was neither important for the theological concepts of the biblical authors, nor for the hermeneutical theories of modern scholars. In the examples discussed in this paper (Mk 2:15-17; 1:40-45; 10:13-14,16; 11:1-11; 11:12-14; 11:15-19; 14:25; 15:23; Jn 13:1-20; 20:22; laying on hands, touching, spitting) historical kernels can be identified. It confirms that in the Gospel we can find many reliable traditions about historical Jesus and even about his intentions.

## SYMBOLISCHE HANDLUNGEN VON JESU

### (ZUSAMMENFASSUNG)

Die Symbolhandlungen Jesu lassen sich als eine neutrale Probe der Traditionen über sein Lebens verstehen. Ihre Untersuchung ist eigentlich unabhängig von irgendwelchen Voraussetzungen, weil diese Kategorie in keinerlei doktrinellen Kontroverse verwickelt ist. Sie war unbedeutend sowohl für theologische Konzepte der biblischen Autoren, als auch für hermeneutische Theorien der gegenwärtigen Forscher. In den im folgenden Artikel besprochenen Beispielen kann man historische Kerne der Tradition (Mk 2, 15-17; 1, 40-45; 10, 13-14. 16; 11, 1-11; 11, 12-14; 11, 15-19; 14, 25; 15, 23; J 13, 1-20; 20, 22; Handauflegung, Berührung, Verwendung vom Speichel) finden. Dies bestätigt, dass in den Evangelien zahlreiche glaubwürdige Traditionen über den historischen Jesus und seine Intentionen zu finden sind.