

The Giving of the Spirit in John 20:22

Examples of Patristic Reception in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries

Christos Karakolis

I. Introductory Remarks

Jesus' giving of the Holy Spirit in John 20:22 belongs to the Johannine narrative of his first post-Easter appearance to his disciples on the day of his resurrection (20:19–23). This appearance is initiated by Jesus' double greeting and blessing (εἰρήνη ὑμῖν, 20:19, 21). Then, in 20:21, Jesus sends his disciples to the world in the way that his Father sent him to the world (cf. 17:18). After this speech-act, another one follows: in 20:22, upon breathing on his disciples, Jesus commands them to receive the Holy Spirit. Finally, he closes his words by providing them with the authority to forgive sins or withhold forgiveness (20:23).

Of course, this is not the appropriate place for an in-depth exegesis of John 20:22. However, right from the start, the immense theological significance of this Johannine verse is more than evident. The disciples will have Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit during their mission to the world (20:21). It is the Holy Spirit that will enable them to forgive sins or withhold forgiveness (20:23). In the Gospel of John, sin is primarily connected with unbelief in Jesus (cf. 8:24; 16:9). The very presence of Jesus leads those who witness his words and works to believe in him or reject him (cf. 3:15–18; 15:22–24) and, thus, correspondingly to be freed from their sins or remain in them (cf. 9:39–41). Consequently, the post-Easter role and activity of the disciples, as described in 20:21–23, will be crucial because they will continue the work of Jesus himself (cf. 14:12). It will now be their task to bring freedom from sin and eternal life to those who listen to their message about Jesus and believe in it (cf. 20:29–31).¹

Furthermore, Jesus' bestowal of the Holy Spirit on his disciples fulfills his central promise and consolation in his farewell discourse. Concretely, Jesus promises his disciples that he will send them another comforter (14:16),² namely the Holy Spirit (14:26; 15:26), and explains to them that he has to leave because if he does

¹ See the relevant analysis in S. E. Hansen, "Forgiving and Retaining Sin: A Study of the Text and the Context of John 20:23," *HBT* 19 (1997): 24–32.

² On this rendering of παράκλητος, see J. G. Davies, "The Primary Meaning of παράκλητος," *JTS* 4 (1953): 35–38.

not, then the Comforter will not come at all. Jesus' departure is, then, in the best interest of his disciples, so that indeed the Comforter can come (16:7). Near the end of the narrative, Jesus indeed keeps his promise by breathing the Holy Spirit on his disciples on the very day of his resurrection (20:22).

However, some aspects of 20:22 within its narrative and theological context raise important questions and are open to various interpretations. Such questions are: Why does Jesus seem to give the Holy Spirit to his disciples before ascending to his Father, as opposed to what he had stated in his farewell discourse (16:7)? Why does Jesus bestow the Holy Spirit on his disciples by breathing on them (20:22)? What is the symbolic meaning of this action? If read along with Acts, is this story of the giving of the Spirit at all compatible with the Lukan account of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost? Is the so-called "Johannine Pentecost"³ entirely different from the Lukan Pentecost in Acts 2:1–4, or are these two events compatible or even complementary with each other?⁴ These and other similar questions are not only interesting to contemporary New Testament scholars and Bible-readers. They were also interesting to ancient Christians, at least those with a critical mind.

As stated in the title, this paper aims to present and highlight some characteristic and representative cases of the patristic reception of John 20:22, particularly of Jesus' giving the Holy Spirit. By doing so, I hope to establish some interesting exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological trends of the patristic exegesis of the Fourth Gospel. On the other hand, I will avoid discussing patristic pneumatology in general or the relationship between contemporary Johannine scholarship and patristic exegesis. These are essential research aspects that cannot be addressed within the limits of the present paper.

Since the material is enormously rich, I only chose 20:22 and not a wider range of text. Characteristically, in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, I was able to find 200 references to 20:22; 61 references to 20:23; and 32 references to 20:21.⁵ A similar search of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*⁶ has produced comparable results. I found at least 366 direct references to 20:22; 79 references to 20:21; and only

³ On this term and the relevant discussion, see among others J. van Rossum, "The 'Johannine Pentecost': John 20:22 in Modern Exegesis and in Orthodox Theology," *SVTQ* 35 (1991): 149–167, here: 149; C. Bennema, "The Giving of the Spirit in John's Gospel – A New Proposal?" *EvQ* 74 (2002): 195–213, here: 202–204.

⁴ Some scholars consider the Gospel of John indeed as presupposing knowledge of Lukan tradition or even of the Gospel of Luke per se; see, for instance, G. van Belle, "Lukan Style in the Fourth Gospel," in *Luke and His Readers: Festschrift A. Denaux*, BETL 182 (ed. R. Bieringer, G. van Belle, and J. Verheyden; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 351–372.

⁵ For this research, I used a database systematizing all biblical references of the *Patrologia Graeca*, which was initiated by the late Ioannis Galanis, professor of New Testament at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Unfortunately, this database has not yet been made public. To my knowledge, there is no similar database for Migne's *Patrologia Latina*.

⁶ *Patrologia Latina* Database. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/patrologialatina> (accessed at 23.12.2023).

2 references to 20:23.⁷ Even if not wholly accurate, these numbers show that both exegetically and theologically, 20:22 has been received as the most crucial verse within its narrative context. Due to the verse's theological significance, as well as the crucial questions it indirectly raises, there is a striking richness and originality of exegetical approaches in patristic literature.

Lastly, I intentionally limited my investigation to patristic texts originating from the fourth and fifth centuries. The rationale for this decision was, on the one hand, to keep the immense source-material within reasonable boundaries and, on the other hand, to focus on interpretations of largely acknowledged early patristic authors who shaped later exegesis in a decisive manner.⁸ For the needs of the current paper, I have investigated texts of the following representative church fathers: Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and Cyril of Alexandria.⁹

II. Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 313–386)

In his 17th catechesis on the Holy Spirit, Cyril of Jerusalem focuses, inter alia, on Jesus' farewell discourse and especially on his promise to send the Paraclete.¹⁰ Several other church fathers draw a connection between Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples and the account of the creation of human beings in Gen 2:7.¹¹ Cyril says that in the Gospel of John, the Lord breathes the Spirit for a second time; the first time, at creation, the spiritual gift given to the first human beings was driven away because of their sins. Thus, after going up from Hades, the risen Lord gives to the apostles only as much grace as they can endure, even though he could have given them the fullness of the Spirit then. By this initial grace, however, he urges them to remain in Jerusalem to obtain the fullness of the Spirit (Luke 24:39). Thus, according to Cyril, Jesus goes up to heaven, receives from the Father the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33), and sends the Comforter from heaven to his apostles on the day of Pentecost.¹²

⁷ Due to the lack of a particular database for biblical citations, I had to follow a different search method in the case of *Patrologia Latina*. I copied characteristic phrases from the Vulgate for every one of the three Johannine verses under consideration in the search field. This search method does not produce entirely reliable results, but, on the other hand, it reveals a pattern that agrees with the results of the analogous search in *Patrologia Graeca*.

⁸ During the first three centuries, there is no extensive exegetical material on John 20:22. According to the database mentioned above, out of the 200 references to John 20:22 in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, only 8 references stem from the second and the third centuries. Furthermore, a total of 105 references to John 20:22 originate from the fourth and fifth centuries. In the case of *Patrologia Latina*, out of 366 hits, only 9 refer to the period before the fourth century.

⁹ The order is according to their approximate, supposed, or calculated birth year.

¹⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* 17.11 (PG 33:982b–984b).

¹¹ *Ibid.* 17.12 (PG 33:984c–985a).

¹² *Ibid.* 17.13 (PG 33:985b).

III. Jerome (ca. 342–420)

Similar to Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome attempts a harmonization between the accounts of Luke-Acts and John on the bestowal of the Spirit.

According to his 120th Letter (to Hedibia),¹³ on the first day after his resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, connecting it with the forgiveness of sins, baptizing, transforming people into children of God, and sharing it with the faithful.¹⁴

However, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus' gift was even greater: it included baptism in the Holy Spirit, the power from above, and preaching the gospel throughout the world. This gift also included speaking in tongues and performing miraculous cures, as well as other miracles. The fire of the Pentecost event corresponds with the call of the prophet Isaiah and especially with the burning charcoal, which purified his lips and his heart (Is 6:5–7).¹⁵

Therefore, Luke and John do not contradict each other but refer to the Holy Spirit's different gifts. The importance of speaking in tongues is critical, so that the apostles would not require a translator while preaching the gospel. The spiritual gift of courage is also significant. All the above gifts are entailed in Jesus' promise on the day of his ascension.¹⁶

On the other hand, the apostles already had within them the Holy Spirit since they came to believe in Jesus. Otherwise, they could not have done any miracles when sent by Jesus to their pre-Easter mission (Mark 6:7–13 and parallels). However, they had not yet possessed the Spirit in its fullness. Therefore, the note of the evangelist, according to which the Holy Spirit "was not yet there, because Jesus had not yet been glorified" (John 7:39b), does not mean that the Holy Spirit did not exist at all but that it was only present to a small extent. For this reason, the disciples continued to fear and even abandoned Jesus at his arrest (John 18:8–9). However, when the disciples were baptized by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, their fear left them immediately, and they were filled with courage so that they could tell the Jewish authorities that "one must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29), not fearing the consequences of their statement.¹⁷

Jerome continues with an anti-Montanist interpretation about Jesus' promise to send his Spirit to his disciples (and not to Montanus and his two female disciples). What's more, already in the time of the Old Testament, the Spirit was present within the prophets because without the Holy Spirit, the prophets could not have spoken about Christ's coming.¹⁸

¹³ Jerome, *Epist.* 120.9 (PL 22:980–1006).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (PL 22:994).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (PL 22:994–95).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (PL 22:995).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (PL 22:995–96).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (PL 22:996–97).

Jerome completes the 9th answer of his Letter to Hedibia by referring to the deity of the Holy Spirit. In Acts, those unaware of the Holy Spirit's existence are re-baptized (Acts 19:3–6) because their baptism without the Holy Spirit is not valid since there is no Trinity without it. Finally, by lying to the Holy Spirit, Ananias and Sapphira actually lie to God (Acts 5:1–11).¹⁹

In the above, by interpreting John 20:22, Jerome refers to several issues: his fundamental position is the distinction of the Holy Spirit's gifts. On the other hand, everything that is related to Christ is also related to the Holy Spirit. For this reason, already Old Testament prophets possess the Holy Spirit. The same applies to Jesus' disciples, right after believing in him. However, they do not own the Spirit in its fullness. Christ provides a portion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the first day after his resurrection. But the fullness of its gifts is provided on the day of Pentecost. On the Holy Spirit's deity, Jerome's argument is as follows: If the Holy Spirit is not a divine person, then the Trinity is dissolved, and the sacraments are invalid. Furthermore, it is apparent in the Gospels that sinning against the Holy Spirit is a sin before God.

IV. John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407)

John Chrysostom also attempts to solve the problem of the seeming contradiction, as he considers it, between John's and Luke's narrative of the giving of the Holy Spirit. The first time, namely in the Johannine account, the Holy Spirit is given to a limited extent as preparation for everything else that is to come. The second time, namely in the Lukan account and in Acts, Jesus leaves (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9) to make the disciples desire his presence even more strongly, a presence that will eventually be substituted by the coming of the Paraclete on the day of Pentecost. Conversely, had Jesus remained close to his disciples for a longer time, their desire for the Holy Spirit would not have been so intense. But, on the other hand, had the Spirit come before Christ's ascension, the consolation for Christ's departure would not have been so great. This proves the equality of the Son and the Holy Spirit, because no comfort could be complete had the Holy Spirit not been a total and worthy replacement of Christ.²⁰

In the "Johannine Pentecost", the disciples do not receive special miraculous powers but only the power to forgive sins. This is because the Holy Spirit has various gifts. By contrast, in the Lukan Pentecost account, the disciples become witnesses of Jesus, and for that to happen, they receive the power to perform miracles. Moreover, the Holy Spirit always works with the Father and the Son and never separate from them.²¹ All the gifts belong to all three persons of the

¹⁹ Ibid. (PL 22:997).

²⁰ John Chrysostom, *Hom. Act.* 1.5 (PG 60:20–21).

²¹ John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 86.4 (PG 59:471).

Holy Trinity. Chrysostom continues with exhortations on the honor owed to priests who have the gift of forgiving the sins as successors of the apostles.²²

Finally, Chrysostom understands Jesus' breathing the Spirit on his disciples as a restoration and reconstruction of their spiritual condition. As such, he connects it with the story of creation and the prophecy about God coming up from the earth and breathing on the face of the people (Nah 2:2). Death was the result of the loss of the Holy Spirit's ancient and vital power. Now, this power is being restored according to the relevant Old Testament prophecies.²³

Chrysostom attempts to explain the dissonance between the parallel Lukan and Johannine narratives. By doing so, he reduces the importance of the first, Johannine, giving of the Spirit to the remission of sins. Its primary function is preparing the disciples for the experience of the second and main giving of the Spirit depicted in Acts.

V. Augustine of Hippo (ca. 354–430)

Augustine discusses a variety of problems and questions arising from John 20:22. One of them is whether the first created human beings possessed a soul before the breathing of God's Spirit and, consequently, whether the loss of the Spirit through the original sin also meant losing their own soul. In answering this question, Augustine emphasizes that in both Gen 2:7 and John 20:22, the same Spirit appears, namely the Spirit of Christ and God, because otherwise, two different Spirits would exist. But, on the other hand, he vehemently denies the identification of the Spirit with the human soul. The soul is inherent in human beings and, therefore, an anthropological element. Indeed, the Spirit given by the risen Christ to the disciples reverses the consequences of the original sin but does not have to provide the disciples with a soul; it simply renews their existing one.²⁴

Furthermore, according to Augustine, John 20:22 suggests that Christ is indeed the one who provides the Spirit.²⁵ However, Augustine clarifies that the materiality of breathing is not identical to the Spirit. He also strongly denies the existence of two spirits, one given on the day of Christ's resurrection and one descending from heaven on the day of Pentecost. This is proven by the fact that Jesus promised to send the one Holy Spirit from the Father, the beginning (*principium*) of the deity.²⁶

²² Ibid. (PG 59:471–74).

²³ John Chrysostom, *Ascens.* 4 (PG 52:777–78).

²⁴ Augustine, *Civ.* 13.24.1 (PL 41:398–99).

²⁵ At this point, Augustine, *Civ.* 13.24.3 (PL 41:400–1), extensively deals with the Greek words πνεῦμα and πνοή, while relating the Spirit with the act of breathing.

²⁶ Augustine, *Trin.* 4.20.29 (PL 42:908).

Augustine also emphasizes that the Spirit was already present in the Old Testament. This means that John's statement that the Spirit was not yet present during Jesus' earthly ministry (7:39) must mean that the Spirit was not yet present in its fullness. There are, namely, several examples of people who recognize Jesus' real identity and God's reality, and this can only be done in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Such people are Anna (Luke 2:36–38), Simeon (Luke 2:25–35), the prophesying Zacharias (Luke 1:67–79), or Mary, who conceived Jesus by the intervention of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26–38). However, the Spirit has not yet been provided in its fullness. This only happens on the day of Pentecost and is accompanied by the gift of speaking in tongues.²⁷

How, then, is it explained that these gifts of the Spirit are nowadays no longer visible? In the present, the church itself speaks all languages so that individual people do not have to fill this need. Augustine formulates the following axiom: the more one loves the church, the more one receives the Spirit. Thus, the Spirit is not static but a dynamic presence that depends on the attitude and the stance of the individual faithful. Whether one truly loves the church can be seen in their unity and love for one another, which are more important than speaking in tongues, according to Paul's witness (1 Cor 13:1). Eventually, the fullness of the Spirit will be given to the faithful after their future resurrection. The earthly life is a journey that prepares them for this very moment.²⁸

According to Augustine, by giving the Spirit twice, Jesus fulfills the commandment to love God by sending the Spirit from heaven, and one's own neighbor, by giving the Spirit during his presence on earth (Mark 12:30–31 and parallels). In both cases, the Spirit is one and the same and not two different spirits.²⁹

On a different note, Augustine avoids setting temporal priorities in the inner Trinitarian relations, which take place out of time. However, he stresses that the Son is begotten by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son,³⁰ while we can never say that the Spirit is also begotten by both the Father and the Son.³¹

Elsewhere, Augustine attributes the problem of the two distinct gifts of the Spirit, according to the Johannine and the Lukan account, to the incompleteness of the first compared to the second one. He even draws a parallel with the case of Judas, who was not fully possessed by the devil until the moment of his final possession during the last supper (John 13:2, 27).³²

²⁷ Ibid. (PL 42:908–9).

²⁸ Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 32.7–9 (PL 35:1645–47).

²⁹ Augustine, *Trin.* 15.26.46 (PL 42:1093–94).

³⁰ The original text is as follows: *Non igitur ab utroque est genitus, sed procedit ab utroque amborum Spiritus*, Augustine, *Trin.* 15.26.47 (PL 42:1095). See the relevant discussion on the Augustinian Filioque in A. E. Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, OSHT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59–63.

³¹ Augustine, *Trin.* 15.26.47 (PL 42:1094–95).

³² Augustine, *Cons.* 3.1.4 (PL 34:1159).

Augustine considers the relationship between the narratives of John and Luke as mutually complementary. The one adds to the other's account of the giving of the Spirit, and both of them present the fulfillment of Jesus' promises about the coming of the Paraclete (John 16:7) and about receiving power from heaven (Luke 24:49). However, the first giving of the Holy Spirit on the day of Jesus' resurrection only concerns the forgiveness of sins. This function of the Spirit is already present in the work of John the Baptist and Jesus, both of whom preach repentance and the remission of sins.³³

VI. Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444)

In his work, Cyril of Alexandria includes the greatest number of direct references to John 20:22 compared to all other Greek-speaking patristic authors.³⁴ What is of particular interest to him is to demonstrate both the divinity and humanity of the Son, and the deity of the Holy Spirit. His christological argument goes as follows: since the Son provides something that the Father also provides, the Son cannot be inferior to the Father but is equal to him. Also, since the Son gives the Spirit by which God builds everything, he cannot himself be a created being because a created being cannot provide something uncreated.³⁵

In the same line of thought, he also formulates a pneumatological argument: since the Holy Spirit forgives sins and gives life (cf. Gen 2:7) just like the Son and God himself, the Spirit cannot be anything other than divine. The Spirit shares the essence of God and comes forth from the essence of God. On the other hand, the fact that Jesus gives the Spirit to the disciples through breathing, namely in a material way, demonstrates that he is truly human. In this case, the human element is the breath, while the divine element is the power. The combination of both proves the union of the two natures in Christ Jesus.³⁶

Here as well, the giving of the Spirit in John is understood as having a preparatory effect. To explain this, Cyril uses the example of Lazarus' resurrection, which prepares its witnesses for Christ's resurrection, as well as for the eschatological resurrection of the dead. Another example in this regard is Christ's transfiguration in view of the fact that eventually, the faces of the righteous will also shine like the sun. Normally, since Christ had promised that he must first ascend to the Father and then send the Holy Spirit (John 16:7), he should not have to give the Holy Spirit to his disciples in person. However, he does give

³³ Ibid., 3.25.74 (PL 34:1207–8).

³⁴ According to the above-mentioned database by Ioannis Galanis, in Cyril's works, there are 41 references to John 20:22 out of a total of 200 references in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* as a whole.

³⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 9.810 (PG 74:257c).

³⁶ Ibid., 9.810–11 (PG 74:257c–260a).

the Spirit to them but only for their spiritual growth and not in its entirety. The church's future leaders, namely the apostles, had to prepare spiritually for the event of Pentecost and for preaching and giving the sacraments. According to Acts, the entire gift of the Spirit will be given at Pentecost.³⁷ Indeed, even Thomas participates in this premature gift of spiritual growth and sanctification, despite being absent (John 20:24), according to the example of the 70 elders in Num 11:16–29.³⁸

As is apparent, Cyril's interest is primarily of a doctrinal and apologetic nature. However, he does not cease to be a profound exegete as well. It is noteworthy that, despite being fond of allegory as a genuine Alexandrian, he avoids interpreting John 20:22 in an allegorical way and remains in line with the interpretation of the overall exegetical tradition. Thus, he sees in both gifts of the Spirit two separate events, the first one being the preparation for the second one and a follow-up of the Genesis creation narrative.³⁹

VII. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I presented a sample of interpretations of John 20:22 within its context from three Eastern and two Western church fathers. Summarizing the above, the following general conclusions can be drawn:

Concerning John 20:22, there is no particular differentiation between Western and Eastern, Latin-speaking and Greek-speaking, Antiochian and Alexandrian exegesis.

Because I limited myself to only two centuries and exegetes representing the so-called *Großkirche*, further research is necessary to uncover the whole array of relevant ancient exegetical approaches and positions.

The interpretations presented in this paper demonstrate that in the fourth and fifth centuries, the *Großkirche* had already formed some concrete trends of christological and pneumatological exegesis of John 20:22, notwithstanding a few unimportant variations and differences.

As is well-known, the *Filioque* has not been a problem during this early period. This is only interesting to Augustine, who elaborates on the Fourth Gospel's Paraclete sayings and constructs a conception of the Holy Spirit that goes beyond the "economic *Filioque*" that the Eastern patristic authors of the time already accept.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., 13.1098–99 (PG 74:716b–717c).

³⁸ Ibid., 13.1100–2 (PG 74:717d–721b).

³⁹ Ibid., 13.1097 (PG 74:713d–714a).

⁴⁰ On the history of the *Filioque* controversy, see Sicienski, *Filioque* (cf. note 30).

Almost all of the examined patristic authors associate the breathing of the Spirit on the disciples with the story of creation (Gen 2:7) but are careful enough not to equate the Spirit with the human soul.

The patristic authors under consideration base their exegetical positions and conclusions primarily on parallel biblical texts and not on other church authors. Obviously, there is an interaction between various patristic authors and a consensus in some common motifs, themes, and arguments. However, in the examined passages, there are no explicit references to other authors. The unquestionable authority is the Bible *per se*.⁴¹

I could not find any use of typology or allegory (only with a small exception in the case of Augustine). Obviously, in doctrinal matters, allegory and typology tend to be avoided, and here we have an eminently dogmatic issue.

It is unthinkable for the church fathers that the Johannine and the Lukan accounts of the giving of the Spirit are two different versions of the same story and not referring to two distinct events. This obviously has to do with their particular perception of the divine inspiration of the Bible, according to which all information included in it has to be completely reliable and accurate.

⁴¹ This changed in later centuries, see C. Karakolis, “Die Kirchenväter können das eigene Verstehen anleiten, aber nicht ersetzen – eine orthodoxe Perspektive,” in *Sola Scriptura ökumenisch*, *Biblische Argumente in öffentlichen Debatten 1* (ed. S. Alkier, C. Karakolis, and T. Nicklas; Paderborn: Brill and Schöningh, 2021), 59–64.