THE TRANSFERRAL OF SYMBOLS FOR THE LAW TO
JESUS IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL—
"BREAD", "WATER" AND "LIGHT" : LIFE

In Judaism the Torah was called "bread", "water", "light" and
was considered to be (the source of) "life".¹ These are all themes
which are central to the Fourth Gospel and many authors believe
that Jn has consciously transferred these attributes or symbols from
the Torah to Jesus.²

One must distinguish, however, between contrasts or comparisons
which are explicitly made by Jn and such as are possibly made. Of
the four attributes, only one is explicitly transferred from the Torah
(Scriptures) to Jesus: life. The comparison between Jesus and the
Torah as (the source of) "life" is explicitly made at Jn 5,39f; elsewhere
Jn will insist that "life" is to be found in Jesus (1,4; 5,26), that he gives
"life" (passim), that his words are "life" (6,63.68), that he is the "life"
(11,25; 14,6).

The contrast between Jesus and the Torah as "bread", "water"
and "light" is not certain. There are good grounds to believe that
Jn 4 and 6 contrast Jesus with the Torah as "water" and "bread",
respectively. Although the contrast between Jesus and the Torah as
"light" may be present in the Fourth Gospel, the probability is not
very great.

It is interesting to note that "life", which is certainly transferred
from the Torah to Jesus, is associated with the symbols "bread", "water"
and "light". Jesus gives the "water" which gives "life" (Jn 4,14); he is (gives) the "bread" which gives "life" (6,33, etc.);
he is the "light" of "life" (8,12).

If in Jn 4 the "water of the well" symbolizes the Torah and if
the "bread from heaven" in Jn 6 also symbolizes the Torah, both
being contrasted with Jesus as the "living water" and the "bread of

¹ The references will be given when each of the terms is dealt with specifically.
² The correspondence is usually recognized by the commentaries. Cf. further Kittel,
TWNT IV, 138-140; Glasson, Moses, 86-94. Some authors (e.g., E. M. Sidebottom, The
Christ of the Fourth Gospel in the Light of First-Century Thought (London, 1961), 33f;
203ff) prefer to stress the correspondence with the attributes of Wisdom. The Law
and Wisdom, as we have seen, are related, so that the two opinions are not opposed.
See what is said below on Jn 1,17.
life”, Jn would be contrasting Jesus with the Torah on the issue of “life”. The explicit juxtaposition found at 5,39 makes this highly probable.

Our investigation will be severely limited to a cursory examination of Jn 6,26-34.49-50.45; 4,10-15 and Jn 8,12. More attention will be paid to the possible background than to an exhaustive exegesis of the passages.