

## Topics from the Gospel of John Part II: The Meaning of the Signs

Merrill C. Tenney

One of the peculiarities of the Fourth Gospel is the fact that its author chose to hang its key by the back door. The purpose of the Gospel of John is not stated in the opening paragraph as in Luke's Gospel, but rather at the end. At the conclusion of chapter 20 John explains his motive and method of writing in these words: "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

The first prominent word in this short summary is signs (*σημεία*).<sup>1</sup> This word (*σημείον*) means (1) the sign or distinguishing mark by which something is known; (2) a miracle, either of divine or demonic nature; (3) a portent of an impending catastrophe.<sup>2</sup> It is used throughout the New Testament, chiefly in the Gospels and Acts. In the Gospel narratives *σημείον* seems to carry the connotation of divine communication, usually a warning of events yet to come (Matt. 16:1, 3, 4; 24:3, 24, 30; Mark 13:4, 22;

<sup>1</sup> Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "*σημείον*," by Karl Heinrich Rengstorf.

<sup>2</sup> William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 755-56.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of four articles, first delivered by the author as the Louis S. Bauman Memorial Lectures at Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana, February 12-15, 1974.

Luke 2:12; 21:7, 11, 25), or a special manifestation of divine intervention in history (Acts 2:22, 43; 4:16, 22, 30; 7:36). In thirteen instances, the larger number of which appear in Acts, the word *σημείον* is coupled with *τέρατα*, "wonders." Both refer to miracles, but *σημείον* emphasizes the significance or purpose of these unusual occurrences, while *τέρατα* refers to the marvel or wonder they excite. Both imply some sort of supernatural event, presumably of great importance.

*Σημείον* appears frequently in the Septuagint as the translation of *תּוֹטָה* "sign," "pledge," or "token." It conveys the idea of a landmark (Gen. 1:14), a protecting identification (4:15), a pledge (17:11), a miracle (Exod. 7:3, 9), a memorial (13:9), a sample of divine power (Isa. 7:11), and a signal (Jer. 6:1). The meaning of the two terms is almost identical, and the concept is used equally in both the Old and New Testaments.

Within the Gospel of John *σημείον* is used seventeen times and in the American Standard Version is uniformly translated "sign." It does not occur in the Johannine Epistles, but in Revelation it seems to have much the same meaning as in John. Its use in the Gospel is closely connected with the structure of the book, for the entire narrative section from John 1:20 to 12:50, comprising the public ministry of Jesus, is built around the signs. The author states explicitly that the purpose of his writing is expressed through these signs and that he has selected seven from a much larger number known to him as the core of the discussion of Jesus' words and works. They may be understood as the divine endorsement of His authority (2:18, 23), or as illustrations of the varied nature of His word (4:54; 20:30).

## THE OCCURRENCES OF THE SIGNS

The distribution of the signs with their related context is as follows:

### THE INTRODUCTION OF JESUS TO HIS FIRST DISCIPLES (1:19-51)

The first meeting of Jesus with His future disciples took place in Bethany east of the Jordan, where John the Baptist was conducting his campaign. The narrative ends with a promise included in the dialogue with Philip that the disciples would see a revelation of God in Christ superior to that of the Old Testament. The figure of the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man recalls vividly the dream of Jacob, who saw angels ascending and descending on a ladder extending up to heaven (Gen. 28:12).

The Son, greater than angels, would become the new Mediator of the revelation of God.

#### THE SIGNS (2:1-11:53)

1. *The transformation of water into wine* (2:1-11). John observed that this was the first of Jesus' miracles performed after He had returned to Galilee from the occasion of the baptism and acknowledgement by John the Baptist. He seemed reluctant to accede to His mother's suggestion and indicated that His action from that time onward would be regulated by His "hour" (2:4). He implied that He was living by a divine schedule that fixed the timing of all His activities and that He could not do something merely to fulfill a request. The fact that He performed the miracle indicated that it accorded with the purpose of God in sending Him into the world. Its nature revealed Him as the Creator and disclosed His power over the chemical processes of nature. By one word of command He accomplished the transformation that a vine requires several months to produce. The miracle was witnessed by a sufficient number of people to establish its reality.

2. *The healing of the nobleman's son* (4:46-54). The second sign also took place in Cana. Upon Jesus' return from His trip to Jerusalem and Samaria, recorded in John 2:13-4:42, He began a ministry in Galilee. There He was approached by a nobleman, possibly a courtier of Herod Antipas, who petitioned Him to intervene on behalf of his son, who lay seriously ill about twenty miles distant in Capernaum. Again Jesus demurred, saying, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe" (4:48). He virtually accused the nobleman of being an idle curiosity-seeker. The genuine concern of the latter prompted Jesus' reply: "Go your way; your son lives" (4:50). Responding in faith, the nobleman retraced his steps to Capernaum to learn en route that his son had been healed. Jesus had transcended the nobleman's highest expectation; for although He did not visit the sick child, He gave ample proof that distance was no obstacle to His power.

3. *The healing of the man at Bethesda* (5:1-10). The third sign in John's narrative occurred in Jerusalem. Jesus must have performed miracles in Jerusalem on His former visit since Nicodemus referred to "these signs that You do" (3:2). The language implies that Jesus had maintained a ministry of healing that was well publicized. In this instance, however, Jesus took the initiative and

approached a man who had been waiting at the Pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years. Because of the belief that the first person who stepped into the pool as the water was troubled would receive healing, he had remained there year after year, but there were always others better able than he to take advantage of the opportunity. Jesus questioned him gently in order to ascertain whether he really desired healing. It was a test of the man's will; and at Jesus' command he stood and walked. Despite the long period of helplessness, during which his muscles would have become atrophied, he was so completely healed that he put his bedroll on his shoulder and walked away. Jesus demonstrated His power over the ravages of time; for a paralytic of thirty-eight years would normally be incurable.

This sign, however, had other overtones as well. Because the healing occurred on the Sabbath, Jesus was instantly accused of breaking the law of Moses. John recounts that hostility between Jesus and the Jewish hierarchy had already begun because of His boldness in expelling the commercial concessions from the Temple courts. Although the issue probably died down, it still smoldered in the minds of the Jewish officials, and according to Mark's account it became a tool of the false witnesses at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:55-58). Controversy over the Sabbath arose frequently and from the very first was a main point of contention. Jesus took the occasion to assert His authority not only over the power of disease, but also over the ceremonial law.

The ensuing argument with the religious leaders of Jerusalem evoked from Jesus a defense in which He claimed unmistakably His relation to the Father and His functions in that relation. On the basis of His competence to heal He asserted His spiritual authority. The third sign was performed in public and began the lengthy period of controversy that extended until the time of His death.

4. *The feeding of the five thousand* (John 6:1-15). The fourth sign chosen by John was the feeding of the five thousand. This miracle, mentioned in all four Gospels, was the watershed of Jesus' career. It marked the height of His popularity and, as far as the evidence of the Gospels goes, brought to Him the largest audience to which He ever spoke. Matthew states that those who partook of the food Jesus provided included five thousand men, to say nothing of women and children (Matt. 14:21). To assume that He had the responsibility for feeding ten thousand people would not strain one's imagination too greatly. Using a small boy's lunch

which one of the disciples located, Jesus multiplied the simple fare of unleavened barley cakes and pickled fish until everyone in the vast crowd was satisfied. Apparently Jesus simply kept breaking the bread and fish and distributing it through His disciples without any dramatic ceremony or ostentatious announcement. Quietly but effectively He enlisted the aid of the disciples in the enterprise so that they might realize the full extent of His powers.

The multitude whom He had been teaching and whom He had fed realized that He possessed unusual resources. Their initial reaction was to make Him their king, for they assumed that He could utilize His supernatural abilities to free them from Roman rule and to feed them. Jesus, of course, would not accept any such proposal, since it would be founded on an allegiance prompted by material rather than by spiritual motives. His refusal alienated the people, and the explanation of His mission that He gave immediately afterward in the synagogue at Capernaum disenchanting them completely. The discourse on the Bread of Life spoke of spiritual not material sustenance, and His emphasis on the resurrection at the last day (John 6:54) must have seemed totally irrelevant to them. Furthermore, His declaration, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in yourselves" (6:53), mystified them. Even many of His disciples left Him because they could not understand the meaning of His words. The interpretation of the sign which had been given to demonstrate His sufficiency for human need proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to their faith.

Some glimmering of His meaning must have penetrated the consciousness of the Twelve, however. When Jesus challenged them by saying, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" (6:67), Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (6:68). "Life" or "live" occur five times in the short paragraph which closes Jesus' preceding discourse, and evidently Peter's mention of eternal life refers to this context. Having participated in the action at the miracle, and having listened to the explanation of Jesus afterward, he was ready to stake his future on Jesus' mysterious promise rather than to abandon Him completely. For him and for his colleagues this sign became a turning point in their decision. They were unsure of the road ahead, but they would follow Jesus anyway.

5. *The walking on the water* (John 6:16-21). Closely connected with the feeding of the five thousand was the sign of walking on the water. It is not labeled as a sign but was equally as miraculous as those that preceded it. In this event only the disciples were involved; it was not witnessed by the multitude. Jesus had dismissed the disciples and had sent them back to Capernaum by boat across the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. As the air cools in the evening, the winds pour down from the western heights to the surface of the lake, which is about six hundred feet below sea level, and create a rough sea, rolling from west to east. The disciples were struggling to maintain headway on their homeward voyage and were making little if any progress. As they rowed with their backs to the wind, they suddenly noticed a human figure approaching them across the lake. As it gained on them they were terrified and cried out in fear, thinking that they were pursued by a ghost. When Jesus approached them, He said, "It is I; do not be afraid" (6:20). Their fears were allayed, and they were shortly at the land.

Although little explanation accompanies this episode, it seems to have been given as a reassurance to the disciples who were facing danger. Ahead of them loomed greater dangers than that of the storm: the rising enmity of the Jewish hierarchy; the doubts and fears engendered by misunderstanding; the collapse of their expectations of an immediate kingdom; and the bewilderment that would accompany Jesus' departure from them. He wanted them to learn that He was Master of the forces of nature and that He could avert what seemed to be inevitable peril. His presence would be the permanent guarantee of their safety.

6. *The healing of the blind man* (John 9:1-41). The affliction of the man born blind was not a casual illness that suddenly became acute, nor an ailment contracted in youth after some years of good health. He was congenitally blind, which rendered his condition hopeless. The real import of this sign, however, does not concern his physical condition so much as it does his inward spiritual consciousness. John devotes a larger amount of text to the episode than to any other of the signs except the raising of Lazarus. The healing took place in Jerusalem, where the hostility to Jesus still lingered because of His previous healing on the Sabbath — an offense which the healing of the blind man repeated. There was direct conflict between Jesus and the ecclesiastical authorities on this question, and Jesus' entire work was challenged. The Pharisees

questioned the identity of the Healer, His authority, His method, His ethics, and His origin. Their attitude is the perfect illustration of a closed mind that can accept nothing that does not coincide with its own presuppositions.

The narrative is given in detail because it concerns a problem deeper than the blindness. The inability of the man to enjoy the external world and to participate in the ordinary activities of life raised the question of purpose. Why should this calamity have happened to him? Why was he cut off from the joys and achievements which might otherwise have been his? The disciples of Jesus implied this by their question, "Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind?" (9:2) .

Jesus pointed out that the blindness was not a punitive judgment for any particular sin by the man or by his parents. He did not explain what caused it but rather asserted that it provided an opportunity for God to intervene with creative power. His statement, "We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work" (9:4), parallels the utterance recorded in John 5: "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working" (5:17). The divine attitude toward men is positive, not negative; human misery is divine opportunity. Jesus proceeded immediately to cure the man, using such means as He had to evoke the man's cooperation in faith.

Jesus' contact in this fashion illustrates a second principle: that He wanted to produce not only an instant faith adequate for response to His immediate challenge, but also a progressive faith that would lead to acceptance of Himself. The application of this principle may be seen in the blind man's reaction to Jesus. When the blind man was questioned by Jesus' incredulous enemies concerning the manner of the healing, which was undeniable, he replied, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam, and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight" (9:11). The use of the definite article with the name of Jesus (ὁ Ἰησοῦς) implies that Jesus was already well known in Jerusalem although the blind man regarded Him as only one of the general multitude. Perhaps the blind man thought of Him as a healer whose reputation was widespread and who had happened to visit the city.

Further argument and probing by his interrogators elicited the opinion that Jesus must be a prophet. There had been numerous prophets in the history of Israel, all of whom had claimed divine

authority, and some of whom, like Elijah and Elisha, had performed, miracles of healing (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:8-37). By analogy, therefore, he reasoned that Jesus must be a prophet, or else He would be unable to perform such a deed.

The opposition, however, were not satisfied. Adhering firmly to the principle that anyone who worked on the Sabbath had transgressed the Law, they declared that Jesus was a sinner and called on the blind man to repudiate Him by giving glory to God alone. Exasperated by this obstinacy, the man strengthened his previous confession by affirming that Jesus must come from God because otherwise He could accomplish nothing (9:33). In disgust the ecclesiastical authorities excommunicated him and thus cut him off from the fellowship of his friends and from the hope that his faith could give him. Excommunication from the synagogue was a serious matter, for expulsion from the covenant people meant the loss of salvation to a Jew and consequent despair.

Learning of this misfortune, Jesus undertook to find the man, presumably to comfort him. His challenge, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9:35),<sup>3</sup> was designed to bring his growing belief to a final focus. The immediate affirmative reaction indicates that there had been a dawning realization of Jesus' divine authority which brought him to an ultimate confession of belief. This "sign" is thus a pattern of growing faith and illustrates Jesus' power to change human destiny as He continues the Father's work. Not only could He restore sight to the body, but He could also evoke spiritual perception within a man who seemed to be the victim of an unjust fate.

7. *The raising of Lazarus* (John 11:1-44). The last of the signs in the sevenfold series is the raising of Lazarus. It occurred shortly before Jesus' death; in fact, it was one of the contributing factors to His arrest and subsequent condemnation. It involved many factors which do not appear in the other signs: the seriousness of the occasion, for death is normally final and irreversible; the emotional interest of Jesus in a personal friend; the seemingly irrational delay; the remarkable prayer at the graveside; and its relation to the faith of Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, who present

<sup>3</sup> Reading ἀνθρώπου with P<sup>66,75</sup>, Ⳑ, B, D, W, Syr<sup>s</sup>, et al., Metzger comments that "the external support for ἀνθρώπου is so weighty, and the improbability of θεοῦ being altered to ἀνθρώπου is so great, that the Committee regarded the reading adopted . . . as virtually certain" (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London: United Bible Societies, 1971], pp. 228-29).

two different types of human reaction to the last great critical problem that confronts mankind.

The opening statement in the narrative of Lazarus' resurrection is that "Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus" (11:5). Jesus had shown compassion to the blind man, who was presumably an utter stranger to Him, because He was doing His Father's work and so shared God's attitude to men. In this case He had a personal attachment for the family, who had on previous occasions entertained Him and whose fellowship He prized. The death of Lazarus was unquestionably a personal grief to Him.

Because of this fact His delay in returning to Bethany seems inexplicable. To be sure, the Jewish priesthood had already set a price on His head (7:30; 10:39; 11:53), and He knew that if He appeared in the environs of Jerusalem He might be seized and executed. This threat, however, does not seem to have been the reason for His delay although the disciples recognized the peril (11:8). As on a previous occasion, He was awaiting the time God had set for Him to complete the purpose of the divine will. The enigmatic statement, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world" (11:9), indicates that Jesus felt assured of safety while pursuing the course defined for Him by the will of God.

The avowed purpose of the apparently unreasonable delay was the development of the faith of the disciples, including Mary and Martha. To witness another healing would be no novelty; they had undoubtedly seen many such miracles. There had also been two occasions on which Jesus had restored the dead to life: Jairus' daughter, who had been dead only a short time (Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:22-43; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56); and the son of a widow at Nain (Luke 7:1-17). Both of these were persons who had expired only hours before Jesus came; Lazarus had been dead for four days when the miracle occurred. The raising of Lazarus would, therefore, have been much more convincing to those who observed it.

The reactions of the two sisters to this calamity are diametrically opposed. Martha was aggressive, angry, and reproachful. She rebuked Jesus by saying, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Mary used the same words, but with a different emphasis. She was paralyzed with grief and reluctant to leave the house. Martha was defensive; Mary was crushed.

Nevertheless both had retained faith in Jesus. Martha had qualified her reproach by saying, "Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You" (11:22). They had summoned Him because they were sure that He could avert death; now they await His command.

Jesus' reaction is summed up in the well-known words, "Jesus wept" (11:35). He risked His life by returning to Bethany; He was distressed by the sorrow which death had caused (11:50); and He shared in the grief of the family. His tears may seem incongruous with His obvious intention to raise Lazarus, but He could not suppress His human feelings even though He exercised divine power. John makes plain throughout the Gospel that Jesus was truly man and also truly God.

The prayer at the graveside was revelatory of Jesus' relation to the Father. He did not frantically implore divine intervention but rather calmly offered thanks for what He considered to be a completed fact. He took for granted that God had already done what He had requested and so commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb. His demand that the disciples believe (11:15, 25-26, 40) was reinforced by the example of His own assurance that God had already answered prayer in spite of contrary appearances. That faith was justified by the sudden appearance of Lazarus from the underground tomb, brought back to life by the dynamic energy of divine power.

This sign concludes the series intended to demonstrate the divine attitude and power manifested in Jesus. It declares Him to be the Master of man's last and most implacable enemy, death. By presenting Jesus' readiness to intervene on behalf of man at His own peril, by unveiling His unfeigned emotion evoked by sympathy with the bereaved family, and by illustrating the meaning of His declaration, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies" (John 11:25), it creates new hope for men who must face the inevitable terminus which death brings to all their present hopes and achievements.

#### SUGGESTED MEANINGS OF THE SIGNS

These signs which John has listed possess major importance for interpretation.

From the literary standpoint, they are regarded by some as vestiges of a source or sources that the hypothetical editor used in composing the Gospel. Brown regards John 1:19-12:50 as "The

Book of Signs,"<sup>4</sup> and quotes Bultmann as suggesting that these signs were excerpted from a larger collection attributed to John.<sup>5</sup> The indication of borrowing is from a source found in the allusion to various signs in 12:37 and 20:30. The latter passage states that Jesus performed many signs not written in the Gospel. Bultmann thinks that the story of the call of the disciples in John 1:35-49 may have constituted the introduction to the "sign source."

This thesis has been developed in detail by a number of others, most fully in recent years by Fortna<sup>6</sup> and Nicol.<sup>7</sup> Both agree that the Fourth Gospel incorporated a large segment of material consisting of these signs, to which the Johannine comments, discourses, and account of the Passion and Resurrection were later added. Fortna attempts a reconstruction of the text of the "source," in which he includes John 1:6, 7, 19-34 (with some lacunae), 3:23, 24; 1:35-50, and the accounts of the miracles with the excision of what he considers to be Johannine comments. He indulges in considerable reorganization of the text, such as inserting the interview with the Samaritan woman into the narrative of the raising of Lazarus. Despite his meticulous labor and thorough documentation, one feels that his effort is more ingenious than convincing.

Nicol, while relying equally on criteria of style for his identification of the "source," does not attempt a reconstruction but isolates the sign-segments as "sources" by a relative absence of the "Johannine characteristics" appearing in them. He is somewhat less dogmatic about the precise content of the hypothetical source or sources. Both of these authors have done a service in tabulating and analyzing literary phenomena in the Fourth Gospel related to these signs, but the speculative character of their hypotheses makes their conclusions very uncertain.

It is, of course, not impossible that sources of one kind or another may have been used by the writer of this Gospel. Luke states plainly in his introduction that "many have undertaken to

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 29, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966), pp. cxxxviii, xxix.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxix. See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Ricker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 6-7, 113-15.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Tomson Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. xiii, 275, esp. 235-45.

<sup>7</sup> W. Nicol, *The Sources in the Fourth Gospel: Tradition and Reaction* (London: E. T. Brill, 1972), pp. x, 155.

compile an account of the things accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1) and implies that he had read them, but he continues by stating that they were derived from eyewitnesses who became ministers of what they knew. The contention that the Book of John, or any other Gospel for that matter, is simply a random mosaic of more or less legendary tales fitted together to give authority to the opinions current at some stage of the subapostolic church does not do justice to the facts. Brown, who himself is not averse to some free exercise of biblical criticism, quotes Pierson Parker as saying, "It looks as though, if the author of the Fourth Gospel used documentary sources, he wrote them all himself," and adds, "There are really no convincing parallels in antiquity for the types of sources that Bultmann has postulated. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

The best explanation is the simplest: that the author was himself a witness of these events and that from his memories of Jesus' works he selected those which would best illustrate Jesus' career and character. There are no stylistic idiosyncracies in any of these "signs" that would mark them as borrowed from other sources, and each of them could have been witnessed by John the son of Zebedee.

If, then, these are actual occurrences related from personal memory, they would be vivid pictures of Jesus' response to human situations that typify various aspects of need. If their "sources" originate in the author's own experience directly or indirectly, they would have peculiar meaning for him and would be especially convincing as he narrated them.

The fact that two are numbered, the miracle at Cana as "the beginning of His signs" (2:11) and the healing of the nobleman's son as the "second sign that Jesus performed when He had come out of Judea into Galilee" (4:54), may mean simply that John was impressed by Jesus' works in His own home territory. He performed miracles in Jerusalem, subsequent to the first miracle in Cana and prior to the second, which are mentioned in John 2:23. After mentioning the second, John does not indicate any particular numbered order for each one, probably because he has little to say of the Galilean ministry recorded by the Synoptics. In that ministry was included the feeding of the five thousand, which was climactic

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

in Jesus' career and recorded for that reason. It was preceded and followed by numerous healings and other miracles that would make it difficult to number.

Coincident with each of these "signs" was a personal interview of some sort, sometimes brief, sometimes protracted, sometimes with an individual, sometimes with a group. The first sign involved a conversation with Jesus' mother (2:4); the second, with the father of the boy who was healed (4:48-49); the third, by a challenge to the paralytic and a subsequent warning (5:6-8, 14), and a longer discourse to His opponents who challenged His right to heal on the Sabbath (5:10-47); the fourth, a consultation with Andrew and Philip about the best method of feeding the crowd (6:5-9) and a long discourse the next day in the synagogue of Capernaum (6:41-59); the fifth, a word of encouragement to the frightened disciples (6:20); the sixth, the instruction of the disciples and the blind man (9:2-5, 35-38); and the seventh, the word of teaching to the disciples (11:8-16, 20-27, 39-43). The disciples are mentioned in all of these instances except the second and third, and it is possible that they were present on these occasions. Where they are mentioned, it is evident that Jesus was endeavoring to develop their faith by testing it and by using the situation for teaching.

The miracle at Cana confirmed the impression that Jesus had created by the initial interview recorded in the first chapter of John. It cemented the disciples' attachment to Jesus after they had joined Him on recommendation of John the Baptist (1:35-37). As noted above, no conclusions can be drawn directly from the second and third signs, but at the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus challenged His followers directly. The differing responses from Andrew and Philip revealed not only the minds of the men, but also the opposing attitudes current among them. Philip's was negative; he produced statistics to prove what they could not do because they did not have enough money to buy bread. Andrew's response was positive, but tentative. He could obtain a boy's lunch, but that seemed ridiculously small in comparison with the crowd. Both men needed to realize the sufficiency of Jesus for the emergency. The outcome evidently brought a positive response from the disciples as a group, when, after the discourse on the Bread of Life and the ensuing bewilderment of many in the audience, Peter declared Jesus to be "the Holy One of God" (6:69).

The last three signs taught the disciples Jesus' power over danger, despair, and death. He rescued them from the storm; He demonstrated His power to reverse the fate of the blind man; and He was able to restore Lazarus to his grieving family. By these miracles He increased their confidence in Him.

The signs, then, were revelatory in character. Each one disclosed some new interest and power on the part of Jesus. They illustrated successively His mastery of quality, distance, time, quantity, natural law, fate, and death the very things that human beings cannot change or create. He is superior to accident and misfortune and can use them to further His own purpose. John presents these signs as an introduction to the Passion that he may prepare his readers for the last great sign, Jesus' own resurrection, which He announced in the very beginning of the narrative: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). John adds that when the prediction was fulfilled, "His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken" (2:22).

Each of these signs had a definite connection with faith. After the first, Jesus' disciples "believed in Him" (2:11). The second produced a working faith in the nobleman, who committed himself to Jesus with his entire household (4:53). The third caused the man who was healed to walk when he had not attempted to do so for thirty-eight years. The fourth illustrated the power of a tentative faith. Jesus accepted Andrew's timorous suggestion, and more than justified his hopes. When the disciples welcomed Jesus into the boat, although they had first feared that He was a ghost, they found themselves at land. The healing of the blind man answered their theological dilemma, as well as brought the man himself to a genuine commitment. Finally, the raising of Lazarus transformed the sisters' theoretical belief in a resurrection into a practical trust in the Lord who is the resurrection and the life. The signs make a tremendous contribution to the growth of belief as depicted in the Gospel of John.

The signs, however, are not cited merely as wonders to arouse a temporary and superficial faith. At the beginning of the Gospel the author indicates that Jesus performed numerous signs in Jerusalem which induced belief, but that Jesus did not reciprocate by trusting Himself to the "believers" (2:23-24). He hesitated to grant the nobleman's petition because He did not want a faith founded only on "signs and wonders" (4:48). He openly criticized the

crowd at Capernaum after the miracle of the loaves and fishes by saying, "You seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves, and were filled" (6:26), and added later in the synagogue discourse, "You have seen Me, and yet do not believe" (6:36). The emphasis which He gave to the healing of the blind man was not so much a reaction to the miracle itself as to the man's relation to Him (9:35-38). He told the Pharisees that they were blind, not only because they had denied the miracle, which was understandable, but because they had failed to apprehend His identity (9:41). Even at the raising of Lazarus, where the family were predisposed in His favor, Jesus endeavored to fix Martha's faith not on an abstract concept of resurrection, but on Himself (11:25-27). These signs, like the interviews which were frequently connected with them, are intended to evoke a personal belief in Christ which will link the believer to His person rather than merely an assent to the actuality of the miracles.

Another emphasis in the signs connects them with the concept of glory. The first personal footnote in the Gospel says, "We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten [Son] from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). The effect of the first sign, according to the author, is that Jesus "manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him" (2:11). The sign manifested His glory because it revealed His power, His attitude of compassion, and His accreditation by the Father. The last sign, the raising of Lazarus, is likewise interpreted: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it" (11:4). After this event Jesus said, "Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" (11:40). The "glory" of which He spoke was the honor and dignity that pertained to His deity. Although He appeared as a human being and lived subject to human limitations, His works revealed His real nature and were a foretaste of the ultimate glory to which He expected to attain when His work was completed (17:5). Jesus' final prayer included the petition that the manifestation which had been partial and imperfectly apprehended might in the future become clear to the disciples whom He had destined for eternal life.

## CONCLUSION

The signs are thus an integral part of John's Gospel. They contribute illustrative evidence concerning Jesus' person and position as the Incarnate Word. They prepare the mind of the reader for the

final section on the Passion by showing that Jesus has shared every aspect of human life: its joys in the wedding, its anguish when disease strikes a life, its helplessness when paralysis immobilizes action, its hunger when food is scarce, its fears when exposed to the uncontrolled elements of nature, its hopelessness when facing a future of poverty and frustration, and its confusion when confronted by the irrationality and sorrow of death. Jesus suffered all of these, and His final victory over them was the greatest sign of all — the resurrection. These signs are samples of what He can do for those who trust Him and of the life that He confers on those who believe on His name.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204

[www.dts.edu](http://www.dts.edu)

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)