

Introduction to the Gospel According to John
Lesson Three – The Book of Signs
“The Book of Signs”
By J B Cross

This is part three of a four-lesson course on the Gospel commonly known as the Gospel of John. The first lesson introduced the Gospel’s major concepts and considered the origins and history of the text. This lesson continues the close reading of the Gospel and should be used alongside the Gospel itself.

The Gospel According to John

After the Prologue, the first major narrative section of the Fourth Gospel is commonly called the Book of Signs. It covers much more than the signs or miracles themselves, because it tells the story of Jesus’ public ministry. Like the Book of Revelation, which Christian tradition has also associated with the name John, this Gospel has produced much disagreement about meaning, context, authorship, and interpretation. It is also markedly different from the Synoptic Gospels, even regarding the basic timeline. One of its overriding themes is the love of God for humankind and God’s desire that we love one another. As we read an ancient book such as this one, we should remember that ancient writers and readers had different expectations from ours. John’s Gospel may be viewed as a theological text expressed through narrative and symbol. In modern terms, we often approach theology abstractly, using occasional examples. In the ancient world, theological reflection often proceeded through concrete stories, followed by occasional abstraction. In John, one often finds a concrete story or series of stories followed by an exposition by Jesus or by the narrator.

There are various ways to organize a discussion of the Fourth Gospel. Each outline has limitations, but each can help readers organize the material. We have been using the organization proposed by Luke Timothy Johnson in [The Writings of the New Testament](#). James L. Price offers another outline in [Interpreting the New Testament](#). Price treats the Gospel in broad

sections, including a Prologue, the Book of Signs, the Passion material, and a Conclusion. The section Price calls the “Book of Signs” is our topic for today. In Price’s outline, John 2 through John 12:50 is divided into seven episodes, including the signs or miracles shown here in bold.

The first episode, entitled “New Beginning,” includes the sign at Cana, **water into wine**; the cleansing of the Temple, punctuated by discourses; the conversation with Nicodemus, in which one must be born again; the discourse concerning John the Baptist and baptism; and the conversation with the Samaritan woman. This series of stories concerns the relationship of Jesus to Judaism. At the wedding, the water comes from jars used for Jewish rites of purification. In the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus’ zeal for his Father’s house recalls the Old Testament. Nicodemus represents those within Judaism who are attracted to Jesus but puzzled by him. John therefore presents Jesus’ ministry as fulfilling and renewing Israel’s hopes and institutions.

The second episode, entitled “The Life-Giving Word,” includes the healing of the official’s son, identified in John as Jesus’ **second sign** at Cana, although the son is at Capernaum; the **healing at the pool of Bethzatha/Bethesda**, performed on the Sabbath and therefore controversial; and the discourse on Jesus’ authority and power to judge.

The third episode, entitled “The Bread of Life,” includes the **feeding of the five thousand**; Jesus coming to his disciples on the sea, which some scholars count as a separate sign and others treat as part of the feeding episode; the discourse concerning the true bread; and an appendix. The feeding occurs on a mountain and recalls Moses, Sinai, and the manna in the wilderness.

The fourth episode, entitled “Light and Life,” contains an introduction and conversation during the Feast of Booths.

The fifth episode, entitled “Judgment by Light,” contains the **healing of the man born blind**, a trial scene concerning the miracle, and a discourse on the Shepherd of the flock.

The sixth episode, entitled “The Victory over Death,” includes the **raising of Lazarus** from the

dead and an appendix or comment.

The seventh episode, entitled “Life Through Death,” contains the anointing at Bethany and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

This organization emphasizes how different the storyline is in the Fourth Gospel when compared with the Synoptic Gospels. In the Synoptics, Jesus’ identity as Messiah is revealed gradually; in John, it is proclaimed from the beginning. John omits the baptism of Jesus and the temptation stories. It also places the cleansing of the Temple early and presents Jesus as making frequent visits to Jerusalem, both of which differ from the Synoptic pattern. In Mark, for instance, the cleansing of the Temple intensifies the conflict leading to the Crucifixion. In John, the raising of Lazarus becomes the immediate event that leads the authorities to seek Jesus’ death, even though that episode is absent from the Synoptics. The Synoptic storyline builds toward a single, final, and fatal visit to Jerusalem. As noted in the first lesson, John’s timeline may seem the more natural of the two plots, but there is no independent way to verify the exact order of events. We are therefore left to trust that the four Gospel writers believed there was something more important to convey than a mere chronology. These contrasts matter because they help us draw meaning from the texts.

Scholars have offered various explanations for the Fourth Gospel’s contrasts with the Synoptic Gospels. One explanation is that John used a different set of pre-Johannine sources as his basic material. The biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), for example, proposed that John drew on hypothetical sources such as a signs source and a revelation-discourse source. These sources would have been either preexisting written material or oral tradition. No ancient text of these proposed sources has been found. Rather, scholars have tried to infer possible sources by applying literary criticism to the New Testament writings.

There is, of course, much disagreement about the Fourth Gospel, even on points that might appear obvious, such as the number of signs. Many sources identify six commonly recognized signs in the Book of Signs: water into wine, the healing of the official’s son, the healing at Bethzatha or Bethesda, the feeding of the five thousand, the healing of the man born blind, and

the raising of Lazarus. Other scholars and teachers include Jesus walking on the water, producing a list of seven signs. Luke Timothy Johnson includes walking on the water, while some sources, including Price's outline and the Oxford Companion discussion reflected below, treat it differently. The Gospel also contains other events that seem miraculous, such as Jesus' knowledge of Nathanael, his knowledge of the Samaritan woman's life, the Resurrection, and the catch of 153 fish in John 21. These events are important, but they are not always counted among the signs in the Book of Signs because scholars use different criteria for what John presents as a "sign."

Before turning to John's particular signs, it is helpful to pause over the broader biblical meaning of miracles. The point is not merely that extraordinary events occur, but that such events disclose something about God's purpose, Jesus' identity, and the response of faith.

Miracles, which in John are called "signs," also occur throughout the Bible, in history, and in literature. In the Bible, miracles are a means by which God discloses and fulfills divine purpose in the world and in the redemption of those who respond in faith. In Scripture, there are several different types of miracles:

1. **Confirmatory** — the birth of Isaac to Sarah, the burning bush, safe passage through the sea, and the manna, each of which confirms God's covenant promise, call, deliverance, or sustaining care.
2. **Judgment miracles** — the plagues, the destruction of the cities of the plain, and the fall of the walls of Jericho.
3. **Acts of mercy** — healings and other works that relieve suffering or restore persons to community.
4. **Divine acts of deliverance** — such as Daniel's deliverance from the lions' den and the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace.
5. **Visions and revelations** — extraordinary divine disclosures, such as Ezekiel's visions, which are not miracles in the same sense as healings or deliverances but belong to the broader biblical pattern of divine disclosure.
6. **New Testament signs and works** — miracles that are essential to understanding Jesus' identity and mission. When Jesus answers John the Baptist's inquiry about his identity in Matthew 11 and Luke 7, he points to healings and related works rather than giving an abstract definition.

A miracle has traditionally been defined as a sensible fact produced by the special intervention of God for a religious end, transcending the ordinary course of things usually called a law of nature. The possibility of miracles began to be questioned more sharply with the rise of modern science

in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rationalists have tended to treat biblical miracles either as facts capable of natural explanation or as events misrepresented by credulous contemporaries. Traditionalists have held that miracles are not only possible but likely, since if God is the supreme first cause of all, God is not subject to the laws of nature and may act directly, free from secondary causes. As science has developed, it has moved away from the hardest forms of determinism, which may suggest at least some possibility of reconciliation between modern science and Christian tradition. Protestant orthodoxy has often confined miracles to Scripture, while Catholic orthodoxy has claimed the possibility of miracles throughout the life of the Church, with Lourdes as one example.

The following six signs are commonly recognized in discussions of the Fourth Gospel and are reflected in Howard Clark Kee's discussion of "Miracles" in The Oxford Companion to the Bible:

The table below is not meant to settle the scholarly debate over how many signs John contains. It summarizes one common six-sign presentation and connects each sign with the theological theme most closely associated with it in this lesson.

SIGNS, EXPLANATIONS, AND SAYINGS IN JOHN

Sign	Discourse / Theme	Closely Related Johannine Theme
Changing water into wine (John 2:1–11)	New beginning, abundance, and transformation	Jesus reveals his glory
Healing the official's son (John 4:46–54)	Life-giving word and faith	Life through believing Jesus' word
Healing the sick man at Bethzatha/Bethesda (John 5:1–15)	Sabbath controversy and the Son's authority	The Son gives life and executes judgment
Feeding the five thousand (John 6:1–15)	Bread from heaven and true nourishment	"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35)
Healing the man born blind (John 9:1–41)	Spiritual sight and blindness	"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5)
Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–45)	Victory over death	"I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25)

If miracles make you uncomfortable, you are not the first. They have troubled Anglicans and others for centuries. One important Anglican figure for this discussion is Richard Hooker (1553/54–1600), the great theologian and defender of the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559.

Hooker remains one of Anglicanism's most accomplished advocates. His major work was Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, published in several books and not fully completed by Hooker himself. Hooker wrote in the context of the great debate of his age with the Puritans. He believed the Puritans were mistaken in treating Scripture as "the only rule of all things which in this life may be done by men," a position addressed in Book II of the Laws. If that sounds familiar, one may recognize that a similar debate still continues today, though without the powdered wigs or the lack thereof. Hooker used Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and others to deduce the existence of universal law and authority. He saw the universe as composed of a hierarchy of reasonable laws designed to serve God's purposes for creation. Hooker distinguishes the "first eternal law," God's own rule for himself, from the "second eternal law," the order imposed on creatures. That second law is expressed through physical laws governing nature, the celestial law governing angels, the law of reason governing rational creatures, divine law revealed through Scripture, and human law devised through reason and divine law. His basic theory was one of correspondence: inferior laws are derived from the supreme law. In church polity, Hooker argued that the Church's authority should rest not on Scripture alone but also on reason and the tradition of the early Church. Hooker's system was based on the belief that God desires the salvation of all creation and all people.

Richard Hooker was not the last person to struggle with the signs or miracles in the Bible. Hans Küng was a noted modern theologian and Roman Catholic priest whose critical and rational approach to several doctrines brought him into conflict with Roman Catholic authorities. Some detractors have described him as disbelieving the miracles of Scripture. In the long passages of On Being a Christian relating to miracles, however, Küng's emphasis is more subtle. He does not simply say that the miracles did not happen; rather, he argues that faith should not rest on proving each miracle as a supernatural interruption of natural law. His reasoning may be summarized as follows. The working of miracles may have been an aid to faith in the distant past, but in the modern age of science and reason the miracle, once the dearest child of faith, has often become its weakest point. One way people have avoided the difficulty is to define miracles so broadly that the concept becomes inoffensive: sunsets, life, and the world itself are all called miracles. Yet that raises a problem: what about disasters? Is God more involved in some events than in others? Do we credit God for every accident that turns out well and excuse God for fatal

accidents? Küng observes that people in Jesus' time were not asking the same questions as modern people of the rational age, such as questions about natural law and scientific explanation. They lived in a world in which such events were more readily accepted and were not usually treated as breaches of natural law. The individual stories, as told, do not now yield enough information to determine with certainty whether each account records a historical fact in the modern sense. One need not accept or reject all miracle stories on the same basis. Some cures may have seemed miraculous at the time; some stories may have been embellished over time; some may reflect translation problems or misunderstandings. Küng also notes that miracles alone prove nothing, since even to Jesus' contemporaries they were ambiguous. It depended on one's attitude toward Jesus whether the acts were seen as signs of God's power or as a diabolical snare. In John especially, the miracles are vivid events but also symbolic acts: the loaves show Jesus as the bread of life, the healing of the blind man reveals him as the light of the world, and the raising of Lazarus points to resurrection and life. What is demanded is not faith in miracles as isolated wonders but faith in Jesus: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). More important than the number and extent of cures, exorcisms, and wonderful deeds is the fact that Jesus turns with sympathy and compassion to those whom others avoid: the weak, the sick, the neglected, and social outcasts. Küng notes that some Qumran texts exclude the blind, the maimed, and the lame from full participation in the community. Jesus, by contrast, does not turn away from any of these. He does not treat the sick as sinners, but draws them to himself. Küng has created controversy within and beyond his own denomination. His views are offered here because many serious Christians have at some point stumbled over the miracles. Whether or not one agrees with Küng, he tried to deal with the issue of miracles rigorously, with intellectual discipline and vigor.

Another distinctive feature of the Fourth Gospel is the "I am" sayings. These are based on the Greek phrase *egō eimi*. A Greek-speaking listener could hear in this phrase a solemn formula of self-identification, and Jewish hearers or readers may also hear an allusion to Exodus 3:14, "I am who I am," as spoken to Moses.

After the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), in reference to the manna.

After the Feast of Booths, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), presenting himself as the light that overcomes spiritual darkness.

In contrast to the thieves who steal the sheep, Jesus says, “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7).

In a second contrast, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), who, unlike the hireling, lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus says, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), stressing that he is the source of life for those who abide in him.

In response to the crisis with Lazarus, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

In the farewell discourse, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

A second type of “I am” statement is more mysterious.

When Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman’s question whether he is the Messiah, his answer is, “I am he” (John 4:26).

At the arrest scene, Jesus is asked twice whether he is the one they seek, and he answers, “I am he” (John 18:5–6).

Another point to keep in mind as you read through the long discourses between Jesus and those who argue with him is that the discourse is not directed only at the persons in the story; it is also directed at you as a Christian reader. If you still find this section of John and the miracle stories hard to digest, join the club. Even if one cannot accept the miracles as historical facts in the modern sense, one can still read them as literature and use them to discern the author’s meaning.

Fact, fiction, misunderstanding, or exaggeration, one must acknowledge that their effect on those who witnessed or received the stories was genuine. The plain fact is that something happened after the death of Jesus that caused a number of rather ordinary people to undertake the extraordinary enterprise called Christianity.

Terms

literary criticism

Miracles

Questions for Further Understanding

Why are the miracles in the Fourth Gospel called signs?

If God heals the sick and injured, why do we suffer? Why does God allow bad things to occur?

Does the fact that the miracles or signs related in the Fourth Gospel seem to contradict reason and nature make it more difficult for you to believe and accept the Gospel as true?

What finally happened to the Puritans of Hooker's day?

These sources were used for the lesson's organization, background on John's Gospel, discussion of miracles, treatment of Richard Hooker, and summary of Hans Küng's approach to miracle stories.

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By J B Cross
EpiscopalChristianEducation.com
Little Rock, AR 72202