

SIGN AS SYMBOL

THE SIGN THEME IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

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INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel According to John, is materially, stylistically and literarily different from the three Synoptic Gospels.¹ As Carson notes in the introduction to his commentary, “a thoughtful reader does not have to work at this book very long before noticing remarkable differences between [John] and the Synoptics.”² These remarkable differences make up what Barrett calls the book’s “peculiar character;”³ a character borne of a “twofold conviction, shared by its author,”⁴ that the historicity of Jesus’ life is of prime significance and, that the historical data of Jesus’ life is reduced to mere trivia in the absence of the God-given belief that Jesus “is the Word become flesh.”⁵ This twofold conviction is evident in the distinctly Johannine perspective on the Fourth Gospel’s major themes.

Seeking to provide evidence upon which the nascent Church can rest their God-given faith that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (John 20:30–31),⁶ a sizable section of John’s Gospel is devoted to recording and discussing seven specific illustrative actions that Jesus performed. Uniquely, the author calls these deeds “signs” (*sēmeia*);⁷ many scholars call the section containing these signs the “Book of Signs.”⁸

In order to ascertain the distinctly Johannine perspective of the sign motif, this article will examine the signs in the Book of Signs. Then, in light of how John expresses his perspective relative to his stated aim, an application will be made to Christian life today.

THE BOOK OF SIGNS

As with nearly every aspect of the Fourth Gospel, a consensus among scholars on the exact

parameters of the Book of Signs remains elusive.⁹ That notwithstanding, there is a general agreement that the book starts just prior to the wedding in Cana passage of the second chapter (2:1–11) and finishes with the Isaiah discourse in chapter twelve (12:37–50). While the number of the signs in the Book of Signs is commonly agreed to be seven, consensus is similarly elusive regarding which signs to include. For example, Köstenberger lists the clearing of the temple (2:13–22),¹⁰ but not the walking on water of chapter six (vv. 16–21), whereas Brown includes the latter but not the former.¹¹ However, given that the Gospel itself counts the curing of the official’s son as the second sign after the wedding at Cana sign (4:54), the clearing of the temple does not appear in the list below.

Changing water to wine (2:1–11)

Curing the Official’s Son (4:46–54)

Curing the Paralytic (5:1–15).

Multiplying the Loaves and Fishes (6:1–15).

Walking on Water (6:16–21).

Curing the Blind Man (9).

Raising Lazarus from the Dead (11).

IT IS APPARENT FOR JOHN, SĒMEION IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST A MIRACULOUS WORK

SIGNS OR SYMBOLS

Any ambiguity as to which of Jesus’ actions in the Fourth Gospel is to be regarded as first has been removed for us in the beginning of chapter two, when the author himself explicitly states that the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana is the first of the signs that Jesus did “and revealed his glory” (2:11). This statement is also the first time the word *sēmeion*, “sign,” appears in John’s text. It is appropriate at this point, therefore, to consider the semantic significance of the word *sēmeion* as it is seen to be used by John throughout his Gospel.

While there is no doubt that in some contexts, such as John 2:23, it would be perfectly fitting for a translation to render *sēmeion* as “miracle,” it is apparent that for John, *sēmeion* is much more than just a miraculous work; it is “something that points to a reality with even greater significance.”¹² Koester concurs, in that he also believes that “a sign is not

1 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 21–3;

2 Ibid.

3 Charles Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed., (London: SPCK, 1982), 5.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Unless otherwise noted, all English Scripture is taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), 1989.

7 Bryon D. Harvey, “Sign,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015), John (no page).

8 For example, Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible reference library (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 300.

9 Although he uses the term, Carson, *The Gospel*, 103, is unhappy with it, believing that the author’s purpose statement (20:30–31) indicates that “from [John’s] perspective the *entire* Gospel is a book of signs.” Italics in original.

10 Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 89.

11 Brown, *An Introduction*, 300.

12 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 442.

an end in itself but a visible indication of something else.”¹³

This meaning beyond simply “miracle” can also be seen wherever “John’s use of [*sēmeia*] overlaps with his use of [*erga*] (“works”).”¹⁴ It is with regards to this that Painter calls our attention to the curious fact that *sēmeia* “is the term used by the narrator and characters other than Jesus; [while] Jesus prefers rather to speak of his [works].”¹⁵ In fact, only twice does Jesus mention “signs” in relation to his works, and then somewhat indirectly (4:48; 6:26). For the most part, though, John portrays Jesus as the obedient Son who sees every action he takes and every word he speaks as doing his work; which is the same as doing his Father’s work (5:17).¹⁶ By highlighting this overlap (not synonymity!) between the signs and works of Jesus, John reinforces that there is more to the signs than the specific miracle, that everything around the action—the time, setting, individuals involved, the words spoken—are potentially a part of the cluster of messages being conveyed by that sign.

It is this all-encompassing nature of the signs that leads

Schneiders to reassess the meaning of the word “sign,” in her book *Written That You May Believe*.¹⁷ In consideration of contemporary terminology, and after supposing that John chose the word *sēmeion* rather than *symbolon* (“symbol”), in order to retain the Septuagint’s translation of the Hebrew word for “sign” (*’ot*), Schneiders concludes that the “Johannine *sēmeia* are ... not signs but symbols.”¹⁸

Additionally, even Koester, who distinguishes the Johannine signs from other actions of Jesus by narrowly defining them as miraculous events with “a privileged place”¹⁹ in the Fourth Gospel, concedes that both miraculous and non-miraculous actions are “symbolic actions ... woven together in the narrative [to] reveal facets of Jesus’ identity in a manner perceptible to the senses.”²⁰ This meets

with Schneiders’ idea up to a point, but she takes it further in declaring that, yes, both sign and symbol are “*sensible realities* [but] the sign ... merely points to or stands for an absent reality that is totally other than itself [whereas] the symbol *renders present* the transcendent because and insofar as it participates in what it re-presents.”²¹ Furthermore, she states that a symbol “involves a person subjectively in a transforming experience of transcendent mystery.”²²

Schneiders also points out that “among those working in the several disciplines concerned with symbolism, there is today broad consensus ... on the nature and function of the symbol”²³ as she describes it, and that, in those circles, her definition “would ... be generally acceptable.”²⁴

But how does this expanded concept of sign as symbol accord with John’s usage? Given the twofold conviction of the author of the Fourth Gospel mentioned above, and the results he expects from his use of the signs, their simply pointing to, or

indicating, a transcendent reality, rather than involving the observer of the sign in an experiential way with the transcendent, would seem rather inadequate to

meet his objectives. If all the Johannine sign did was unambiguously announce in writing a miracle of Jesus, then there is no transcendence either communicated or experienced by the reader—the data has become mere trivia. If however the sign is beheld by the believing reader—one, like the author, possessed of the God-given faith that Jesus is the Son of Man—it resonates immediately and opens the event to the reader’s symbolic, transcendent interpretation, thereby “demand[ing] involvement as a condition for entering into [this] revelation.”²⁵

SIGNS AS SYMBOLS

Looking at the first sign in the Fourth Gospel, we see that Schneiders’ sign-as-symbol checklist is built into the text. Jesus’ reconstituting water molecules into superior wine that could be tasted by a third-party oblivious to the details of its provision (vv. 9–10) describes nothing if not a *sensible reality*. That he accomplished this without even touching the waterpots—note that John pre-empts any accusations of sleight-of-hand by carefully recording that Jesus verbally directed the event and only the

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¹³ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 74.

¹⁴ John Painter, “The Signs of the Messiah and the Quest for Eternal Life,” in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 242.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 242–3.

¹⁷ Sandra Marie Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 1999).

¹⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹ Koester, *Symbolism*, 74.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Italics in original. Schneiders, *Written*, 66–7.

²² Bullet point numerals have been redacted from original. Ibid., 66.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 68.

stewards came into physical contact with the vessels containing the water and the wine (v. 7–8)—certainly relates an *experience of transcendent mystery*. Then by concluding his account on the disciples’ faith statement (“and his disciples believed in him”)—John was also careful to record that the disciples were witnesses to the entire event (v. 2)—the author assures us that they were *involved subjectively in a transforming experience of transcendent mystery* (v. 11).

The second of Jesus’ signs, the healing of the official’s son (4:46–54), was also done for a select audience in Cana (this includes the father of the boy and the narrator, certainly [v. 53], but there is some ambiguity as to how many others are being addressed by the plural “you” of verse 48), and was accomplished remotely, with Jesus only directing things verbally (v. 50). The account of this sign also fits the checklist: A sensible reality (the ill son); an experience of transcendent mystery (the son cured although not present); and a person involved subjectively (the father).

While the construction of these two Cana pericopes, including the narrated reaction of the people involved, supports the idea that the Johannine signs are indeed symbols, it in no way fully explains all of the symbols invoked by these signs. That is because a symbol “is not simply an appeal to the intellect but a locus of experience;”²⁶ and since everyone processes experiences differently, no two witnesses to a symbol will derive the exact same significance from it. This is not a licence to indulge in corporate interpretive anarchy, but is rather an admission that personal, internal significance and meaning of a sign will often be highly individual.

SIGNS MISREAD

The author of the Fourth Gospel “could not assume that the meaning of [Jesus’] actions would be any clearer to the readers of the Gospel than they were to the people he described in his text.”²⁷ However, to reduce that potentiality, John often takes steps to “direct the readers’ reflections [or he] provides a frame of reference that discloses several appropriate levels of meaning while excluding some possible misinterpretations.”²⁸ For example, in the account of Jesus curing the paralytic at the pool of “Beth-zatha” (5:1–18), John juxtaposes the superstitious

belief in the healing power of the stirred water²⁹ with the Messianic promise of healing (Mal 4:2). But he does so with such scant detail that only those familiar with the superstition and the promise could perceive the symbolism in the setting. For those unable to get the point, John also juxtaposes the Pharisees’ increasingly negative reaction—from persecution (v. 6) to execution (v. 18)—with Jesus’ own positive reaction; which is to justify the healing by proclaiming it a work of God (v. 17). And this us-and-them dynamic between the author’s protagonist, Jesus, and the Pharisees was set up in the opening verse of the passage with John’s use of the pejorative formulation “a festival of the Jews” (5:1).³⁰ As Koester notes, often it is these “comments made by Jesus before or after a given action [that] focus attention on its most significant aspects.”³¹

The misreading of Jesus’ signs by his opponents occurs time and time again. As Schneiders notes, “The symbol, although sensibly perceptible, is by nature revelatory only to spiritual intuition.”³² Of the seven signs in our list above, none so starkly exhibit this “essential ambiguity of the Johannine *sēmia*, in the face of which the blind see and those who see become blind,”³³ as does the curing of the man born blind (9).

From the last verse in chapter eight, where it is said “Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple,” to the last verse of chapter nine, John keeps up a continuous wordplay with sightedness and blindness. He also maintains an at times comic interplay between the self-righteous Jews who were born with sight but never see “the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5; cf. 11:9–10; 12:35–36, 46)³⁴ and the self-aware man who was blind from birth but eventually sees that light (9:36–37). These opposing responses

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²⁶ Ibid., 67–8.

²⁷ Koester, *Symbolism*, 76.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Köstenberger, *John*, 180.

³⁰ “The formulation ‘a festival of the Jews’ is probably not simply a neutral description but reflects the present distancing of the evangelist and his community from Jewish institutions. Despite their having emerged from within a thoroughly Jewish milieu, as a result of their history of conflict with the synagogue they now see such festivals as belonging to their parent religion.” Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 192.

³¹ Koester, *Symbolism*, 76.

³² Schneiders, *Written*, 67.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Jewish literature was generous with the title ‘light of the world,’ applying it to Israel, Jerusalem, the patriarchs, the Messiah, God, famous rabbis and the law (cf. 1:4–5); but always it refers to something of ultimate significance.” Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Jn 8:12.

to this sign bear out the author's testimony in the Fourth Gospel's prologue (1:14)—although “[e]verybody present could see Jesus ... not everyone could see in him the glory of the only Son”³⁵—only we the believers ever truly behold that.

This difference in response to the sign as symbol is also shown to distinguish the disciples chosen by God from those who choose themselves. In the aftermath of the back to back signs of multiplying the loaves and fishes (6:1–15) and the walking on water (vv. 16–21), those disciples who witnessed the former eventually left Jesus (v. 66), while the twelve who witnessed both remained (vv. 67–69). John subtly telegraphs this leaving and coming in Jesus' response to each group's immediate response to the respective signs: He silently withdrew from the approach of the self-chosen (6:15) but with comforting words he approached the fearful, withdrawing chosen (19–21).

A SIGN OF THE END

The Book of Signs ends with the most significant of the seven Johannine signs, the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11). Of the sign itself, Köstenberger says that no more powerful than this could be given—describing it as “the culminating piece in the Fourth Evangelist's theodicy, [that] constitutes the final damning piece of evidence against Jesus' opponents.”³⁶ Of the literary composition of the narrative, Schneiders declares that the author “achieves the ultimate integration of history, theology, and spirituality.”³⁷ Of Jesus' seemingly enigmatic opening remarks in verse 5 (“This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so the Son of God may be glorified through it.”), Borchert says that the “meaning ... is multidimensional. It can be understood on several levels.”³⁸ One of those levels of understanding could certainly revolve around the interjection of the author's own stated purpose in having recorded this sign (20:30–31).

Here, too, the author's twofold conviction (as described by Barrett in our introduction above) is in full view. The historicity of this event in Jesus'

life is of almost incalculable significance and yet the details would be staggeringly trivial to any reader bereft of Christian faith. The full meaning of the sign as symbol is also clearly in view here. Certainly no other Johannine sign is a better example of a *sensible reality that involved its participants subjectively in a transforming experience of transcendent mystery*.

CONCLUSION

It has been acknowledged throughout the history of the Christian Church that, of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John inhabits a theological, literary and spiritual category all of its own. In everything from its simple but profound Greek, to its panoply of great themes, the Fourth Gospel is a *rara avis*, a singularly unique creation. This uniqueness is no less singular with regards to the author's perspective on the sign motif. As we have seen in this examination of the seven signs recorded in the Gospel's Book of Signs, John employs his unique understanding

of sign as symbol, as well as a masterful talent for composition, to record these signs in such a way that he could realise his lofty evangelical purpose for every succeeding generation of readers: to have them “come to believe

that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [they] would have life in his name” (20:30–31).

Of course, for the believer today, living over two millennia after the events, entering into the transformative experience of the symbols is a subconscious activity. To the critical intellect, accustomed to reviewing the Fourth Gospel's symbols as “signs,” they are at best a series of powerful miracles that Jesus performed during his earthly ministry, recorded for the ancient Church by one of his disciples, in order to prove he was the Messiah. But through the emotive senses, which are attuned to both the subconscious and super-conscious, the described environment of the event is drawn from the text and incorporated into the personal and communitarian experiences retained in the mental symbology of imagination and memory of the faithful reader's being. Through the very human elements of the miracle stories, such as the grief of a bereaved family or the horrific spectacle of a dead man shuffling from his tomb, two-thousand years of time is effortlessly bridged and the recorded experience, and all its attendant mystery, revelation and awe, become a new lived experience.

Finally, to understand this process with the conscious mind, with the intellect, is to adopt the

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35 Ibid.

36 Köstenberger, *John*, 323.

37 Schneiders, *Written*, 67.

38 He also notes that even the setting of Bethany might be symbolically significant for the author, meaning as it does, “the house of suffering.” Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 350.

Johannine perspective with regards to his *sēmeia*. It is to see that the signs are not just signposts, they are symbols, that they are not merely representative, they are revelatory. It is to grasp the true nature of these symbols, to understand their ability to involve a contemporary reader of faith in the transformative experience of the transcendent mystery every time they are encountered. And to understand this, is to understand that one does not simply reread the signs, one relives them.

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