

The Seven Signs in the Gospel of John

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The Gospel of John is organized around seven of Jesus' public actions which the author identifies as "signs." These are moments which reveal spiritual realities and truths about Jesus, especially his divinity.

These are the seven signs:

1. Wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-12)
2. Cure of the royal official's son (John 4:46-54)
3. Cure on a sabbath (John 5:1-18)
4. Multiplication of loaves and fishes (John 6:1-15)
5. Walking on water (John 6:16-21)
6. Cure of a man born blind (John 9:1-41)
7. Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44)

The First Sign: The Wedding Feast at Cana John 2:1-11

Why does John count this as the first of the “signs” which reveal Jesus’ glory? How is it a sign of anything of spiritual significance?

Hints:

- What is “the third day” referred to at the beginning of the story?
- What do the water and the wine symbolize?
- What is the significance of Mary’s role in the story?

Though the story takes place at Cana in Galilee, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, it harkens *back* to a famous event at Mount Sinai during the Exodus and looks *forward* to Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

“On the third day...”

This phrase at the beginning of the story doesn’t refer to an event that came before it in the Gospel, but to a *theophany*, or a revelation of God’s glory, in the Old Testament. John is subtly connecting the revelation of *Jesus’* glory to the revelation of *God’s* glory on Mount Sinai. Thus, he is strongly suggesting that *Jesus is God*. And, since God initiated a covenant with his people in that event at Mount Sinai, John is also suggesting that Jesus is going to initiate a *new covenant* with God’s people.

Exodus 19:

The Israelites, having escaped from Egypt, arrive at Mount Sinai. There God tells Moses of his desire to make a covenant with the Israelites.

v. 7: “So Moses went and summoned the elders of the people. When he set before them all that the Lord had ordered him to tell them, the people all answered together, ‘Everything the Lord has said, we will do.’”

v. 10: “The Lord added, ‘Go to the people and have them sanctify themselves today and tomorrow. Make them wash their garments and be ready for the third day; for *on the third day* the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai before the eyes of all the people.’”

When the third day arrives, the Lord manifests his presence by lightning and thunder and loud trumpet blasts. He gives Moses the Ten Commandments, thus establishing a covenant of law with his Chosen People.

So, the Exodus 19 theophany contains these key elements:

- The people commit themselves to doing whatever the Lord tells them to do.
- They purify themselves, preparing for a sacred encounter with the Lord.
- On the third day, God manifests his glory and establishes a covenant with the people.

The Cana story contains these elements:

- Mary tells the servants to do whatever *Jesus* tells them. Here Jesus takes the place of God Almighty in the Exodus story, while Mary takes the place of Moses.

- Jesus orders the servants to fill the jars with water. John tells us that these water jars are used specifically for *ceremonial washings*, i.e., to purify the people according to the Law of Moses. Hence, this water serves as a symbol of the old covenant, based in law.
- This water is never used for purification, however, because Jesus transforms it into wine, a symbol of *celebration*.

The transformation of the water into wine symbolizes a transformation in the *relationship* between God and his people, from a covenant based on law and ritual to one based on faith in Jesus as the Son of God. However, the new covenant is not yet realized at the wedding feast. As Jesus says, his “hour” has not yet come. The new covenant will be established later, by his death on the cross. The miracle at Cana is only a “sign” of what is to come.

The wedding banquet:

The nuptial setting for the miracle at Cana is also highly significant and symbolic. It recalls the Old Testament imagery of God as the bridegroom and Israel as his bride. However, notice that the bride and groom are never even mentioned in the Cana story. Jesus is the sole focus, because his sacrifice and the salvation which it brings will transform the traditional biblical meaning of the wedding banquet. In the New Testament, it comes to represent the eternal banquet of heaven. *Jesus Christ* becomes the bridegroom, and *the Church* becomes his bride. And the feasting represents the immense joy shared by all the blessed, who have attained salvation in the Kingdom of God.

Mary’s role:

Mary also has a key role in this story, suggesting that she will play a central role in the new covenant. She who is already mother of the *groom* (Jesus), will also become the mother of his *bride* (the Church). Mary appears only twice in John’s Gospel: at the wedding feast at Cana and at the cross. At both of those events, Jesus addresses his mother in the same, strangely impersonal way, calling her “woman.” He appears to be symbolically distancing himself from his mother, while inviting her to accept a new role as *Mother of the Church*. She will be the one who intercedes for us, as she interceded for the couple at the wedding feast. She will be the one who accompanies us in our suffering, as she stood by her son’s cross with the Beloved Disciple. She will be the one who points us unerringly toward her divine son, reminding us again and again to *do whatever he tells us*.

Summary:

The wedding feast at Cana is a sign of several spiritual realities:

- Jesus’ divinity
- The new covenant, which will replace the old Sinai covenant
- The eternal “wedding banquet” that awaits us in heaven
- Mary’s role as Mother of the Church and intercessor for us before her Son

The Second Sign: Cure of the Royal Official's Son John 4:46-54

Jesus is back in Galilee again, after spending some time in Judea. He has established a reputation as a miracle worker. But, he expresses frustration that the people's faith in him is shallow. He says, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." That's what this story is about — believing in the power of Jesus' *word*, without first seeing a sign.

The royal official who approaches Jesus is from Capernaum, about a day's walk from Cana. He wants Jesus to accompany him to Capernaum to lay hands on his son and heal him. It is very urgent, as the boy is close to death. However, Jesus refuses to go. Instead, he challenges the official to believe in his *word*. Jesus assures him that his son will live, and then sends him on his way, with no visible sign that Jesus has done anything or will do anything to save his son. The official has to believe *without seeing*, something that the crowds thus far have been unable to do.

When the official asks about the timing of the cure, he appears to be seeking an even *deeper* level of faith in Jesus. This time, the initiative is coming from him, not from Jesus. The fact that the cure was instantaneous impresses the official even more. It is a sign of Jesus' incredible power to heal, immediately and at a distance. This is no ordinary faith healer, but someone who truly possesses *divine power*. The official is so moved by this experience that he becomes a believer and an evangelist. He and his entire household come to believe in Jesus.

Summary:

This story is a sign not only of Jesus' power to heal, but of the need for *faith that does not depend on visible signs*. The royal official, not Jesus, is really the main character in the story. He is the one who teaches us a lesson about faith and our constant need to seek deeper levels of faith in Jesus.

The Third Sign: Cure on a Sabbath

John 5:1-18

As dramatic as this cure is, Jesus' ability to cure a man after 38 years of paralysis is not the main point of the story. In fact, the healing itself plays an insignificant role in the controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities, which dominates most of the story. When the healed man explains to those religious authorities that the man who cured him told him to pick up his mat and carry it, they never even inquire about the miraculous cure. All they care about is safeguarding the sabbath from those who would dishonor it. And, according to their understanding, neither this man nor Jesus has the authority to work on the sabbath. The "sign" that Jesus will give them is his shocking explanation for why he has unique authority to work on the sabbath, when no one else does. It's because he is *the Son of God*.

This gospel story is very different from all of the others in which Jesus or his disciples are accused of violating the sabbath restrictions. In all of the other stories, the conflict centers on the sabbath rules and their proper interpretation. While the scribes and Pharisees cling to a legalistic interpretation of the rules, Jesus always stresses the higher purpose of God's laws. In this story, however, Jesus does not challenge the sabbath rules or their interpretation. He claims that he is *exempt* from those rules because of *who he is*. He says, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work."

That curious response from Jesus may seem obscure to us, but not to the religious authorities. They clearly understand what Jesus is implying about himself and his divine authority. Although "sabbath" is based on the idea of resting on the seventh day, in imitation of God after he finished the act of creation, rabbinical tradition taught that *God* continues to work on the sabbath, in two distinct ways. Because people continue to be born and to die every day, including the sabbath, God obviously works on the sabbath by giving life and passing judgment. Jesus has just given new life to the man suffering from a 38-year illness, and his interpretation of that event is that he is simply *imitating his Heavenly Father*. As the Father works on the sabbath by giving life, so does the Son. The religious authorities get it. They resolve to kill Jesus, "because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, *making himself equal to God*."

Summary:

If Jesus had merely claimed that healing someone on the sabbath was a noble act, which glorifies God, this story would not rank among the "signs" which reveal his glory. Instead, he claimed that this healing was an example of God giving life on the sabbath, as only the Divine Father *and he, the Divine Son*, are capable of doing.

The Fourth Sign: The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes

John 6:1-15

This is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four gospels. Furthermore, the details are nearly identical in all four versions. However, John does make a few subtle changes to the text. These elements that are unique to John highlight the “sign” value of the story, drawing attention to what the miracle reveals about Jesus.

Eucharistic symbolism:

The miracle of the loaves and fishes clearly speaks to us of Eucharist. Jesus’ actions closely match those of the priest as he celebrates Mass. Jesus takes the bread in his hands, blesses it, breaks it, and distributes it to the people. All are fed abundantly, symbolizing the special nature of this food. At Mass, when ordinary bread and wine are transformed and then shared as *Eucharist*, they also take on a superabundant character, nourishing us spiritually *and* physically. And, all are filled with the grace of the Sacrament, no matter how many people have come to receive that spiritual food. So, all of the key aspects of Eucharist are reflected in the story. That’s probably why all four gospel writers felt compelled to include this particular miracle in their narratives, and why they felt no need to alter the details significantly. Nevertheless, John tweaks the story in a few places.

Elements unique to John’s version:

- Explicit reference to the Passover
- Jesus taking more initiative, not relying as much on his disciples
- The crowd’s reaction at the end

Passover:

In his introduction to the story, John mentions that the *Passover* is near. This comment brings us back to the Exodus from Egypt. John deliberately links this miraculous feeding in a deserted place to the manna in the desert during the Exodus. The manna was the first “bread of life” that God provided for his people. Now *Jesus* is taking the place of God, providing another type of sustenance. However, later in this chapter, Jesus will explain that *he himself* is “the true bread of life” come down from heaven, which provides nourishment for eternal life. The difference between the manna and the Body and Blood of Christ is like the difference between an ordinary batch of five loaves and two fish and the superabundant food that can fill up 5,000 hungry men and produce twelve baskets of leftovers besides. The reference to Passover also points to the *sacrifice* of Jesus, which is made present in the Eucharist. Jesus became the bread of life by first becoming the new Passover lamb, whose sacrifice takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus takes the initiative:

- Jesus, not his disciples, initiates the miracle by asking how they are going to feed so many people.
- Jesus feeds the crowd himself. The disciples do not distribute the food for him.
- Jesus personally directs his disciples to gather up the fragments, so that none will go to waste.

As in John’s passion narrative, Jesus is in control and dictating all the action. This seems to be John’s way of emphasizing the *self-gift* of Jesus that this food symbolizes. He is the bread of life because he chooses to offer himself for others. He personally invites us to partake of his sacrifice and share in his life. Just as

he calls the hungry crowd to come close and be nourished, so he calls us to partake of the sacraments and to receive the nourishment that they can offer us.

The crowd reaction:

After the miracle, the crowd acclaims Jesus as “the Prophet... who is to come into the world,” and they wish to carry him off and make him their king. This reference to “the Prophet who is to come” also harkens back to Moses and the Exodus. When Moses died, the Lord promised to raise up another Prophet like him someday. The crowd sees this miraculous feeding as a “sign” that Jesus is the longed-for Messiah and the Prophet like Moses, who has finally come into the world to liberate them from oppression. But Jesus refuses to accept any position of temporal power. He was sent into the world to give his life for others, to be their “bread of life.”

Summary:

The multiplication of the loaves and fishes serves as a sign of the Eucharist in all of the gospels, but John’s version focuses the story’s sign value more personally on Jesus. He is the new Passover lamb, the new manna in the desert, and the true bread of life. He is the one who nourishes us for eternal life by giving us *himself*.

The Fifth Sign: Walking on Water

John 6:16-21

In the Old Testament, God's mastery over nature distinguishes him from the mere mortals whom he has created. His power over the sea is particularly noteworthy, because ancient peoples thought of the sea as a place of chaos and mystery, a place of unseen dangers and demonic powers, far beyond the control of any human being. So, you would think that when Jesus walks on the water, his disciples would immediately recognize this as a sign of his divinity.

There are three distinct versions of this story. In Matthew and Mark, the disciples are terrified by the sight of Jesus walking on the water, because *they think that they are seeing a ghost*. In Matthew, the disciples worship Jesus only after he gets into the boat and the wind suddenly dies down. In Mark, they are still bewildered when the story ends.

In John's version, none of the disciples think that they are seeing a ghost. They recognize Jesus right away, and they seem to understand exactly what he is doing and what it signifies. They are afraid because of the divine power that he is demonstrating right before their eyes. Jesus announces his presence in much the same way that God does in Old Testament theophanies, saying, "It is I (literally, 'I AM'); do not be afraid." Their fear is the awe that one *should* experience in the presence of God, not the terror of seeing a ghost. Hence, in John's version of the story, Jesus' action is a clear and unambiguous sign of his divinity.

Perhaps to make this sign of Jesus' divinity even more clear, John modifies the beginning and ending of the story. Jesus does not send the disciples away, as in Matthew and Mark; they go down to the sea of their own accord. And, despite being out in the deep water when Jesus appears, no sooner has he manifested himself as God than the boat suddenly and inexplicably arrives at the shore to which they were heading. These two elements make the story look like an allusion to Psalm 107, identifying Jesus' actions with those of God in the psalm.

In Psalm 107:23-30, there is a description of God rescuing sailors who find themselves endangered on the sea. It begins with, "Some *went off to sea in ships*, plied their trade on the deep waters," and ends with, "They rejoiced that the sea grew calm, that *God brought them to the harbor they longed for.*"

Summary:

In the two earlier versions of the walking-on-water story, the disciples are afraid because they are being tossed about by a storm when they see a ghostly figure approaching them across the water. In John's version of the story, the disciples are not being tossed about by a storm, nor do they think they are seeing a ghost, but they are awestruck before the Son of God, who strides majestically upon the sea and declares, "I AM."

The Sixth Sign: The Man Born Blind

John 9:1-41

Right from the beginning of this story, Jesus gives us several hints that the healing of the blind man will be more than just a demonstration of divine power. It will serve as some type of sign. Jesus rejects his disciples' assumption that the man's affliction must be a punishment from God. And, ironically, he asserts that the man's *blindness* will allow the works of God to become *visible* through him. In other words, by granting *physical vision* to this man, Jesus is going to give *spiritual vision* to those who are willing to receive his revelation.

Jesus says: "We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is *day*. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the *light* of the world."

In John's Gospel, daytime and light symbolize revelation, while night and darkness symbolize rejection of that revelation. Jesus is the light of the world because he is the one who reveals God's saving plan and invites people to share in his offer of eternal life. However, Jesus also includes his disciples in this saving work, saying to them, "We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is *day*." Hence, the "day" of revelation is not limited to the time when Christ is present in the flesh. It continues through the work of *the Church* in every generation. For those who respond positively to Jesus and his message, the "day" will never end. The light that we experience now, in this life, will only become brighter and everlasting in the next life. But for those who reject Jesus, the "night" is coming, when no one can save them.

After the healing, the rest of the story shows us the difference between those who walk in the light of Christ and those who walk in darkness. The man born blind receives physical sight immediately, but he receives the *light of faith* gradually. His answers to the Pharisees become more and more confident as they continue to question him and disparage Jesus. At first, the man claims no knowledge of this mysterious person who opened his eyes, but by the end, he's challenging the Pharisees to open *their eyes* to the obvious truth that only a man of God could do such marvelous works. At the very end of the story, Jesus finally catches up to the man and invites him to believe in him. The man responds by professing his faith in Jesus and worshipping him. He now possesses the full light of faith. His *spiritual blindness* has also been removed.

The man born blind now walks in the light of Christ, but the Pharisees continue to stumble in the darkness, because of the hardness of their hearts. They refuse to believe in Jesus, despite all the signs that have inspired belief in others. Jesus' most damning statement to them comes at the conclusion of the story. He tells them that they will not be judged for any form of blindness that is beyond their control. They will be judged and condemned for *closing their eyes* to Jesus' revelation, while insisting that they see clearly. They have chosen to turn away from the light and remain in darkness.

Summary:

Through the wonder of the Incarnation, Christ became the light of the world. Through the ministry of the Church, his light continues to shine brightly. Every generation has the opportunity to see and embrace his light. All of us can live in the "day," when the works of God are visible. However, we also have the choice to close our eyes and turn away from the light, like the Pharisees in the story. The Lord will open our eyes, *if we let him*. But, if we insist that we see just fine *without him*, then our blindness and our sin will remain.

The Seventh Sign: The Raising of Lazarus

John 11:1-45

Jesus saved his most astonishing sign for last. Even those who already believe in him as the Messiah sent by God are shocked when Lazarus emerges from the tomb. The key to understanding this story is to notice what people already believed about Jesus and about resurrection from the dead and then to ask what *new insights* the raising of Lazarus revealed to them.

One curious detail in the story is Jesus' delay in going to Bethany. He knows that Lazarus is seriously ill, so time obviously is of the essence. In the story of the royal official's son, Jesus demonstrated his ability to heal at a distance, without even going to lay hands on the sick person. Yet, for some reason, he chooses not to heal his dear friend Lazarus. Jesus had also healed people who were recently deceased. So, if he leaves immediately upon hearing the news of Lazarus' illness, he almost surely can get there on time either to save Lazarus from dying or to revive him shortly after he has died. Instead, he waits for two whole days. As a result, by the time Jesus arrives, everyone assumes that it's too late for him to do anything other than comfort Martha and Mary in their grief.

Jesus seems to suggest that his delay was intentional. He says to his disciples, "I am glad for you that I was not there [when Lazarus died], *that you may believe.*" It appears that Jesus made sure that Lazarus had been dead for more than three days, when Jewish people thought that the soul left the body, in order to demonstrate his absolute power over life and death. The sign would have much greater power after those three days had elapsed.

In Bethany, Jesus encounters many people who believe in him. Martha and Mary both say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Others recall how he gave sight to the man born blind and wonder why someone with such power couldn't save his own friend from dying. The consensus among the believers is that Jesus has virtually unlimited power to *heal*, but that no human being, not even the Messiah, has power to save someone who has been dead this long. In the face of such skepticism, Jesus boldly declares, "*I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*" What an extraordinary claim!

It's clear from the dialogue between Jesus and Martha that she already believes in a type of resurrection from the dead. This idea, which was fairly common among Jews by the first century, held that people who have died essentially sleep in a place of the dead until God reawakens them for a final judgment at the end of time. God will then grant eternal life to the righteous and condemn sinners to eternal punishment. This is what Martha means by the "resurrection on the last day." But Jesus is talking about something entirely different.

The judgment that Martha and other Jews expected would be based on the deceased person's adherence to the Mosaic Law. Only the people who followed the commandments would be worthy of eternal life. However, Jesus is claiming a *personal authority* over life and death. He's saying that *he* is the true source of life. *Belief in him*, not adherence to the Law, will determine who receives eternal life. This is what the raising of Lazarus signifies. This miracle serves as a sign of Jesus' *limitless* power to bestow life on his followers.

In the course of the narrative, John twice notes that Jesus is "perturbed and deeply troubled," so much so that he even weeps. The bystanders assume that he's just mourning the loss of his dear friend, and

perhaps feeling guilty that he didn't get there on time to save him. But Jesus is actually troubled by the *lack of faith* among the people. A few days later, he would weep on the Mount of Olives, as he overlooks Jerusalem, realizing that the people who are about to witness his passion and death will not understand the meaning of those events until he rises from the dead. Similarly, he now stands before the tomb of his friend, about to call him back to his *earthly life*, but realizing that nobody there will truly understand the meaning of this sign until later, when *he himself* rises to *eternal life*.

Summary:

Like all seven signs in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus serves as a visible demonstration of Jesus' divine power, while also pointing to a deeper truth about Jesus, which cannot be fully grasped until he has risen from the dead. In this case, the mystery that is being revealed is the *ultimate* mystery, namely, that Christ is the author of all life and the giver of eternal life. What he did for Lazarus is *nothing* compared to what he promises to do for all of us who believe in him.

Summary of the Seven Signs

1. Wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-12)

Jesus foreshadows that he will replace the old covenant, based on the Law of Moses, with a new covenant, based on faith in him. He also hints at the new role that his mother will play as Mother of the Church.

2. Cure of the royal official's son (John 4:46-54)

Jesus calls on believers to trust in him and his word, without having to see visible signs.

3. Cure on a sabbath (John 5:1-18)

Jesus claims the same authority as the Father, making him equal to the Father.

4. Multiplication of loaves and fishes (John 6:1-15)

Jesus is the true bread of life. He offers us himself as nourishment for eternal life.

5. Walking on water (John 6:16-21)

Jesus demonstrates and proclaims his divinity, and his disciples are in awe of him.

6. Cure of a man born blind (John 9:1-41)

Jesus gives light and life to all, except those who willfully close their eyes to his revelation.

7. Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44)

Jesus is the source of all life. All those who believe in him will live forever.