

BY ROBERT E. JONES

"Signs"

IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN is a unique and distinctive record of Jesus' life and ministry. William Barclay observed, "we have only to read the Fourth Gospel in the most cursory way to see that it is quite different from the other three."¹ One area in which John's Gospel is distinctive from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) concerns the miracles Jesus performed. For instance, nearly one-half of Mark's first 10 chapters deals with the miraculous, whereas John's Gospel contains only 7 carefully selected miracles, called "signs," in the first 12 chapters.² As a result the Greek word *semeion* (sign) becomes in John 1-12 "the exclusive term for certain miraculous events"³ and refers almost entirely to Jesus as a means to reveal His true nature.⁴ Each of the seven signs in John 1-12, then, has the purpose of

explaining something about Christ's Person. Therefore, a sign possessed two necessary components: (1) a supernatural act Jesus performed, and (2) a meaning or message identifying some characteristic of Jesus' Person and ministry.

A Description of the Seven Signs in John 1-12

The First Sign occurred at a wedding celebration in Cana of Galilee to which Jesus and His disciples were invited (2:1-11). During the wedding celebration the wine ran out. At His mother's request, Jesus acted by turning some water into wine. In verse 11, John stated that this first sign displayed Christ's glory. Therefore, the primary focus is not the miracle itself, but what the miracle teaches about Jesus. The key to understanding the miracle's message is the six stone water jars placed there for Jewish purification (v. 6). These stone water jars

represented the requirement of the Old Testament law as the way to God. The miraculous changing of the water into wine shows that Jesus is now the only way to the Father.⁵ The old way to the Father has been replaced by a new way in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The Second Sign is in John 4:46-54 and involved the healing of an official's son. After Jesus returned to Cana from His journey to Judea, an official of King Herod went to Jesus and requested healing for his sick son who was close to death. Jesus told the official his son would live, and the man, in believing faith, returned to Capernaum. Arriving home, he found his son alive and well. After a brief inquiry, the official determined his son's healing occurred at the moment Jesus had spoken words of healing the previous day. The sign's meaning here is twofold. First, Jesus has authority over time and space. Jesus did not have to accompany the official to



Sea of Galilee with Capernaum in far distance. John recorded Jesus healing a nobleman's son who lived in Capernaum.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: JAMES MCLEMORE (11/3/15)

Left: The Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (9/3/17)

Capernaum to heal the sick boy. All He had to do was speak words of healing and instantly the boy's health returned. Second, the miracle points to Jesus as the life-giver, a theme that continues in the Gospel's subsequent chapters.

The Third Sign follows immediately in John 5:1-15 and occurred in Jerusalem at a pool named Bethesda (v. 2). According to the account, an angel would stir the pool's waters from time to time, and the first person to enter the pool after the stirring would experience healing. When Jesus saw a man who had been lame for 38 years and had been at the pool a long time, He told the man to pick up his bedroll and walk (v. 8). Instantly, the man was healed and began to walk. This miraculous event occurred on the Sabbath (v. 9) and emphasized that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus possessed authority to do good on the Sabbath even though His actions angered the Jewish religious leaders (v. 16).

The feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1-15) forms the context for **The Fourth Sign** and is the only miracle we find in all four Gospels. The setting once again is in Galilee where a large crowd followed Jesus because of the signs He had been performing (v. 2). After teaching the people, Jesus fed the huge crowd by miraculously multiplying 5 barley loaves and 2 small fish. John reinforced the extent of the miracle by indicating all the people ate as much as they wanted and yet 12 baskets of food were left over. The apostle used this extraordinary miracle to declare that Jesus is the Bread of life. Jesus fed the people physical bread, but more importantly He offers to all people spiritual bread that is everlasting life. This spiritual bread satisfies all who receive it, and the supply is more than adequate. The Bread of life discourse in verses 22-59 further emphasizes these truths by repeatedly stating that Jesus is the Bread of life (vv. 35, 48, 51).

Placed between the fourth sign and the bread of life discourse is **The Fifth Sign** (vv. 16-21). The fourth sign concluded with Jesus departing from the crowd. Later that evening Jesus' disciples got into a boat and started across the Sea of Galilee toward Capernaum. A sudden storm arose, causing rough seas. After the disciples had rowed about 3-4 miles, they saw Jesus walking on the water and coming toward them. Initially they were afraid until Jesus said to them, "It is I" (v. 20, HCSB). Immediately the churning water was calm, and Jesus and the boat full of disciples were suddenly on the shore. The miracle declares that Jesus possesses authority and power over nature itself. But more importantly it emphasizes Jesus' majesty as expressed in the phrase *ego eimi* ("It is I," or "I am"). By His

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: John 9:1-41; 11:1-44

Khirbet Cana in the Asochis Valley differs from the city of Cana. Some believe this site was the location for Jesus' first sign.

Below: Terra-cotta wine or water jar from the 2nd–3rd cent. A.D. ILLUSTRATION PHOTO JAMES MCLEMORE/ACQUINUM MUSEUM/BUDAPEST, HUNGARY (13/12/18)

ILLUSTRATION PHOTO BOB SCHULTZ (10/8/6)

physical life to another man, Jesus came to give eternal light and life to all who would believe in Him.⁹

The Significance of the Book of Signs

In the Book of Signs, the Apostle John selected seven miracles Jesus performed to introduce and develop seven themes about Jesus' Person and ministry. Yet

the Christ of the Book of Signs is the Christ who died and rose again, and this is the major theme that runs throughout the seven signs. The One who performed each sign was the Christ who was exalted and glorified through the cross. In this sense John constructed the Book of Signs so each sign contains this major significance—that the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ came to give eternal life to all humankind.¹⁰

Indeed, John concluded his Gospel by stating Jesus performed many other signs, but the ones John recorded had as their purpose to convince his readers to believe in Jesus as God's Son and thereby have life in His name (20:30-31). **B**

walking on the water, Jesus defined Himself as more than a prophet or king. He made clear He is the One who can be defined only by the divine name "I am."⁶

Chapters 7–8 record a series of discourses Jesus made in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. At the end of those discourses, Jesus encountered a man who had been born blind, establishing the setting for **The Sixth Sign** in 9:1-41. Jesus healed the man by spitting on the ground, making mud from the spittle, and putting it on the man's eyes. He then instructed the man to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. When the man returned from washing in the pool, he could see. This healing miracle, which like the third sign also occurred on the Sabbath, created quite a stir among the Pharisees. Further, this sixth sign declared Jesus to be the Light of the world (v. 5).⁷ A man who had sat in darkness all of his life came to see the light both physically and spiritually, for the story closes with the man declaring his faith in Jesus (v. 38). The primary lesson of the miracle is the triumph of light over darkness,⁸ and as a result of this sign, many people believed in Jesus (10:42). But Jesus came not only to give light to the blind; He also came to bring judgment upon those who think they see but actually are spiritually blind (9:39-41).

The Seventh Sign follows in 11:1-44. The account opens with Jesus having received a message from Mary and Martha that their brother, Lazarus, was ill. John's insertion of the parenthetical phrase concerning Jesus' love for Lazarus and his two sisters (v. 5) served to reassure readers that Jesus did not delay going to Lazarus out of indifference. Other factors motivated His delay. When Jesus did arrive in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead four days (v. 39). At Jesus' command, the stone was removed from the burial tomb. After offering a prayer of thanks to His Father, Jesus commanded Lazarus to come forth from the tomb. Immediately Lazarus walked out of the tomb alive and still wrapped in his burial clothing. As with the sixth sign, Jesus gave the meaning of the seventh sign prior to performing the miracle. In His conversation with Martha, Jesus said to her: "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25, HCSB). More than any other miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead illustrates who Jesus truly is and what He came to give all people. Indeed, the themes of light and life in the sixth and seventh signs show that in giving sight to one man and

1. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 1.

2. Raymond E. Brown, "The Gospel According to John 1–12," *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 525.

3. Ernst Fuchs, "σημεῖον, σημειῖν, σημειόω, ἄσημος, ἐπίσημος, εὐσημος, σύστημα" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 245.

4. *Ibid.*, 243. For a fuller description of "signs" in John's Gospel, see Raymond Brown's commentary, 525-532.

5. Brown, 104.

6. *Ibid.*, 254-255.

7. In 8:12 Jesus made the same declaration after having forgiven the woman caught in adultery.

8. Brown, 379.

9. *Ibid.*, 430.

10. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 383-384.

Robert E. Jones is pastor, Euclid Avenue Baptist Church, Bristol, Virginia.



**Traditional Tomb
of Lazarus at
Bethany.**
ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/JERRY
VARDAMAN COLLECTION (29/2/14)