

The Seven Signs

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Seeing the Glory of Christ
in the Gospel of John

Anthony T. Selvaggio



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The Seven Signs

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To my bride, Michelle

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Introduction

Reading the Signs of John's Gospel

It was the middle of the night, and we were stuck in Pennsylvania. My wife and I were on our way to a vacation in Virginia, and we decided the driving would be easier if we traveled through the night rather than battling daytime traffic. That seemed like a good idea at first. Then it started to rain. We were soon in the dark, with rain pelting the windshield. The lights of oncoming eighteen-wheelers further reduced visibility. It was miserable driving, and we were cold and tired. We decided to look for a restaurant, where we could have a warm cup of coffee and wait out the weather.

While that seemed like a great plan, it had one flaw. We were in the middle of rural Pennsylvania, which was not exactly a metropolitan area. We were surrounded by trees and farms, but there was no sign of a restaurant.

We eventually found a gas station that was open, and we pulled in to ask for directions to the nearest town. A large, bearded man lumbered to our car. I rolled down the window and asked for directions to

the nearest town. He replied in a gruff and indignant voice, "You're in one."

Having offended the locals, we resumed our journey until we finally saw a sign indicating that an eatery, open twenty-four hours a day, was a few miles ahead. How happy we were to see that sign! After refreshing and regrouping at the diner, we drove the rest of the way to sunny Virginia.

During that long night in central Pennsylvania, all we wanted was a sign advertising a restaurant. That sign would help us find where we wanted to go.

Imagine a world without signs. Without signs we wouldn't know what a box of crackers costs at the grocery store. Without signs we could not navigate our way through a hospital to visit a sick friend. Without signs we might get lost when driving around in unfamiliar places. Every day of our lives, we rely on some form of sign.

Signs provide us with information and guide us to our desired destination. When we see a highway sign that says, "Boston, 40 miles," we know that we have not yet arrived in Boston, but we are heading in the right direction. If we continue along this road, we will eventually get to Boston.

Signs are also important in the Bible. Like the signs in our daily lives, signs in the Bible point to something beyond themselves. But what sets biblical signs apart from the signs of daily life is that biblical signs direct us to spiritual truths. When God provides a sign, He is using it to point people to an essential spiritual truth.

The intent of this book is to help you find God's truth by exploring the spiritual meaning of seven signs performed by Jesus and recorded in the Gospel of John. But before we begin this journey, we must first understand more about the purpose of signs in the Bible.

The Presence and Purpose of Signs in the Old Testament

The signs in the Old Testament most often involved God performing a supernatural event, sometimes through a human servant. A great example of this is in Exodus, where God performed many signs and wonders through His servant Moses (see Ex. 4:28–30; 7:3; 10:1–2; 14:11 and 22). The plagues on Egypt were clearly miraculous events.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that all signs in the Old Testament were miraculous. By the time of the prophets, God used very mundane things as signs. Consider, for example, the prophet Isaiah walking naked and barefoot for three years as a sign of judgment against the nations of Egypt and Ethiopia (Isa. 20:3). Similarly, note the mundane nature of the following sign from the prophecy of Ezekiel:

Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and portray upon it the city, *even* Jerusalem: And lay siege against it, and build a fort against it, and cast a mount against it; set the camp also against it, and set battering rams against it round about. Moreover take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it for a wall of

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iron between thee and the city: and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. This shall be a sign to the house of Israel (Ezek. 4:1–3).

In this account an ordinary iron pan was a sign, but clearly it, like other signs in the Old Testament, was miraculous.

Biblical signs can be miraculous, but not always. We see a gradual shift of the miraculous nature of signs; they are less so as we move from Exodus to the time of the prophets. But one thing is evident in all the signs of the Old Testament. All Old Testament signs served to authenticate God's appointed divine messengers so that people would believe the message they brought.¹ The signs in Exodus confirmed the authenticity of Moses as God's messenger and thereby authenticated his message as divine. In the prophetic period, God used signs to authenticate His prophets as the human oracles of His message so that people would believe God's message.

The Presence of Signs in the Gospel of John

While signs are recorded in various places in the New Testament, they take a prominent role in the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John is uniquely different from the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The uniqueness of the Gospel of John can be seen

1. Andreas J. Kostenberger, "The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 5 (1995): 91.

in what it leaves out in comparison to the subject matter of the synoptic gospels. Unlike the synoptic gospels, John's Gospel lacks the nativity story, the temptation of Christ by Satan, the narrative parables, extensive teaching on the kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount, the Olivet discourse, and a detailed account of the Lord's Supper.

On the other hand, the Gospel of John contains much that is not found in the synoptic gospels. For example, the Gospel of John includes the "I am" sayings of Jesus, the farewell discourse, and the seven signs of Jesus.²

The seven signs of Jesus play a prominent role in the structure of the Gospel of John. These signs exclusively appear in the first half of John. Here is a list of the seven signs and where they appear in the Gospel of John:

1. Turning Water into Wine (John 2:1–11)
2. Cleansing the Temple (John 2:12–17)
3. Healing the Nobleman's Son (John 4:46–54)
4. Healing the Lame Man (John 5:1–15)
5. Feeding the Multitude (John 6:1–15)
6. Healing the Blind Man (John 9)
7. Raising Lazarus (John 11).

2. Scholars debate the number of signs in the Gospel of John. Some say there are only six signs, while others argue there are seven. I take the latter view. For a helpful discussion of the number of signs in John's Gospel, see Kostenberger, "The Seventh Johannine Sign," 87–103.

Because the signs are in the first half of John's Gospel and play a significant theological and structural role in the Gospel, many scholars refer to this section of John's Gospel as the "book of signs."

John's unique emphasis on the signs of Jesus makes us wonder what purpose these signs serve in his Gospel. What is John trying to show us by using these seven signs? What spiritual truths should we learn from them? These questions can only be answered by examining the seven signs in the Gospel of John.

The Purpose of the Seven Signs in the Gospel of John

Let us begin by considering what these seven signs have in common. One is that they were each performed in public in the presence of witnesses. The signs of Jesus were not secretive; they were meant for the public to see.

Another is that all these signs are specifically called signs in John's narrative. Some form of the Greek word for sign (*semeia*) is used by John in referring to each of the seven signs.³ That tells us John wants his readers to understand these mighty acts of Jesus specifically as signs, interpreting them in light of what the Old Testament teaches about the nature and purpose of signs. It also informs us that John

3. Six of the seven signs have the word *semeia* in the narrative in which they appear. The narrative of the fourth sign, the healing of the nobleman's son, does not include this word in the narrative, but it is included by reference in John 7:31.

purposely links these signs to one another. So these signs share a common, cumulative, and collective purpose. John explains what this collective purpose is toward the end of his Gospel.

In John 20:30, John says he purposely selected a limited number of signs to tell his readers about. He writes, "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book." John confesses that he left out other signs. Then John reveals the exact purpose of the signs he did choose to include in his Gospel and why: "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). These seven signs of Jesus are included so that the readers of John's Gospel, including you and me, would "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and that we might "have life through his name."

John's signs have a similar purpose to that of the signs of the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament signs, the signs of John's Gospel are meant to authenticate the divine Messianic ministry and message of Jesus. Our survey of Old Testament signs shows that these signs are predominantly found in the time of Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant, and in the time of the prophets. Therefore, we should not be surprised that Jesus also performed signs because He is the mediator of the New Covenant and a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:18).⁴ Like Moses and

4. The connections between Moses and Jesus extend beyond

the prophets, Jesus was sent from God with a divine message. His signs authenticate that message.

While the seven signs of John's Gospel have much in common with the signs of the Old Testament, there is one extremely important difference between them. Unlike the signs of Moses and the prophets, the signs that Jesus performed testify of the divine authenticity of His message as well as the greater reality that Jesus Himself is the divine message. The seven signs in John's Gospel not only verify Jesus' assertion that He proclaims the Word of God, but also that He is the very divine Word of God (John 1:1).⁵ Thus when Jesus performed His seven signs, He declared something about Himself that Moses could never claim. With these signs, Jesus claimed to be the Son of God.

their both being mediators and prophets, and performing signs. There are also parallels between the actual signs performed through Moses and those performed by Jesus. For example, in Exodus, God used Moses to turn the water of the Nile into blood (Ex. 7:4–24). Jesus' first sign was turning water into wine (John 2:1–11). In Exodus, God, through Moses, fed His people manna from heaven (Ex. 16:4–35). Jesus' fifth sign was feeding a multitude of people, then declaring that He was the "bread of life" (John 6:1–15). Jesus Himself compared His miraculous feeding of the multitude with the miraculous feeding of the children of Israel by Moses (John 6:32–33, 48–51). But the major difference between Jesus and Moses was that Moses was merely an agent of God and possessed no inherent power to perform a sign. Jesus, by contrast, was the very ontological Son of God.

5. The word *ontological* refers to the essence or nature of being. In this context, the point is that Jesus not only proclaims the Word of God, but He is declared to be the Word of God in His being and essence.

Consider, for example, how Jesus linked His signs with the reality of His divinity in the following two passages from the Gospel of John:

John 5:19–20: Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel.

John 10:37–38: If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him.

In each of these passages, Jesus declared that His signs, or works, indicated His equality with the Father. He openly declared that He was the Son of God, and His signs corroborated this claim.

The signs of Jesus proved that He is the Christ, the very Son of God. When Jesus performed a sign, He was making the case for who He is. By recording those signs in his Gospel, John is making a similar case. Many scholars have noted that John's Gospel is like a legal brief, arguing why we should believe in Jesus Christ. At the center of that argument are the seven signs of Jesus. As John 20:30 says, John knew many other signs that Jesus did but, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he chose to emphasize only these seven. John sifted through all the existing

evidence and presented his audience with the very best evidence for his case.

John uses the seven signs as building blocks of evidence. Each sign adds to the weight of evidence. These seven signs crescendo in the final, seventh sign, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This is John's closing argument to the case that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. After this sign, Jesus ceased to perform any more signs and ended His public ministry. The remainder of John's Gospel thus focuses on the internal aspects of Jesus' relationship with His disciples and preparing them for His death and resurrection. It is as if John says, "If you do not have faith after seeing these seven signs, particularly after witnessing Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, then you will never believe. You have failed to properly read the signs."

Many Jews that Jesus encountered during His earthly ministry failed to correctly read those signs. Even though Jesus worked these signs in their presence, John writes after the raising of Lazarus, "But though he had done so many miracles [*semeia*] before them, yet they believed not on him" (John 12:37). The Jews failed to see beyond the sign to the reality of who Jesus is, thus fulfilling the words in the prologue of John's Gospel, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11).

This failure to grasp the meaning of the signs was not limited to the Jews of Jesus' day. It is a risk for anyone today who reads the Gospel of John or hears it preached. These seven signs become a liv-

ing reality whenever they are proclaimed, and the failure to believe in the truth that they reveal, as Thomas Schreiner points out, does not reside in the inadequacy of the sign but rather in the one who rejects it. As Schreiner says, "If the signs do not lead to faith, the fault lies not in the signs but in the human beings who refuse to believe and who fail to see in the signs who Jesus is."⁶

Like the highway signs we see every day, the signs of John's Gospel point beyond themselves to a greater reality. The signs of John's Gospel are not the destination; they are directions to the greater truth about who Jesus is and what He has done. John wants us to see through the looking glass of these signs so that we may confess that Jesus is the Christ, the very Son of God.⁷ That is the purpose of the seven signs of John's Gospel.

The Purpose of This Book

What exactly do I hope to accomplish by taking you on this journey through the seven signs of John's Gospel?

Let me begin with you who already savingly believe the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

6. Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 67.

7. Kostenberger provides this helpful definition of what John means by a sign: "A sign is a symbol-laden, but not necessarily 'miraculous,' public work of Jesus selected and explicitly identified as such by John for the reason that it displays God's glory in Jesus who is thus shown to be God's true representative (cf. 20:30–31)" ("The Seventh Johannine Sign," 95).

God. My hope is that you will behold anew the glory of your Lord. While the seven signs were given to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, they also have a greater purpose—to display His glory. As some scholars have noted, there is a connection between the seven signs and the prologue of John's Gospel, particularly with John 1:14, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (*and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father*) full of grace and truth" (emphasis mine).⁸ The seven signs of John's Gospel will help us understand and behold the glory of the one and only Son of God. For you who believe in Jesus, my goal is to help you to come to a deeper, fuller, and more profound understanding of His glory.

Now let me address you who are not yet persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. My desire is that the Holy Spirit will convince you of this truth. My hope is that the Holy Spirit will do that work as I flesh out the meaning of the seven signs in a twenty-first-century context. My goal is to once more make John's case. So I would like you to approach this book like a juror at a trial. Consider and weigh the evidence that John presents, then come to a verdict. My purpose in writing this book is the same as John's: "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31).

8. Donald Guthrie, "The Importance of Signs in the Fourth Gospel," *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967): 80.

With these goals in mind, let us begin our study of the seven signs of John's Gospel. It is a journey that begins at a wedding and ends at a funeral. Throughout this journey you will witness incredible events such as water being turned into wine, a lame man brought to his feet, and a dead man coming forth from his tomb. While this journey centers in the land of Palestine, it will ultimately take you beyond the finiteness of this created world. For on this majestic journey, you will see more than mere signs and wonders—you will see the glory of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God!

*Study Questions*

1. Why does God provide His people with signs?
2. What was the purpose of the signs performed in the Old Testament, and how did the nature of those signs change over the course of Old Testament history?
3. What is the explicit purpose of the seven signs of John's Gospel?
4. What is the major difference between the signs performed in the Old Testament and the signs performed by Jesus in John's Gospel?