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The Importance of Signs in the Fourth Gospel

Donald Guthrie

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The special use of the Greek word σημεῖον in John is well known, but this study is intended to bring into focus several important aspects of 'signs' as a major contribution to the purpose for which the Gospel was written. It makes good sense to begin with John's own statement of purpose in xx. 30, 31, although this is the final occurrence of the word in the Gospel.

There are several important implications to be drawn from this statement. (a) John's account of the signs which Jesus did is intentionally selective. He mentions many other signs (πολλὰ σημεῖα) of which he must have had detailed knowledge. In fact, he is specifically referring to those performed in the presence of the disciples. They were observable phenomena which evidently possessed particular significance. Some indication of what that significance was is contained in the concluding half of the statement (verse 31). (b) The purpose of the selection was theological. The signs were designed to produce faith of a particular kind. The verb 'believe' (πιστεύω) is frequent in John, although the noun πίστις is lacking.¹ It is important to note how often in this gospel believing is connected with seeing as well as hearing and this will be brought out in the course of our enquiry. (c) The theological purpose is stated in a twofold form—(i) that Jesus is the Christ and (ii) that He is the Son of God. It is essential for an adequate appreciation of John's use of signs to examine to what extent the description of the various signs would serve this purpose. It is not without considerable importance that the Messianic identity of Jesus is stated first.² This is essentially a Jewish concept and does not support the view that this gospel is wholly Hellenic in purpose.³ The connection of Messianic claims with signs is not surprising, for it was generally expected that the Messiah, when he came, would authenticate his claims by means of signs. The absence of signs would have been unthinkable for a claimant to the Messianic office. In further support of the special emphasis given to Messianic claims is the fact that only in this gospel is the Hebrew form of the word 'Messiah' found, once on the lips of Andrew (i. 41) and once on the lips of the Samaritan woman (iv. 25).

In spite of the fact that much discussion has surrounded the early attestation of Jesus' Messiahship in John, because of the injunctions to silence in the Synoptic Gospels, it cannot be confidently asserted that John's Messianic references are unhistorical. In the case of the Samaritan woman's testimony, it is important to note that the Samaritans were led by that testimony and by their own contact with Jesus to recognise him as 'Saviour of the world' (i. 42), which shows a non materialistic and non-nationalistic view of messiahship. Where this existed there was less need for reserve. Later on in the gospel there comes into focus a more materialistic concept when the multitude sought to make Jesus king after the miracle of feeding the five thousand (vi. 15).

¹ For a survey of the various aspects of 'faith' in John's Gospel, cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 1953, 179ff.

² W. C. van Unnik, 'The purpose of St. John's Gospel', *Studia Evangelica*, 1959 (edited Aland, Cross, Danielou, Riesenfeld and van Unnik), 382-411, draws special attention to the significance of the title Christ as 'the Anointed One'.

³ As maintained, for instance, by E. F. Scott in his *The Fourth Gospel, its Purpose and Theology*², 1908. Many nineteenth century scholars maintained the same view. Scott, indeed, regards the two titles used in Jn. xx. 31 as equivalent terms (p. 183).

It should further be noted that the Messianic claim may reflect an early Christian confession—'Jesus is the Christ'. Such a confession at once marks out a Christian from a non-Christian Jew. But its validity would not be confined to Jews, for it

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would be a meaningful confession to Gentiles in the Church who would pass under the influence of Jewish Messianism through acceptance of the Septuagint. It will be of particular importance to trace the contribution of John's special signs to this Messianic awareness of Jesus.

The other object of the signs—to lead to faith in Jesus as Son of God—needs careful examination.⁴ The title occurs several times in this gospel and a survey of the different occurrences will establish the sense in which it is here used. In the prologue, John speaks of the revelation of God through the only begotten Son (i. 18). Nathanael confesses Jesus to be Son of God and King of Israel (i. 49), although in his reply Jesus uses the title Son of Man, thus showing the two titles to be complementary. Some texts give a similar confession on the lips of Simon Peter, but the more probable reading is ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ (vi. 69). Jesus himself uses the title when addressing the man whose sight he has restored with the challenging words, 'Do you believe on the Son of God?' (ix. 35). But here some important texts (including Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) read 'Son of Man'. Jesus again uses the title when he was accused of blasphemy because he spoke in such intimate terms of his unity with the Father (x. 36). In this case no article is used. When Jesus heard of Lazarus' death, he commented that it had occurred so that the Son of God might be glorified (xi. 4). Such an announcement before the miracle of bringing Lazarus back from the grave puts the whole incident into its right perspective. It was to draw attention to a fundamental characteristic of the divine Son, his power over death. Before the miracle was performed Martha had confessed that Jesus was both Christ and Son of God (xi. 27). In this case, her faith did not rest on the sign itself, but on her conception of Jesus. At the trial the Jews claimed that he was worthy of death because he made himself the Son of God (xix. 7). In this latter case the Greek form is without the article.

When to all these specific instances, the numerous times that Jesus speaks of the Son are added, the conclusion is inescapable that John has borne in mind his distinctive purpose throughout. He has recorded considerably more material which testified to the divine Sonship of Jesus than the Synoptics.

It should be noted that John's purpose is not only stated in terms of an affirmation of faith, but also in terms of living. Faith has a practical outcome which is expressed as 'life in his name' (xx. 31). The qualifying clause is of great significance, particularly when considered in its Hebrew context. The name denoted the character. In that case 'life in his name' must mean life in accordance with his character. The signs were therefore designed for a practical purpose and it is of considerable interest to observe how various aspects of 'life in his name' are brought out.

⁴ In his survey of the use of this title in this gospel, C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, 250-262, concludes that an eternal relationship is in mind. 'The human career of Jesus is, as it were, a projection of this eternal relation (which is the divine ἀγάπη) upon the field of time' (*idem.* 262).

We come now to discuss John's sequence of miracles regarded as signs. The first is the turning of water into wine which is not only stated to be the first of his signs at Cana (ii. 11), but is also said to have manifested his glory, which in turn led his disciples to believe in him. This miracle has special interest as the first of a series and should furnish some key to the interpretation of the whole. In what sense then does this incident reflect the glory of Jesus? The connection between the result of this incident and the statement in the Prologue (i. 14) that 'we have beheld his glory' gives the clue for the interpretation of this first sign. The authenticating of the reality of the Word become flesh is by means of some visible 'glory'⁵, and this is precisely what John claims was seen as the water was changed to wine. It was

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glory in an intensely practical and domestic setting. It was to illustrate the dwelling of the Word among us in the general affairs of life. A village wedding may seem irrelevant in an account of the mission of the eternal Word, but it is precisely because such a humble setting provided the first occasion for the bursting forth of the glory of Jesus that John selects it as the first of his sequences of signs.⁶ Some scholars see no significance in the setting, but attach great importance to the symbolic meaning. Thus C. H. Dodd⁷ regards the account as 'a naive tale about a marvel at a village wedding', but sees in it an allegory of spiritual truth. Similarly C. K. Barrett⁸ considers that the water is to be understood as Jewish purificatory water, in which case the sign represents the supersession of Jewish ritual by Jesus. But the account does not read like a symbolical creation of the author in order to impart spiritual truth. There can be little doubt that he himself believed that what he wrote was historically true, whatever might now be contended for as the possible origin. His notion of 'sign' is something different from a mere emblem.⁹ It was a visible manifestation of Christ's glory. If the water and wine can be symbolically interpreted this is no justification for maintaining that they are essentially symbols. Since the writer in i. 14 seems to include himself among the eye witnesses of his glory the Cana incident makes considerably more sense as history than as symbol. The transformation is clearly described as miraculous and it is this characteristic which testifies to the divine power of Jesus.¹⁰

The most important factor in the Cana incident, viewed as a sign, is the faith to which it led. The first sign fits perfectly, therefore, into the author's stated purpose. Whatever symbolic truths are taught by the details of the signs, it is their effect which counts most with the author. Faith is here more than intellectual assent, which would not need to be confirmed by supernatural power. Some belief must have existed prior to this in the minds of the disciples, but this manifestation of glory confirmed it.

⁵ W. H. Rigg, *The Fourth Gospel and its Message for Today*, 1952, 46-80, gives a full discussion of the significance of the glory of God in this gospel.

⁶ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1887, 39, remarks that the glory of the sign must be sought not only in the miraculous element, but also in connection with the circumstances as a revelation of the insight, the sympathy, the sovereignty of the Son of Man, who was the Word Incarnate'.

⁷ *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 1954, 297.

⁸ *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1956, 158.

⁹ When C. H. Dodd states that 'the story is *not* to be taken at its face value' (*op. cit.*, *ibid.*), he implies that the historical framework can be ignored in preference for the deeper meaning. But he admits the realism in the recounting of the story.

¹⁰ Difficulty has been felt over the apparently large quantity of wine created. It may be lessened by regarding only that drawn off as having been transformed (cf. Westcott, *ad loc.*). But the miracle would be as much a sign whatever the quantity of wine produced.

The healing of the official's son described in chapter iv is specifically linked in iv. 46 with the miracle of the wine. It is more than a link of locality in that both happened at Cana. This healing is described as 'the second sign', no doubt in order to draw attention to the sequence. We may expect that this sign will complement the first and this is precisely what it does. The official had clearly heard news of Jesus' power for he sought him out to heal his son. The immediate response of Jesus is remarkable in the context. 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe' (iv. 48). John does not inform us what prompted this abrupt rebuke. On the surface it would seem that the man had exercised faith to take the trouble to urge Jesus to go to his son. What then was the point of Jesus' remark? When considered as a part of the whole purpose of the gospel it becomes intelligible. The connection between faith and signs is part of the warp and woof of the gospel, but John is concerned to record our Lord's distinction between faith based on mere wonder working and faith based on an essential spiritual understanding of the sign.¹¹ It is as if Jesus had said to the man, Is your faith really of the kind which can exist without any props? The man's answer is the cry of a parent's aching heart, but when Jesus assured him that the son would live John records that the man believed (iv. 50). When he returned home and discovered that the healing happened simultaneously with Jesus' command, not only he but his whole 'household believed.'¹² In this sign, therefore, is seen a definite extension of faith. The whole incident becomes an incentive to faith on the basis of Jesus' word of

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power, but without reliance on any external attestations.¹³ Such a faith is deeper than that of the disciples' faith in ii. 11, which was based on what they themselves had seen.

The third miracle in John's gospel, also a healing miracle, is not specifically described as a sign,¹⁴ but there is little doubt that he intended it to be viewed in the same light as the others. There are, however, some significant differences, the most marked of which is the absence of any specific reference to faith. This is unlike the Synoptic healing miracles where appeal to faith on the part of the person to be healed is a regular feature.¹⁵ In the case of the impotent man in John v we meet only with the man's complaint about the lack of any adequate help to move him into the healing waters, without a hint as to whether or not he had even considered,

¹¹ R. H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel, its significance and environment*, 1941, 164, n. 2, refers to the fact that in rabbinic writings the idea occurs of the superiority of faith without miracles to faith with miracles.

¹² J. H. Bernard, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, 1928 1. clxxx, considers that this incident does not record a miracle but a correct diagnosis. He thinks that the symptoms were described by the boy's father and as a result of this Jesus was able to predict that the crisis was over and that the boy would live. But there can be no doubt that John did not regard the incident in this light, for he could hardly have described such an action as a sign. He was clearly deeply impressed by the fact that the healing took place at the precise hour of Jesus' statement.

¹³ The Valentinians interpreted this symbolically, but considered that those requiring signs and wonders to lead to faith were ψυχικός as distinct from πνευματικός (of whom an example is seen in the Samaritan Woman), cf. M. F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel*, 1960, 491.

¹⁴ J. H. Bernard, *idem.*, I. clxxix, goes as far as to maintain that we are not compelled to suppose any miracle in this incident, on the grounds that many modern parallels exist in the healing of nervous conditions. But whatever the cause of the infirmity, John makes clear that the cure was not only instantaneous, but also totally unexpected. The extraordinary character of the cure was sufficient to convince him that it demonstrated more than normal human power.

¹⁵ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1960, 85ff, draws attention to some parallels between this incident and that of the healing of the paralytic man in Mk. ii. 1-12. Both, for instance, refer to the sin of the man concerned as well as the healing of him. Yet whereas in Mark the faith of the man's friends is referred to, in John no mention is made of faith.

let alone believed, that Jesus could heal him. Nevertheless, his immediate response to Jesus' command that he should take his pallet and walk shows a considerable degree of faith. It is strange that John does not draw attention to this. Instead he proceeds to show the impact of the event on those who did not believe, i.e. the Jews who persecuted Jesus (v. 16). In the subsequent discussion which Jesus had with these Jews he definitely charges them with unbelief (v. 38). It is clear, therefore, that this sign did not lead to faith on the part of all who knew about it. The point of the account seems to be that there were those more concerned about the laws of Sabbath observance than about the real significance of the event. It is most probable, therefore, that John intended this sign to be a warning about the adverse effects of signs on observers with preconceived ideas. The miracle was no evidence to such people that Jesus was Son of God. Indeed, the implications of Jesus' actions and subsequent comments led his adversaries to plot against him because he made himself equal with God (v. 18). To be effective a sign clearly needs as a pre-requisite a disposition in the observers to respond. It is important to note, further, that Jesus criticises them for their unbelief in view of their possession of the Scriptures which testified of him (v. 39). They should have been able to detect that Jesus was the Messiah. They had failed to do so, but John hopes that the record of their failure will lead other men to make such an affirmation.

The fourth sign differs yet again in its result. After the feeding of the multitude, the only miracle recorded in all four gospels, John records the general reaction. When the people saw the sign they began talking of Jesus as the coming prophet in such a way as to show a basic misunderstanding. When Jesus perceived that their purpose was to make him a king, he withdrew from them. The sign had clearly not led them to a true faith; indeed faith is not mentioned at all. If they were contemplating Jesus as Messiah it was not in the way that John intended his readers to understand him. There was something lacking in their appreciation of the sign. In fact, Jesus himself makes this clear (vi. 26). They were seeking him for purely materialistic purposes, because of the easy food which he had provided. Moreover, so completely had the value of the miracle as a sign been lost on them that they could say, 'Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you?' (vi. 30). But to such people signs would never lead to faith. They failed completely to discern between the material and the spiritual food. This sign contains within it yet another example of a warning against the misunderstanding of signs.

It is interesting to note that the subsequent discourse in this incident elucidates the true interpretation of the sign. It cannot, however, be maintained that this is

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John's usual practice. It must rather be assumed that the discourse follows in this case because the real symbolic meaning would not otherwise be apparent. The discourse brings out the claims of Jesus to be Son of God. John intends both the sign and its interpretation to contribute to his purpose. The sad commentary of Jesus on the situation is that having seen him they have not believed (vi. 36). The fifth sign which comes between the fourth and its interpretation is notable for the absence of much comment upon it.¹⁶ In fact, when the disciples saw Jesus walking upon the water their first reaction was gladness (vi. 19, 21). In this case there was a partial misunderstanding of the sign, which was not alleviated until Jesus himself established his identity. But does John intend the miracle to be understood in any

¹⁶ J. H. Bernard, *op. cit.*, I, clxxvi., does not class this as a miracle and therefore excludes it from the list of signs, which are thus confined to three in Galilee and three in Jerusalem and district.

symbolic way? Is the main point that Jesus is independent of physical laws, or is it that no resistance can deter him from his purpose? If John intends this to be regarded as a sign, it is most probable that it was to demonstrate the power of Christ in the natural creation. But in this incident there is no hint of any response of faith.

The healing of the man who was born blind, the sixth sign, is notable for the long discussion in which it involved the man himself and for the gradual stages by which he came to believe in Christ. When a question arose about the cause of the man's blindness, Jesus by-passed the theological controversies and declared that it was through the blind man that the works of God would be seen (ix. 3). It is evident therefore, that Jesus intended the miracle to be a sign of God's power. But that the sign was to have symbolic meaning is equally clear since Jesus declares himself before the miracle to be the light of the world (ix. 5), an echo of the previous statement in viii. 12. It was the function of light to bring illumination even to blind eyes. The sign of restoration of sight was, therefore, a fitting sequel to the Lord's declaration. The man who had received his sight recognised that Jesus did signs (ix. 16), and could not square this with the Pharisaic assertion that Jesus was not of God. In spite of the fact that he was not an educated man, he had grasped the fundamental purpose of the sign. It testified to God. It was included in the gospel for the same purpose. It is important to notice the progression in the man's conception of Jesus. At first he was 'The man called Jesus' (ix. 11); later he says, 'He is a prophet' (ix. 17), even less specific than the similar claim after the feeding miracle (vi. 14), where the article is used; still later he comes to believe in Jesus as the Son of man (ix. 35). His final confession is striking for its simplicity, 'Lord, I believe' (ix. 38). But this belief is not so much the effect of the sign as the effect of the man's personal interview with Jesus. This clean cut assertion is in strong contrast to the extraordinary obdurateness of the Pharisees. In the face of indisputable evidence they question even the actuality of the miracle, let alone the significance. Once again the Johannine purpose comes into view. The most convincing sign will not be a sign to those whose preconceptions make it impossible for them to appreciate the spiritual aspect of Jesus' work. At the conclusion of John's account of the incident he records Jesus' own comment on his life purpose—that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind' (ix. 39). Clearly this can be understood only in a spiritual sense.

The raising of Lazarus is the most striking of John's signs, both for its content and for its effect. Before the account of it Jesus is recorded as saying of Lazarus' illness that 'it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it' (xi. 4). The connection with the purpose of the gospel is again obvious.

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The emphasis on glory, which is one of the most important aspects of this sign, in which the glorious power of Christ is vividly seen, finds a parallel in the first sign. But the glory is linked to faith, as also in the incident at Cana. Indeed, the faith motive is more emphatically seen in this miracle. It is prepared for by Jesus' plain speaking when he explained not only that Lazarus was dead, but that he was glad not to have been there so that the disciples might believe (xi. 15). Yet again before the recording of the miracle itself, John includes a discussion between Martha and Jesus, in which Jesus presents the spiritual character of the sign he is about to perform and calls on Martha to make a definite affirmation of faith in him. This faith concerned not only the reality of resurrection but also the identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (xi. 27). The parallel with John's purpose is unmistakable. This sign was designed in a special way to lead to faith in the Messiahship and divine Sonship of Jesus.

The miracle had still not happened, when Jesus reminded Martha that if she believed she would see God's glory. This was in direct rejection of Martha's protest at the opening of the cave. Again the connection between faith and glory is stressed (xi. 40). It is worth noting that at this stage in the story John connects up this miracle with the previous one by recording the sneer of some of the Jews, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' (xi. 37). Clearly no amount of signs were likely to convince such objectors. In Jesus' prayer just prior to the miracle he again draws attention to its purpose as an inducement to belief that God has sent him (xi. 42), and in this case it was for the benefit of the by-standers. The immediate effect of the miracle is at once noted—many believed when they had seen what Jesus did (xi. 45). But this was not the climax to the story. So remarkable a miracle as this did not inevitably lead to faith. For some it led to opposition and plotting to kill Jesus. The chief priests and Pharisees admitted that Jesus performed many signs and admitted further that everyone would believe in him if they did not take some action to stop it. They appear to have grasped clearly the connection between signs and belief. At the same time, their conception of 'belief' was widely deficient if they thought that for multitudes to believe in Jesus would have incurred the wrath of the Roman authorities (xi. 48). Lazarus himself was a continual sign and it is no wonder that John records the chief priests' design to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus, because many were believing in Jesus (xii. 10, 11). The real climax of this series of signs is seen in xii. 37 where it is asserted that signs had led to disbelief instead of faith.

What was the symbolic purpose of this latter sign? The demonstration of Jesus' power over death drew attention to his significant assertion, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (xi. 25). The event was intended to convey a spiritual meaning.¹⁷ Physical death comes to all men and even the resurrected Lazarus had ultimately to die again, but there was a spiritual life which could never be terminated (xi. 26). John had grasped the truth of this and tells the whole story with dramatic force by showing at various stages that faith was operating. There can be no doubt that the significance of this sign lies in preparing the mind for the most stupendous event of Christ's own resurrection.

Whereas it is generally considered that John's Book of Signs consists of seven signs, it would be incomplete in a survey of this character to omit the incident of the haul of fish during the post-resurrection appearances as recorded in John xxi. The link between the seven signs and this one is the resurrection itself. This is

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nowhere specifically called a sign in this book, but it must be included in view of chapter xx. 30, 31. The risen Lord had just said to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believed' (xx. 29). The evidence of the resurrection of Jesus had led to faith for Thomas, and it is clearly John's intention in his book to record the kind of evidence about Jesus' resurrection which would lead to similar faith in others. It is not without significance that in John xx. 8 'the other disciple' is said to have

¹⁷ To see a spiritual meaning in this miracle is not to dispute its actuality. R. H. Strachan, *op. cit.*, 241f, although seeing some historic touches, regards John's account of the story as a striking example of Christian miracles. Referring to the person of Jesus he says that 'our Christian belief in His person must not be invoked in order to guarantee the historical accuracy of the works of His biographers'. But our estimate of historical probability cannot be divorced from our conception of the person of Jesus. It is because of what he is that the whole miracle becomes credible.

believed when he saw the empty tomb. Although faith is so closely linked with sight in this gospel the aim is certainly to lead to that kind of faith which does not depend on sight. Of all the miracles which are recorded this is never more true than for the resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, this is involved in John's purpose to draw attention to the Messiahship and divine Sonship of Jesus. It is faith in a risen Lord for which he contends.

The incident in chapter xxi. is not described as a sign and probably did not form part of John's original choice of signs. The completely unexpected haul of fish netted only when Jesus' command was obeyed may undoubtedly be applied symbolically. But the point of the story is to show that the Lord was revealed to the disciples as a result of the miracle. Its further significance was its role as an introduction to the conversation between Jesus and Peter. The connection is not as close as in some of the earlier signs, as in this case there is no continuation of the metaphor. It should be noted that the action of fishing is not used as a means to convey spiritual challenge. The shepherd metaphor, which is substituted for it, is an echo of the type of imagery recorded in John x.

In addition to the passages already considered there are a few others which are complementary to them. Nathanael is assured by Jesus that he will see greater things than he has yet seen (i. 50), which will presumably lead to greater faith, for his confession is already recognised by Jesus as an act of faith. A similar prediction by Jesus is found in v. 20, when he says, 'greater works than these will he show him that you may marvel'. This is further explained as the gift of life and shows that the works are to be spiritually understood. It is worth noting that in this context it is stated that the possessor of eternal life is the man who hears Jesus' word and believes Him who sent him (v. 24). The Nicodemus incident in chapter iii. draws attention to the value of signs, although the narrative here does not contain a specific sign. To Nicodemus the signs which Jesus performed were a testimony to the fact that Jesus was a teacher sent from God. But as yet his spiritual understanding is severely limited. Indeed, Jesus challenges him that if he does not believe the earthly things of his teaching, how is he likely to believe the heavenly things? John possibly has signs in mind when he comments that the Galileans welcomed Jesus when they saw all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast (iv. 45).

Jesus himself recognised the value of works as a witness that the Father had sent him (v. 36). The testimony to the value of works was an essential factor in John's Messianic presentation of Jesus. The works had significance insofar as they showed the true nature of Jesus. On the other hand not infrequently faith is linked with words rather than works (cf. iii. 12; v. 24, 47; vi. 68, 69; viii. 30, 45; xvi. 30). The comment of the officers whom the Pharisees sent to arrest Jesus was 'no man ever spake like this man!' (vii. 46), to which the Pharisees answered, 'Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?' Faith is again connected with hearing even in the minds of those hostile to Jesus.

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In the farewell discourses Jesus makes a significant statement about the value of works. 'Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves' (xiv. 11). Evidently believing through the works is regarded as of a lesser order than believing through the words of Jesus. Yet the works are not to be despised, for Jesus says that those who believe in him will do even greater works with a view to glorifying the Father (xiv. 12, 13). Jesus contrasts the attitude of the disciples with that of the world and points out that the world is even led to hate both him and his Father as a result of seeing the

works (xv. 24). When Jesus began to speak plainly to his disciples, they remarked that they now believed that he came from God (xvi. 30). In the high priestly prayer of Jesus in chapter xvii. he makes clear that the disciples had been given the words which Jesus had been given by the Father, as a result of which they had believed that the Father had sent him (xvii. 8).

It should be observed that Jesus did not describe his works as signs.¹⁸ He prefers to speak of works, and definitely rejected the request for signs. Does this mean, therefore, that the evangelist took a different line from that of Jesus? And if so, what is the explanation? The most important consideration is that Jesus was addressing himself to those who had had the advantage of hearing him personally, but the readers of this gospel were those who needed to be convinced of the nature of Jesus in more indirect ways. Yet there seems little doubt that what Jesus meant by works was identical with what John meant by signs. Jesus preferred faith without signs, but conceded the usefulness of works for those weaker in faith.

It will be seen, therefore, that the theme of works and their connection with faith is a major one in this gospel. Indeed, it may be maintained that this theme is the key to the understanding of the gospel as a whole. It will be relevant to examine in support of this the relation of the signs to the prologue. This will contribute to the impression of unity which the gospel gives.

Beginning from the idea that the author's aim in recording the signs is to lead to faith in Jesus of a particular kind, a faith which acknowledges his Messiahship and his divine Sonship, the purpose of the prologue is seen to fit into the overall pattern. The prologue presents an exalted view of Christ which is nevertheless firmly related to the world of men. The necessity for a revelation of God of the kind that Jesus brought is clearly stated. To all men God is invisible apart from what they see of him in his Son (i. 18). The possibility of illumination through the intermediary action of the Son is much in focus. There is an intended contrast between i. 14 (we have beheld his glory) and i. 18 (no one has ever seen God). John's record cannot be otherwise conceived than as a direct aim to set out in tangible form some of the evidences of that glory which he and others had seen. There is a similar contrast between the Word being with God (i. 1) and the Word dwelling among us (i. 14). It is an understanding of the nature of the latter which alone can testify to the former. The signs can teach us nothing about the pre-existent character of Christ, although they can show that the manner of his dwelling among men presupposes a more than human nature.

The great abstract themes of the prologue find echoes in the signs. The major concept of life, which had its fullest manifestation in the incarnate Word, is powerfully illustrated in the Lazarus account. 'In him was Life' (i. 4) is developed in Jesus' own claim, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (xi. 25). A visible demonstration of the remarkable power that Jesus possessed over death vividly

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demonstrates the claim of the prologue. Yet even that sign is but a shadow of the resurrection of Christ. The closely linked concept of light finds its main illustration in the sign of the man born blind, which follows another great assertion of Jesus, 'I am the light of the World' (viii. 12). The testimony of John the Baptist was directed towards that light and was specifically distinguished from it (i. 8). But the purpose of his testimony was 'that all might believe

¹⁸ Cf. the discussion of E. B. Redlich, *An Introduction to the Fourth Gospel*, 1939, 130ff.

through him'. Since the climax of the 'sign' of the blind man came when he acknowledged his faith in Jesus, the connection between light and faith is not far to seek.

John is deeply conscious throughout his gospel that Jesus as the revelation of God met and will continue to meet with resistance. Even although the world was made through the Word, it not merely failed to recognise him, but also failed to receive him (i. 10, 11). The reader is prepared at once for a paradox. The story of Jesus is not under the normal category of a success story. Faith in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, will not come easily. Even the most remarkable signs will result in stiffer opposition. The path of faith is for those with spiritual discernment who can see the significance of the signs. But John does not leave the reader in any doubt about the possibility of faith. All who received him and believed on him received authority to become children of God (i. 12). This was a *fait accompli*. John and the other Christians had experienced it and knew that it had not come about by any superior effort on their part. It was of God (i. 13). It is wholly consonant with these considerations that some of the signs show no faith-results in the observers, while others do.

The most notable link between the signs and the prologue is their connection with 'glory'. The stage is well set in i. 14 ('we beheld his glory'), and is further developed in the signs. It is important to understand what John means by 'glory' (δόξα) in this and other contexts. Is it the kind of glory seen at the Transfiguration? The fact that John does not mention that event although all of the Synoptics do suggests otherwise. In all probability he intends to demonstrate a glory which is distinguished from the idea of dazzling brilliance, and yet at the same time is a visible manifestation which was sufficiently distinctive to be recognised. The readers were not to look for a display of omnipotent power but for significant actions which marked Jesus out from all other men. The changing of water into wine was a manifestation of glory not only for the supernatural element involved in it, but also for the significant concern which Jesus showed over a purely domestic problem. The only other sign which is specifically said to be performed for the glory of God is the raising of Lazarus (xi. 4). Nevertheless, it may reasonably be supposed that all the signs may be regarded from this point of view. Their sum total provides an impressive platform for the display of various aspects of the glory of God in Jesus. Yet it must not be supposed that this limits John's illustration of δόξα for he himself links it with grace and truth. There was a moral and spiritual glory about the life of Jesus which had never previously been seen in any man. His absolute devotedness to the Father's will showed the splendour of his resolution to finish the work he had been sent to do (xvii. 4—'I have glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do'.) Sufficient has been said to show the close connection between the prologue and the signs and to demonstrate the author's persistent purpose throughout the book.

It remains to discuss the significance of the present study in a consideration of the problem of history in John. if the author was so dominated by a dogmatic

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purpose, can his historical details be trusted? No answer to this question is adequate which does not define clearly the nature of history. If by history is meant the unbiased account of

bare events, John clearly does not qualify.¹⁹ No writer ' who has an eye for symbolism aims to present bare events,²⁰ and a writer like John is no exception. But to what extent does he allow his own interpretations to colour his record? Can a symbolic approach exist side by side with a true history? Much will clearly depend on the nature of John's symbolism. This cannot be discussed *in toto*, but only as it affects his use of signs.

It is certainly possible to have symbolic representation without any attempt at historical veracity. Pure allegory often partakes of this quality. But this is not the nature of John's signs. They are specifically written as historical events. The water was turned into wine on the third day after Jesus had called Philip and Nathanael and took place at Cana of Galilee²¹, subsequent to which Jesus went to Capernaum. The official's son was healed soon after Jesus went from Judaea to Galilee and again his subsequent movement is noted, i.e. he went to Jerusalem. The precise location of the lame man is in a portico of the pool called Bethzatha. It is further stated that the miracle was performed on the sabbath. The feeding of the five thousand is noted as occurring by the Sea of Galilee, which is further identified as the Sea of Tiberius. Subsequent to this miracle, on the evening of the same day, Jesus goes to his disciples on the sea as they were voyaging to Capernaum. Following this further miracle and the extended discussion upon the theme of the heavenly food, Jesus is said to have gone about in Galilee (vii. 1), and the time of this is noted as being near to the time of the feast of Tabernacles. The timing and location of the healing of the man born blind is less specific. In the course of the healing the pool of Siloam is mentioned (ix. 7). The raising of Lazarus takes place at Bethany and Jesus is said to have journeyed to Ephraim immediately afterwards, and again a Jewish feast, the Passover, is mentioned as being imminent. The Lazarus incident is so bound up with the Passion story that it is said to have been the cause of the chief priests planning to put Jesus to death. Even the one post-Resurrection miracle is stated to have happened at the Sea of Tiberius, although no precise location is mentioned. All these details do not give the impression that John is creating narratives for symbolic purposes. They give the impression on the contrary of historic happenings to which John has come to attach a special significance.²²

As signs intended to lead to specific faith in Jesus, their basis must be historical since Jesus as Messiah is a historical concept. Messiahship involves a relationship with historical persons and any signs of attestation must take place in the actual world of men. Jesus as Son of God needs signs which testify to his power among men. The signs as mere symbols of spiritual truths would not convince men of the essential character of Jesus. Whatever assessment of John's historicity is made by scholars of varying schools of thought it seems difficult to deny that John's intention was to write what actually happened. Indeed as if to safeguard this he insists that Jesus performed many signs in the presence of the disciples (xx. 30). Nevertheless, as a counterbalance to this, it has been suggested that John heightens the miraculous in order to prove the superhuman power of Jesus. Hence the lame man is an invalid of thirty-eight years, the blind man is blind from birth, Lazarus is already four days dead.²³ But the

¹⁹ On the most rigid interpretation of historical research, Christianity cannot be considered a proper subject (cf. T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic*, 1960, 164). Since John's purpose is specifically theological, his work cannot possibly in this strict sense be proved either authentic or unauthentic by historical criticism.

²⁰ Many modern writers dispute the possibility of bare event—cf. E. C. Rust, *Towards a Theological Understanding of History*, 1963, 5, R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 1963, 131-3.

²¹ John's topography shows an accurate acquaintance with Palestine, cf. R. D. Potter's article in *Studia Evangelica*, 329-37.

²² C. H. Dodd in his book *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, 1963, concedes a considerable amount of historical credence to John's Gospel.

²³ Cf. E. F. Scott, *op. cit.*, 165.

extraordinary character of the signs does not indicate that they were intended to be regarded symbolically rather than historically.

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In conclusion, it must be enquired to what extent the signs which are relevant to the original readers are equally relevant for the modern world. Are signs still useful in the pursuit of faith? Is man more disposed to believe in the Messianic office and divine character of Jesus when he has once disposed of the miracles? If so his view of Jesus will be different from John's. But John begins with so exalted a concept of Jesus that it would have been incredible if he had not broken through the natural order, especially in view of the central miracle of the Resurrection. But is our present age less credulous, less influenced by an apologetic based on the miraculous? Most moderns would claim that it is so. Yet the majestic record which John has produced is still capable of leading men into faith in a supernatural Messiah.²⁴ The signs in his book are full of meaning for those disposed to seek for it, but for those whose minds are dark the signs will appear no more than stumbling blocks.

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²⁴ E. F. Scott, *ibid.*, 164, maintains that all John's miracles are designed to be demonstrations of power to prove the divine character of Jesus. But in doing this he denies the element of compassion. Yet it is a part of the total manifestations of Jesus to reveal some compassionate quality in the exercise of healing power.