

**2015: Examine the role and purpose in John's Gospel of the sign, Water into Wine (2:1-11).**

Kostenberger identifies three main characteristics of the sign in John's Gospel: they are performed in public, they are explicitly labelled as 'signs', and they "point to God's glory, displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's true representative." Wright described the Synoptic 'mighty acts' (*dunamei*) as "acted parables" that reveal *what* Jesus was doing in his ministry as a whole. Their "role" in John is rather as 'signs' (*semeia*) to reveal *who* Jesus was. This role is clearly exemplified in the Cana story.

The sign portrays a high Christology, showing how the human Jesus embodied the presence of Israel's God as 'the Word became flesh' (1:14). His authority is demonstrated at Cana by the obedience of the servants, and his power over nature in producing wine. Wine symbolises blessing and abundance, so when the new wine (of Jesus) is declared superior (to the old wine of Israel) a Replacement Theology might be symbolised. This is confirmed by the 6 purification jars of water, one short of the completeness symbolised by the number 7, as though Old Israel was insufficient and imperfect. By replacing water with wine, Jesus replaces old Mosaic covenant with the new. Readers should thus grasp the superiority of the Son of God and his gift to the mediator of the old covenant and its gifts." (Beasley-Murray)

In his 1941 commentary on John, Bultmann noted that instead of calling Mary his mother, Jesus calls her "woman" (2:4). He took this to mean that Jesus is rejecting the importance of being Jewish, by refusing to acknowledge his ancestral subordination to her. However, 'de-Judaizing' Jesus in 1941 Germany now appears a dubious proposal. Since 'salvation is from the Jews' (4:22) we may note that Jesus did not replace Israel' (as though it was obsolete) so much as the fulfil Israel's hope (initiating covenant blessings symbolised in this instance, by wine). The role of this sign is to reveal who Jesus is, the authoritative, Son of God, fulfilling covenant hope.

The "purpose" of this sign is to encourage followers to believe that Jesus is the Messiah (20:31). One way for John to achieve this was to address the concerns of his own day such as the delayed parousia. Since when John was written (c90-100CE) Jesus had not returned as many expected. John thus portrays a 'realised eschatology', showing the future blessing of Jesus 'made real' in the present. Jesus thus declares that his hour 'has not yet come' (2:4) but those present receive his blessing anyway, just as in John's day the hour of Jesus' parousia had not happened, but followers could experience eternal life in the present. The fact that the sign happened on the third day, again, suggests a reference to the resurrection (which happened on the third day after Jesus' death). The purpose of the sign is then to bring a foretaste of the great final resurrection through the actions of Jesus.

The role of sign at Cana is thus to portray Jesus as the embodiment of Israel's God. Its purpose is to encourage his late First Century followers to believe that Jesus, as 'Word become flesh,' would bless their community in the present, even if the Parousia had 'not yet come.'

**2015: 'Understanding the signs does not require an understanding of Christian Theology.' Assess this claim.**

If 'Christian Theology' refers to the development of a body of doctrinal systems recognised and articulated by the Church Fathers and developed throughout subsequent history, then we may confidently agree with the claim that signs can be understood perfectly well without it. John did not write his Gospel for later theologians, but so that contemporary followers might 'believe' (20:31) rather than understand.

In any case, understanding comes not from the study of Christian Theology, but from the Holy Spirit who, the Johannine Jesus says, "will lead you into all truth." (16:13).

John wrote in a context where Christian Theology had not been developed, so wrote in terms comprehensible to Jewish theologies. From a Jewish perspective, for instance, the "I am" sayings (to which the signs are linked) refer to Israel's God incarnate in Jesus. This is Jewish Theology because it is a claim about the nature and action of the Jewish God, and one that could be perfectly well understood.

It might also be argued that Christian Theology has hindered understanding, by excessively allegorizing signs in John. That is, by over-interpreting the significance of every minor detail. For instance, Sanders and Mastin criticise Russell for seeing in the 6 stone water jars symbolism of Adam and Eve.

On the other hand, N.T. Wright argues that anyone reading the Christian Bible is thereby 'doing Christian Theology.' Theology, he claims, is the task of loving God with the mind (see Lk 10:27). It is the intellectual dimension of the Christian quest for holiness. In this light, every Christian is a theologian because every Christian engages in talk (logos) about God (theos).

From this perspective, it is necessary to understand Christian Theology. The point of the signs must be sufficiently understood, in order that one might see the God to whom they point. It is for this reason that the earliest converts to Christianity in the late first century (when John was written) were expected to learn Christian theology in the form of the Didache. This was a theological document that formed a 'catechism,' Christian training that converts were expected to undergo prior to baptism. John may well have assumed that believers would learn Christian theology this way.

Thus we may conclude that if Christian Theology is the formal academic enterprise of experts, it is not necessary to understand the signs (though it may yield a fuller understanding). If, however, Christian Theology is the responsibility of all disciples, then to understand the signs is to follow them and vice versa. In this light Christian Theology is vitally necessary.

**2014: Examine the role of healing miracles as signs in John's Gospel.  
(40 Marks)**

Kostenberger identifies three main roles of the sign in John's Gospel: they are performed in public, they are explicitly labelled as 'signs', and they "point to God's glory, displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's true representative." Wright described the Synoptic healing accounts as "acted parables" that reveal *what* Jesus was doing. Their role in John is rather to reveal *who* Jesus was. This is made clear in both the healing of the Official's Son (4:46-54) and of the Crippled man (5:1-18).

In both cases they are described as signs, and in general terms reveal that God's power is revealed in compassion and mighty acts. When Jesus heals the official's son, "the word made flesh" literally restores human flesh from a distance. This shows God is incarnate in the person of Jesus, a fact confirmed in the healing of the crippled man which concludes with the recognition that Jesus was "making himself equal to God." (5:18)

Both healings go further, noting that God's power for salvation goes beyond the healing itself. In the case of the official's son, salvation extends beyond Israel (Bultmann thought this was the same incident as the healing of the Roman Centurion in Luke). Beasley Murray has similarly claimed that by telling the crippled man to "get up", he is deliberately using the language of resurrection. Thus the role of the sign is to point beyond the immediate to the breadth (ethnically) and depth (physically) of God's power for salvation.

Though "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22) both healing accounts suggest a Replacement Theology (RT). The healing of the official took place in Galilee, showing God's power at work far from the Jerusalem power-centre of traditional Judaism. However, RT themes are more prevalent in Judean incidents, as in the case of the Crippled man. He had been ill for the same length of time Israel's wilderness wanderings. Bultmann rejects this symbolism: "Neither the source nor the Evangelist has in mind an allegorical interpretation of the 38 years." However, since Bultmann's overall aim is to de-Judaize the Gospels (a highly dubious intention in 1941 Germany when he wrote his commentary), he may have been prematurely dismissive.

There is also a hint of inaugurated eschatology in both healings. For the official, the reference to the 'hour' symbolises divine time, and the threefold declaration 'your son lives' may be a hint that the final resurrection is brought forward into the present 'hour' (4:52 and 53). Similarly, the crippled man was healed on the Sabbath, an eschatological image in which Jews celebrate "God's future made present" (Barth).

Finally, the official showed faith, but the crippled man lacked it. Wright notes that faith is not the ability to believe in miracles but 'faithfulness' to the covenant God at work in the person of Jesus. Jesus thus warns the crippled man (as he would warn Israel) that there would be dire consequences for

unfaithfulness to the covenant (sin). Faith is thus the willingness to follow *signs* (like healing) that reveal who Jesus really is.

**2014: 'John was not concerned about giving an accurate record of events when describing healings in his Gospel.' Assess this claim. (20 Marks)**

The claim is based upon the general view that John is less 'historical' than his synoptic counterparts, a view traceable back to Clement of Alexandria in the second century. John's Gospel can be seen as more spiritual (Clement) or theological (Bultmann) than factual.

Hence the healings are described as 'signs,' included in the text because of the truths they signify, the controversies they create and the discourses they initiate. For example, the healing of the man born blind (Jn 9) leads to controversy and dialogue. This narrative is thought to be based upon the historical situation of the church (which was facing pressure from synagogues at the end of the first century), rather than the historical situation of the man born blind. The point of the healing, it is often argued, is to provide symbolic confirmation (of the accompanying 'light of the world' discourse), that Jesus enables the world to see. It is theological rather than historical.

However, for all its merits the claim simply has too many weak points. Firstly, since the time of Robinson, the historical accuracy of John's Gospel has been valued more highly by NT scholars. No longer do most regard John as a second century text, but as late first century at the latest (largely due to the discovery of fragments of Johannine papyrus dating back to c120, thought to be copied from much earlier manuscripts). This puts John's Gospel within the time of eyewitnesses, who could challenge inaccuracies. Further, if the beloved disciple had a hand in the composition of the Gospel, he had no need to invent healing events – but rather he selected from a vast store of them (21:25).

If John's symbols are to have any value, they must have a historical validity of their own otherwise they are not trustworthy as signs. Inventing fake signs to communicate divine truth is self-defeating.

John's historical reliability has often been underestimated. An example of this is Dodd who thought that the pool with five porticoes (5:2) merely symbolised the five books of Moses (and the inadequacy of Judaism, as the man had yet to be healed). However, as Rowan Williams points out, in the late twentieth century archaeologists discovered a large pool with 5 chambers near Jerusalem's sheep gate. John's healing account is thus more historically accurate than was once assumed.

This demonstrates my belief that the claim of Johannine inaccuracy has now been widely discredited and the historical credibility of the healing is indeed 'based on an accurate record'.

**2013: Examine the nature of signs in John's Gospel with particular reference to the Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6:1-15).**

The Synoptic gospels describe Jesus' miracles as 'dunamei' (mighty acts) that authenticate Jesus' claims, whereas John describes them as 'semeia' (signs) that draw attention away from Jesus towards God himself.

Kostenberger identifies three main roles of the sign in John's Gospel: they are performed in public, they are explicitly labelled as 'signs', and they "point to God's glory, displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's true representative." Wright described the Synoptic healing accounts as "acted parables" that reveal *what* Jesus was doing. Their role in John is rather to reveal *who* Jesus was. This is made clear in the feeding of the 5000.

John's Gospel contains a 'high Christology', emphasising that Jesus understood himself to be the human incarnation of God, the prophet who has "come into the world" (6:11) as though from beyond it. Bultmann claims that, in contrast to the synoptic parallels, "in the Johannine account great stress is laid on the fact that Jesus seizes the initiative." That is, they point to Jesus' own action as God's own initiative'

The signs also point to Jesus as the true means of salvation. According to Beasley-Murray, the feeding account echoes the Passover (6:4) which celebrates the Exodus as greatest act of Salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures. The sign thus "fulfils the hope of a second Exodus." As Moses fed the Israelites with manna in the desert, so Jesus feeds his followers with miraculous food. Jesus thus gives thanks (in Greek, 'eucharisto,' 6:11) linking this with the Eucharistic feast (reported as the Lord's Supper in the Synoptics). The nature of the sign thus draws the reader beyond the present time, to the past (the Exodus) and to the future (the Messianic Banquet at the end of time.)

Since Johannine signs draw attention to Jesus as God's means of salvation, they imply a 'Replacement Theology' (RT), in which Judaism as the current means of salvation has been superseded. Hence, Jesus makes an implicit claim to be a 'new Moses,' suggesting the redundancy of the covenant Moses had delivered. For Bultmann the twelve leftover baskets symbolise the 12 tribes of Israel, left redundant by the salvific acts of Jesus. However, since Bultmann's overall aim is to de-historicize and therefore "de-Judaize" the Gospels (a highly dubious intention in 1941 Germany when he wrote his commentary), he may have been prematurely dismissive. It is important to note that for John "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22) and that Jesus does not so much replace as fulfil the hopes of (and promises to) the covenant people.

Finally, these acts (Greek, 'erga') of Jesus require a response of faith. 'Erga' is the word Jesus used to describe his own action and faith is the desired response. For Perry, faith is not merely the capacity to believe in the miraculous however, but refers to the faithfulness to the covenant as fulfilled in God's representative, Jesus. The feeding of the 5000 reads like a test of

faith as Jesus begins by asking the disciples where they will obtain bread for so many, with the Passover approaching.

In sum, the signs of John's Gospel both inspire and demand faith in Jesus as God's representative, and serve the purpose of the Gospel as a whole, which was written that followers might 'continue to believe/have faith (20:31).

**2013: 'There was no good reason for John to use signs in his Gospel.'**  
**Assess this claim.**

Since the purpose of the signs was to encourage Christians to 'go on believing' (20:31) were there better ways that this could have been achieved?

Firstly, if the signs were merely symbolic pointers that indicate Jesus as God's representative, John might simply have been more clear in communicating this in the discourses. Plato, for instance, managed to communicate highly complex Socratic philosophy through the medium of discourse, without claiming Socrates had performed miracles. Since the Synoptic Jesus seems to have rejected the use of miracles as validating his truth claims (e.g. Lk 4:1-11), adding them to a Gospel that has a more theological focus seems unnecessary. Hence he could have avoided them and stuck to discourses.

Most scholars believe John's was the last Gospel written, and that he simply was offering theological commentary on accounts that already existed (Dodd) which begs the question of why he would need miracle stories. Surely, if his gospel was to be circulated throughout a sceptical, Hellenistic culture, he should have avoided mentioning miracles unless they are absolutely necessary to his account.

However, it is this last point which fundamentally invalidates the claim. The signs are woven through the very fabric of John's Gospel. Bultmann and others believe John is based upon a Book of Signs. This shows how the signs that John recorded are inextricably bound up with the discourses that follow: the feeding of the 5000 and the claim 'I am the bread of life'; the healing of a man born blind with the claim 'I am the light of the world; the raising of Lazarus and the claim 'I am the resurrection'. As a prophet 'mighty in word and deed', words alone are insufficient to describe who Jesus is.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the miracles or 'mighty acts' of Jesus help to explain what he was doing and how the kingdom of God arrives. In John, the miracles or 'signs' are designed to point to Jesus as God's representative. According to John, Jesus did not perform only 7 signs, but 'many other signs' (20:30) and 'many other things' (21:25). They are clearly such a fundamental aspect of who Jesus was, that to exclude them would paint an unrealistic portrait. Thus, the claim that there was no good reason to use them is without foundation.

**Jun 2012: Examine the purpose of signs in John's Gospel with particular reference to the Crippled Man (John 5:1-18).**

The purpose of signs is stated explicitly by John, who says they are written that his readers "might believe that Jesus is the Messiah" (20:31). Kostenberger identifies three main roles of the sign in John's Gospel: they are performed in public, they are explicitly labelled as 'signs', and they "point to God's glory, displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's true representative." Wright described the Synoptic healing accounts as "acted parables" that reveal *what* Jesus was doing. Their role in John is rather to reveal *who* Jesus was. This is made clear in the healing of the crippled man.

If the signs reveal who Jesus was, they present a 'high Christology', that is, they show Jesus was the human incarnation of God. Hence, after healing the crippled man Jesus refers to God as his own father (5:17) and faces conflict as a result (5:18).

As the incarnation of Israel's God, Jesus becomes God's agent of salvation. Hence, the signs show Jesus' power to save. For the crippled man, Jesus is shown to offer spiritual salvation from sin (v14), physical salvation (from the man's disabled state) and future salvation (Jesus' command 'get up' is the same word used for resurrection.) Beasley-Murray says, 'as the Father raises the dead, so too does the son.' This shows how salvation entails a 'realised eschatology', since the healing constitutes a 'foretaste' of the final resurrection of the dead. The signs thus point to the fullest dimensions of present and future salvation (Eternal Life) brought by Jesus as God's representative.

The signs also imply that Jesus was replacing the religious structures of Judaism. Though "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22) the account of the crippled man suggests a Replacement Theology (RT). He had been ill for the same length of time Israel's wilderness wanderings. Bultmann however, rejects this symbolism: "Neither the source nor the Evangelist has in mind an allegorical interpretation of the 38 years." Bultmann's overall aim is to de-historicize and therefore, "de-Judaize" the Gospels, (a highly dubious intention in 1941 Germany when he wrote his commentary), so he may have been prematurely dismissive. Dodd similarly equated the 5 porticoes of the pool with the 5 books of Moses, implying that the old covenant (like the pool) cannot bring healing / salvation. However, as Rowan Williams points out, in the late twentieth century archaeologists discovered a large pool with 5 chambers near Jerusalem's sheep gate. He concludes that Johannine signs may be prone to over-interpretation.

Finally, signs point to faith (or faithfulness) in the person of Jesus as the fulfilment of God's covenant. The crippled man does not show faith because his reaction is to complain. He represents Israel without faith (5:14). So, Jesus goes on to teach that healing carries obligation of faithfulness.

Thus, the purpose of the signs in John is to reveal who Jesus is, how salvation comes (present and future), and how following Jesus constitutes faithfulness to God (20:31).

**2012: 'People at the time would have understood the signs as John did.'  
Assess this claim.**

If 'at the time' refers to John's own readership, it can confidently be claimed that people would clearly understand John's signs. (No author plants signs that cannot be understood). His Gospel would neither have been written or survived had it been incomprehensible to his readers.

If, however, 'at the time' refers to Jesus' own time (possibly sixty years before the completion of the fourth Gospel) then it is highly likely that Jesus' Palestinian contemporaries could not have understood John's signs – since they were written for later Hellenistic readers.

In addition, the symbolism and the highly developed Christology would not have been grasped by those who, as yet, had failed to understand who Jesus really was. For instance, the repeated use of the "I am" sayings, according to Bauckham, are an allusion to the name 'Yahweh'. This might simply have sounded blasphemous prior to his resurrection. The resurrection, as God's vindication of Jesus as Messiah authenticates claims that – in the Synoptics – Jesus refuses to make. (He never even claims to be Messiah, describing himself as the Son of Man.)

This may be challenged by pointing out that people at the time understood the signs perfectly well. An example, are the opponents of Jesus who – after hearing of the healing of the crippled man – understood that Jesus used the sign to make himself equal to God (5:11). This shows that they did understand the high Christology (emphasising his divine nature) of his claim.

To 'understand' a sign fully, is to follow where it points (Beasley-Murray). In the case of Jesus, to encounter God's salvation for oneself. Many of 'the Jews' did not do this, and continued to oppose Jesus (e.g., Jn 9). On the other hand, John believed that the Holy Spirit enables people to follow the sign, since 'the Spirit will guide you into all truth' (16:13). Hence, we may claim that with the aid of the Spirit some understood the sign, but without the Spirit they did not.

In sum, whilst Jesus' contemporaries might have 'understood' the signs, prior to the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, they might not have fully appreciated what the signs indicate: that Jesus is the Messiah (20:31).



## **Jun 2012: Examine the purpose of signs in John's Gospel with particular reference to the Official's Son.**

The purpose of signs is stated explicitly by John, who says they are written that his readers "might believe that Jesus is the Messiah" (20:31). Kostenberger identifies three main roles of the sign in John's Gospel are each identifiable in the healing of the official's son: they are performed in public, they are explicitly labelled as 'signs', and they "point to God's glory, displayed in Jesus, thus revealing Jesus as God's true representative." Wright described the Synoptic healing accounts as "acted parables" that reveal *what* Jesus was doing. Their role in John is rather to reveal *who* Jesus was. This is made clear in the healing of the official's son.

Firstly this sign points to the extent of Jesus' power to heal as it stretches not only from Cana to Capernaum (where the boy was), but beyond the bounds of Israel. Bultmann believes that this story was based on the same account as the centurion's son of the Synoptics. This would make the officer a foreigner, showing how God's power for salvation embraces Gentiles as well as Jews. However, this may be exaggerated since why would John not have made this as explicit as Luke made it?

Secondly, though "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22) the account may suggest a Replacement Theology (RT). This must be carefully stated. The boy in the account is healed at the 7<sup>th</sup> hour, a number representing completion. In this light, the action of Jesus may be seen as 'fulfilling' rather than 'replacing' Jewish belief. However, as with many of the signs, reference to the hour hints towards 'inaugurated eschatology.' That is, in light of a delayed parousia John shows how the blessings of Jesus are 'made present' through the actions of Jesus, even when Jesus himself is not present. This is symbolised firstly by the fact that the boy experienced microcosmic salvation (in Capernaum) because of the action of Jesus (over 20 miles away in Cana). It is symbolised secondly by the threefold declaration 'your son lives' (4:52 and 53). Most commentators see this as a reference to the resurrection. Here, a return from 'the point death' (4:48) symbolises the future resurrection brought into the present experience.

Finally, the link between signs and faith is affirmed three times in this short account. Initially Jesus rebukes the people for demanding a sign prior to faith (4:48), but the man believes simply at Jesus' word (4:50). The household who saw the boy's recovery (but not Jesus' command) also believed (4:53). Bultmann thus pointed out that the man's faith was not in miracles in general, but in a particular situation in which he encounters the power of Christ. The faith engendered in signs, is not the mental acceptance that God can do the impossible, but entails faithfulness to the God of Israel at work in the person of Jesus. Hence, the wider purpose of the signs at the time when John wrote, was to encourage ongoing belief (20:31) not as an end in itself, but so that the reader "might have life in his name" just as the official's son. That life (described as 'eternal life') describes the infinite scope of God's power and glory made real in the life of faithful believers in the present.