

Signs and Faith in the Fourth Gospel

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The Problem of Signs and Faith in John

The comment that the Gospel of John is a pool in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim aptly characterizes the issue of the signs in the Fourth Gospel. In recent years there appears to be no lessening of interest in various aspects of the question of signs in the Gospel of John. Monographs on the topic appear regularly.¹ Among the questions which continue to be investigated are the possibility and shape of a signs source lying behind the Gospel, the historical and religious provenance of the signs tradition, and John's theological appropriation of it. Of particular and enduring interest is the question of the role of the signs in bringing about faith.

That this question persists is surely due to the intrinsic interest of the question itself, as well as to the ambiguity of the data in the Gospel. How does one square apparently straightforward statements such as 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name," which suggests that signs are to lead people to faith, with statements where Jesus seems to distance himself from people who believed "when they saw signs" (2:23-25; 4:48; 6:2) or perhaps even rebukes the request for visible evidence on which to believe (4:48; 20:29)? In recent years, investigation into the

1. In the last five years, for example, the following studies have appeared: H.-P. Heekerens, *Die Zeichenquelle der johanneischen Redaktion: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des vierten Evangeliums*, SBS 113. Stuttgart, 1984; Wolfgang J. Bittner, *Jesu Zeichen im Johannesevangelium*, WUNT 2/26 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987); Robert Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Earliest Version of John's Gospel: Recovering the Gospel of Signs* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989). See also the survey by Robert Kysar, "The Fourth Gospel. A Report on Recent Research," *ANRW* II 25.3 [2398-2402, 2453-56].

question of signs and faith in John has also been fueled by the trend to seek literary layers within the text as well as historical stages behind it, with the hope that alleged tensions between various statements in the Gospel may be solved by appeal to sources, layers of traditions, redactors, or some combination of these.²

The present essay also deals with the question of signs and faith in John. In doing so, it acknowledges an indebtedness to Rudolf Bultmann. He was not the first to pose the question of signs and faith in John, but in doing so he pressed beyond surface questions to deeper theological issues about the nature of revelation and faith which he saw as essential to understanding John and, indeed, the entire New Testament. Bultmann clearly saw that the character of faith was as important to the discussion of signs and faith in John as was the question of the role of the signs themselves, or the resolution of critical problems, such as the use of sources. Unfortunately, few scholars have followed his lead in this regard. Although there are numerous studies of signs in John, and although many have also addressed the question of their role in producing faith, far fewer have spent as much creative energy in probing the character of faith in John as they have these other topics (or, we might add, as did Bultmann). This situation led Robert Kysar to comment, "The nature of faith itself in the fourth gospel is widely discussed, but the creative contributions are fewer [than contributions to the question of the relationship of signs and faith] . . . Little that has been written lately on the subject merits our attention here."³

But although Bultmann raised important questions, there is little agreement that he provided satisfactory solutions to them. At least one scholar who thought that he did not was his own pupil, Ernst Käsemann. Indeed, these two scholars represent nearly opposite ends of the spectrum with respect to the question of signs and faith in John. In order to show what is at stake in this issue, I would like to begin by

2. In addition to the works by Heekerens, Fortna and von Wahlde and the review of scholarship by Kysar in note 1, above, see also Jürgen Becker, "Wunder und Christologie: Zum literarkritischen und christologischen Problem der Wunder im Johannes-evangelium," *NTS* 16 (1969-70) 139-48, and "Exkurs 1. Die Semeiaquelle," in *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn; Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1979) 1:112-20; Ernst Haenchen, *John* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); W. Nicol, *The Semeia in the Fourth Gospel: Tradition and Redaction* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); Luise Schottroff, *Der Glaubende und die feindliche Welt: Beobachtungen zum gnostischen Dualismus und seiner Bedeutung für Paulus und das Johannesevangelium* (WMANT 37; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969); W. Wilkens, *Zeichen und Werke: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des 4. Evangeliums in Erzählungs- und Redestoff* (ATANT 55; Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1969).

3. Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 229. The situation has not changed greatly since that time, as a glance at Kysar's "The Fourth Gospel: Recent Research" will show (see note 1).

briefly recounting the positions of Bultmann and Käsemann on this question. This sketch will also serve to show what issues remain to be investigated in formulating a proposal about the relationship of signs and faith in John.

Bultmann argued that the Gospel of John used a source which viewed miracles as manifestations of power and thus as legitimating credentials for the Revealer, understood as a *theios anthropos*.⁴ Although the Evangelist adopted the signs-source, he discarded the view that miracles are intrusions of the divine into the human world which produce physiological changes or supply material gifts apart from the person of the Revealer. Instead, the miracles are symbols of the giving of the Revealer himself, indicators that "the activity of the Revealer is a disturbance of what is familiar to the world."⁵ But that Jesus' activity is in fact the work of the Revealer of God cannot simply be read off from external acts. It is known only in the moment of faith, in the decision by which one overcomes the offense that in the human being, Jesus of Nazareth, one does indeed encounter the Revealer. For revelation in Jesus is essentially *hidden*, and faith is "the willingness to live by the strength of the invisible and uncontrollable."⁶ Bultmann's famous *Dass* applies to Johannine theology: it is the mere fact that in Jesus one encounters the Revealer of God that calls for faith. One can ask for no other content, evidence, or legitimation in order to believe, for such demands vitiate the very heart of authentic faith, which is the surrender of everything that seems to provide security. The request for signs is, in fact, just a quest for security, whereas authentic faith must discard any such quest.⁷

Käsemann countered Bultmann's assertions by insisting that no first century author could have envisioned the manifestation of God, or of a god, apart from the miraculous or marvelous.⁸ Extraordinary happenings inevitably accompany the appearance of deity, and are the evidence of divine identity and presence. The signs of the Fourth Gospel serve primarily to reveal the glory (or divinity) of Jesus. Not surprisingly, John deliberately selects those miracles which *heighten*

4. For Bultmann's view of the signs, see his *The Gospel of John* (ET Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 113f., 119f., 206f., 208f.; and the discussion in *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 2:44-45, 56-57, 60; for his discussion of faith, see *Theology*, 2:70-92.

5. *Theology*, 2:44.

6. *Theology*, 2:75.

7. Signs can, according to Bultmann (*Theology*, 2:45) serve to jolt people to pay heed to the Revealer and thus perhaps lead to faith. But they are only concessions to human frailty and cannot serve as the basis for true faith.

8. Käsemann's work, *The Testament of Jesus* (ET Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), especially its first chapter, challenges Bultmann's delineation of Johannine theology. For his discussion of miracles, see particularly 21-23, 52-53.

the manifestation of Jesus' glory.⁹ Signs do not merely symbolize the revelation of glory; they are a necessary and indispensable part of it. Bultmann's *Dass* is not enough; in John there is also a content to the revelation, a *Was*. And what the signs make known, specifically, is the unity of the Son and the Father. Indeed, the Gospel takes this to extremes. Jesus is more than a *theios aner*; he is in fact "God going about on earth."¹⁰ Accordingly, faith cannot be limited to decision, but it must include assent to dogma. And, writes Käsemann, "John's peculiarity is that he knows only one single dogma, the christological dogma of the unity of Jesus with the Father."¹¹

Here we have two opposing evaluations of signs and their function in the Gospel of John. On the one hand, signs serve merely to symbolize the gifts of life offered through the Revealer himself. But they do not make the identity of the Revealer more apparent or more easily grasped. Nor do they remove the offense of the hiddenness of the Incarnation so as to aid the leap of faith. On the other hand, in Käsemann's estimation, signs function to make Jesus' identity transparent, providing the evidence of his unity with the Father.¹² Faith is assent, believing the dogma of the unity of Father and Son.

In this debate Bultmann's viewpoint has received greater criticism, for it anachronistically interjects into the exegesis of a first-century document later rationalist discussions about the possibility of miracles.¹³ Furthermore, Bultmann not only depends heavily on a particular existentialist understanding of revelation, but argues that John holds these assumptions as well. To this point Käsemann counters that one must interpret historical documents in their proper historical categories, arguing that the first-century framework sug-

9. Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (ET Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 293, argues that the intensification of the miraculous characterizes the entire early Christian miracle tradition.

10. Thus the Christology which Bultmann assigned to John's signs source properly belongs to the Gospel itself. Käsemann's characterization of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel corresponds exactly to Bultmann's depiction of Markan Christology. In *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 241, Bultmann writes, "In Mark [Jesus] is a *theios anthropos*, indeed, more; he is the very Son of God walking the earth." For discussions of the *theios aner* concept, its relationship to miracles, and its influence on New Testament studies, see D. L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* (SBLDS 1; Missoula: SBL, 1972) esp. 241-92; Carl H. Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism* (SBLDS 40; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) 1-45; Gerd Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 266-68, 272-73.

11. *Testament*, 25.

12. On the transparency of miracle, see also Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 301.

13. For comment on first-century "skepticism" about miracles, see E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1965) 124-26. The question was not so much whether miracles actually took place, but by what means they were performed. Bultmann, to the contrary, suggests that John may well have doubted the factuality of the miracles he reports; see, e.g., *John*, 119 n. 2.

gests that the revelatory significance of the signs lies in their demonstration of divine power or glory.

But here is where one may justly criticize Käsemann's interpretation. For to the extent that Käsemann lodged the revelatory significance of the signs in the demonstration of Jesus' divine power or glory, his exposition of the Johannine view of signs is inadequate. Jesus' signs manifest not his own glory, but that of the Father working in him, and only in this way do they manifest the unity of Father and Son. And yet even that assertion does not exhaust the significance of the signs in John. One must probe further to ask, *How* do the signs reveal the unity of Jesus with the Father? For in the answer to this question one also finds the answer to the question, How do signs function so as to lead to faith? According to John, how were the signs to lead people to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name" (20:31)?

This essay would like to investigate more closely the question how the signs function so as to lead to faith. For ease of discussion, this overarching question can be divided quite simply into three parts: (1) What is a sign in John? (2) What is faith in John? (3) How do the signs function so as to lead to faith?¹⁴ We will take each of these questions in turn. To the first two questions, I will offer a brief answer in the form of a thesis statement and a short discussion of that thesis. To the third question—How do the signs lead to faith?—I will again propose an answer in the form of a thesis statement and then, in order to defend that thesis at greater length, turn to an exegetical discussion of selected narratives. Finally, I will offer some summary and reflective comments on the character of faith in the Gospel of John.

What is a sign in John?

We may begin with a brief answer to the first question: what is a sign in John?¹⁵ I propose this understanding of a sign in John: *A sign is a*

14. Here it could be objected that this paper is assuming the very thing that it needs to prove, namely, that signs do lead to faith. In the opinion of many scholars, the view that signs lead to faith comes from a source or tradition that John used, and does not represent John's own theology (see note 2, above). It is argued that John is more ambivalent towards, and perhaps even critical of, both the role of miracles and the value of faith that rests upon them. Elsewhere I have argued that there are few, if any, traces of this alleged critique of faith based upon signs in the Fourth Gospel; see *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Fortress Press, 1988), chapter 3. If signs do not lead to faith, then the problem of later generations who do not see is not a problem; but John addresses this issue directly (20:26-31). For a similar assessment of signs and faith, see Bittner, *Jesu Zeichen im Johannesevangelium*.

15. The issue I am addressing here is not the question of which of the things that happen in John are properly called signs. I believe that John includes the healings, the

manifestation, through the person of Jesus, of God's work in the world. We may unpack this thesis thought by thought. First, the word "manifestation" here is intended to imply something that is visible or even tangible.¹⁶ There is, in the words of Rudolf Schnackenburg, a solidly material aspect of the signs.¹⁷ Their significance is not to be located solely in a "spiritual" or "other-worldly" meaning, as is sometimes proposed, for they are real deeds which happen among real people.¹⁸ What it means to say that the signs are the *work of God* is that they manifest the very character, or some aspect of the character, of *God* (5:19-21, 36; 6:32; 9:3, 33; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 14:8-11; 15:24). Signs are *theological* as much as they are *christological*.¹⁹ They are not legitimations of Jesus' divinity, but rather manifestations of the character of the God who stands behind them. Who God is is made known in these signs. Moreover, signs are manifestations of God's work *in the world*.

feeding of the 5000, and the changing of the water to wine under this rubric; but acts such as the temple cleansing, the discourses of Jesus, the resurrection, and the appearances—including the catch of fish—are less obviously "signs" for several reasons: (1) The term "sign" is explicitly used in John only in connection with what we call the miracles (e.g., 2:11) and in no case unambiguously refers to other deeds. (2) Discussions about or requests for "signs" (2:18; 6:30) come up—ironically—when Jesus has just provided the kind of sign that has been requested. (3) Summary statements which refer to signs are probably best taken as referring to the "miracles" which Jesus did. 12:37-38, for example, could not include the resurrection or appearances. The statement about signs at 20:30-31 should be read in light of the earlier summaries, and not vice versa. (4) Finally, the broader term in the Gospel is "work" or "works." Under this term, one may include other deeds of Jesus. At any rate, the definition of "sign" which I propose would not be substantially different if one were to take it more inclusively than I have done.

16. Although in John "sight" becomes metaphorical for "insight" or faith (9:39-41), the metaphor does not eclipse the more literal meaning of "sight" as physically seeing. Precisely this is the point: when one sees (witnesses) a sign, one must see (understand) its meaning. But the meaning of the sign depends on both the factuality and nature of the sign itself. To the dual meaning of "seeing" in John corresponds the dual meaning of "glory." Glory is both visible manifestation and so also revelation of character or being; see G. B. Caird, "The Glory of God in the Fourth Gospel: An Exercise in Biblical Semantics," *NTS* 15 (1969): 265-77.

17. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980) 1:525; Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 298, 300.

18. In sharp contrast, see Schottroff, *Der Glaubende and die feindliche Welt*, esp. 26, 248-61. Schottroff argues that there are two parallel realities in the Johannine world, the spiritual and the material. The material element, the actual deed of Jesus, is irrelevant to meaning of the sign and so for faith as well.

19. On this point, see C. K. Barrett, "Christocentric or Theocentric? Observations on the Theological Method of the Fourth Gospel," in *Essays in John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 1-18. Barrett, in criticism of both Bultmann and Käsemann, writes, "We must now, without abandoning either anthropology or Christology, go on to speak of theology in the strict sense of the term. John is writing about, and directing our attention to, God" (3).

They are the active and visible manifestation of God's gracious char- through the person of Jesus. John seems eager to reserve the term for Jesus and his works and life. There are no stories in John about rival actor at work for the salvation of the world. Finally, signs are done exorcists, and no warnings of false messiahs who will come with signs and wonders. Even the disciples are promised that they will do "greater *works*," not greater *signs* (14:12). A sign is a manifestation, through the person of Jesus, of God's work in the world.

What is faith in the Gospel of John?

What, then, is faith in the Gospel of John? In keeping with the understanding that signs manifest the character of God and show God's gracious activity at work in the world through Jesus, faith can be defined as *faithfulness in trusting the God who is made known in Jesus Christ*. Again we may examine the components of this definition. First, faith is *faithfulness*. There is in the Fourth Gospel an emphasis on the importance of persevering, continuing, being steadfast in faith. That is the burden of John's use of the word *menein*, for example. It is those disciples who "continue" in Jesus' word who will know the truth and be set free (8:31); those who "abide" in the vine who will bear fruit (15:4-7). Jesus' farewell discourses are intended to keep the disciples from falling away (16:1), from becoming like the disciples of chapter 6 who "withdrew and no longer went about with him" (6:66).

Second, faith is faith in *the God who is made known in Jesus Christ*. Even where the person of Jesus seems to be the explicit object of faith (e.g., 8:25, 28, 58; 17:3; 20:30-31), that faith is directed through Jesus to God. Jesus alone speaks the words of life (6:68), but those words communicate life because the living God has given life to the son who in turn confers it on believers (5:21-26; 6:32-33, 57). Ultimately life comes *from* God, but *through* Jesus; and faith which leads to life is faith through Jesus, but in God.

Third, faith is steadfastness in *trusting* the God who is made known in Jesus Christ. John's language for faith is language of personal relationship and experience: one loves (13:34; 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:12), knows (14:7; 17:30), obeys (14:21-24; 15:12-14; 17:6), lives in vital fellowship (14:23, 15:1-7) or in personal communion (17:21, 23), is taught (6:45; 14:25; 16:13), has peace (14:1, 27-28) and joy (14:28; 15:11; 16:20-21; 17:13). John's language borrows from the world of human experience and life: from childbirth (1:12-13; 3:1-6; 16:21), family (1:12-13; 8:34-58; 14:18), friendship (15:15), eating and drinking (6:31-58). The language of faith is the language of life (3:15-16, 6:40, 47-51, *passim*). John insists on the vital and robust character of faith as entrusting oneself to God.

Faith is also steadfast trust because it is committed to the God made known through Jesus, and to no other God. For there is no other source of life (3:15-19), no other revelation of God (1:18; 14:9-11), no other avenue to God (10:8-10; 14:6-7), no other source of knowledge of God (1:18; 3:32). The finality of the revelation of God through Christ also serves to define faith in the Fourth Gospel, for it shows both to whom and through whom faith is to be directed, as well as to emphasize the character of faith as steadfastness. For the implication of the finality of revelation is the steadfastness required of faith: one may turn nowhere else for life.

Such a definition of faith does not entirely agree with the twofold insistence found often in Johannine studies today that faith in John is dogmatic and christocentric in character, that faith is primarily believing certain dogmatic propositions about Jesus. This definition of faith misses the heart of what faith is in John. Statements which are, on the surface, most radically christocentric are seen, on closer examination, not to call for faith in Jesus, but for faith in God mediated through Jesus. Thus Jesus is the bread of life given by God (6:32); Jesus is the way to the Father (14:7); Jesus has been granted authority by God to raise the dead and give life (5:21, 24-29; 11:25-26); and Jesus is the only Son who makes the Father known (1:18). In the end, sayings which point to Jesus' unique role and function are first and foremost statements about knowing God and receiving life and salvation from God, and not "dogmatic" assertions about Jesus. The Gospel's christology really stands in the service of its soteriology and not in the service of formulating *doctrine* about the person of Jesus. If the Incarnate Word makes available the status of "children of God" (1:12-13), one gains this status not by believing that certain things are true about Jesus, but by being reborn by the power of the Spirit of God (1:13; 3:5-8), the Spirit which Jesus bears and brings (3:34).

This understanding of faith is simply a corollary of the previous definition of signs. If Jesus' signs are manifestations of God's work through him, then it follows that if they are to lead to faith at all, they are to lead to faith in the God whose work they are. This does not imply that the agent through whom they are done is simply dispensable. The signs are also truly the signs of Jesus. But here we are already anticipating the third question—How do signs lead to faith in John?—and it is to this question that we now turn.

How do signs lead to faith in John?

Again let me begin by advancing and unpacking a thesis. *Jesus' signs lead to faith when one discerns in them the manifestation of the character of God as life-giving and responds to Jesus as mediating that life.* With Käse-

mann we may assert that true understanding of Jesus' works as the works of God includes the recognition that they are carried out with God's authority and power. But that recognition is in turn based on understanding the character of God's work as work which heals, restores, grants wholeness, gives life. God grants life through these works, and it is the character and work of God—and of God alone—to give life. This is the key. God alone gives and restores life, and if the signs confer life, then Jesus' works are the works of God. Because Jesus' signs impart life and manifest God's life-giving character, one should "believe the works" (10:38; 14:11), that is, believe that they are God's own works of healing and restoration.

The words "impart" and "manifest" are deliberately chosen, rather than the words "symbolize" and "reveal." Jesus' signs do more than symbolize the gift available through him, as though the sign in itself were irrelevant to understanding him or that it were not part of the gift of life itself. Jesus' works do indeed point to the fact that he himself is life, but they do so because they themselves are also gifts of life. What the signs manifest and bring to men and women is, in Johannine terminology, life. Signs do not merely symbolize or point to the availability of eternal life through Jesus; they themselves offer life in the present. They effect what they promise. They are part and parcel of the substance of the gift of life. A helpful analogy is that of the signs which accompanied the Exodus. The plagues and wonders wrought by God through Moses foretold and promised the coming deliverance from Egypt; yet they were also part of God's acts on behalf of the people of Israel. God's signs through Moses both promise and are part of the liberation of the people from captivity.²⁰

Too often Jesus' deeds are regarded merely as pictures or illustrations of spiritual realities. On this view the real significance of the Johannine miracles lies not in the deed which was actually done, but in the spiritual or mystical reality which Jesus is also able to impart. The "bread of life" which Jesus promises is actually spiritual food, eternal life. A blind man is healed, but it is infinitely more important that he receives spiritual sight. Likewise, Lazarus symbolizes the raising of the spiritually dead. But we may justifiably ask, how is it that feeding 5000 guarantees or even suggests that Jesus can give that kind

20. In the LXX *sēmeion* appears as the preferred rendering of the Hebrew word *ôth*. Frequently the term *ôth* is connected with *mōphet*, in the plural translated as *sēmeiai kai terata*, "signs and wonders." This is a formulaic designation for God's acts, especially in conjunction with the Exodus and with the salvation of his people. The plagues of Egypt are "signs" (Exodus 8:23; 10:1-2), effected by God's power through Moses, but so are the rod that became a serpent, and Moses' hand which became as white as snow (Exodus 4). But the word *ôth*, *sēmeia*, need not be limited to the mighty intervention of God. The symbolic prophetic actions were also called signs.

of food which will ease the pangs of spiritual hunger? And what is the connection between raising a man from the grave and the grand promise that those who believe in Jesus will "never die"? Certainly bringing the dead back to life is extraordinary; but is even such a marvelous act a sufficient basis for believing the promise that Jesus can also bestow eternal life? One may grant that these acts are symbols; but are they adequate for their purpose? They are if they are understood, like the Mosaic wonders and the prophetic signs, to effect what they promise.

Second, just as the word "symbolize" can mislead when applied to the Johannine signs, so can the word "reveal," since it is sometimes taken as implying the communication of *new* information or something previously hidden or unknown.²¹ That God is gracious and works to bring health, freedom, and life to Israel was not new to Israel. It was the substance of their confession and understanding of God, the common ground between John and his partners in debate, the datum against which Jesus' works could be tested and understood, and on which John's appeal was based. In fact, the continuity of Jesus' work with that of the God of Israel is one of the assumptions upon which John's argument is based. Jesus' critics did not deny that he worked signs; but they denied that his works were in keeping with, and could only be, the work of God.

But wherein lay the continuity between the work of God as made known to Israel in the past and the work of Jesus? On what basis was this claim to be believed? It was not to be believed solely on the basis of Jesus' own claims, nor to be known only in believing, in the leap of faith itself, nor by virtue of his working of miracles as tokens of divine power. Jesus was to be known by the kind of work he did. Jesus was to be known by the way in which he brought the mercy of God into the world. He was to be recognized because his signs manifested the character of God as the creator and sustainer of life. The response which is called for, then, is faith in this God who creates and sustains life, a faith which is construed as worship, trust, and obedience, and which is mediated through the person of Jesus.

Much has been asserted here that needs further exploration. In order to support this understanding of how signs lead to faith, we need first to test the thesis that the signs themselves confer life. The statement that signs confer life implies both that "life" is the substance of what they offer and that they are not simply pointers to another plane of life, whether that be construed as a "spiritual" life or "everlasting life." In order to test this thesis, we will examine several

21. See, for example, James Montgomery Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 54, who uses revelation in this way.

of the Johannine narratives of Jesus' signs. Second, following the discussion of what is offered through the signs, we can then take up somewhat more briefly the question of the relation between signs and faith.

Two healings

We begin with the paired healings of the official's son (4:46-54) and the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-9). We may note two points. First, each story illustrates the truth of the statement, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (5:25). Jesus gives the boy life when death threatens. His promise, "Go; your son will live" (4:50; 53; cf. 51) becomes a word of life. And although death does not threaten the invalid at the pool, Jesus restores him to fullness of physical life in granting him health and strength.²² Second, the healing of the man at the pool takes place on the Sabbath. Together these two factors—the kind of work Jesus does and the day on which he does it—lay the basis for the discourse that follows (5:17-47). Here Jesus argues the point that he works even as his Father works. With this statement Jesus defends his Sabbath healing, but he also characterizes the kind of work that he does. For he performs the kind of work reserved for God alone: he gives life (5:21, 26), as has been twice demonstrated.²³ The discourse of chapter 5 also speaks of Jesus' power to judge, which is simply another way of speaking of his power to grant eternal life (5:22, 27-29, 30), as the following statement makes clear: "he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (5:24).

Thus two stories where someone has "heard Jesus' word" and has been granted life are used to introduce the claim that Jesus grants eternal life.²⁴ But what is the relationship between the gift of physical life and the granting of eternal life? Are the healings merely illustrations of the gift of eternal life? The interpretation of signs as "symbols" suggests that physical life serves as a symbol or figure of eternal or

22. See the discussion in C. F. D. Moule, "The Meaning of 'Life' in the Gospels and Epistles of St. John: A Study in the Story of Lazarus, John 11:1-44," *Theology* 78 (1975) 122.

23. There is a stimulating discussion of these passages and their parallels in Philo in Jerome Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 25-29.

24. On the significance of "hearing Jesus' word," see the recent study by Craig Koester, "Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Biblica* (1989) 70:327-48. Koester argues that authentic faith in the Gospel of John is based on hearing, but never on seeing; signs confirm faith that is engendered through hearing (332). The emphasis on Jesus' word is not unlike that found in Bultmann, *Theology*, 59-69 and Jürgen Becker,

spiritual life. But on what basis can the claim be made that the one guarantees the other? The answer that John supplies is the answer of the OT prophets: there is one God who provides and nurtures life. For this reason, healing often images salvation in the OT. We are reminded, for example, that after the celebration of the crossing of the Red Sea, and the provision of water at Marah, comes the assertion of God, "I am Yahweh your healer" (Exod 15:26), surprising only because one might have expected an identification of Yahweh as deliverer or protector. Hosea is replete with the refrain, "who will heal Israel?" In one of the most poignant laments of the book we read, "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms. But they did not know it was I who healed them" (Hos 11:3). Throughout Hosea, the image of healing is used for both the disciplining and the salvation of the people of God. Jeremiah similarly employs the image of God as healer. Jeremiah is somewhat skeptical that God will indeed keep the promise to heal (14:19). But God does promise healing (30:17-22), an all-encompassing healing, which includes both the restoration of physical well-being and the granting of the knowledge of God in a renewed covenant (31:33). Jeremiah's prayer, "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved" (17:14), shows both that healing could be used as an image of salvation, and that healing was also part of salvation.²⁵

Healing images salvation, because both are the work of the one Creator God. If we turn to the Gospel of John, we are reminded that the world was created by God through the Logos (1:10) and there is "life in him" (1:4). The Word is the agent or instrument of bringing the world to life. Subsequently, Jesus' healing of the official's son and of the man at the pool confer physical life. Thus Jesus is the agent of bringing life to the world, sustaining the world even on the Sabbath as does the Lord God of Israel. Jesus also has the authority to pass judgment and raise people in the resurrection to eternal life. From beginning to end, his work is characterized as bestowing life from God. It is hard to escape the conclusion that John wants us to understand the Word, incarnate in Jesus, as the mediator of both physical and spiritual

"Exkurs 1. Die Semeiaquelle," and "Wunder und Christologie." Koester's interpretation, however, rightly does not play off Jesus' word against the signs, as do Bultmann and Becker. And yet one wonders whether it does not dismiss too quickly (1) the problem of those who will not see (20:20-31) and (2) the summary statements in 12:37-38 and 20:30-31, which draw a direct link between signs and believing. 12:37-38 especially asserts the guilt of those who do not believe. This is hard to understand unless the signs were to lead them to faith, and not merely to confirm faith they already had.

25. See the summary in Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 14.

life.²⁶ The signs, then, are not simply illustrations or figures of another kind of life-giving power Jesus has. They confer or bring life. Moreover, the signs give life because they are ultimately wrought by the one God (5:19; 21, 26; 10:38; 14:11) who is the source of all life. The life-giving signs of Jesus are ultimately the life-giving work of God.²⁷

Two gift miracles

We turn from these two healings to two signs in John which fall under the rubric of "gift" or "supply miracles." The feeding of the 5000 is common to all four Gospels; the changing of the water into wine is unique to John. Yet there are interesting overlaps. In neither of these stories can it be said that Jesus actually improves the "quality of life" of those involved, or that he saves them from imminent death. In each case the provision of food and drink becomes symbolic of or points to something else that Jesus also provides.

This is clearly visible in the story of the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6. Jesus feeds the multitudes, and interprets his action as representative of a ministry that brings the bread of life to the world. Jesus supplies that which is necessary to meet physical need, but the discourse of chapter 6 makes no claims about Jesus' ability to continue to meet such needs. Instead, it uses this deed to advance Jesus' claims that he satisfies spiritual hunger as well. The discourse, in fact, seems to move quickly away from the actual deed of feeding hungry people to another level of meaning. Typical of Johannine misunderstandings, the discourse builds on the fact that Jesus' audience hears his promise to give them living bread in a crassly materialistic way, whereas Jesus is actually talking about quite another kind of bread and hunger. Jesus feeds people who are spiritually hungry.

And yet while this understanding of Jesus' act is true insofar as it goes, one must not neglect the historical and Biblical allusions so important to understanding this story. For the narrative and discourse of chapter 6 deliberately echo themes of the first Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, from the giving of manna through Moses' intercession (6:30-31) to the grumbling of the people in the wilderness (6:41, 52).²⁸ Clearly the point is that God now provides the true bread

26. Moule, "Meaning of Life," 122.

27. Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 226-27 writes, "There is no relativisation of miracles in John; on the contrary, they are a continuation of God's work of creation (5:17), and indeed surpass it (5:20). They are unique. No-one else can perform them (15:24; 3:2)."

28. For discussions of Exodus motifs behind chapter 6, see the studies by Bertil Gärtner, *John 6 and the Jewish Passover* (ConNT 17; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1959); Peder Borgen, *Bread From Heaven. An Exegetical Study in the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965).

(6:32), the bread which brings life. But the analogy carries conviction because it rests on the story of the first Exodus, when God gave the people bread in order to sustain life.²⁹ Through Jesus, the same God is at work to sustain and grant life. But the provision generously surpasses the need. Here John strikes the note of messianic fulfillment and abundance as well. The extravagant provision for the people calls to mind promises of the messianic age, and the feeding itself suggests the return of the treasury of manna from on high in the age to come.³⁰ In many ways, then, John depends on the assumption of the continuity of Jesus' signs with the work of God: it is the same kind of work, work which sustains life, and it fulfills the promise given by God to raise up another prophet "like Moses" (Deut 18:15-18).³¹

One may also recall the changing of the water to wine at Cana. Here there is need, but less urgent than that of the multitudes in the wilderness, for wine to celebrate a wedding scarcely falls under the category of "daily bread." Again Jesus' provision is more than adequate; it far surpasses the need. As one writer notes, "What is striking in this story is the utterly gratuitous nature of this deed . . . It is precisely this gratuitous generosity that is the glory revealed in this sign."³² Or, as John notes, "from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace" (1:16). John may again be calling on the promises that the coming age of deliverance would be an age of abundance of both physical and spiritual blessings, including both the abundance of the harvest and of the revelation of the glory of the Lord (e.g. Isa 66:11). The signs link the actions of Jesus to the promises and work of God, and show that the same faithfulness and goodness is manifested now as then, but in surpassing abundance and fullness. But the signs do not simply promise or symbolize God's gifts of life; they also offer those gifts. For God is the creator, sustainer, and giver of all life.

29. Borgen (*Bread from Heaven*, 7-10) discusses six texts from the Palestinian midrash and Philo which state that God reversed the natural order in making bread come down from heaven, rather than up from the earth. Assumed here is God's sovereignty over the natural order, as well as his ability to change it in order to provide for the Israelites who are "so much beloved by Him" (*Mek. Ex.* 16.4).

30. See Gärtner, *John 6*, 14-20; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 1:265. None of the texts cited by Brown are as early as John, but they may nevertheless illumine the passage, if the traditions preserved can be traced back to the first century. On this point, see also Aileen Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship: A Study of the Relation of St. John's Gospel to the Ancient Lectionary System* (Oxford: University Press, 1968) 61-68.

31. On the promise to raise up a "prophet like Moses," see Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet-King. Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967).

32. Rodney A. Whitacre, *Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology* (SBLDS 67; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 109.

Common to both these narratives is what has been called the "spontaneity" of the act.³³ Jesus takes the initiative in these deeds. In fact, the Johannine narratives also repeatedly show Jesus as taking the initiative in healing. Where someone approaches him with a request to act or to heal (2:3, 4:47, 11:30) he first distances himself from the petitioner (2:4, 4:48, 11:4-5), showing that he acts only in his own hour and only at his Father's bidding.³⁴ In all other narratives, Jesus takes the initiative in acting (5:6; 6:5-6; 9:3-7). The theme of Jesus' spontaneity and sovereignty in initiating the signs is a corollary to the belief that God alone is the source of all life, and that life is a gift to be received from the gracious and sovereign hand of God.

The healing of the man born blind

We come then to the narrative of the healing of the man born blind, a story unique to John and obviously a carefully fashioned narrative. Here favorite Johannine terms such as light, darkness, seeing and believing, judgment and guilt, play such important roles that one cannot help but read the narrative on two levels: as the concrete act of the man Jesus, but also as evocative of realities that go beyond what is actually seen and experienced through the healing itself. That is, this is clearly a story about healing in the physical realm, but it is the story of another kind of healing as well. The question is how these two healings are related.

To answer the question, we must turn to the narrative itself. Again we may note several features for comment. First, when Jesus heals the blind man, he restores to him, by miraculous power and divine authority, a normal faculty. The man receives his sight, and in so doing receives entry into the fullness of human life. He is now "the man who used to sit and beg" (9:8). Second, John evokes the creation narratives of Genesis in showing how Jesus brings light from darkness, and in referring to the astonished man's statement, "Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind." Third, the narrative ends with this man's confession of faith in Jesus. Ultimately the man receives not merely sight, but the

33. Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 103-4, 227. Theissen comments that the motif of spontaneity is particularly strong in the gift miracles of the Gospels. We might add that while this also characterizes the Johannine narratives of gift miracles, the theme of Jesus' sovereignty recurs throughout John; see, e.g., 7:30, 44-46; 8:20, 59; 10:18, 39.

34. For a discussion of Jesus' "distancing" himself from petitioners who come to him, see Charles H. Giblin, "Suggestion, Negative Response, and Positive Action in St. John's Portrayal of Jesus (John 2.1-11; 4.46-54; 7.2-14; 11.1-44)," *NTS* 26 (1980): 197-211; and Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 72-73, and the references there.

insight of faith. What is important to note is *how* this insight comes to the man, for there is clearly a link between the healing and the man's coming to faith. The physical healing does not simply illustrate or symbolize spiritual healing, nor are the two healings simply simultaneous with each other. Insight comes in discerning in the healing the very action of God. Thus the question which weaves its way throughout the discourse is the question whether the work which has been done attests that Jesus is from God (9:16, 17, 24, 29, 31, 33), whether this healing is in fact the very work of God. The man receives both sight and insight, but he receives insight when he recognizes that ultimately God was at work through Jesus in healing him (9:30-33).

But how does such recognition come about? Here we must remember that the narrative of the healing of the blind man begins with the question of the disciples, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' statement that the man was not born blind because of any sin probably does not intend to dispel the connection between sin and disease. Rather, Jesus asserts that the man was born blind that God's works might be made manifest in him. This enigmatic response does not mean that the man was born blind in order to serve as an object lesson in which God's magnificent power might be displayed. We may quote the conclusions of a recent study on John: "The disciples' question, and the viewpoint behind it, are rejected altogether. They see suffering as an occasion for moralizing about the victim. Jesus sees it as an occasion for doing the works of God, that is, for relieving the suffering The 'work of God,' it turns out, is not punishing sinners with suffering but overcoming the suffering. . . . Simply, the world is blind, and it is God's work to heal it."³⁵ God's life-giving and restoring work are to be manifested in healing this individual. Those who do not discern in the sign God's own work have not seen in it the manifestation of God's character as life-giving. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the discourse which follows immediately upon this healing is that of the good shepherd who "lays down his life for the sheep," who has come that people may have "life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:1-18).

By way of summing up these exegetical remarks, we may say that through the signs God is at work restoring to health the very world which was made through the Logos who became incarnate as a human being. The tangible gifts of food, healing, and life which the signs bring are not to be understood only as symbols of "spiritual" or "other-worldly" realities. Signs are manifestations of God's provision and care for his people, as much as the signs of the Exodus are. God

35. David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 44.

provides manna and drink for Israel, and so sustains them. God delivers Israel from brushes with death. God preserves, protects, guides, and saves the people of Israel. God's wondrous deeds—the deliverance at the Red Sea, the provision of food and water—do not symbolize protection and preservation: they *are* preservation, protection, guidance, and salvation. So too one can say that Jesus' healings do not simply betoken God's favor and blessing, they are the concrete manifestations of that benefaction, the very gifts of God, and thus the very works of God. The prophets speak of and long for God's healing—freedom from their oppressors, a recapturing of humility and service to the Lord, restoration to fullness of life. Physical and spiritual blessings are woven into one fabric, because there is one creator and one Lord.

Certainly this is John's understanding as well. Where life is given, God is at work, for God alone gives life. Thus it is artificial to speak of the signs as symbols of God's activity, for they are God's activity. Signs are not symbols of the life God gives: they are life from the hand of God. Jesus' signs do not picture the eternal life available with God in another realm or on another plane. Rather, they confer life from the generous and life-giving God. It is scarcely surprising that a Gospel which opens with the affirmation that the Word became *flesh* should also assume that God's gifts of life are granted in the material realm as well.

The relationship of signs and faith

We may turn, then, to a discussion of the function of signs in leading people to faith. The foregoing discussion has argued that the life-giving character of the signs provides the basis for discernment of God's work and decision for or against Jesus. The signs force one to choose for or against Jesus.³⁶ But why do they force such a choice? One author notes, "A *semeion* is a demonstration which asks for reaction. In the case of positive reaction, the principal question is, however, What power and authority do you believe to be demonstrated here?"³⁷ Obviously the correct response is that the power and authority demonstrated through Jesus is God's power and authority. But that is recognized not simply by the sheer manifestation of power; rather, it is known through what is offered in and effected by the signs, and that is life. And the response sought is not simply awe or amazement, but trust and obedience.

36. Gerd Theissen (*Miracle Stories*, 297) notes that this is true of the NT as a whole, "Miracles in the New Testament invariably force one to choose."

37. Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God: Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective* (ET Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) 122.

Again the OT provides the crucial backdrop for understanding John. In Deuteronomy Moses says to the people of Israel, "You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials which your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders, but to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear" (Deut 29:2-4). Even those who were witnesses to and beneficiaries of God's acts of deliverance did not understand their implications or hear their call to obedience. Similarly, Jeremiah laments that the signs and wonders which God had done did not lead the people to repentance or obedience (32:20-23). It will be necessary for God to establish a new covenant, written on the hearts of the people (31:33). Clearly, signs were to elicit obedience and faithfulness. But they evoke faith because they are God's redemptive acts on behalf of his people. They are not magnificent displays designed to coerce faith, but tokens of God's gracious and redeeming love on behalf of the people. In this sense, the relationship between God's acts and the people's faithfulness is indirect rather than direct, circuitous rather than linear.

The Gospel of John summarizes Jesus' ministry by quoting two passages from Isaiah which show the reality of unbelief (6:10; 53:1). Neither of these speaks explicitly of signs. But it is clear that in John's view the unbelief of which Isaiah spoke has its counterpart in the unbelief which Jesus encountered. John writes, "Though [Jesus] had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him; it was that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Lord, who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'" John also cites from Isaiah 6:10 the passage quoted in the Synoptics in conjunction with Jesus' parables: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with the heart, and turn for me to heal them." Blindness does not consist of failing to believe that miraculous deeds have been done, but in the failure to respond to God's deeds with repentance and obedience: they have not "perceived with the heart," and have not "turned" to be healed. The decision which is called for is obedience to God who manifests his grace and mercy in the signs.

The Fourth Gospel understands the signs of Jesus to be a continuation and manifestation of the mercy and grace of God. Because the signs are God's works, deeds of grace and deliverance, they serve to call people to repentance, obedience, and faith. Thus the Fourth Gospel also understands the signs of Jesus to be a continuation and manifestation of the activity through which God calls out a people. Here we again raise a question against Bultmann's interpretation of signs, for his discussion is highly individualistic in tenor. But John is not just about disparate individuals coming to faith; it is about the gathering

together of the children of God. Not only do Jesus' signs confer life from God, they are also integral to the activity through which God calls out a people.

Indeed, the role of the signs as judging is the other side of their role in gathering together God's people. For the gathering of a flock implies the separation of those who are not part of the flock. If the signs serve to gather together, they will also serve to separate and judge. But the sign has not failed when it serves to judge. Neither in the OT nor in John is unbelief an indication that signs have failed; rather, unbelief is an indication of judgment. The purported "failure" of the signs is actually a failure of seeing, of discernment, of faith. Unbelief and disobedience are not surprising, though in light of God's gracious deeds on the people's behalf, they are surely culpable and guilty of sin.

Summary Comments: Faith in the Gospel of John

In summary, I would like to repeat the three thesis statements offered earlier. (1) A sign is a manifestation, through the person of Jesus, of God's work in the world. (2) Faith is faithfulness in trusting God as made known in Jesus Christ. (3) Jesus' signs lead to faith when one discerns in them the character of God as life-giving and responds to Jesus as mediating that life.

We may for a moment dwell on the nature and character of faith in the Gospel of John and, in light of these exegetical remarks, expand on the definition of faith suggested earlier. For there are several corollaries to that understanding of faith which arise out of the function of the signs argued for in this paper. I will suggest these below.

(1) Faith entails discernment, both about the nature of Jesus' work and about the kind of God to whom faith is directed. The decision to follow Jesus, to entrust oneself to him, is based on the understanding that he does the life-giving work of God. Faith further discerns that the God whom it trusts is the God who creates and sustains life, who heals, who restores and raises to life. Faith is not directed to a void, but to the living God, the God of life.

(2) Faith has a corporate or communal dimension. One shares in believing with all those who have also received life from God through Jesus. John does not envision the gift of life as granted to scattered individuals. Those who have received life are also gathered into one fold, one people, knowing one God and Creator. Thus faith and love are closely linked in Johannine theology. If faith denotes the response of the people to God, love denotes their response to each other.³⁸ Just

38. Oddly enough, the Fourth Gospel never speaks of believers loving God or commands that they should.

as in faith one passes from death to life, so in love one overcomes the hate and death-dealing power of the world.

(3) Faith entails a commitment to life in the midst of death, to love in the midst of hate, to truth in the midst of error, to God in the midst of the world. Thus faith can never will suffering or evil for others; it seeks to bring them to life. The promise of salvation in John 3:16 is paralleled in the Johannine community by the call to love of one's fellow believer in 1 John 3:16-18. For faith which is directed to the God of life cannot abandon others to the realm of death.

(4) Faith stands before the Creator and Sustainer of life with the recognition of human frailty and utter dependence upon God. The faith which Jesus seeks, to which the signs call people, is the recognition that all that they are and have comes from God. Through the Logos the world was created, is healed and sustained, and will be raised to life. Thus faith is essentially gratitude, gratitude to God for grace, mercy, healing, wholeness; gratitude for life itself. Faith knows peace, for it trusts that all things are in God's hands.

(5) Because God is the source and destiny of life, faith is faithfulness in trusting God, for God was before all human life and always lives. God is the living God. The life which believers receive endures even beyond the grave, for it comes through the Logos who was in the beginning with God, and has life from the Father himself. To such a God corresponds a faith which perseveres, for to whom can it turn but the God who speaks words of life?

(6) Finally, in the Fourth Gospel faith is faith in God, mediated through the person of Jesus. The question to John's readers is whether Jesus continues, manifests, and carries out a work which brings healing and liberation, whether he brings life. In recounting the signs as the life-giving work of God in Jesus, the Gospel reminds its readers that there is no other bread of life, no other shepherd, no other way or truth. Indeed, this is already said in the simple words of the prologue, "In him was life."