

The Miracles as “Signs”

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The stories told about Jesus of Nazareth include stories of miracles. According to the Gospel of John Jesus performed many miracles (20:30). It mentions only a few of them, but they are spectacular. There are seven: they include turning water into wine (2:1-11), healing an official’s son from a great distance (4:46-52), healing a lame man (5:1-16), healing a blind person (9:1-7), raising a dead person (11:1-44), feeding 5000 people with just a few loaves and fishes (6:1-15) and then walking on water (6:16-21). Storytellers loved to tell stories about miracles. The more fantastic, the better!

The first Christians were fond of telling stories about Jesus’ miracles. Sometimes they added more detail to make the story more interesting. Sometimes they made the miracles more dramatic than they probably were. Sometimes they exaggerated the effects. Sometimes they added to their stories echoes from the stories of Old Testament heroes. For instance, in the feeding of the 5000 we read that a lad came forward with barley loaves which Jesus used to feed the crowds (6:9). This detail seems to come from the similar story about Elisha where a lad also brought barley loaves so that the prophet could miraculously feed hundreds of people (2 Kings 4:42-44). In this way the story tellers were saying that what happened in the life of Jesus belonged to the holy stories of old. We should recognise that God was at work through Jesus as he was through Moses and the prophets. The same can be said of miracles about the deep. They recall Israel’s crossing the sea to escape from Egypt.

The writer of John’s gospel chose a selection of miracle stories, but handled them in a very special way. We can see this best by looking at what he says near the beginning of his gospel. In 2:23-25 he reports:

When he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs [miracles] that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to testify about a person; for he himself knew what was in a person.

According to John’s gospel Jesus was not happy if people followed him just because they saw great miracles. In the Greek the statement is even more striking. Literally it says: they *believed* or *trusted* in him, but he did not *believe* or *trust* in them. This is one of a number of places where we hear that faith based solely on miracles is a problem. Here the writer explains: “because he knew what was in a person.” Something was not yet right when people wanted to follow him just because of his miracles. After all, other people also performed miracles.

We can see what John means when we read on into John 3. There we hear of Nicodemus. He is just like the people who follow Jesus because of his miracles. He puts it this way: “You are a teacher come from God, because no one can do the miracles which you do unless God is with him” (3:2). That is not enough according to Jesus. For he replies: “Truly I tell you, unless a person is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3). Nicodemus fails to “see” properly. He fails to “see the kingdom of God”. He will only see properly when he has been born again from

above. In 3:5 Jesus speaks of being “born of water and the Spirit” and in 3:6 of being “born of the Spirit”. It means becoming the kind of person who can see beyond the miracles to their true meaning. Only a person who is open to God’s Spirit will see like that. Those who see only with human eyes will see only fantastic miracles and nothing more. They will follow Jesus because they are impressed by sensational miracles, not because of who he is.

A similar thing happens in the story of the healing of the official’s son (4:46-52). Jesus is irritated by the crowds standing around who want miracles, so he rebukes them: “You won’t believe unless you see miracles!” (4:48). Similarly in the story of the feeding of the 5000 we read that crowds followed him because of the miracles (6:2). After the miracles they want to crown him king just because of the miracle (6:14-15). Jesus does not let this happen.

In John the miracles are called “signs”. The Greek word, “*semeia*”, can simply mean miracles, but it can also mean “signs”. Those who see only with human eyes see only miracles. Those who see with the eyes of the spirit see “signs”. In the conversations which follow Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 we read that Jesus rebukes the crowd again because they do not see properly: “You want me not because you saw the signs but because you ate the bread and were sated” (6:26). He then continues: “Don’t work for the food which perishes, but for the food which remains forever, which the Son of Man will give you” (6:27).

In the discussion which follows we find some extraordinary claims. Jesus gives spiritual bread. In the wilderness Israel received manna from heaven. Now Jesus is saying: God has bread to give us which is spiritual and which will meet the deep hunger of the soul. Jesus has come to give this kind of bread. John can also say that Jesus, himself, is this bread. At the end he will put it in a way that will remind people of the Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, where people eat bread and drink wine to remember Jesus (6:51-58). Most striking of all, Jesus declares: “I am the bread of life. Anyone coming to me shall never be hungry, and anyone believing in me will never be thirsty” (6:35).

John’s gospel shifts the focus from the miracles as fantastic achievements to the miracles as signs about deeper meaning. We move from the feeding of the 5000 to the claim: “I am the bread of life”. Similarly we move from the healing of the blind man in 9:1-41 to the claim: “I am the light of the world” (9:5; 8:12). We move from the bringing back to life of the dead man, Lazarus (11:1-44) to the claim: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live even if he dies and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:25).

Bread, light, life. These are just some of the images used to describe Jesus in John’s gospel. We also find images like water, shepherd, vine, and in the beginning: Word. This is an important clue. John portrays Jesus as God’s word or voice or message. Because God is the source of life, light, true bread, living water, John’s gospel describes Jesus as the bearer of life, light, true bread and living water. Or sometimes it says simply that he *is* the life, the light and the bread. Even more striking is the way Jesus sometimes speaks. He declares: “I am .. the life, the light, the bread”. This would remind some people of the way God spoke to Moses at the burning bush where he said: “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14) or of passages in Isaiah which speak of God

as the “I am” (Isaiah 43:10-13). Jesus is speaking the way God spoke. How could this happen and what did it mean?

The Jews also used the images of life, light, bread and many others to speak about God. They also used these images when they spoke about God’s Law, which was sometimes also described as God’s wisdom and God’s Word. God’s Law or Word was life giving. It was light. The Psalmist writes, “Your word is a lamp for our feet, a light for our path” (119:). In Isaiah 55 we read of the invitation:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

They spoke of God’s Law and Word being like food for the soul, like water for the thirsty. Sometimes they imagined that God’s Word or Wisdom was like a person beside God, like the highest angel. They spoke of God creating the world through Wisdom and of Wisdom coming down to earth to look for a place to dwell. Some writers claim that Wisdom found a place only in Israel (Sirach 24:7-8; Baruch 13:35-36). They identified God’s Wisdom as being God’s Law. Others say that Wisdom found no one prepared to give wisdom a home (1 Enoch 42). John’s gospel clearly knows about these traditions. It speaks of Jesus as being like God’s wisdom and describes him as the Word, through which all things were created (1:1-3) and who came to earth looking for a place. His own people refused to accept him, but some believed (1:10-12).

John’s gospel has clearly taken up the images which were used to describe the Law and has applied them to Jesus. Just as the Law was life and light and truth, now Jesus has become the life and light and truth. John goes further than that. It makes the claim that the Law of the Old Testament was not really in itself the bringer of life and light and truth, but only pointed forward to the life and light and truth which was to come in Jesus. People spoke of the Law as being like manna from heaven. John says only Jesus is manna from heaven (6:32). This explains why so many of the statements about Jesus use the word “true”. Jesus is the “true bread”, the “true vine”. In fact Jesus declares: “I am, the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).

These are large claims which led to controversy. The signs and what they assert can be easily misunderstood. When Jesus spoke of himself as being light and life and truth, was he claiming to be God or a second God? This would have been intolerable for Jews who believed there is only one God. It was also not what the writer of John’s gospel meant. At the most simple level we could say: Jesus spoke for God (as God’s prophet) and so he spoke like God, with God’s authority.

The matter was more complicated, especially because John’s gospel came from Christian communities which had identified Jesus as God’s Wisdom or Word which had become flesh or become visible in Jesus. That created some problems. No one wanted to say that God’s Word or Wisdom was another being separate from God.

There is only one God! God's wisdom belongs to God and is part of God. God's Word is what God speaks. As John 1:1 says: "The Word was God". That really does sound like they were saying: Jesus is God. Yet John's gospel is always careful to point out that Jesus is not a god or equal to God. Instead it speaks of Jesus as God's Son or child, whom God has sent into the world to present and embody God's message. Images are coming together here to say something profound, but the images do not always fit well together.

The most common image is that Jesus came as God's envoy. In the ancient world where they did not have the modern means of communication through telephone, fax and email, people depended heavily on envoys or representatives who would sometimes carry letters or sometimes simply have the authority to speak on their sender's behalf. This is how it is in John's gospel. Over and over again Jesus explains that he has come from the Father, to do the Father's works, to make the Father known. As such he is obedient to the Father. He does the Father's will and when he is finished, he returns to the Father. This is why he speaks the way God speaks and claims to be the light, the life and the truth and uses rich images like food, bread and water of himself. These are all appropriate, but only because really it is God who is all these things and Jesus represents him.

When the Jews challenge Jesus because it sounds like he is making himself equal with God by claiming to be doing God's works and acting with God's authority (5:17-18), Jesus answers by saying that he is only claiming to act with such authority because he is doing what he has been told. He is not claiming to be God's equal but to be God's obedient son (5:19-20). Similarly when the Jews take offence that Jesus claims that he and the Father are one (10:30), thinking that Jesus is claiming to be God, Jesus answers them by saying that he is one with God because he does God's will (10:31-39). The combination of images, using the model of the envoy, the idea of the Word or Wisdom, and the symbols of life and light and truth, usually attributed to God, was bound to lead to some confusion.

The standard way that Christians tried to merge all these different images together is by saying there is one God, but that one form in which God has shown himself is in Jesus or to say that there is a mystery in God. God is one and yet we recognise three elements within God: the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Behind all the explanations is the claim being made by John's gospel that when people came face to face with Jesus in his ministry they were at a deeper level also meeting God. Through Jesus God was inviting people into a relationship with himself in which they would find true life, light, and nourishment. It was not really about making Jesus the centre, but about making God the centre. Jesus always pointed people towards God, never just to himself. Jesus never claimed to be the life and light and truth apart from God.

To understand the miracles, according to John's gospel, we need, therefore, to see them as something more than wonders and fantastic achievements. They are to be seen as signs which point to a deeper reality: that Jesus is the bearer of life and light and truth. This is to 'see the kingdom of God', to see with the eyes of the Spirit. When we read John's gospel with this kind of vision, we begin to see beneath the surface of the stories to their deeper meaning.

Thus the turning of water into wine (2:1-11), for instance, needs to be heard as a story about Jesus bringing the true wine, the great wedding feast, which so many people used to describe God's wish for all humankind at the end of time: all nations coming together in harmony. It also reminded hearer of the celebration of that feast in the interim in the Holy Communion with bread and wine.

Even stories which are not miracles carry this character of being signs. The expulsion of people from the temple (2:12-22) is a symbol of a new kind of temple: Jesus himself and his community. The encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well (4:1-42) celebrates Jesus as the water of life which quenches deep inner thirst (4:4-15). The discussion with the woman also returns to the image of a new temple where people will worship in spirit and truth (4:19-26). The healing of the official's son (4:26-52) and of the lame man (5:1-8) celebrate that Jesus brings new life. The feeding of the 5000 (6:1-15), discussed above, and the walking on the water (6:16-21), are like new versions of the feeding with manna in the wilderness and of God's miracles with the sea at the Exodus. They are signs that God is at work again in Jesus in way that brings all former events to a climax.

The healing of the blind man in John 9 celebrates the light which Jesus brings. It also stands in sharp contrast to Jesus' opponents among his fellow Jews, who worry more about rules than about the man's well being. Their behaviour also becomes a negative sign: it shows that they are blind, whereas the blind man has come to see, both literally and spiritually (9:39-41). The story of Lazarus (11:1-44) has become a sign of God's gift through Jesus of eternal life. To the eyes of faith what matters is no longer whether we die or even what might happen at the end of the world, but sharing this new life now, because it transcends death. While the miracle brought Lazarus back to life, it would have been a short reprieve. Like everyone else he would have died. Those who focus only on the miracle stay at that level. It was fantastic, but of no lasting effect, whereas the spiritual meaning is profound. In this instance the sign is so important it almost leaves the literal story behind.

All of Jesus' life in John's gospel can be seen as one big sign, a sign pointing to God. Each episode is like a drop of water in which the light is reflected. While the writer of the gospel knows he is talking about Jesus who lived in history, he is far more interested in telling us about the impact of Jesus and his ongoing life and influence. He has crafted each scene so that it tells about Jesus from this broader perspective. The details and the dialogues all serve this end. As hearers or readers we are always being invited to see the whole picture. As with the miracle stories, so with all the stories of the gospel, we miss the point if we think only of the Jesus of the past in history. Those stories are now being told in the gospel primarily so that we see with the eyes of faith what Jesus revealed and respond to God's invitation through him to find life and light and truth in him. Without that, history, true or otherwise, does not matter. Thus John is the gospel of signs.

This is especially true of his death and return to the God. A sign of defeat and failure to the eyes of the world, it was a sign of victory and return to glory to the eyes of faith. To the eyes of unfaith it achieved nothing; to the eyes of faith it became the basis for drawing all people to faith. To the eyes of someone like Nicodemus it means Jesus goes into oblivion; to the eyes of believing disciples Jesus ascends into God's glory.

