

# THE BOOK OF SIGNS

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John's Gospel gives us the account of Jesus' ministry in the so-called Book of Signs. This includes not only what the Synoptics call miracles, or wonder-works, but also the words of the one the Prologue calls "the Word made flesh", and the human words provoked by him. No doubt that the human contributions are vital: in particular the story of the Man Born Blind in Jn 9 sees Jesus out of the picture (I could ask you *why?*) and the whole story is dominated by a dialogue between the newly-enlightened man and his elders and betters.

Many of the signs are intimately connected to selected words. The great signs are certainly

- A the feeding of the multitude,
- B the healing of the man born blind, and
- C the raising of Lazarus.

Each of these (if in slightly different ways) is closely allied to the discourse that goes with them:

- A the sermon on bread and its extension in the Eucharistic words:
- B the debate between the Pharisees and the man born blind: and
- C the words of Jesus about being light of the world, resurrection, and life.

This exchange between words and the deeds of Jesus gives us living instance of incarnation, where the Word becomes flesh. The biblical tradition is perfectly echoed in the theme of divine speech equalling creation, as in *Let there be light and there was light*; we may take these words as morally present in the Prologue: as usual it provides us with the setting for understanding the body of the Gospel (*In the beginning* is much more than an isolated echo. It provides a key for the comprehension of the signs<sup>1</sup>). In the Prologue, the words

*In him was life...that was the light of men*

poetically implicates Jesus Christ in the Creation and opens up the reason, purpose, and understanding of Creation to human minds, and specifically to the Christian human mind. So the theme of the Gospel is firmly grounded: this good news is giving us the light by which the world will be correctly understood, the *light by which the world will be justly judged*. There is nothing arbitrary or subjective here: in Christ we see the light of the world, and he is the only light, and the true light. In him the world was made; towards him the world is travelling. His taking flesh in it is thus the heart of its history, the event which releases the truth for human eyes to see. There is no alternative choice except darkness, evil, confusion, death.

If the signs incarnate the words, the words also have their own independent truth, their own higher relationship to the eternal Word. Far from merely interpreting a few first-century signs, they convey eternal truth, offering us entry ("even now") into a renewed creation where the eternal reigns. The Johannine habit, instanced in chapter 2, where the original context - in Jn 3 the encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus - recedes and eventually dissolves away bears witness to the way in which a temporal context generates truth, which then transcends the time and place in which it is uttered and becomes valid for any context.

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<sup>1</sup> We should be open to the echoes of other Gospels, so that we do not improperly isolate John from the Synoptics: others did, and their corpses litter the desert. *Luke* is very clear in presenting the birth of Jesus as the initiation, not just of a new Covenant, but of a new Creation: Lk 1:35 has the Holy Spirit hovering over the deep, and the image of the virgin evoking the chasm of nothingness at Creation.

This in turn illuminates and judges the contemporary “world” (in the pejorative, Johannine sense of that word) where truth does *not* reign, and which is condemned to die when the eternal judgment is pronounced, that is, in the Hour of God. Here is the central view-point, the frame of judgment to which the unfolding Gospel continually returns; there is no phrase or concept in the Gospel which is not germane to the point at issue: the world’s judgment of Jesus, which slowly reveals itself as God’s judgment on the world. No theme could be more radical or relevant than this final verdict, this ultimate revelation of the truth. We ought to recall that this judgment involves no action on the part of God: God is not, as it were, deliberating or, as we say of ourselves, “making up his mind”. The only fluctuating element in the story is made up of the human deeds and thoughts, as we think through and deliver our response to the Word.

The constantly recurring themes of judgment are therefore vital to our understanding of this Gospel. The time that remains before the striking of God’s Hour is itself critical, that is, pregnant with judgment; our deeds in time have a fateful significance in aligning us, before the last word of God is finally spoken. A worldly paganism may see life as insignificant, as unworthy of being taken seriously. This perfectly evokes the Psalmist’s question: *How can God know? Does the Most High take any notice? How useless to keep my heart pure and wash my hands in innocence, when I am stricken all the day long, suffering punishment day after day.* For John, by contrast, any and every movement of the second hand is a further step within a finite space, whose decisions will be etched permanently on the charge sheet. The refusal of the Jewish leaders to harden up their position on Jesus (or on John) bears witness to their ignorance of the critical times in which they live. It disqualifies them from sharing in the messianic future which lies beyond judgment. But none of that threatens this oncoming Hour of God. The only threat is to the standing or falling of the Jewish authorities when the day comes. On this they seem determined to pass their own judgment, and it will go against them.

The Gospel Signs are all *irruptions into the historic present* of realities that belong to the timeless. Our three signs partake of the judgment to come:

- those who see the sign of the multiplied bread correctly *come to Christ, learn from him, and put their trust in him.* Those who *cannot see* the Sign are condemned to search for bread that cannot last, that is bread which is not of eternity. Fed on perishable bread, they will themselves perish in the death that is approaching for the world. Equally
- the man born blind is impelled by his experience to leave behind the safety of his Jewish community, and to *worship Jesus* who has given him sight. Those who *refuse to see* the Sign - and therefore prevent themselves from sharing its enlightening power - ally themselves with the faithless generation that will not respond; the infallible dawning of the light of glory will drive them away with the eternal darkness where the Spirit of faith has not been welcomed.
- At the raising of Lazarus all surrogates are abandoned, and the refusal to accept this final Sign is equivalent to the act of murder, not only of Jesus, but of Lazarus too, whose experience has made of him a living sign of faith in Christ. *They resolved to murder Lazarus too, since it was on his account that people were leaving them and believing in Jesus.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hygiene Warning: Note that in all these instances, but above all in this last, the potentially anti-Semitic interpretation is dangerously close: the “murderous Jews”, once separated out from the rest of *the world that was made by him*, lie open to the worst possible ostracism, especially by a Christian world that is ready to see itself as “over and against” the Jews. This is what actually has happened for two millennia, and we must be determined opponents of such institutionalised anti-Semitism, because Jesus was Jewish; and if we lose our proper sense of kinship with the Jews, by which we inherit the Psalter and come under the strictures of the Prophets, we will lose him.

In examining these three Signs we ought to look for the Johannine features we are coming to recognise. Using the Prologue as our long stop, we can read through the accounts and see how they are constructed: in this way we enter the Evangelist's mind, which is where we believe the Word of God is spoken.

## A Bread for the Multitude (*John 6*)

In reading this chapter we first note its form. The actual Sign forms a compact and easily-isolated passage of fifteen verses. For all that, it is not artless in simplicity: the evocation of the crossing of the sea - unmistakably an Exodus theme - is in the first verse, and already the great multitude is following him, evoking the leadership of Moses; Jesus sits on a mountain, evoking Sinai just as Matthew did at the Sermon on the Mount; and mention of the proximity of Passover follows immediately. We should not miss the significance of this mention of the Pasch: it is not a merely Jewish reference that evokes the liberation feast, but a Christian one too, evoking the Passion and the Resurrection; and the chapter that follows is not only about the Jewish past, but the Christian future - the Paschal Mystery as we now celebrate it. This fact contains the warranty for the inclusion here of the Eucharistic words which are appended after the account of the Sign and the discourse on bread that follows it.

Between the Sign and the discourse comes the story of Jesus' miraculous passage over the (hostile) sea; this more clearly echoes the Exodus, by which God reigns over the waters. The further echo of Genesis' *spirit moving over the waters* should not be neglected, nor should *the voice of the Lord resounding over the waters* (Ps 29:3-4), when Jesus calls out *ego eimi* to the disciples who are helplessly struggling against the sea. The function of this story, positioned in its classical place across the tradition, predates the editorial inclinations of our Evangelist, but is accepted and exploited by him. The escaping of Jesus from their attempt to enthrone him takes the form of a crossing of the waters that is worthy of the royal power of Yahweh. Those who follow him, confined as they are to the struggling craft of humanity, must learn a parallel transition in faith, which will be the theme of the discourse that is coming.

I feel sure I have already described to you the fruit of redaction-criticism of the discourse on bread, and that I have explained how closely its structure follows the expected structure of a rabbinic Synagogue sermon (as spelt out at the end of this lecture). A careful examination of everything Jesus exhorts his audience to do in these verses reveals that the discourse relates to *cognition* and to *the act of faith* - put simply, seeing and believing. The verbs tell the story: from v 24 the crowd *look for* Jesus, *find* him, and *seek to know* when he had arrived there. Jesus describes them *searching* for him, but chides them for not *seeing* the signs. Instead they are greedy for more free food. He bids them *work* for food that endures, and they ask him what work they must do; he surprises them by telling them to *believe* in him. As Bread of Life, he then promises that those who *come to* him will never hunger, those who *believe in* him will never thirst; and charges them with "seeing" without "believing". Then he speaks of the Father's giving to him the gift of believers; these, by the Father's express will, cannot be rejected by Jesus; the will of the Father is that all who are given to Christ, far from being lost, will be raised up on the last day. "*Whoever sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life.*"

All of this language is in the realm of *perception* and *the response of faith*. The "bread" which carries the charge of the recent Sign is clearly the bread of Wisdom, of the Word of God; the discourse does not enter the sacramental realm except insofar as the eventual Sacrament of the Eucharist will appropriate the eternal truth ("God gives you bread from heaven...I AM the bread of life"). It is because this is so dominantly the case, almost to the extent that any and every mention of bread in the Bible will find itself open to a Eucharistic resonance, that the Evangelist - or the Gospel's editors - have decided to attach here the

Eucharistic Words (6:51b-58) which have their true and traditional context in the Last Supper.

## **B Opening the Eyes of those Born Blind (*John 9*)**

This is the Sign where the vital discourse is not with Jesus but between his hearers. Nevertheless, the Sign is framed in specific questions and challenges, just like the feeding of the multitude. The question chosen is about sin, and the link between sin and human affliction. Like the search for true bread, this is no dead letter from the past, but a fundamental religious question for all time: why do we suffer, and why is our humanity disabled from its fulfilment?

Typifying the dualism which pervades the whole Gospel - *I am from above: you are from below* (8:23) - Jesus responds from an opposite point of view: *No-one sinned: he was born like this so that the work of God might be displayed in him*. This language can be likened to the reversal-language which gathers around the Resurrection: *O happy fault: O necessary sin of Adam, that brought to us so great a redeemer!* or *The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*. From a human point of view the man seems cursed: from the divine point of view he is a theatre of divine activity, a setting for the working of grace. In this dual reality, he is every man, and, unlike eg Lazarus, is appropriately never named.

Once more the sacramental symbolism is delicately invoked (anointing from the Messiah - in this case, from his spittle and the earth of which he is the light - and washing in water); but note that this part of the sign happens outside of Jesus' presence, and in obedience to him: this distancing has its own logic in the unfolding of the story, where Jesus will once more not be personally involved. But the positioning of all this within the providence of God is preserved by the obedience of the blind man, and the mysterious title of the pool: like the blind man, like Jesus himself, the pool is *sent*, and in this missionary context the Sign is revealed.

More than any other Sign, this one provokes a setting which is unashamedly a Court of Law. The crime is that of being healed on the Sabbath, but the point at issue is the goodness or sinfulness of the One who broke the Sabbath. By this process the fate of Jesus will be set at issue: but so will the fate of the man born blind, whose place in the community is at risk.. This clearly reflects the situation at the end of the first century, where Christians were being ejected from synagogues; we never forget the relevance of the issues prevailing when the Gospels are written, as opposed to those prevailing when their events originally unfold.

Returning to the Prologue, we recognise in it the theme of *life that is the Light of men, shining in darkness: and the darkness could not overpower it*. We also know there the corresponding theme of *recognition or vision: he came to the world that came into being through him, and the world did not recognise him; and the Word became flesh, and pitched his tent among us, and we saw his glory; and no-one has seen God; it is the only Son...who has made him known*. Vision is far from merely physical, for the Prologue as for chapter 9; the fulness of vision does not come with the opened earthly eye - but with the openness that is God-given, sensitive to God, and ready to find God in Jesus: which can say: *Sir, tell me who he is, so that I may believe in him*.

Note the vital polarity of the story: the man journeys, not from blindness to sight, understood as a quality in himself, or from darkness to light: he moves from blindness to *worship*. The overwhelming imagery of this sign is sacramental, and the terminus of this Gospel is liturgical.

## C      **Opening your Graves, O my People (*John 11*)**

The third Sign we are considering today forms the first part of chapter 11. The rest of it describes the response of the Jewish leaders to this ultimate incident of the Book of Signs. It has often been pointed out that this chapter bears clear signs of having been added as an extra campaign of composition. Chapter ten already ends with an attempt to stone Jesus; the end of chapter eleven represents a far less symbolic, more deliberately political decision to bring about his judicial murder “for the people”. Certainly Jesus’ death was brought about by something much more than a lynching. It is understandable that this deliberation and involvement of the people at leadership level should be set against the backdrop of an incident partaking of what Americans call *ultimacy*: the revelation of Jesus as enemy of death itself.

The prologue says *In him was life*. Clearly this is a statement of something greater than personal existence, or the quality of liveliness. It relates to the previous statement, *Through him all things came into being*: the intimate relationship of the Son of God to the cosmos, to all that has been made. In 5:21 Jesus says, in defence of his claim to be Son of God:

As the Father raises the dead and gives them life,  
so the Son gives life to anyone he chooses;  
for the Father judges no-one: he has entrusted all judgment to the Son,  
so that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father;  
whoever refuses honour to the Son refuses honour to the Father who sent him.  
In truth I tell you, whoever listens to my words  
and believes in the One who sent me,  
has eternal life; without being brought to judgment, he has passed from death to life.

In all truth I tell you, the hour is coming - indeed it is already here -  
when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live.  
For as the Father has life in himself,  
so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself,  
and, because he is the Son of Man, has granted him power to give judgment.  
Do not be surprised at this:  
for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice:  
those who did good will come forth to life,  
and those who did evil will come forth to judgment.

By myself I can do nothing;  
I can judge only as I am told to judge,  
and my judging is just,  
because I seek not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.  
Were I to testify on my own behalf, my testimony would not be true.  
But there is another witness who speaks on my behalf:  
and I know that his testimony is true.  
You sent messengers to John, and he gave his testimony to the truth -  
not that I depend on human testimony: no, it is for your salvation that I mention it.  
John was a lamp, alight and shining:  
and for a time you were content to enjoy the light that he gave.  
But my testimony is greater than John’s: the deeds my Father gave me to perform,  
these same deeds of mine testify that my Father sent me.  
Besides, the Father who sent me bears witness to me himself.  
You have never heard his voice, you have never seen his shape,  
and his word finds no home in you,  
because you do not believe in the one he has sent.

In one sense, there is little in chapter 11 that is not already said in this passage; but the dramatisation of the Lazarus scene is so intense and irreplaceable in imaginative terms, that we cannot help thinking of the words in chapter 5 as an excogitation from a real experience. In fact, there is substantial scholarly questioning of the veracity of Jn 11 as a piece of history; the raising of Lazarus is there represented as the ultimate, decisive element in the hostile intentions of the Sanhedrin; in the other three Gospels there is no reference to the story at all. Was Jesus really crucified *because he raised the dead*? Some of you have suggested that Jesus is crucified *because he has divine powers*. I can see how he might be crucified for *making divine claims*, but little indication that he was effectively eliminated *because he was divine*. If it were so, we would have to say, along with mediaeval anti-Semitism, that the Jews purposely and formally rebelled against God when he came amongst them. Let no-one be guilty of such a statement.

The dramatisation of the Lazarus scene in terms of personal emotion renders it practically unique in the Fourth Gospel. The fright and apprehension of the Twelve, the determined and nuanced motivation of Jesus, the remark of Thomas, and the twin outpourings of reproach from the two sisters create a field of power around the central affirmations of the story: the image of Jesus racked with sorrow and anger as he sees death coming so close to him through his friend, the occlusion between the faith of Jesus and the demurral of Martha against the unsealing of the tomb; and the dramatic appearance of the shrouded man in response to the call of Jesus - these are unparalleled elsewhere in this Gospel. Comparison with the laconic tone of the Crucifixion account is extremely instructive. There the nailing of Jesus forms a subordinate clause, and there is absolutely nothing in the vocabulary of the story to evoke emotion; more time is spent on spelling out the details of the deposition than are wasted on any element of pain or drama. The Crucifixion account does not relate in literary terms to incidents like Lazarus'. We can have little doubt that the Evangelist is here involved in spelling out specific consequences of *the Word being made Flesh*, and *our seeing his glory*.

It is worth asking what value the life and death of a Lazarus have in the great scheme of things. Of what lasting significance is the story of his resuscitation, only to die again at the behest of the Creator? Indeed the story has symbolic value only - to the point where the eventual earthly fate of Lazarus is left as a matter of conjecture. As one raised from the death by Jesus, he is a marked man. As an element of the Book of Signs it has value: Jesus goes to rescue his beloved Lazarus, not from mortal illness, but from death itself. Jesus walks amongst devastated people with his heart filled with the divine promise, and with no question as to the ultimate will of the Father. This drama makes all of that into unforgettable human imagery, and this imagery is the *raison d'être* of the story. The Fourth Evangelist knows that what he dramatises is the truth; the question about the historical verisimilitude of the story is of little account beside the truth of its meaning.

## Structure of the Johannine Discourse On Bread (*Jn 6: 31-51a*)

The Structure is recognisably based on that of a rabbinic synagogue sermon. That it was originally conceived as such probably explains the rather abrupt news of 6:59, that it was taught at Capernaum, *in the synagogue*. The editor has disguised the sermon as a piece of dialogue, but it is still quite easily visible.

**Preliminary argument** between Jesus and the crowd:

- 1 Christological question: “When did you come here?”
- 2 Jesus accuses the crowd’s intentions: arraigns them for misplaced appetite:  
He promises them a better form of food.
- 3 The people demand a lesson: “What is it to work for God?”
- 4 THE WORK OF GOD IS TO BELIEVE IN THE ONE HE HAS SENT.
- 5 The people demand a sign in exchange for their faith.

**The Discourse: First Citation from Scripture** (supplied by the congregation)

“He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” (Ps 78:24)

- 1 The Rabbi reads the text, attributes the pronoun, chooses the tense of the verb:  
“God (*not* Moses) gives you (*not* gave you) bread from heaven.”
- 2 The concept of *true* bread
- 3 **Ego eimi**: “I AM the bread from heaven”.
- 4 The people ask for this true bread always. Jesus arraigns them for lack of faith.  
He promises that no-one who comes to him will be rejected.  
He claims divine warrant for his mission and for his present challenge.  
He holds out the promise of eternal life to those who believe in him.
- 5 The Jews begin to murmur against Jesus (cf Exodus/Numbers against Moses)

**Second Citation from Scripture** (supplied by Jesus - provenance uncertain)

“They will all be taught by God”

- 1 Jesus appropriates this text too, saying that to be taught by God is to come to himself.
- 2 He claims uniquely to have seen the Father.

**Summary of the Discourse**

“I am the bread of life: your fathers ate manna in the desert and are dead; but this is the bread that comes down from heaven, that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.”