

THREE EXEGETICAL KEY POINTS TO INTERPRET THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of John is a great and unique book in the New Testament in many ways. New Testament scholars have confessed its depth and uniqueness throughout the history of the church. Most scholars agree on the famous comparison of John's Gospel to a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant can swim. D. A. Carson describes it to be "simple enough for a child to read and complex enough to tax the mental powers of the greatest minds."¹ The significance of this gospel has been proved by the number of commentaries written after World War II, by well-known New Testament scholars such as E. C. Hoskyns, Rudolf Bultmann, C. H. Dodd, C. K. Barrett, R. H. Lightfoot, Raymond E. Brown, Leon Morris and many others, not including the ones published recently.² R. A. Culpepper calls the Fourth Gospel as "the most influential book of the New Testament" and "the seedbed for much of the church's theology."³

To correctly understand this most significant and influential gospel, one needs to follow the author's guideline in reading and interpreting the gospel. Apostle John presents a clear statement in his gospel. If any reader misses the intention of the author, his understanding may be totally out of context. The best way to understand the Gospel of John is to follow the author's written statement concerning its purpose. John wrote his gospel to show, to prove and to confirm that "Jesus did many

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¹D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14-17* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), 9.

²Raymond E. Brown's Anchor Bible Commentary on *The Gospel according to John I-XII* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1966), xxi-xl, provides useful details to understand the main issues of discussion among New Testament scholars.

³R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13.

other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”(20:30-31). According to his purpose statement, John had intentionally selected some crucial accounts from Jesus’ ministry, especially miraculous signs from among the many materials on hand and edited them according to his purpose (21:25). This statement has three important words in relation to the purpose and structure of the gospel. The purpose of this article is to find the relationship of the three key words with reference to the Apostle’s original intention. These three key words are deeply and inseparably related, and forms sequential steps for the structure and development of the gospel. The understanding of the nature of these three words and their relationship to one another is crucial for the exegesis and interpretation of the gospel as a whole.

THREE EXEGETICAL KEY POINTS

The first exegetical key word is “sign”⁴ which deals with past events carried out by Jesus. The second one is “belief in Christ” (faith) which relates to the person who reads the signs at the present time. The third one is “life” which is given as the result of the right response to the signs. There is no automatic development to the following steps. The correct understanding or response of one step leads to the following step. However, these three key words appear not in order but in a mixed form as they are found in the Prologue as well.⁵

THE SIGN STRUCTURE: GOSPEL OF WITNESSING

Why Sign Instead of Miracle?

John never used “wonder” (*dynamis*) which is the Synoptists’ favorite word with reference to miracles.⁶ According to Rengstorf’s definition of this term, Johannine sign is something one can or should see, used in the sense of “pointer,” “mark,” or “proof” in self-authentication, and offers the chance to know something specific. He

⁴In translating *semeion*, NIV suggests “miraculous” in addition to the original meaning of “sign” both in the Gospel of John and in the Synoptic Gospels.

⁵Detailed discussion on this will appear in the main discussion.

⁶Matthew used this word 12 times, Mark 10 times, Luke 15 times, but John never.

writes, "In John's Gospel, of course, the ref[erence] is almost exclusive to the person of Jesus."⁷ Further, it is the result of a personal action that cannot be separated from the actor. Nicodemus confessed that the signs, which Jesus performed, proved God's presence with Jesus (3:2).

The Old Testament background of this term shows another important aspect. In the LXX, signs (*semeia*) were used, especially in Egypt in the time of Moses to prove God to be Almighty and Israel to be his chosen people: "So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with *miraculous signs* and wonders" (Deut. 25:8). In this sense, signs of the Exodus are a type for the signs done by Jesus, as the Exodus itself is the sign for Jesus' redemption. The significance of signs at the time was with the theological meaning of the divine revelation of God or of his glory.⁸

What does the miraculous sign mean?

Almost all Johannine scholars agree that "sign" (*semeion*) is one of the key words in this gospel.⁹ The Synoptic Gospels used the word "sign" many times (13 times in Matthew, 7 times in Mark and 11 times in Luke) to refer not to the miracles of Jesus, but to the miracle requested by the Jews, which Jesus refused to supply. Interestingly, even in the Gospel of John, out of 17 usages of this term "sign," the term is used twice by Jesus' opponents to request performances of miracles (2:18; 6:30). John used it once to compare the miracles of John the Baptist and of Jesus; John the Baptist did not perform any kind of sign like Jesus had done (10:41). It was used once when the Jews asked themselves whether Jesus was the Christ (7:31). On two occasions, Jesus himself used this term stating the hardness of his hearers' hearts (4:48; 6:26). The remaining 11 occasions, "sign" always

⁷Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "*semeion, semaino, semeion, asemos, eusemos, sessemon*," *TDNT* VII, D II, 7-III, 1, 243. Leon Morris points out the 'witness' aspect of sign in his NICNT commentary on *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 855, in the sense of all the signs had been done in the presence of his disciples and they are witnesses of them

⁸For details concerning Old Testament background, refer to Rengstorf, 209-221. Concerning the typological character of Johannine sign, refer to the same article by Rengstorf, 257.

⁹C. H. Dodd divides the Gospel of John into two books, the Book of Signs (Chaps. 2-12) and the Book of the Passion (Chaps. 13-20). Raymond Brown follows the similar outline except calling the second half part as the Book of Glory.

refers to the miracles of Christ. “Sign” in the Gospel of John refers to more than a miracle done by anyone. It is limited to the acts of Jesus. Even in the usage of the term apart from Jesus’ works, all have the miracle of Jesus for their counterpart where the issue raised is whether Jesus was the Christ or not.

Sign as the Interpretation of the Work of Jesus

Though John never used the word “miracle,” the term, “work” (*ergon*), is common in his gospel. He used the term 27 times in the gospel. This term was used for both good and evil deeds of human beings, of the world or of God, in general (3:19, 20, 21; 6:28, 29; 7:7; 8:39, 41; 14:12). Eighteen times out of 27, John applied the word to what Jesus had done. These works are clearly related to the signs of Jesus. In 17:4, Jesus used this word confessing that he had accomplished his mission on earth from God (5:36; 9:3,4; 10:32). Jesus himself characterized his works in distinction from those of others. Jesus recognized his works as the works of God the Father abiding in Him (14:10). In this case, the works, like the signs, have a revelatory function. Calling Jesus’ miracle a sign is the same as witnessing to his identity by his works done in the Father’s name (10:25). In this way, most of Johannine signs are miraculous. But they are more than wonders or miracles. This writer agrees with C. H. Dodd when he writes that “to the evangelist a *semeion* is not, in essence, a miraculous act, but a significant act, one which, for the seeing eye and the understanding mind, symbolizes eternal realities.”¹⁰

Sign is the interpretation of the work of Jesus in relation to God. That is, signs prove that Jesus is the one who has been sent from God. The ultimate goal of this sign is, as is found in the purpose statement, to witness or to point out that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This witnessing concept is the core of sign presentation. In this sense, sign should not be limited only to miracles. According to his purpose statement, anything that has revelatory characteristics in relation to Jesus as Christ, is qualified to be called a sign in the gospel. Therefore, when Jesus reproached the Jews when they demanded him to perform signs, he was pointing out nothing else but their misunderstanding of the correct meaning of sign (6:30-36). Westcott points out that seven

¹⁰C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, 90.

types of witnessing are found throughout the gospel.¹¹ Considering the structural emphasis of the Gospel of John, not only the witness of works but also everything that is bearing witness to Christ, is worthy to be called sign or interpretation of sign, in a broad sense.¹² Even the Prologue contains many of these “sign words,” such as creation (vv. 3-4), light (v. 5), witness to the light (vv. 6-8, 15-18), and incarnation and earthly life of Jesus (vv. 9-14).

Sign as the Structural Marker of the Gospel of John

Many scholars attempt to relate a certain sign narrative to a certain discourse.¹³ To accomplish this, they attempt to limit the number of signs to seven, to match the seven discourses in the gospel.¹⁴ In the gospel, there is no specific numbering of signs to seven. Rather, J. N. Sanders holds that John has six signs, not seven, leading into the seventh sign of Jesus’ resurrection.¹⁵

The first two sign narrations were counted in ordinal numbers. However, these two numbers are not related to the other following sign narratives. The literal meaning of 5:54 is, “Again this second sign, Jesus did on coming from Judea to Galilee.” The differentiation in the order of the two signs comes because they occur in the same place, namely Cana of Galilee. Thus, it is not clear whether John selected only seven signs or more as the structural marker of the gospel. Raymond Brown stands strongly against the seeing of seven signs in relation to seven discourses in the Fourth Gospel that has been suggested by

¹¹The seven signs are the witness of the Father, the witness of Christ Himself: the witness of works or signs; the witness of Scripture; the witness of the Forerunner; the witness of disciples; and the witness of the Spirit, according to Brooke Foss Westcott, ed. by A. Westcott (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), xcii-xcvi.

¹²Concerning the structure and witness, see John Painter, *John: Witness & Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975), 9-11.

¹³Leon Morris introduces seven signs as the basic materials of the Gospel of John and relates to seven discourses as the basic structure of the gospel in his book, *Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 20-42. For more details, compare C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 297-389.

¹⁴Usually they agree, identifying the seven signs as turning water into wine (2:1-11), healing the nobleman’s son (4:46-54), healing the lame man (5:1-18), feeding the multitude (6:1-15), walking on the water (6:16-21), giving sight to the man born blind (9:1-41), and raising of Lazarus (11:1-57).

¹⁵*A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, edited and completed by B. A. Mastin (London, 1968), 5.

Boismard.¹⁶ The rest of the sign narratives do not include any ordinal concept. Between the first two signs, of turning water into wine and of healing the nobleman's son, Jesus performed many other signs (plural) even in Jerusalem (2:23) but John did not narrate them in detail. This kind of passing references to signs can be found in 4:45, 7:4, 12:37 and 20:30. It is impossible to say that there is no relation at all between the signs and the discourses. It is correct that the Apostle John limited himself to a certain number of signs in the gospel while he was editing all the materials he had possessed (21:25), and that there might be some relationship between signs and discourses. Some signs clearly connect certain discourses, such as the feeding of the multitude and the discourse on the bread of life, and the sign of giving sight to the blind and the discourse on the light of the world.

Every Johannine Sign Contains a Common Pointing

But not all scholars agree on the connections of some signs to certain discourses. The issue is how far this kind of link extends. The complexity of connection comes from trying to connect one sign to a one particular discourse alone. It is possible to connect one discourse to more than one sign, and alternatively one sign to more than one discourse. C. H. Dodd takes this position. In his seven "episodes," he includes more than one sign and more than one discourse.¹⁷ In this way, Raymond Brown, whose view¹⁸ this writer is partially agreeing,

¹⁶Raymond E. Brown insists, "But a closer look leads one to suspect that this ingenuity is being imposed on the evangelist, who never once gives the slightest indication that he has such numerical patterns in mind and never uses the word seven," XLII.

¹⁷*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 297-317. A good example is found in his first "episode" (2:1-4:42). He includes two distinct narratives or signs (those of changing water into wine and cleansing the Temple) and two passages of discourse (those of a dialogue with Nicodemus, and a dialogue with the Samaritan woman, in addition to a succeeding monologue). They all prove a common theme of "the New Beginning," that is, the inauguration of a new order of life for mankind through the incarnation of the Logos. In the second "episode," he includes two healings and one discourse (pp. 318-332).

¹⁸Brown divides the Book of Signs into four parts including the activities of John the Baptist and his disciples who follow Jesus ultimately according to the movement of Jesus ministry chronologically, *op. cit.*, CXL-CXLIV. He rationalizes his proposal as following Apostle John's own division. "We propose our own division with hesitancy, realizing the danger of imposing insights on the evangelist. But we do claim that there are certain indications in the gospel itself for the broad lines of this division (*ibid.*,

suggests that the division of signs should be done not according to certain narratives but according to all the activities of Jesus including those narratives. Whether the number of signs in the gospel is seven or not, all the signs exist toward one work or one sign, the sign par excellence, that is, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (7:21), which is the consummation of all signs.

THE BEGINNING OF BELIEF: RIGHT RESPONSE TO THE SIGN

Each narrative or dialogue in the gospel has a purpose for showing a certain aspect of Jesus as the Son of God, such as life, new birth, light, Word, judgment or death. However, their consummated goal is to witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. All the signs, which occur in the gospel, should be interpreted according to this “sign structure.” If sign is defined as “something pointing out Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God,” then it should be related to that function of pointing. Every time the term sign is used in the gospel, the specific function of the sign should be interpreted accordingly.

“Christological Interpretation” of the Sign

If sign loses its function of pointing, there is no meaning in its existence. Johannine sign stands for the purpose of pointing out Jesus Christ. Identifying the meaning of signs in the gospel is the first step to correct exegesis. John arranged these signs in the gospel to follow his purpose statement. After one gets the right understanding of signs and their related functions, the natural development is to move to the next step, the step of belief in Christ. This second step of Johannine structure should be called “Christological exegesis”—that is, to interpret the nature of a sign’s witness in relation to Christology. What kind of Christ is Jesus, or what should be done after correctly interpreting the signs? A sign shows the meaning of what Jesus did, including his speeches. The second step of exegesis leads to who Jesus is upon the foundation of what he had done. The ultimate conclusion of “sign recognition” is to verify the deity of Jesus and to show that Jesus is the Christ, who was the preexistent, perfect, incarnate God and who had dwelt among human beings as a perfect man. The main theme of

christological interpretation has been proved in the Prologue, which is the key proclamation of the gospel's purpose.

Jesus, "The Son of Man"

Jesus is the human name for Christ on earth in the gospels. To stand against Käsemann's docetic understanding¹⁹ of the Johannine Christ, the reality of Jesus' manhood should be mentioned. First of all, in the gospel, references to Jesus as a man are repeatedly found.²⁰ The second evidence against Käsemann is John's use of the phrase, the Son of Man for Jesus in the gospel. To prove Jesus is the Christ, John uses the title, the Son of Man, thirteen times in his gospel, which is as much as in the Synoptic Gospels.²¹

In the Old Testament, this phrase renders the Hebrew *BEN ADAM*, whose basic meaning is "human being."²² The usage of this phrase in Judaism, before Christianity, covers some special elected one but not in the sense of a Messiah in an individual figure.²³ The Daniel passage (7:13) provides not "the Son of Man" but one "like a son of man." Ezekiel used this phrase (2:1ff) referring to the prophet himself. There can be no doubt that the image of Daniel influenced later apocalyptic writings. However, this title in the gospels is a newly developed one.

The Son of Man: Jesus' Self-designation

This phrase is a characteristic self-designation of Jesus in the Gospel of John²⁴ as it is in the Synoptics. The reason why Jesus favored

¹⁹For more information on a docetic understanding of Johannine Christ, refer to Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ*, 43-67.

²⁰4:29; 5:12; 7:46, 51; 8:40; 9:11, 16; 10:33; 11:47, 50; 18:14, 17, 29; 19:5.

²¹The title "the Son of Man" as designation of Jesus is found only in the gospels except once at Acts 7:56. In the Synoptics, Matthew uses 30 times, Mark 13 and Luke uses it 25 times.

²²In Psalm 8:4, this phrase stands in the place of a man, in parallelism: "what is *the man* that you are mindful of him *the son of man* that you care for him?" (Italics are added).

²³For a more detailed discussion on this, refer to C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 241-249.

²⁴C. H. Dodd defines the Son of Man in the Gospel of John as "the term 'Son of Man' throughout this gospel retains the sense of who incorporates in Himself the people of God, or humanity in its ideal aspect," (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 248).

this phrase, rather than many other Messianic titles,²⁵ is that it was the best term, unpolled by the contemporary Jews of Jesus' time for pointing out the Messiah.²⁶ However, there is another reason for Jesus' preference for this title. This phrase indicates the humanity of Jesus as a historical individual of the human race who has weaknesses of flesh in him; he has all kinds of human emotions as well as characteristic weaknesses of the human body.

Another reason for using the phrase, the Son of Man, is that it is the best word to indicate the incarnation of Jesus. C. K. Barrett describes this truth of incarnation by using the concept of descending-ascending. He writes, "The first stage in the story is the descent of the Son of Man from God to the world, the second is his ascent to where he was at the beginning."²⁷ Barrett illustrates the functions of this phrase in three points; John was affected by a tradition, connecting the Eucharist and the Son of Man; the Son of Man is a suitable description for a figure who descends from heaven; the Son of Man is a suitable term for a self-giving figure.²⁸ This writer adds one more point. This phrase is the perfect term to show the Father-Son relationship on earth. That is why in many places "Son of God" and "Son of Man" are used together.²⁹

"THE SON OF GOD" CONFESSION IN THE GOSPEL

Sign, the Connecting Link

Between His Humanity and His Divinity

If "the Son of Man" refers to the humanity of Jesus who performed the signs, Jesus as "the Son of God" is the proper interpretation of his

²⁵Concerning some messianic titles for Jesus, refer to Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ*, 72-74.

²⁶Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. Hall (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 282. Concerning the wrong Jewish messianic expectations, consult Erich H. Kiel, *The Passion of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 13-17.

²⁷C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 48.

²⁸*Ibid.* 45-49.

²⁹In the third chapter of the Gospel John, Jesus calls himself as the Son of Man (v. 14) and in the same context he uses the Son of God for calling himself (v. 18). Also refer to sixth chapter of John's gospel verse 62 (the Son of Man) and verse 69 (the holy one of Israel). Another reference is the case of 5:25 (the Son of God) and 5:27 (the Son of Man). Concerning the relationship of the Son of Man and Son of God, refer to Oscar Cullmann 290.

deity. In this way, sign is the connecting link between the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Jesus. That is why “the Son of God” is the title used by others rather than Jesus of himself. The claim of Jesus’ sonship is most offensive to the Jews (10:31f). This phrase is used in the testimony of John the Apostle (20:31) and when Jesus mentions himself (5:25; 10:36; 11:4). When others use this title, “the Son of God,” they confess the messiahship of Jesus.

The Son of God as the Christ

As John Painter says, the divine status of Jesus is the heart of the controversy with the Jews with which the gospel is concerned.³⁰ In this way, the Son of God in John is directly related to the issue of the deity of Jesus. The usage of “the Son of God” in the Fourth Gospel is different from that in the Synoptics. In addition to the messianic concept of the Synoptics on this term, John emphasizes Jesus’ unique divine sonship to God in the gospel. It is true that Jesus called himself “the Son of Man” instead of “the Son of God” in the Fourth Gospel. However, the sonship of Jesus in relation to God can be found not only as a title, but also in content. More than one hundred times Jesus calls God “Father” and himself the “Son” in John’s gospel.

Reader’s Confession: Jesus is the Son of God

The main purpose of writing the gospel is to let every reader confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That is how the Apostle John develops his gospel according to this purpose—to produce the confession from the mouth of readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. In this confession, the deity and the humanity of Jesus have been included. This is the second stage of sign interpretation, that is, confessing that the human Jesus is God. This phrase, “the Son of God” becomes the backbone structure of the gospel together with the sign related passages. From the very beginning, right after the Prologue, John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1:34). As the result of John the Baptist’s confession, the first two disciples of Jesus were chosen, followed by the rest of the disciples (1:35-51). Nathanael succeeds John the Baptist in confessing

³⁰John Painter, “Christology and the Fourth Gospel: A Study of the Prologue,” *Australian Biblical Review* 31 (Oct. 1983), 50.

this aim of the gospel (1:49) and in experiencing the sign of Jesus' secret knowledge (1:50).

The Negative Response of Most Jews

This basic confession of belief in Christ runs throughout the gospel. This response appears in two ways: one positive, and the other negative. As the result of the first sign, the disciples of Jesus comprehended the meaning of the sign correctly and "put their faith in him" (2:11).³¹ The next two following signs mentioned in the gospel are undone or unwritten ones. The sign of clearing the temple is related to Jesus himself as the real temple where God dwelt. However, the Jews failed to read the greatest sign of all, the destruction of the temple and rebuilding it in three days (2:18). False interpretation of the sign led them into unbelief. But his disciples interpreted the last and perfect sign correctly and they believed everything (2:22).

Many Believed in His Name

In spite of the negative response of most Jews, many believed in his name to see the signs Jesus did which are not written in detail in the gospel (2:23). Nicodemus, interpreting the signs correctly, visited Jesus, and asked for explanations concerning the signs done by Jesus (3:2). He wanted to see a more clear interpretation of the signs. Nicodemus succeeded in interpreting the signs correctly in the first step, but failed in the second step. He failed to interpret the signs christologically.

The second sign, John called, was interpreted justly and finished its function. As the result of Jesus' healing his son, the loyal official experienced the second step of sign interpretation personally through his own experience (4:53-54). In fact, he had experienced the first step of sign interpretation already before he had the second. He must have

³¹They already had believed in Jesus as the result of John the Baptist's confession. In this case, they put their faith continuously in Jesus. One of the characteristics of the Gospel of John is the use of the phrase "believe in (*pisteuein eis*)."³¹ This phrase is used only once in the Synoptics (Matt 18:6; Mk 9:42) and rare in the Pauline letters (Rom 10:14; Gal 2:16; Phil 1:29). John always uses the verbal form of faith, not the noun form. Merrill C. Tenney defines the word *pisteuo* as follows. "Never does it mean a mere assent to a proposition. It usually means acknowledgement of some personal claim, or even a complete personal commitment to some ideal or person." (*JOHN: The Gospel of Belief*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948, 32.)

seen or heard many signs (4:48).

Failures of Identifying the Sign

Other failures of identifying signs appear in chapter six. The great crowd of people followed Jesus because they saw the signs done by Jesus (6:2, 14) but failed to interpret them christologically. Jesus pointed to their failure to interpret his signs. In appearance, they followed Jesus because they had seen the signs that Jesus had done. In fact, they all failed to interpret the signs christologically (6:26, 30). The correct interpretation of all signs are to be done christologically and to lead to belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, a interpretation in which most Jews failed.

Chapter seven deals with the argument on the interpretation of signs in the second level, that is, christologically. Many of the crowd put their faith in Jesus as the result of having the correct interpretation of signs. They interpreted the signs correctly as pointing to Jesus as the Christ (7:31). The rest of the chapter and chapter eight cover their failure in interpreting the signs christologically.

The conflict continues in the following chapters. The sign of healing a man who was born blind. While this man develops his interpretation of the sign correctly, the Jews³² consistently misinterpret the sign throughout chapter nine. Many people across the Jordan understand the sign correctly and believed in Jesus as the Messiah. The next occurring sign is that of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This is the great conflict-causing sign among the Jews. Some interpret the great sign of Lazarus christologically and believe in him (11:45). The other party stays in misinterpretation. The Jewish leaders recognized the act as a sign (11:47) but did not go up to the second phase of interpretation. Rather, the conflict grows stronger, becoming systematic as their misinterpretation of the sign continues (12:18, 37). This reaction of unbelief leads Jesus ultimately to death on the cross.

Various Stages of Christological Interpretation

Most discourses deal with the christological interpretation of signs even though most of them do not contain the term, “sign,” in them. The

³²In the Gospel of John, the Apostle uses “the Jews” more than 70 times, sometimes in a good or neutral sense but most times he uses it to denote the Jewish nation as hostile to Jesus. Refer to Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 130f.

main theme covers the meaning of signs, that is, the question of who Jesus is. This stage is not always the same in all believers. It starts and develops until one confirms the last stage of sign interpretation. Nicodemus asks for the revelation of Jesus himself. In spite of his first stage of belief on Jesus, he wanted a more advanced christological understanding, which is the main theme of the discourse.

The Samaritan woman at Sychar shows her developing stage of interpreting Jesus. First, she calls Jesus “a Jewish man” against a Samaritan woman (4:9), then “one greater than Jacob” (4:12), and then “a prophet” (4:19), and lastly Jesus as “the Christ” (4:25, 26). Even though the term, “sign,” does not appear, she expects to see a sign greater than Jacob. Jesus gave her a sign of secret knowledge. She recognized the pointing of the sign and believed in Christ firmly.

The man, who was born blind and personally experienced the sign, shows how his understanding of the sign has been developed. First, he interpreted the sign christologically, and acknowledged that Jesus was a prophet (9:17). Finally, he had a full understanding of the real point of the sign; he confessed that Jesus was the Son of Man (9:35-38). In this case, the Son of Man from the mouth of Jesus and the Son of God from the mouth of others have the same connotation of the Christ.³³

The case of Martha is unique. She confessed this second stage of sign interpretation even before the sign of Lazarus happened (11:27). Explanation of this incident of her confession is that she already has seen many other signs before, and transferred her experience to the sign of Lazarus’ resurrection.

THE EXEGESIS OF LIFE:

THE GOSPEL OF CONFIRMATION

The Role of Life in the Kingdom of God

The second exegesis of belief or christological structure leads a believer to the last stage of sign interpretation. Believing itself is not a terminal goal of the gospel. Believing is the means to a greater end. The ultimate goal of the Gospel of John is to confirm the eternal life as the result of accepting the sign pointing and that to which it points.³⁴ The

³³C. H. Dodd confirms this in “The Johannine Son of Man is the Son of God” (*op. cit.*, 244).

³⁴In the purpose statement of this gospel John uses two purpose phrases with

best definition or relationship of belief and life is given by Jesus himself: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (17:3). The true knowledge of signs is to lead to life eternal.

“Kingdom of God” is the Synoptics’ favorite word to refer to salvation. The major theme of Jesus’ parables is to show the significance of the Kingdom of God. However, in the Fourth Gospel, this phrase is found twice in one place when Jesus has a dialogue with Nicodemus (3:3, 5).³⁵ The emphasis of “the Kingdom of God” is God’s rule in action in the Synoptics. John replaces this emphasis with “eternal life.” The best blessing of God’s reign is the life in the Kingdom,³⁶ which lasts forever. In this way, these three exegetical key words, “sign,” “belief,” and “life,” cannot be separated in the Gospel of John.³⁷

Why “Life” instead of “Kingdom of God?”

“Life” in the Gospel of John is the same as “life in the Kingdom of God.”³⁸ However, John’s preference for “life” in place of “the Kingdom of God” is more than the replacement of words. John has a different emphasis by using “life” instead of “Kingdom.” Everywhere in the gospel, the words related to the life cycle are found such as birth and

subjunctive verbs “in order that you may believe (*hina pisteuete*)” and “in order that you may have life (*hina . . . zoe echete*).” Also, these two related verbs are found in the purpose statement of the First Epistle of John (5:13).

³⁵Jesus uses “my Kingdom” once in John(18:36). Leon Morris introduces the reason why the Apostle is avoiding the phrase, “Kingdom of God,” as the result of his own misunderstanding of the term when the two brothers asked a special privilege in the Kingdom of God (Mk 10:35ff), in John, 214.

³⁶G. R. Beasley-Murray illustrates Kingdom related synonyms such as, “inherit eternal life,” “treasure in heaven,” “enter the kingdom of God,” and “be saved” in his book, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 3.

³⁷This writer found that Merrill Tenney shares a similar view concerning the relationship of the three main themes of the purpose statement: “In the *signs* appear the revelation of God; in *belief*, the reaction they ought to evoke; in *life*, the result that belief brings. They integrate the appeal of the entire Gospel” in *John the Gospel of Belief*, 33f (Italics original).

³⁸G. R. Beasley-Murray points out that in the Synoptics, “kingdom of God” is not equivalent to “life” or “life eternal.” The former is the sovereign action of God for the salvation of humankind, but the latter is a blessed existence under that saving sovereignty, *Gospel of Life*, 2.

death, growth, food and drink and others. This life structure is another key to interpret the Gospel of John.

John starts the prologue with God's creation, which includes all kinds of life. Also, he defines *Logos* as the source of all creation and light of all men (1:4). The main theme of the gospel and of the prologue is "witness" (1:5-11), which stands for "sign," concerning the *Logos* who has the life in the form of "born from above" (1:12).

Out of seven major signs and related discourses, six cases are all related to the life-concept and at least have the elements of life: three healings, feeding drinks and bread, and ultimately raising from death. It is the same that the seven "I AM" statements contain life-related words.³⁹ This life theme in the form of rebirth appears in the dialogue of Jesus with Nicodemus. He raises the issue of signs but Jesus answers with the issue of rebirth. This dialogue ends with the theme of belief and eternal life (3:15, 16, 36). The dialogue with the Samaritan woman starts with water for a drink, moves to the living water which gives eternal life, and ends with belief in Christ (4:25, 42). This belief and eternal life theme continues on to the sign of the healing at the pool (5:24).

Life in Christ

The signs of two healings are pointing to the greater truth that Jesus is the source of spiritual healing and eternal life (5:21; 6:54). Jesus insists that he is not only living water but also the bread of life (6:35). Many Jews failed to see the life in Jesus. They saw only material meaning in the sign of feeding. As a result, even many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him (6:66). Failure to see the life in Christ results in a failure to believe in Christ Himself. Sign interpretation completes when one arrives to this eternal life.

One of the characteristics of Johannine life concept is that "eternal life" is possible only through the unity with the person Jesus. Departing from Jesus, there is no eternal life. It is because Jesus himself is the life (1:4; 12:25; 14:6). This concept has been described very well in the

³⁹They are "the bread of *life*" (6:48); "*light* of the world, in the Prologue, life is said as the light of men" (8:12); "the door through which salvation is given" (10:7,9); "the good shepherd who gives his *life* for keeping the *life* of sheep" (10:11); "the resurrection and *life*" (11:25); "the way, the truth, and the *life*" (14:6); "the vine which supports *life* of the branches" (15:1,5).

high-priestly prayer in chapter seventeen. The purpose of Jesus' coming is to give eternal life to men who believe in him (17:2,3). The way of giving eternal life is through becoming one in Christ. The best example of becoming one is shown in the godhead of the Trinity (17:21, 22). The way of becoming unity is abiding in (*meno*). Paul has a similar description of becoming one in the phrase "in Christ." Paul put more emphasis on mystic union and never describes Christ's being in God like men in God.⁴⁰ John puts more emphasis on fellowship, which becomes the main purpose of writing the First Epistle of John (1 John 1:3). This fellowship idea is found all over chapter seventeen.

The Present Aspect of Life

Another peculiarity of Johannine life, in comparison to that of the Synoptics, is that life in John has no need to wait until the last day of Jesus' coming. In other words, Johannine eschatology needs to be explained in relation to Johannine Christology. This means that if one becomes united with Christ, life is in him. The life starts at the moment one believes in the Christ by way of rebirth, and continues after the birth by having fellowship with him. This aspect of life concept in John clarifies the nature of Johannine eschatology. Johannine eschatology starts from present in contrast to that of the Synoptics which emphasize the last days. G. R. Beasley-Murray differentiates those two in terms of "the synoptic horizontal line of eschatological action and the Johannine vertical line."⁴¹ The present aspect of life together with fellowship clarify the exact meaning of the passage, "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25, 26). Earthly body may decay for a while but the fellowship once started would last eternally. Even though Martha did not understand the passage fully, she confessed her belief on Jesus as the Christ who gives eternal life (11:27).⁴² Martha had the right

⁴⁰C. H. Dodd points out the difference of the Johannine concept of mutual indwelling from the idea of Pauline mystical union, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 187-195, Dodd leaves room for Pauline influence upon John, *ibid.*, 193.

⁴¹*Gospel of Life*, 8-13.

⁴²B. F. Westcott describes the present aspect of life in Martha's case: "The resurrection is not a doctrine but a fact; not future but present: not multitudinous but belonging to the unbroken continuity of each separate life. The Resurrection is one manifestation of the life: it is involved in the life. It is a personal communication of the Lord Himself, and not a grace which he has to gain from another," *The Gospel*

understanding of the relationship of Jesus Christ and life correctly. As a result, she believed in him in the full sense of Johannine belief. Faith in John is not a noun but a verb, which signifies that faith is changing. That is the desired procedure which readers follow according to the Apostle John.

John closes his gospel with the confession of Thomas right before writing his purpose statement which is the end of the gospel.⁴³ This incident could be told as the last example or application of the purpose statement. Sign does not appear here. It is because the ultimate sign of Jesus' resurrection has been revealed and interpreted correctly by the disciples except Thomas. It takes time but Thomas himself has the right interpretation of the great sign of Jesus and confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This gospel ends with this correct interpretation of the great sign of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

To understand the Gospel of John, the author's written purpose statement should be applied not only in reading and interpreting but also in teaching and preaching. Apostle John suggests three key words that are crucial in the exegesis of the gospel. They are "sign," "belief in Christ," and "life."

John uses "sign" in the place of "miracle" or "work" of the Synoptics. Miracle itself has no meaning departing from its significance. John puts emphasis on the significance and calls what Jesus said and did as "sign." The miraculous signs in the Gospel of John are pointing out who Jesus is in relation to God. In this sense, sign works as the first exegetical marker of the gospel. Some miraculous signs are related to some discourses. The Apostle edited specially available materials to reveal that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Every sign has a different emphasis in revealing the nature of Jesus' divinity. However, every Johannine sign contains a common point which is that Jesus is the Christ.

The second exegetical marker of interpretation is "belief in Jesus," or "christological interpretation" of the sign. Each time the term or concept of sign appears, belief in Jesus is accompanied. In this sense,

according to John, 89f.

⁴³Almost all New Testament scholars agree that the twenty-first chapter is an appendix.

the sign structure and belief structure work together either negatively or positively. Jesus prefers “the Son of Man” to designate himself. This phrase refers to the humanity of the Christ. The Apostle John prefers “the Son of God” to refer to Jesus’ messiahship. The Apostle expects to have this title confessed by the mouth of the reader. In the gospel, John provides all kinds of believers who are different in status and manner. They show various kinds of responses but are in common accepting Jesus as Christ, the Son of God. In this way, sign functions to interpret and link between the humanity of Jesus and his divinity. Some who do not understand the pointing of the sign show negative responses and lead Jesus to death on the cross.

The last exegetical key in the Gospel of John is “life.” Believing in the Christ is not the final goal of the gospel. It leads to life eternal. Johannine life stands in the place of “the Kingdom of God.” John’s emphasis on the term, “life,” is christological. Christ is the source of life. “Eternal life” is possible only through the unity with the person Jesus, and in deep fellowship with him to continue to enjoy the life which is the purpose of sending the First Epistle of John. Johannine life does not start in the future. It has begun already when one is united with Christ in fellowship.

By focusing on the Apostle’s purpose statement, sign leads the reader to the right response to Jesus, the Christ. The right response to the sign leads the reader to eternal life which begins now and lasts forever. In this way, “sign,” “belief,” and “life,” as three exegetical key words cannot be separated in the Gospel of John but works for the basic structure and development of the purpose of the gospel. The best way to exegete the Gospel of John is to interpret passages in analysis with these three exegetical keys. In application, anyone who studies, teaches, or preaches the Johannine passages should know and apply these three exegetical key words as the basic exegesis principle of the gospel.

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