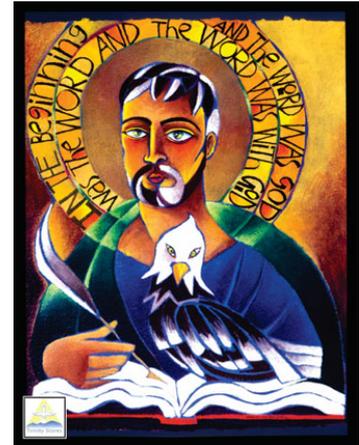


## Studies in John's gospel

For my money, one of the most beautiful verses in John's gospel comes near its end. Having told most of his story, the gospel writer, in chapter 20, writes this: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which aren't written in this book. But these ones are written so that you may believe that the Messiah, the son of God, is none other than Jesus; and that, with this faith, you may have life in his name." For a simple yet eloquent summary of the purpose of this gospel, I defy anyone to do better.



John's gospel has been fiercely debated by scholars over the last two centuries, but debate took a decided turn away from traditional beliefs about the gospel in the last 30 or 35 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though it has been a key text for Christian believers for some 1900 years, its historical accuracy has come under attack in recent decades. So much so that the "dominant approach" to John's gospel among scholars has become one that disregards its claims about history. This approach to the gospel has tended to regard historical facts and theological truths as being two separate, unrelated fields of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

These studies have been written, however, on the understanding that the events of John's gospel did indeed happen. More recently, scholars like Richard Bauckham have argued back against the so-called "dominant view, gathering evidence in support of the argument that the gospel is indeed historically reliable. Such scholarship leads quite naturally to the conviction that history and theology are inseparable – a viewpoint that is eloquently stated in the majestic opening passage of John: "the Word became flesh, and lived among us." This short verse, so easy to overlook as we gloss over words we may have read many times before, forcefully declares what many scholars have tried to refute: that our God acts and has acted within human history. This gospel strains throughout to depict the *connection* between God and human history – quite the opposite of a separation of the two.

The studies that Gillian and I have prepared (and are preparing still...) for this Lenten series are structured according to seven signs recorded in John's Gospel. For the believer and non-believer alike, the artistry of John's gospel is stunning. It is structured around seven "signs" performed by Jesus. Each sign is another clue to Jesus' true identity, and the fact that there are seven of them can be no mistake. Some scholars argue that by recording seven signs, John is deliberately echoing the creation story and so giving his readers the hint that Jesus' ministry is a 'new creation'. This kind of theory is given added clout by the way the gospel begins: "In the beginning..." – a very deliberate and self-conscious echo of Genesis.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the debates in "Johannine scholarship", see Richard Bauckham: *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007. Pages 9-31.

The first sign John points out is the wedding at Cana, and the second is the healing of the official's son. In between times Jesus promises a third sign to his detractors: the destruction of the Jewish temple, followed by its raising within three days. We interpret this as a reference to Jesus' own crucifixion and resurrection, and the crowning seventh sign of the gospel. Between the second and seventh signs, we're left to count for ourselves:

- The healing of the paralysed man in chapter 5
- The feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6
- The healing of the man born blind in chapter 9
- And the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11

In line with other ancient biographies, the signs come 'packaged' with other events and explanatory discourses, so that the reader might understand the significance of what was being enacted. The sign and the packaging are clues as to who Jesus is.

These studies will draw your attention to some of the artistry of John's gospel, while seeking above all else to lead you into a greater commitment to God, and a greater intimacy with Him. If you are not a Christian, Gillian and I hope you will enjoy the beauty of the gospel, and ponder seriously its claims to historical veracity. If it's true, it's amazing! Seriously good news. If you are a Christian, we hope that these studies will lead you into greater intimacy with the Jesus whom the gospel reveals, and from there to a life of more faithful discipleship. But why am I trying to re-phrase what John says best himself in the passage I quoted at the outset: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which aren't written in this book. But these ones are written so that you may believe that the Messiah, the son of God, is none other than Jesus; and that, with this faith, you may have life in his name."

## The First Sign: The Wedding at Cana

Tonight we take a last look at the first of the signs John uses to structure his gospel: the turning of water into wine.

### Read John 2:1-12 (overpage)

This sign takes place in Cana, the elevated town some 20 miles from the Sea of Galilee.

1. What do you think Mary's tone of voice might be at verse 3?
2. What about Jesus' tone of voice at verse 4?
3. What does Jesus mean when he says "My time hasn't come yet"?
4. Yet Jesus responds to his mother's implied request anyway. Why?
5. What do you make of the fact that the jars Jesus had filled were normally used for Jewish purification rites?
6. Who is made witness to this sign, and who is left ignorant of what has just occurred?
7. The chief steward refers to the wine Jesus has produced as "good wine". What does this suggest about Jesus?
8. When it says in verse 11 that Jesus "displayed his glory, and his disciples believed in him", what do you think it means?

### Packaging

- This sign follows immediately after Jesus' promise to Nathanael that he "will see heaven opened, and God's angels going up and down upon the son of man." (1.51)
- Immediately following the story of the wedding at Cana is the account of Jesus clearing out the temple (John 2:14-16), and his promise (in response to the Judeans demanding a 'sign') that he will destroy the temple and rebuild it within three days (John 2:19).
- Each of the synoptic gospels speaks of what follows when you pour new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9, Mark 2, Luke 5).

### Tasks for the coming week

1. Listen to the recording of John 1-3 on the St Michael's website.
2. Read the IVP commentary on the wedding at Cana – you can access this at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) by clicking on *Additional Resources*, scroll down to *Use Commentaries*, and navigate to the IVP New Testament Commentary on John OR go directly to <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Glory-Is-Revealed-Kosher-Domestic>
3. Read Tom Wright's *John for Everyone* (pp 19-23).
4. Which rites or rituals of your own might you allow the good wine of Jesus to fill and revitalise?

## **John 2:1-12 – Water into Wine**

1 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.

3 The wine ran out.

Jesus' mother came over to him.

'They haven't got any wine!' she said.

4 'All right mother,' replied Jesus, 'but what's that got to do with you and me? My time hasn't come yet.'

5 His mother spoke to the servants.

'Do whatever he tells you,' she said.

6 Six stone water-jars were standing there, ready for use in the Jewish purification rites. Each held about 20 or 30 gallons.<sup>2</sup>

7 'Fill the jars with water,' said Jesus to the servants. And they filled them, right up to the brim.

8 'Now draw some out,' he said, 'and take it to the chief steward.' They did so.

9 When the chief steward tasted the water that had turned into wine (he didn't know where it had come from, but the servants who had drawn the water knew), he called the bridegroom.

10 'What people normally do,' he said, 'is to serve the good wine first, and then the worse stuff when people have had plenty to drink. But you've kept the good wine till now!'

11 This event, in Cana of Galilee, was the first of Jesus's signs. He displayed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

12 After this, he went down to Capernaum, with his mother, his brothers and his disciples. He remained there for a few days.

---

<sup>2</sup> Around 76-113 litres.