

The Christological and Eschatological Significance of Jesus' Second Sign-Miracle in the Fourth Gospel: Healing of the Official's Son in 4:43-54

Stephen S. Kim, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The first two miracles in the Gospel of John form a literary *inclusio* around the beginning chapters of the Gospel, commonly known as the “Cana Cycle” (2:1–4:54),¹ because of their common geographical and thematic settings. Geographically, both miracles take place in Cana of Galilee and thus form a literary bracket around these three chapters.² Thematically, both miracles develop the theme of the new life that is available in Christ to all who would believe on His Person. Whereas Jesus demonstrates His authority as the divine Messiah to grant new life by changing water into wine in the first miracle, He illustrates the same truth through restoring the official's son from the brink of death in the second miracle.³ Before discussing the second sign-miracle of Jesus, however, it is imperative that its attendant contexts (3:1-4:42) be developed. These include Jesus' personal interview with Nicodemus in chapter 3 and His personal encounter with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4.

THE SETTING

Having declared Jesus as the promised Messiah by the testimonies of John the Baptist and the disciples in chapter 1,⁴ the Fourth Evangelist demonstrates that as the Messiah He is capable of replacing the old system of Judaism with the new wine of His kingdom (2:1-11). And, as the divine Messiah, He offers eternal life to all who would believe on His Person. Jesus then demonstrated the significance of the first sign-miracle by cleansing the temple in Jerusalem, an authoritative act reserved for the Messiah at His second advent (2:12-22). He performed these signs at the beginning days of His ministry in order to reveal His messianic identity, as the One who will one day establish His promised kingdom. However, as the Messiah He offers new life to all who would believe on Him.

¹ For an analysis of Jesus' first miracle in John 2, see the present writer's article, “The Christological and Eschatological Significance of Jesus' First Sign-Miracle in the Fourth Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March 2010). And, for a more comprehensive analysis of Jesus' seven sign-miracles in the Gospel of John, see the present writer's doctoral dissertation, “The Relationship of the Seven Sign-Miracles of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel to the Old Testament,” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001).

² Although the pericopes that fall in between the two miracles take place outside of Cana (i.e., Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria), these three chapters begin and end with the miracles taking place in Cana, thus causing Brown, among others, to entitle these chapters, “From Cana to Cana,” Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 95.

³ When the Evangelist describes Jesus' miracle of healing the official's son as the second sign-miracle (δεύτερον σημεῖον), he is probably referring to the second miracle Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee, and not necessarily the second miracle among the seven. This is probably so because the other miracles are not numbered by the Evangelist.

⁴ For an analysis of the Christological and eschatological significance of John 1:19-51, a section commonly referred to as the “Testimonium,” see the present writer's previous article, “The Relationship of John 1:19-51 to the Book of Signs in John 2–12,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (July-September 2008): 323-37.

Then in chapter 3, the Evangelist reveals *how* one can partake of the new life that is in Christ through Jesus' personal interview with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is introduced as "a man of the Pharisees." As a "man" he seems to represent the many Jews in Jerusalem who believed in Jesus because they saw the signs he was doing (2:23-25; cf. 3:2).⁵ Nicodemus is also described as a member of the "Jewish ruling council," the Sanhedrin, a ruling body of elders among the Jews.⁶ Culpepper suggests correctly that the figure of Nicodemus also stands to represent the Pharisees, for whom the law and oral traditions marked the way of entrance into God's kingdom.⁷ In short, he was a perfect candidate for entering God's kingdom,⁸ if the conditions for entrance were measured by "human righteousness." However, Jesus makes it clear that he stood outside the kingdom.⁹

The condition for entering the Messiah's kingdom or eternal life according to Jesus is spiritual rebirth or a birth from above.¹⁰ Laney combines the two ideas and

insightfully suggests the phrase, "born again from above."¹¹ It is clear from Nicodemus's response, however, that he could not comprehend Jesus' statement beyond the natural realm. Thus, Jesus rebukingly explains to Nicodemus that the concept of spiritual rebirth is derived from the Hebrew Scriptures and that he should have been familiar with it. Jesus explains that to

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 134-36. There is a literary connection between Jesus' statement in the closing verses of chapter 2 and the opening verse of chapter 3 by the word ἄνθρωπος (2:25, 3:1). The Evangelist is probably suggesting by this that Nicodemus was a man who was moved by Jesus' signs to learn more about Him.

⁶ Brown suggests that Nicodemus almost certainly belonged to the highest governing body of the Jewish people, composed of the priests (Sadducees), scribes (Pharisees), and lay elders of the aristocracy, and that its seventy members were presided over by the high priest, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, 130.

⁷ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Interpreting Biblical Text, ed. Charles B. Cousar (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 134-35.

⁸ The "kingdom of God" (βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ) is an expression rarely used in the Fourth Gospel, being used only twice (3:3, 5). The term βασιλεία, however, is used three times in 18:36. It is an expression used far more frequently in the Synoptic Gospels, being used more than fifty times (Matthew uses the parallel expression "kingdom of heaven"). The kingdom of God mentioned here is not to be confused with the universal kingdom of God, which has always been operative (Ps 103:19). Rather, Jesus is referring to His messianic kingdom that was promised by the OT prophets. The context of these chapters indicates this. As Homer A. Kent Jr. correctly explains, "Although the ultimate establishment of this kingdom will be on earth, at present believers are participating in a limited sense in certain aspects of that kingdom (Col 1:13)," *Light in the Darkness: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), 58. J. Carl Laney concurs by saying, "The kingdom is a present reality (Col 1:13) that will ultimately be realized in physical form (Matt 25:34; 26:29; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor 15:50; 2 Tim 4:18; Rev 20:1-6), *John*, Moody Gospel Commentary, ed. Paul Enns (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 77. The term that the Evangelist uses to communicate this truth throughout his Gospel is "eternal life."

⁹ This is indicated possibly by the phrase that Nicodemus came to Jesus "at night" (νυκτός). Although the Evangelist is indicating the literal time of day when he approached Jesus, but like so many other instances in the Fourth Gospel the Evangelist seems to also clue a symbolic meaning (cf. 9:4; 11:10; 13:30). Besides, the light and darkness motifs have already been developed by the Evangelist in the Prologue (1:1-18) to represent spiritual light and darkness, respectively. Thus, Nicodemus who came to Jesus at "night" lived in spiritual darkness in spite of all his religious credentials.

¹⁰ The phrase "born again" (γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν) can be translated to mean either spiritual rebirth or spiritual birth from above. See BAGD, 77. s.v. ἄνωθεν. This is probably one of John's many double-meanings. For an excellent study of the Johannine double-meanings in the Fourth Gospel, see Saeed Hamidkhani, "Johannine Expressions of Double Meaning: A Literary-Exegetical Analysis (Th. M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992).

¹¹ Laney, *John*, 77.

be “born again/from above” is to be born of water and the Spirit.¹² Laney correctly observes that he is probably referring to the New Covenant promises of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ and His sacrificial death for sins (3:16-17; cf. 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 7:22; 8:6-13; 10:15-22).¹³ In short, then, the requirement for entering the Messiah’s kingdom is spiritual rebirth from above by means of one’s faith in Jesus’ sacrificial provision. As Koester perceptively concludes, “Being born from above means coming to faith in Jesus, who came from above.”¹⁴ Thus, even Nicodemus, a man who possessed impeccable and impressive religious credentials, could enter the Messiah’s kingdom and partake of the eternal life only if he placed his trust in the divine provision of Christ’s sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins.

If the Evangelist reveals *how* one can partake of the new life that Christ offers through Jesus’ personal interview with Nicodemus in chapter 3, then he reveals *who* can enter into that life through His personal encounter with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4. The literary connection between these two chapters is made obvious through the sharp contrast between the two characters, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman.¹⁵ If Nicodemus was a “prime” candidate for entrance into the Messiah’s kingdom, humanly speaking, then the Samaritan woman was the “least likely” of candidates for His kingdom. Culpepper correctly observes that she lacked all of Nicodemus’s advantages.¹⁶ Thus, the great barrier that Jesus crossed in reaching out to the Samaritan woman is highlighted by the Evangelist’s parenthetical statement in verse 9: “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.”¹⁷

¹² Jesus’ enigmatic statement “born of water and spirit” is a concept derived from the OT. Zane C. Hodges suggests that “water and the Spirit” should be translated “water and wind,” a double metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Isa 44:3-5; Ezek 37:9-10), “Water and Spirit—John 3:5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July-September 1978): 206-20. Both the Isaiah and the Ezekiel passages describe the future restoration of Israel as a nation prior to the establishment of the messianic kingdom. Kent points out the similarity between the concept of being “born of water and Spirit” with the New Covenant truths expressed by the prophet Ezekiel (36:25-26), where the water symbolizes the cleansing aspect and the Spirit illustrates the impartation of a new life (heart), *Light in the Darkness*, 58.

¹³ Laney, *John*, 79.

¹⁴ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 164.

¹⁵ Culpepper points out the polarization of characters between the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus: “He was a Jew; she was a Samaritan. He was a respectful leader; she was a village peasant with five husbands in her past.” He observes that there were four levels of barriers that Jesus had to cross in conversing with the woman: gender, nationality, race, and religion. He then concludes that “all four barriers are crossed and community is created,” *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 139. For a more detailed comparison between the two characters, see also David S. Dockery’s article, “Reading John 4:1-45: Some Diverse Hermeneutical Perspectives,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (fall 1988): 127-40. He compares the two characters in a chart by laying them side-by-side on various aspects.

¹⁶ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 136. He compares the two characters this way: “He is a male teacher of Israel; she is a woman of Samaria. He has a noble heritage; she has a shameful past. He has seen signs and knows Jesus is ‘from God’; she meets Jesus as a complete stranger.”

¹⁷ R. E. Brown succinctly describes the barriers between Jews and Samaritans: “The Samaritans are the descendants of two groups: (a) the remnant of the native Israelites who were not deported at the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.; (b) foreign colonists brought in from Babylonia and Media by the Assyrian conquerors of Samaria (II Kings xvii 24ff. gives an anti-Samaritan account of this). There was theological opposition between these northerners and the Jews of the South because of the Samaritan refusal to worship at Jerusalem. This was aggravated by the fact that after the Babylonian exile the Samaritans had put obstacles in the way of the Jewish restoration of Jerusalem, and that in the 2nd century B.C. the Samaritans had helped the Syrian monarchs in their wars against the Jews. In 128 B.C. the Jewish high priest burned the Samaritan temple on Gerizim,” *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, 170.

The setting of the story that takes place at the Jacob's well and the subject of water provide much insight into the significance of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman and the gift He was offering her. While Jesus was offering her "living water"¹⁸ as the gift of eternal life, the woman, like Nicodemus, could not comprehend His offer beyond the natural realm.¹⁹ It is obvious that Jesus was building on the Scriptural metaphor of water (cf. Ps 36:9; Isa 55:1) to refer to the new life that He offers: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:13-14).²⁰ Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well is probably intended to be a reminder of the patriarchal blessings that took place by a well.²¹ As such, Jesus was revealing His own Person as the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures who fulfills the patriarchal promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob long ago. When the woman expresses her expectation for the coming Messiah, Jesus responds with the revelatory words, "I who speak to you am he" (v. 26). By using the expression "I am," Jesus was intentionally identifying Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The motifs of the water and the well in this story also anticipate the eschatological hope expressed by the Hebrew prophets. For instance, the prophet Isaiah, in envisioning the eschatological days, declares: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (12:3). He then continues his prophetic exultation with these significant words: "In that day you will say: 'Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted'" (12:4). The prophets certainly envisioned the last days as a time when the Messiah will not only fulfill His promises to the nation Israel but also as a time when the Gentile nations will also be blessed by Him (cf. Gen 12:1-3). And, the conclusion of the Samaritan woman pericope certainly foreshadows in the present age the truth that will be fulfilled in the eschatological age (4:39-42). The story concludes with the Samaritans believing in the Messiah by faith in recognizing Jesus as "the Savior of the world" (v. 42). In short, the Messiah is not only the King of Israel, He is also the Savior of the world.

To conclude, the story of the Samaritan woman reveals that although she was outside of the Jewish community, not to mention her sinful life-style, by placing her faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah, her sins were washed away and she gained an entrance into the kingdom. This obviously stands in contrast to Nicodemus who, in spite of being within the Jewish community apparently did not walk away from his encounter with Jesus with a newly found life

¹⁸ "Living water" (ἕδωρ ζῶν) was commonly a designation for water that flowed from a spring, in contrast to the stagnant water taken from a cistern (cf. Jer 2:13). Koester points out that "living water" was used for purification purposes in Scripture, i.e. skin disease (Lev 14:5-6, 50-52), bodily discharge (15:13), and corpse defilement (Num 19:17), *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 168. It is clear that the Johannine term "living water" has a double meaning, a characteristic that is common in the Fourth Gospel.

¹⁹ Polhill, "John 1-4: The Revelation of True Life," *Review and Expositor* 85 (summer 1998): 454.

²⁰ By "living water," Jesus was also speaking figuratively for the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39). Jesus says later on in the Gospel, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (v. 38). The Evangelist adds parenthetically following this verse, "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified" (v. 39).

²¹ Both Isaac (Gen 24) and Jacob (Gen 29) met their wives (Rebekah and Rachel) by a well that confirmed God's promise made to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-21). Moses also met his wife, Zipporah, by a well (Exod 2:15-22). Norman R. Bonneau makes an extensive comparison between John 4 and Genesis 24, although he goes perhaps too far in his analogies, "The Woman at the Well: John 4 and Genesis 24," *Bible Today* 67 (October 1973): 1252-59.

like the Samaritan woman.²² These two pericopes reveal, then, that one can only receive eternal life and enter into the Messiah's kingdom by believing in Jesus, regardless of one's religious or ethnic background.

THE SIGN

The miracle narrative begins with transitional verses that shift the scene from Samaria to Galilee (4:43-45).²³ Having ministered in Samaria for two days (v. 43; cf. 4:40), Jesus now returned to the place where He performed His first miracle. These verses also introduce the conclusion of the "Cana Cycle" (2:1-4:54) by bringing Jesus back to the same place where the theme of signs was introduced (2:11).²⁴ By designating the miracle as a "second sign" (δεύτερον σημεῖον), the Evangelist is probably indicating the literary inclusio that brackets these three chapters with the two Cana stories. The second miracle indicates a literary unit not only by its common geographical setting with the first miracle, it also advances the theme that has been highlighted throughout this section, namely, that Jesus is the One who gives life.²⁵ Both miracles develop the theme of the new life that is available in Christ to all who would believe on His Person. Whereas Jesus demonstrates His authority as the divine Messiah to grant new life by changing water into wine in the first miracle, He illustrates the same truth through restoring the official's son from the brink of death in the second miracle.

The miracle story begins with a description of a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum (v. 46).²⁶ Capernaum was a city located approximately eighteen miles northeast of Cana on the shore of Kenneret (the Sea of Galilee), and according to Laney, it was an important tax collection station on the international highway (the Via Maris).²⁷ Apparently, there was stationed a certain royal official, who was probably in the service of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee from Herod's capital at Tiberias, possibly in the service of Rome.²⁸ Borchert explains the

²² It is possible that Nicodemus did come to faith on the night of his encounter with Jesus in chapter 3, although it nowhere mentions it in the context. He more likely placed his trust in Jesus later on, for the Evangelist makes it clear that Nicodemus demonstrated his faith in burying the body of Jesus along with Joseph of Arimathea in 19:38-42.

²³ Although most commentators treat these verses (vv. 43-45) as introductory verses to the miracle narrative, R. E. Brown treats these verses separately as a "transitional passage," *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, 186-89.

²⁴ Borchert, *John 1-11*, 216.

²⁵ Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 144. Culpepper demonstrates that the theme of Jesus as the Giver of life is developed in all the pericopes of the Cana Cycle: the Prologue (1:1-18); the wedding at Cana (2:1-12); the cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple (2:13-25); the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-21); John the Baptist's testimony and Jesus' following discourse (3:22-36); the Samaritan woman (4:1-42); and the official's son (4:43-54).

²⁶ Although this story is somewhat similar to the Synoptic Gospels' account of the Centurion and his servant (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10), the details of the stories are too different for them to be the same occasion. For instance, whereas the person requesting the healing to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is described as a "royal official" (βασιλικός), the Synoptic accounts describe the man as a "centurion" (ἐκατόνταρχος). Furthermore, whereas John describes a "son" (υἱός) who is sick, Luke describes a "servant" (δοῦλος), although Matthew uses the term παῖς which, according to Carson, could refer to either a son or a servant, *The Gospel According to John*, 233-34.

However, as Morris says correctly, "About the only things in common are some interesting verbal parallels and the healing at a distance." *The Gospel According to John*, 288. For a more detailed contrast between this Johannine account with the Synoptic story, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 168-69.

²⁷ Laney, *John*, 101. Köstenberger guesses that the travel involved a day's journey of about fourteen miles and adds that it was mostly uphill, since Cana lay in the Galilean hill country and Capernaum was located several hundred feet below sea level, *John*, 170.

²⁸ A. H. Mead, "The βασιλικός in John 4:46-53," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23 (February 1985): 69-72.

possible background of the official: “Most scholarly opinion leans in favor of the man’s having been in the service of Herod Antipas, a subordinate ruler (for the Romans) or tetrarch in charge of Galilee and Perea, the man who divorced his Nabatean wife and married Herodias (the divorced wife of Philip, Herod’s half-brother; cf. Matt 14:1-12). This official may have been a military officer, but since he was from Capernaum (a town on the Sea of Galilee near the border of another tetrarchy), the official could have been involved in other duties such as revenue collection.”²⁹

Although the ethnic identity of the royal official is subject to debate without an explicit statement, Mead insists he is a Gentile officer in the service of Herod Antipas.³⁰ The contextual evidence seems to support this conclusion.³¹ The verse immediately preceding the account of this miracle may provide a clue to his Gentile identity. At the closing of the Samaritan woman account in chapter 4, the Samaritans who came to faith as a result of the woman’s testimony about Jesus declared: “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the *world*” (v. 42, emphasis added). This verse seems to be a literary hinge to what follows, namely, the salvation of the Gentile household of the royal official (vv. 43-54).

The official’s son lay sick in Capernaum, and was close to death (ἤμελλεν ἀποθνήσκειν). Culpepper accurately observes, “Death is the problem, not a particular illness.”³² This is evident by the fact that the narrative repeatedly emphasizes that the son “lives” (vv. 50, 51, 53) as a result of the miracle. When this man heard that Jesus had come to Galilee, he went to Jesus and “begged” (ἠρώτα) him to come and heal his son (v. 47).³³ His faith becomes evident, because when Jesus granted his request, “he took Jesus at his word” (ἐπίστευσεν ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῷ λόγῳ ὃν εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς) and departed (v. 50). And, his faith in Jesus’ word was confirmed when his servants met him on the road of his return and informed him of the exact hour his son was healed (vv. 51-52). When the man realized that his son was healed the exact time Jesus spoke the words of healing, he and his whole household believed (ἐπίστευσεν) (v. 53).

THE SIGNIFICANCE

On the most obvious level, the miracle reveals that Jesus has the power to save from death even at a great distance. Jesus’ word has the power to work miracles even though He

²⁹ Borchert, *John 1–11*, 219.

³⁰ Mead, “The βασιλικὸς in John 4:46-53,” 70-71. He insists that based on Herod’s close relationship with Tiberus, a Gentile would not have been out of place at his court. He further explains that the synoptic centurion, though certainly a Gentile, was in Herodian service also. Craig S. Keener refers to him as “A Galilean Aristocrat,” *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 630.

³¹ Francis J. Moloney proposes that the description of the βασιλικὸς in the present Johannine context suggests a Gentile identity of the man. He explains, “He is the last in a series of characters who appear across 4:1-54. He is not from Cana, but from the border town of Capernaum, well known for the presence of Gentile soldiers. All the other characters in 4:1-54 are Samaritans, people from the world outside Judaism. It is most likely that this particular βασιλικὸς is understood and presented to the reader by the author as a final example of the reception of the word of Jesus from the non-Jewish world,” *The Gospel of John*, The Sacra Pagina Series, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 4, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1989), 153.

³² Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 146.

³³ Laney suggests that the desperation of the father’s request is evident by the imperfect tense of the verb, and possibly indicates a persistent and repeated request. In other words, the man “kept on asking.” *John*, 101. The man’s desperation is also seen by the fact that he again asks Jesus to come down in verse 49.

Himself is far removed from the actual place.³⁴ Sloan explains the significance of Jesus' healing the official's son at a distance.

While Jesus does not believe his presence is required—that is, that the miracle must be “seen”—the nobleman pleads with him to “come down before my child dies.” The nobleman assumes that healing can occur only with Jesus' presence. Thus, while we hear in 4:50 that the man “believed” the word that Jesus spoke to him—healing at a distance evidently requires more faith than healing associated with presence—and therefore started off toward his own home, we are told again in 4:53 that it is also upon later hearing that the hour of his son's healing corresponded to the hour of Jesus' statement (“your son lives”) that he “believed.” The demand for physical presence, overcome by faith, has nonetheless its (sublimated) counterpart in the synchronizing of word and deed. As is customary in the Gospel of John, belief has different meanings, and in this case it seems clear that “belief” of 4:53 is corroborated and/or intensified by the nobleman's subsequent experience of learning of the temporal correspondence between the words of healing, spoken at a distance, and the act of healing. The believing of 4:53 is thus related not only to the amazing fact of healing, but the even more astounding fact of healing “from a distance.” That is, the healing was unseen—it was done by Jesus, but in the *absence* of Jesus.³⁵

The emphasis of this miracle, then, is the authority of the Messiah's word, and it is similar to the first miracle in that regard. Even in the first miracle of Jesus turning water into wine, it was the Messiah's spoken word that caused the miracle to occur. Thus, both miracles confirm the claims of the Prologue (1:1-18) that Jesus is the Λόγος of God. In short, Jesus, as the divine Messiah, has the power and authority to command life to be.

The miracle also reveals a deeper Christological significance. There are aspects of this sign that reveal His Person as the promised Messiah. In healing the royal official's son from the brink of death, Jesus demonstrates yet another important aspect of the Messiah's role as predicted by the Old Testament prophets, namely, His authority to bring healing and deliverance from the cruel fate of death (cf. Isa 25:8; 35:5-6; 53:4; 61:1). As Carson explains, “The one who transformed water into wine, eclipsing the old rites of purification and announcing the dawning joy of the messianic banquet, is the one who continues his messianic work, whether he is rightly trusted or not, by bringing healing and snatching life back from the brink of death.”³⁶ It is significant that both sickness and death will be absent in the future messianic kingdom. The apostle John also envisioned such a blissful time in his Apocalypse: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4). Therefore, as Laney concludes correctly, “In Jesus' healing of the official's son He was giving a foretaste of kingdom glory.”³⁷ In short, then, by revealing His Person as the Messiah who will overcome death, Jesus was illustrating that He has the authority to grant eternal life even now to those who would believe.

³⁴ For a helpful discussion on Jesus' absence in healing the official's son, see Robert B. Sloan, “The Absence of Jesus in John,” in *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Robert B. Sloan and Mikeal C. Parsons (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 207-27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 209-10.

³⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 238.

³⁷ Laney, *John*, 103.

The significant relationship between the theme of life and believing is therefore also one of the emphases of this miracle. Borchert correctly observes, “The Johannine theme of life and death is encapsulated in these two brief but powerful statements (“Go! Your son will live”). As indicated earlier, the man obeyed the word of Jesus without seeing the sign.³⁸ As Blum concludes, “Jesus’ word has power to work, and people are simply to believe His word.”³⁹ In short, the Evangelist demonstrates in this miracle a theme that he has developed throughout the beginning chapters of the Gospel, that is, Jesus, as the divine Messiah has the authority to give life. And, believing in Jesus and His Word results in the eternal life that only He could give.

This miracle also reveals yet another aspect of the Messiah’s kingdom. If the ethnic identity of the royal official and his son is Gentile, as argued above, this sign emphasizes the universality of the eschatological kingdom of the Messiah (Isa 2:2-3; 42:6; Zech 8:23). The prophets of old have envisioned the days of the Messiah when the Gentiles nations will join Israel in the worship of the King. And, this miracle shows that the blessings of the Messiah’s redemptive work extends not only to the Jews, but to the Samaritans and Gentile nations as well (cf. Gen 12:3). Thus, Jesus is not only the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, He is also the Savior of the world.

The literary pattern of highlighting Jesus’ encounter with a Jew (Nicodemus), a Samaritan (the Samaritan woman), and a Gentile (the royal official), brings to remembrance Jesus’ command to His disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).⁴⁰ It is conceivable that the apostle John had his Lord’s command in mind in designing his Gospel this way.⁴¹ It is ironic, however, in comparing the responses of the three individuals whom Jesus encountered in these chapters, that the only one who walked away from his encounter with Jesus without receiving eternal life was the Jewish teacher of the law. Whereas the other two who were initially outside the covenant community put their faith in the Messiah and thus received life eternal, Nicodemus could not abandon his works-based system of religious Judaism.

CONCLUSION

The Evangelist’s “purpose statement” of the Fourth Gospel explicitly states that his selected sign-miracles are intended to reveal Jesus as the promised Messiah and the unique Son of God, and those who believe in Him are promised life eternal (cf. 20:30-31). Thus, all of the sign-miracles in the Gospel of John reveal Jesus’ Person as the divine Messiah who grants life to those who would believe. But, this theme of Jesus as the life-giving Messiah is particularly central in the first four chapters of the Gospel. The first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, consisting

³⁸ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 25a (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 220.

³⁹ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 288.

⁴⁰ Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 129-29. Culpepper provides a helpful chart in demonstrating the similar geographical patterns in both the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts.

⁴¹ Mead, “The βασιλικὸς in John 4:46-53,” 71. Brown, however, fails to see what he calls a “linear progression of faith” in these chapters. He says: “We have already expressed doubts that John intended a progression in faith from the Jews of ii-iii through the Samaritans (half-Jews) to the Gentiles at Cana,” *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 197. The literary clues within these chapters show, however, that there is a geographical pattern underlying these chapters.

of the Prologue (1:1-18) and the Testimonium (1:19-51), plays a significant role within the book by introducing the key concepts and themes that will be developed later in the Gospel. The Prologue and the Testimonium introduce Jesus as the divine Messiah who grants eternal life to those who would believe

in Him, which He will provide by His redemptive and sacrificial death on the cross as the Passover Lamb. By introducing Jesus as the divine Messiah who grants life to all who would believe, the Evangelist provides a foretaste of the kind of revelations to come in the seven sign-miracles and their attendant contexts in the form of narratives and discourses.

The first two sign-miracles are recorded in the section of the Gospel commonly referred to as the “Cana Cycle” (2:1–4:54). The two Cana sign-miracles frame these three chapters as a literary unit with their common geographical and thematic settings. They both take place in Cana of Galilee, and they both develop the theme of newness of life that Jesus provides as the divine Messiah. The first sign-miracle (2:1-11), as the “beginning of signs” (ἀρχὴν τῶν σημείων), stands as a representative sign for the rest of the miracles to follow. The first miracle of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana authenticated His Person as the promised Messiah and the divine Son of God. And, as a representative sign the Evangelist states that Jesus revealed His glory (δόξαν) through this miracle (2:11), which will be true of all of the miracles. The second miracle of Jesus healing the royal official’s son (4:43-54) brings the “Cana Cycle” to a close with Jesus performing his second miracle in Cana of Galilee. Whereas Jesus demonstrates His authority as the divine Messiah to grant new life by changing water into wine in the first miracle, this sign-miracle demonstrates the importance of believing in Jesus and obeying His word. It is believing in Jesus as the promised Messiah and the divine Son of God that results in the deliverance from the realm of death into the life from above, or eternal life.