Part 1

The Book of Signs

Scholars have identified the first part of the Gospel as the ‘Book of Signs’ (Appendix C). It includes a formal Prologue (1.1–18) and an introduction to Jesus’ earthly ministry (1.19—2.12). Within the Book of Signs, most sections begin with references to the Temple and festivals of the Jewish calendar. These sections share a pattern in which a work Jesus performed becomes the catalyst for dialogues and teaching. These break the text into smaller units. The Book of Signs ends with a peroration (a formal conclusion) (12.36b–50). The last feast mentioned (the Passover, 11.55) serves as a bridge which will mark the end of Jesus’ public ministry (12.36) in the run-up to the festival and lead into the ‘Book of Glory’ (chapters 13—20).
Summary

The Book of Signs begins with a Prologue (1.1–18) which summarizes the whole theme of the Gospel. After this the story of Jesus’ earthly life begins when John the Baptist identifies him as the Lamb of God (1.19–34). His disciples begin to follow Jesus and bring their colleagues to him (1.35–51). The section finishes with the first of Jesus’ signs: the changing of water into wine at Cana (2.1–12).

1.1–18: The Prologue

Introduction

John starts his Gospel with a hymn or poem which sums up God’s plan for the world, from its creation to its end. The hymn also shows that people need to make a choice to be with God (1.18).

The story continues with episodes in which John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus (1.19–34), and the first disciples begin to follow Jesus (1.35–51). The section concludes with Jesus’ first sign: the wine of Cana (2.1–12).

Notes and commentary

1.1a. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God: John starts with a clear reference to Genesis 1.1, stressing the role of the Logos in creation. The Greek word logos literally means ‘Word’ but also refers to God’s speech (Psalm 19.1–4) which is able to create (Genesis 1.3, 9, 11, 15, 24, 29–30). Sometimes this comes near to talking about the Word as a person (Psalms 33.6; 107.20; Isaiah 55.1–11), but Old Testament (OT) writers never name a specific figure; John, however, identifies the Word with an historical person (1.14).
Similar ideas were also found in Greek philosophy. For example, the Stoics, a philosophical school originally founded in Athens in the fourth century BC, which had become popular and influential in early imperial Rome, referred to the divine power or principle which shapes the world as the Logos. The word *logos* was used because it stresses the idea of order: that the world is created with some order, purpose and meaning which may be understood if one thinks rightly about such matters. John differs from two different views of God in Greek theology: the idea that God would not touch matter and that the world is a corrupt place created by an inferior deity, and the idea that the gods could not touch matter and were not involved in creating this world at all.

1.1b. **And the Word was God:** John describes the Logos as ‘divine’ or ‘God’. While some have taken this to mean that the Word is not God, this imports ‘degrees of deity’, as if the Logos is divine but not fully God, which are not part of the text. The words translated as ‘the Word was God’ can also be translated as ‘What God was, so was the Word’ which has the advantage of stressing that the Word has the same nature, rank or status as God, but is not exactly the same as God; he is a different ‘person’, as later Christian thinking would put it.

1.3. **Without him not one thing came into being:** Echoing Genesis, the Logos is shown to be God by his creative power. Further, the verse also stresses that the Logos is not a creature, or made as part of Creation, but exists before the world is created (1.2).

1.4. **In him was life, and the life was the light of all people:** The verse links the Logos with ‘life’ and ‘light’, two images which will be linked to Jesus throughout the Gospel. ‘Life’ and ‘light’ are not separate, but are linked: as Jesus brings light, he also brings life. The creation of life, sometimes linked with light, is also in Genesis 1.20–31; 2.7; 3.20. This verse introduces the dualism (Appendix B) of light–dark, which also echoes Genesis 1.3–5, 17–18.

1.5a. **The light shines in the darkness:** The world is described as a dark place, and the light is visible in it. It contrasts the Logos and Creation, again stressing that the Logos is not part of the world. Light is a symbol of what is good, and, even in the OT prophets, is a symbol of the Messiah (Isaiah 9.2; 42.6–7; 49.6; 60.1–5; Malachi 4.2).

1.5b. **And the darkness did not overcome it:** An alternative translation, ‘the darkness did not master it’ (Moffatt, *The New Testament*), implies that the dark can neither overwhelm nor understand the light. This verse anticipates the way in which the powers of this world will not understand or beat Jesus. In this context, the verse may refer to the presence of the Word in the world before the Incarnation, during the OT period. The language of light and dark might mean that the world is the place of a war between good and evil, or that there was some kind of light superior to natural light (Wisdom 7.29–30), or refer to a choice between good and evil.
1.6–8. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light . . . He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light: This section introduces John the Baptist. It carefully records that he is a man, sent by God; he is not the light, but was sent to testify to the light. The Baptist, while a special person, is not as important as the Logos.

1.9. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world: This comment stresses that John the Baptist is not the ‘true light’.

1.10. He was in the world . . . yet the world did not know him: This verse continues to describe the Word (1.5). ‘Did not know him’ suggests that a contrast is being drawn between the Word as life and light and the world as darkness. This has an additional irony (1.11): the Word made the world, and the world does not recognize him, or accept him.

1.11. He came to what was his own: This may refer either to the Jewish people or the whole of humanity. Note that both Jews and Romans will be involved in the rejection of Jesus later in the Gospel.

1.12a. But to all who received him, who believed in his name: While the world as a whole rejects the Word who made it, there is a group of people who do recognize him, and believe in his name. The ‘name’ was a way of talking about God and may show that the Word is God. In the New Testament, ‘believe’ means ‘believe in’ and ‘trust’.

1.12b. He gave power to become children of God: In the OT, the people of Israel are God’s children, but there is a change here. These ‘children’ are people who may trace the origins of their belief and trust in God not to human birth, or any natural process, but to some intervention by God. Individuals cannot claim to receive the Word because of where they were born or who their parents were, but only because of God’s action. See further, 8.39–48.

1.14a. And the Word became flesh: This verse marks a distinct phase in the existence of the Word, who ‘became flesh’: a contrast from what he is in the earlier part of the hymn. This short phrase stresses that the Word really becomes a part of this world, and does not pretend to do so. It seems that John had to deal with opponents who argued that Jesus was never a real person, but only pretended to be human and pretended to die (a belief known as Docetism). The statement also clashes head-on with ancient philosophical and religious traditions which held that spirit and matter could never mix, or that deities might come to earth, but never become truly human.

1.14b. And lived among us: The Greek literally means ‘pitched his tent among us’ and refers to the exodus story in which God’s presence with his people is described using the image of the tabernacle (or ‘tent’, Exodus 25.8–9; 33.7).
1.14c. **We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth:** The phrases ‘glory’ (Exodus 33.22; Numbers 14.10; Deuteronomy 5.24) and ‘grace and truth’ (Exodus 34.6) allude to the Shekinah, God’s presence with his people and faithfulness to the covenant he made with them. As the Shekinah might be linked to the Temple (Jeremiah 17.12; Ezekiel 10.4; Psalm 102.16) or the Torah (Exodus 3.18; 34.28), this statement may further be seen as a claim that Jesus replaced either or both of these. Grace is associated with the ideas of gift and thanksgiving. Rather than imagine grace as a kind of force, it is well translated as generosity. For ‘truth’, see Appendix E.

The phrase ‘only son’ (nRSV) is sometimes translated ‘only begotten’ which may mean ‘only’ or ‘one of a kind’. This second meaning is used of an only child in the OT (Judges 11.34; Tobit 3.15; 8.17). It may be replaced by ‘beloved’ (Genesis 22.2, 12, 16), also used directly about Jesus in Mark 1.11; 9.7 and in the parable of Mark 12.6. Hebrews 11.17 describes Isaac as ‘only’, and this may be what the word meant at the time. ‘Only begotten’ may be a translation which was influenced by later Christian thinking about the nature of Christ and the Trinity.

1.15. **He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me:** Mark 1.4 makes a similar point, using the image of John not seeing himself as worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals. Jesus is superior to the Baptist, a remark made more significant by being placed on the Baptist’s own lips.

1.16–17. **Grace upon grace . . . grace and truth:** These verses contrast the law, which was given by Moses, with grace and truth which were revealed in the person of Jesus. The Gospel will explore this in detail, showing Jesus as superior to Moses, and as the definitive revelation of God’s love.

1.18a. **No one has ever seen God:** Making Jesus superior to Moses may explain the strange beginning to verse 18. While a number of OT traditions state the commonly held view that humans cannot look at the face of God and live (Genesis 16.13; Exodus 33.20), Exodus 24.9–11 describes Moses and the elders of Israel not only looking at God, but also eating and drinking with him. Exodus 33.11 uses face-to-face encounters to indicate the closeness of Moses’ friendship with God (see also Appendix I), as does Deuteronomy 34.10. John overlooks such traditions to stress the superior revelation given by Jesus, and stresses this by describing him as ‘close to the Father’s heart’, a figure of speech indicating intimacy. In John 1.50–51, Jesus will promise the disciples visions of heaven.

1.18b. **It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known:** Both testaments use ‘Father’ to tell of God’s close bond to his people when he entered into partnership with them through covenants. It reflects the patriarchal nature of most ancient societies, in which the father was effectively the head of the household. As such, the designation ‘Father’ signifies a social role and status, not the gender of God. We must be careful not to use the word ‘Father’ in a way that limits God to the functions of a human male. Nor should we use it to claim that men are superior to women:
Genesis 1.27 clearly indicates that men and women are all made in the image of God without any further distinction of rank. The fatherhood of God (in its fullest developed forms) includes the following elements:

1. the Father as Creator: this role is part of the Creation mandate or covenant (Genesis 9.1–17);

2. the Father of the people of God (theocratic fatherhood, Malachi 1.6) through the covenant of faith (Genesis 15.1–6; 17.1–22);

3. generative fatherhood – used only for the Father–Son relationship in the New Testament (NT);

4. adoptive fatherhood: believers become children of God through his gift, not by their nature (1.12–13; NT only).

**Interpretation**

The Gospel starts by setting the context for Jesus’ earthly life: it sets both a theological and an historical context.

The theological comes first: in 1.1–18 a hymn, often called the Prologue (Foreword or Introduction), sets Jesus in relation to God. The letter 1 John starts just like this too: with a hymn which refers to the Logos. The Johannine writings show us how important hymns like this were for passing on the Christian message or building up faith in the early Christian communities: Revelation, in particular, makes extensive use of hymns. Perhaps the most famous example is found in Philippians 2.5–11, a piece of writing which shows that hymns were written very early and that such early writing could be highly complex and profound; it is very dangerous for scholars to assume that complicated ideas must be late in origin.

Scholars debate the origins of the hymn which makes up the Prologue, and also the date when it became part of the Gospel. In terms of origins, the debate is between whether it is a hymn from Jewish or Graeco-Roman traditions. Various scholars have suggested that the hymn may have come from Gnostic writing, Jewish wisdom literature, and even Jewish philosophical writing like that of Philo. They suggest that it owes much to those schools of thought which include philosophical reflection on the nature of the world and its relation to God. We can make too much of the issue of whether it is Jewish or Greek, as both traditions had sometimes become mixed, as in Philo’s writing, and even in Jewish wisdom literature which had already been influenced by ideas from Greek philosophy.

One thing is more certain, that John has not slavishly copied a hymn and simply placed it at the beginning of the Gospel. Wherever the hymn might have come from, John appears to have edited and added to it; scholars suggest that verses 6–9, 13, 15 and 17–18 may have been added to the original hymn. As John is a highly original and creative thinker, we should be wary of claims which suggest that he remains trapped by earlier writing or ideas which he adopts and uses within his writing. John uses nothing which cannot...
be reshaped to suit his purposes. He has thus ensured that the section which describes how the Logos had a role in creation, and was made flesh (1.14), is clearly linked to the historical Jesus through references to Scripture and the Baptist. While he shares the term Logos with Greek philosophy, he is not limited by the Greek philosophical usage; he gives the term his own particular meaning.

The hymn has a poetic shape which some critics describe as a *chiasmus*, meaning that there is an idea A which leads to B; B is repeated and then followed by A again (A-B-B-A); others say it is an example of parallelism, a common practice in Hebrew poetry, notably the Psalms, in which verses repeat the same theme. Neither of these really holds up all the way through. A further way of looking at the hymn is to describe it as like a stepladder, in which the idea which finishes one section begins the next. Thus: the Word as God (1.1–2), the Word in creation (1.3–5), the Word in the world (1.10–12) and the Word and the community (1.14–16).

John starts his Gospel with the claim that the Logos is God and is intimately connected with the creation of the world, giving it some kind of purpose. Such a purpose will demand a response from the audience, and will be filled out as the Gospel progresses when we hear and see what Jesus does and teaches. The contrast between light and dark leaves no doubt as to what kind of choice the audience should make. The way in which it refers to the great story of Israel’s origins in Genesis and Exodus reveals that this is the beginning of John’s great story about Jesus, who will come to be seen as more important than Moses and the patriarchs (the key historical figures of Israel’s earliest history), and as the one who gives the clearest revelation of God and his love for humanity.

Because the hymn comes right at the beginning of the Gospel, it can be tempting to use it as a key to understand all that follows. However, the hymn may have been added to the Gospel just before it was completed. This means it is better to see it as a summary of the whole Gospel. It is useful to return to the hymn and see how much clearer it has become as a result of reading the whole Gospel.

Important, the hymn claims for Jesus status and honour superior to that of both Moses and John the Baptist, both highly revered leaders.

**STUDY SUGGESTIONS**

**Word study**

1 Explain ‘the Logos’. Is John using this term in a new way? How?

**Review of content**

2 What does the Prologue tell us about John’s view of creation?
3 What does light and dark tell us about John’s view of the world?
4 Describe the role played by John the Baptist.

Discussion and application

5 Does the Prologue, which stresses that God has a plan for the world, challenge the way that people think about the world and the meaning of life in your context?
6 What is the traditional understanding of how the world was made in your culture? How does the Prologue challenge that view?
7 When we use terms and ideas from our contexts, do we remain trapped by their original meanings, or, like John, do we adapt them for our own purposes?

1.19–51: Jesus’ earthly context

Introduction

John introduces Jesus as an adult: there are no accounts of his birth, or youth. The stage is set by introducing a well-respected leader, John the Baptist (1.34), who will direct people’s attentions to Jesus. His followers provide Jesus’ first disciples (1.35–40). A journey to Galilee produces a further disciple, Philip (1.43), and leads to conversations with Nathanael (1.45–51). The section finishes with the first miracle: the changing of water into wine at Cana (2.1–12).

Notes and commentary

1.19. The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?': The verse suggests that some people viewed the Baptist with suspicion. The term ‘the Jews’ is used here for those who are hostile to Jesus; they seem to be figures in authority. Note that here they are sufficiently influential to send ‘priests and Levites’ to question the Baptist. These were the official figures who controlled the cult worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. See Appendix L.

1.21. Are you Elijah? . . . Are you the prophet?: The Baptist may have been asked if he was Elijah because of beliefs that this prophet, who did not experience death and burial (2 Kings 2.11), was expected to return before the appearance of the Messiah (Matthew 16.14; 17.3–4). John’s
appearance resembled that of Elijah (Matthew 3.4; 2 Kings 1.8), as did his preaching (Matthew 3.7–12; Luke 3.7–17), and both Jesus (Matthew 11.14; 17.12; Mark 9.13) and the angel of the Lord called him Elijah (Luke 1.17 which draws on Malachi 4.5). Some bystanders at the foot of the cross think that the dying Jesus is calling for Elijah (Mark 15.35; Matthew 27.47). The ‘prophet’ is a reference to Moses (Deuteronomy 18.15, 18; 1 Maccabees 4.46). The Baptist denies that he is either of these expected characters, and again plays down his own importance.

1.23. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’: The Baptist defines himself using a quotation from Isaiah 40.3, which is meant to give comfort to God’s people and suggest that they should prepare themselves for his coming. Compare Mark 1.2–3, where the Gospel writer makes a prophecy from Isaiah 40.3 and Malachi 3.1.

1.24. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees: The Baptist’s questioners are described as coming from ‘the Pharisees’, a sect whose members thought that all people should maintain the ideals of purity demanded of the priesthood. This may suggest either a further description of the first group (1.19), or the introduction of a second group of questioners.

1.25–27. ‘Why then are you baptizing . . .?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal’: The Baptist does not really answer the Jews’ question, but replies that he is the inferior of the one who is to come (compare 1.15). To untie sandals was the lowliest task to be performed by a slave.

1.28. Bethany across the Jordan: This was a different town from the Bethany near Jerusalem (John 12.1; Mark 14.3–9). Some ancient commentators identified it with Bethabara. If so, Jesus, like Joshua, starts outside Israel (Joshua 1.1–2) and leads his people into the Promised Land.

1.29a. The next day he saw Jesus: The references to days only indicate different days in the narrative. While it is tempting to view these as parallel to the six days of creation or the revelation at Sinai (Exodus 24.16), they simply do not add up accurately or report a time frame; nor do they explain the jump to ‘the third day’ (see further in 2.1).

1.29b. Lamb of God: This title has three possible layers of meaning:

1 An apocalyptic lamb: This figure will conquer evil in the world (Revelation 17.14). Some object that the idea of taking away sin does not fit well with this image.

2 The lamb as the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 42.1–4; 49.1–6; 52.13–53): Although these verses may originally have referred to Israel as a nation, they become increasingly used to describe an individual, even the Messiah, in Christian writing. Other references suggest that John may have
1.1—2.12: Jesus: in heaven and on earth

Isaiah in mind (John 1.23, 32–34; Isaiah 42.1; 53.1; 61.1; John 10.38). This idea may also draw from Jeremiah 9.19.

3 The paschal lamb: While it may be argued that people did not think of the paschal lamb (the Passover lamb) as a sacrifice, consider 1 Corinthians 5.7. There is also a chance that ‘lamb’ might refer to other sacrifices offered in the Temple, especially the daily sin-offering (Exodus 29.38–46; Leviticus 4.32). John will later connect the Passover explicitly with the timing of Jesus’ death (18.28; 19.31, 42).

We do not need to choose between these: it is possible that the title may refer to more than one of them.

1.29c. Who takes away the sin of the world: ‘Sin’ refers to activity which is contrary to the will or command of God.

1.30. After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me: The phrase ‘he was before me’ echoes 1.1–2. The Baptist is talking of the pre-existence of Jesus (the Word), although he may have originally been referring to a figure like Elijah.

1.31. I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel: The Baptist finally answers the question from 1.26 clearly. He baptizes with water in order to reveal Jesus. This may be genuine, or a reason supplied by the Gospel writer.

1.32. I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him: Unlike the prophets who were often only temporarily given the Spirit (Numbers 11.25–26; Judges 3.10; 1 Samuel 10.6), the Spirit will remain with Jesus until his death, and, by implication, with the community which will come to receive it (19.30). The fact that Jesus permanently possesses the Spirit gives him a higher status.

Some have argued that this verse supports an adoptionist Christology (that Jesus is not divine until the time he is given the Spirit at baptism) but this is rejected in both the Prologue (1.1–18) and the Baptist’s previous words (1.30–31).

The Spirit may be ‘like a dove’ because of the creation story (Genesis 1.2). The dove was also a symbol of Israel (4 Ezra 5.26) and the new Creation after the Noah story (Genesis 8.8–12).

1.33. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’: John never says that Jesus was baptized by the Baptist (unlike Mark 1.9; Matthew 3.13; Luke 3.21), perhaps to avoid the claim that the Baptist is superior to Jesus. Here, only the Baptist sees the Spirit and is told what it means.

1.34. Son of God: The phrase is most likely drawn from Psalm 2.7, an enthronement psalm which was later used for Jesus’ exaltation (Acts 13.32–33). It looks forward to the time when Jesus is raised up by God. In a wider
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Graeco-Roman context, it means Jesus has ‘the quality of God’, specifically the power to create and to control. In the OT, the phrase ‘son of God’ is used in two different ways:

1 **the heavenly sons of Elohim**: (Genesis 6.2, 4; Deuteronomy 32.8; Job 1.6; 38.7; Psalms 29.1; 82.1, 6; 89.6; Daniel 3.25): angelic figures manifested in heavenly form;

2 **the sons of Yahweh**: individual human beings identified with God (Psalm 2.7; 89.26; 1 Chronicles 28.6), or the people of Israel (Exodus 4.22; Hosea 1.10).

In the NT, the term ‘son of God’ may also be used to describe heroic or faithful humans (Matthew 5.9; Luke 20.36; see also 5.1–47). Acts 14.8–18 reports the Graeco-Roman belief that gods might come down from heaven.

1.35a. **The next day**: On the third day in the narrative, the Baptist, presumably still at Bethany, identifies Jesus to two of his followers as the Lamb of God (1.29). The two follow Jesus.

1.35b. **John . . . was standing with two of his disciples**: The writer uses the word ‘disciples’ for those who accept the teaching of the Baptist, and will also use it for followers of Jesus. John does not limit disciples to the Twelve (6.66).

1.38. **Rabbi**: The disciples give Jesus an honorific Judaic title, which also means they accept Jesus’ authority as a teacher. John translates Semitic terms like this, suggesting that some of his audience are not familiar with Hebrew or Aramaic: they speak Greek.

1.39a. **Come and see**: Jesus’ invitation gives a definite guarantee or promise.

1.39b. **They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him**: The two words ‘stay’ and ‘remain’ are synonyms throughout the Gospel. John uses them 40 times, compared to 12 in the Synoptic Gospels. They indicate loyalty, as does ‘follow’ (1.37). The disciples leave the circle around the Baptist for a new fellowship with Jesus. Following has dimensions that are both spiritual (learning from and copying a leader) and physical (accompanying someone).

1.40. **One of the two . . . was Andrew**: Andrew (Gk, Andreas, ‘manly’) is described differently in Mark 1.1–18. He is identified here as a follower of the Baptist rather than a fisherman, and in a different place (Bethany, 1.28; 1, 43, rather than the Sea of Galilee). Andrew fetches Simon Peter and brings him to Jesus (1.41–42). He and Peter come from Bethsaida (a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, near the Jordan river) like Philip (1.44). He will appear again in 6.8–9; 12.21–22. For more on Peter, see 21.2, 3. This pattern of meeting Jesus and bringing others to him will occur again (1.45; 4.28–29).
1.41. The Messiah: For this term, see 1.38; 4.4, 19; 6.14–15; Appendix K.

1.42. Cephas (which is translated Peter): Cephas, or Peter (1.38), means ‘Rocky’, implying someone firm or stable. The nickname is ironic as Peter will prove to be unreliable (18.15–27).

1.43a. The next day: On the fourth day in the narrative Jesus plans to travel to Galilee where the miracle at Cana (2.1–12) will take place.

1.43b. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me’: Jesus finds Philip and asks him to ‘follow’ (1.38–39). Philip is a Greek name, like Andrew and Simon. These names might mean the people are Greeks (12.20–21), but many Jewish people had Greek names, even those who would be considered strong Jewish nationalists (1 Maccabees 5.55; 11.60).

1.45a. Nathanael: His name means ‘God has given’. He is also a Galilean, from Cana (2.1).

1.45b. We have found him: Philip identifies Jesus as the one who has been described by Moses and the prophets. His claim that they have found him is puzzling: disciples are called by Jesus – they do not choose him through their own insights – and, as the following dialogue will show, Philip has not really understood whom he has found.

1.45c. Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth: Jesus is identified in conventional terms using his father’s name and town of origin. Place and genealogy were important indicators of status.

1.46. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?: The question indicates the popular view that Nazareth was a place of no importance.

1.47. An Israelite in whom there is no deceit: Jesus considers that Nathanael is someone genuinely worthy to see what Scripture has promised (1.45), an honest person (compare Jacob in Genesis 27.35–36) who does not lie (Psalm 32.2; Isaiah 53.9) and is not an idolater (Revelation 14.5).

1.48a. Where did you come to know me? This is a common expression in both Semitic and Greek languages, meaning ‘How do you know me?’

1.48b. I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you: Jesus’ answer gives a sense that something miraculous is happening to Nathanael: he is in the presence of someone who has an uncanny knowledge of him. A number of explanations for the mention of the fig tree have been offered, but none is completely convincing. Fig trees are thought to represent:

- peace and prosperity (1 Kings 5.5), sometimes associated with the Messiah (Micah 4.4; Zechariah 3.10);
- the study of the law (Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 5.11), suggesting that Nathanael is a scribe or rabbi;
- a way of revealing accurate knowledge, based on the Susanna story in Daniel 13 (in the Greek version of the OT known as the Septuagint (lxx)).
• *one’s own home* (Isaiah 36.16; Micah 4.4; Zechariah 3.10), suggesting that Nathanael knows all he needs to know;

• *shade or darkness*, meaning a lack of understanding from which Nathanael will pass to knowledge or enlightenment;

• *an ideal or blissful location*, described in Graeco-Roman poetry and philosophical traditions.

1.49. *Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel:* Nathanael’s initial scepticism is replaced by a number of strong confessions of faith (1.38, 32–33). ‘King of Israel’ also suggests the Messiah (1.41), and a text like Psalm 2.6–7 might provide a link to make it and ‘Son of God’ both messianic.

1.50. Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these: Jesus promises Nathanael that his knowledge of him is nothing really special.

1.51. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man: For emphasis, Jesus uses the phrase ‘Very truly’, an emphatic statement like ‘I say to you’ or ‘Amen, I say to you’ in the Synoptic Gospels (Appendix I). Jesus is giving his word to Nathanael that he will be privileged to see revelations which equal those given to Jacob (Genesis 28.10–12). The visions share the image of angels ascending and descending, but here the angels minister around the Son of Man. ‘Son of Man’ is a Semitic saying, and many scholars believe it is very likely that Jesus used it. The fact that it is not good Greek makes it unlikely that later writers invented or inserted it: it most likely comes from early traditions about Jesus. The phrase can be used in any of three ways:

1 as a way of saying ‘I’;

2 as a way of talking about the average person, like the English phrase ‘the man in the street’;

3 as a title (based on Daniel 7.13–14).

This made it a good phrase for Jesus to use to describe himself as it is ambiguous and would make people think for themselves about who he was, rather than simply believe what they heard. When John uses the phrase, he describes Jesus’ suffering and his glory (as in the above points 2 and 3), and gives further layers of meaning to the title (3.13–14; 5.27; 6.62; 8.28).

By Jesus’ time, the phrase ‘Son of Man’ blended together two elements:

1 a pre-existent, transcendent Messiah;

2 the idea that a human being would embody that Messiah.
The title is thus used of Jesus because he fitted these hopes. In other ways, he will be different from what people expected (6.15).

**Interpretation**

In 1.19—2.12, a series of earthly encounters gives a preview of the nature and purpose of Jesus’ earthly life. Jesus is linked to known characters such as John the Baptist and the disciples, and to places like Cana.

Was John the Baptist an historical figure? Our main sources for him lie within the Gospels, but crucially Josephus, a first-century AD Jewish writer, refers to him in one of his works (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116).

How accurate is John’s picture of the Baptist? John has a very clear agenda: he wants to show the superiority of Jesus. There is always a chance that the Baptist did not mean exactly what John makes him say. It is possible, for example, that when the Baptist expects the ‘one who is to come’ he means Elijah (1.30–31), and that the Gospel writer has made him refer to Jesus. We might sum up this line of argument as John saying: ‘You thought the Baptist was talking about Elijah [the hidden Messiah], but he was really talking about this man, Jesus [the hidden Messiah now revealed].’

In 1.35–42, two of the Baptist’s disciples are shown as leaving him to follow Jesus, fulfilling 1.23. The Baptist raises no objections to their leaving, and even seems to urge them to follow Jesus. This again shows the significance and superiority of Jesus to the Baptist.

In 1.43–51, Philip and Nathanael are introduced. The dialogues which take place show John’s use of misunderstanding to reveal Jesus’ identity (Appendix I). The first of these shows that Philip’s claim, ‘We have found’, is rash. Unlike the Baptist, he appears completely unaware of Jesus being the Word and related to God (1.32–33). Both Philip and Nathanael think they know who Jesus is, but Philip’s quotations of Scripture, and Nathanael’s concerns with Jesus’ parentage and home town, really show that they still do not understand whom they have met. In terms of honour and shame, Jesus scores highly for having a status which is far above his supposed origins.

John reveals an important feature of discipleship here: often new converts are very excited, and may be tempted to think they know everything. John shows that such enthusiasm is not enough, and may even be a sign of overconfidence, arrogance or weakness. Nathanael’s sarcastic response to the mention of Nazareth shows how even wise people may instinctively speak from prejudice. In this Gospel, the disciples learn and grow in faith by their misunderstandings and corrections.

Jesus’ greeting puzzles Nathanael. It is also deeply ironic: Nathanael is praised extravagantly by the one he has ridiculed (1.46). In response, Nathanael replies with a series of titles which reaches a climax when he describes Jesus as ‘King of Israel’, a messianic title. These titles are typical of the hopes people had at this time about the Messiah. Jesus ignores the titles and tells Nathanael that he will see more wonderful things: visions
of the heavenly nature of Jesus. This will be revealed by the end of the Gospel: Jesus will have been raised and revealed in all his glory, and Nathanael will be a witness to the risen Lord (21.2).

**STUDY SUGGESTIONS**

**Word studies**

1. What does ‘Jews’ mean? Why is this a problematic word when we interpret John?
2. Which Aramaic or Hebrew words does John translate for his readers? Why?
3. Give a definition of ‘Son of Man’. How does John use it?

**Review of content**

4. What role is played by John the Baptist?
5. Compare this version of the calling of the disciples with those in the Synoptics (Mark 1.16–20; Matthew 4.18–22; Luke 5.2–11). What differences in detail can you see?
6. Is there a pattern to the way the disciples first meet Jesus?

**Discussion and application**

7. The difficult word often translated ‘Jews’ has been used by Christians to stir up racial hatred. Does our use of language like this ever deliberately or accidentally lead to others being persecuted or treated badly? Is this appropriate behaviour for us?
8. The Gospel writers’ treatment of John the Baptist shows a great respect for the religious experience recently seen in their own context. Are we as generous as them, showing respect for the religious experience of our contexts? If we are not, why is this so?

**2.1–12: The miracle at Cana**

**Introduction**

Jesus continues to travel in Galilee. An invitation to a wedding leads to a request to assist the bridegroom, and the first of Jesus’ signs.
1.1—2.12: Jesus: in heaven and on earth

Notes and commentary

2.1a. On the third day: The previous sequence has four days (1.19), followed by three next days (1.29, 35, 43), so this may be the third day after 1.53. This could be either the sixth or seventh day if counted exclusively or inclusively. Yet another possibility is that 1.40–42 implies a further day, making this the eighth day. Six days might draw parallels to the days taken by God to make the world (Genesis 1.7), seven to the Sabbath, or eight to the resurrection. Constructing an exact sequence may be irrelevant: this may simply be a temporal reference showing that the events at Cana take place two days after the previous action.

2.1b. There was a wedding: Palestinian weddings of the time involved a procession in which the bride was taken from her father’s house to her new husband’s home. A contract and the act of living together (cohabitation) formed the marriage. The marriage was accompanied by feasting which might last for up to two weeks. The wedding may have a symbolic meaning: signifying the ‘end times’ (Hosea 2.19–20; Isaiah 25.6–8; Jeremiah 2.2; Song of Solomon), the time of the Messiah (Isaiah 44.4–8; 62.4–5; Matthew 8.11; 22.1–4; Luke 22.16–18; Revelation 19.9) or, in Graeco-Roman literature, of death. The setting at a wedding may point to Jesus’ death.

2.1c. Cana of Galilee: The setting was Khirbet-Qanah, nine miles north of Nazareth in the Beth Notafah valley. See also 4.46; 21.2.

2.3. The mother of Jesus: Mary is not mentioned by name, but identified as ‘the mother of . . . ’ This naming practice may give honour by showing her status as a mother (19.26–27).

2.4a. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman’: Jesus’ use of ‘woman’ is not as abrupt as we might think, and is used elsewhere (4.21; 20.15).

2.4b. What concern is that to you and to me?: Jesus has no reason to fulfil the request.

2.4c. My hour has not yet come: Jesus explains the lack of obligation: it is not yet the appropriate time for him to act. The phrase suggests a divine plan which includes Jesus’ public ministry, glorification, salvation, the testing of the disciples, and their eventual enlightenment and understanding. At other times, it seems to refer more precisely to Jesus’ Passion, thus including the idea of ‘hour’ connected to death commonly found in Judaic and Graeco-Roman writing. See also 4.21; 7.6, 8, 30; 12.23; 13.1; 17.1.

2.5. Do whatever he tells you: Mary does not argue further with Jesus, but simply tells the servants to do what he wants. She leaves the decision to Jesus himself.

2.6a. There were six stone water-jars: Stone water-jars were used to guarantee freedom from impurity from either people or objects (Leviticus
11.33). Some writers suggest that the number six implies imperfection, and so suggests that the Jewish legal system was imperfect. Care should be taken here: regrettably, in later times, Christians rejected Judaic practice outright rather than seeing Jesus as one who accepted Judaic values and considered himself a reformer. The number, which is very large for a domestic situation, may simply function to show the extravagance of Jesus’ actions.

2.6b. For the Jewish rites of purification: The word ‘Jewish’ here is descriptive and does not imply any hostility or opposition to Jesus. The water is described as being used for purification. Purification is not a major theme in John (unlike Mark 7). This seems to be a descriptive detail rather than a point of theological controversy (11.55; 18.28).

2.6c. Each holding twenty or thirty gallons: An imperial gallon is the equivalent of about 4.5 litres.

2.8. The chief steward: This individual was a guest who was chosen to ensure that the ceremonies ran smoothly.

2.9. The bridegroom: Perhaps this man was a relative of Jesus, or of Nathanael. While some have suggested that Jesus draws attention away from the wedding, the narrative makes clear that he actually saves the bridegroom’s honour (since it is he, not Jesus, who is praised for the wine, 2.10) and fulfils his own social responsibilities. Later esoteric claims that Jesus himself was the bridegroom ignore the flow of the story.

2.11. The first of his signs: Jesus has already revealed his powers in his dealings with Nathanael (1.43–51). This verse refers to his first sign performed openly or in public. ‘First’ is the same as ‘beginning’ (1.1), so this may imply the start of Jesus’ public ministry (Appendix C).

2.12a. He went down to Capernaum: Jesus returned to a town by the Sea of Galilee (also in 4.46–54; 6.17–59).

2.12b. His brothers: The writer suggests that Jesus is part of a larger family; Mark 6.3 names Jesus’ brothers. These need not be brothers with the same mother and father. The term ‘brothers’ included half-brothers, cousins or brothers-in-law. It does not mean ‘believers’ here (7.5).

Interpretation

Jesus and the disciples are invited to a wedding, showing that he still belongs to a world in which they have social duties and responsibilities. The disciples are present, but take no part in the story which unfolds. They witness both the social contract of a wedding, and Jesus’ glory. The episode contains a puzzling dialogue between Jesus and his mother. It includes a misunderstanding (Appendix H). Mary believes that her request to Jesus is legitimate.
Her words imply that Jesus may assist with a social problem: the hosts have run out of wine (2.3). His reply suggests that he has more important concerns.

This pattern of reluctance and then compliance is found elsewhere (4.46–54; 7.2–14; 11.1–16). The pattern has four stages: request (2.3), reluctance (2.4), agreement to the request (2.7) and conflict (2.13–14). In all of these Jesus eventually helps people who might be categorized as family or friends within his own circle. In all four instances, the pattern concludes with a story of conflict with outsiders which follows, but is not caused by, the request story.

The miracle at Cana is the first of Jesus' signs. It is not just a miraculous event: the symbolism of the wedding, and the talk of the hour, indicate the divine plan of which Jesus is a part, and anticipate his death and the continued role of his followers as witnesses and believers.

This is worth close study: John will not always associate miracles with seeing and believing. First, this story points out that it is the disciples who believe, not all those who are present, thus marking a difference between those who follow Jesus and the world at large. Second, the verse tells us that the sign took place and the disciples believed. Note that the Greek never says 'so that the disciples believed'. Belief does not follow automatically from seeing the sign. This lack of direct connection between sign and belief will become even clearer in later passages when people see or experience Jesus' signs, but refuse to believe in him (chapter 6). Here, John is warning that seeing signs is not the foundation of true belief. This reaches its climax in John's claim that it is better to believe without seeing (20.29).

The sign is connected to glory, a term which has been used earlier to describe the Word (1.14). It may echo traditions which show God's glory being revealed to his people (Exodus 16.7; Numbers 14.22). The setting of the wedding suggests that glory is linked to messianic times. It may also show a new dispensation which reforms or replaces current practices. The use of wine may further indicate new teaching or reform. There is an interesting parallel that Mark 2.19 starts Jesus' ministry with a discussion of new wine, comparing his teaching to that of the Pharisees, just as John here describes Jesus giving a better-quality wine (2.10) as he starts his ministry. Again we need to be careful: we may note a parallel, but should not say that this must be so because of Mark. To do that would actually be a mistake: to make the meaning of John depend on Mark.

The presence of wine has sometimes led readers to think that this may be a symbolic story about the Eucharist or sacraments. This is at best a minor theme. People who want to read a eucharistic meaning point to the Passover season which links Cana (2.13) to the feeding miracle (6.4) and the Last Supper (13.1). Additionally, 19.34 links Mary, blood and the death of Jesus with wine; others see a link through the phrase 'blood of grapes' (Genesis 49.11; Deuteronomy 32.14; Sirach 1.15). However, for John the identity and person of Jesus (who he is) and the coming of the messianic age matter more than sacraments or the Eucharist.
STUDY SUGGESTIONS

Word study
1 Why is ‘brothers’ (2.12) difficult to interpret?

Review of content
2 In John’s opinion, are signs a good basis for faith or belief?
3 How does John show that Jesus is a highly regarded spiritual leader?
4 Did Jesus have brothers and sisters? Does this matter?

Discussion and application
5 Do John’s views raise any issues about the way we usually think about miracles and belief?
6 Have traditional beliefs and practices become so much a part of our faith practice over time that they no longer corrupt our worship or beliefs?