

Signs To Life

READING AND RESPONDING
TO JOHN'S GOSPEL

KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE

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Introduction
Reading and Responding to John's Gospel

Students in my biblical studies classes and church members attending seminars often remind me of the Ethiopian eunuch we read about in Acts 8:26–40. They typically articulate deep convictions about Scripture, read it and have a passionate desire to study and understand it, but often do not know how or where to begin. The Ethiopian eunuch's story tells us that the apostle Philip was moved by the Holy Spirit to run up alongside the stranger's chariot. It was then that Philip heard that the Ethiopian was reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked with some apprehension: "Do you understand what you are reading?" But the man reading Scripture replied, "How can I unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him" (Acts 8:30, 31).

This book is an invitation to "sit beside" others and learn new things as we read the Gospel of John together. Often its pages are not as "plain" as we first thought. And how do we actually do what we are so often told, that is, to "take the Bible just as it is"?¹ What does it mean to "take the Bible just as it is"? Reading biblical passages in English already moves a reader from the Bible's original languages to interpretations. And certainly whenever a reader says, "This is what the passage means to me . . ." she has left what is "literal" for what is meaningful. Isn't that inevitable (and a good thing)? Isn't that the only way the Bible comes alive for us? The contributors to this book believe that the gospel according to John (also referred to as John's gospel or the Fourth Gospel) should be read and re-read "just as it is"—as an inspired work but also as a work of art that should be taken seriously as a literary whole.

This present volume begins with several assumptions that are highlighted by its title: "Signs to Life: Reading and Responding to John's Gospel." First, the word "signs" refers to the seven miracles (called

“signs”) spoken about in the first half of John’s gospel. Like signposts alongside the road or highway, the signs are not the destination, but they do guide readers there. Each sign points to Jesus, the focus of John’s gospel. When characters in this gospel ask for more signs, they betray their own location—they have not yet arrived at the place where John wants them to be. But the author does not give up on such characters. He keeps trying to guide them—and his readers—toward Jesus.

The word “signs” also suggests that this particular Johannine story of Jesus’ life does not leave readers alone to figure everything out. Instead, the author gives literary cues within the narrative that encourage readers to follow the “signs” along the way and to respond appropriately. These cues, for example, are found in such things as narrator’s comments, character development, irony and repetition. Different readers will notice different parts of the story and will “fill in the gaps” in their own ways.² Readers who follow the signs and cues learn that this Jesus offers “life abundantly” (see John 10:10).

Readers from different social locations will imagine ways that Jesus gave life in the past and how the Spirit continues to give life in the present. John’s gospel was preserved by its first readers and has been valued by readers in every generation since. Contemporary readers continue to read and respond to this good news. Each engagement inevitably (and thankfully) involves the presuppositions and insights each reader brings to the act of reading. As readers pay close attention to the literary cues, some readers’ presuppositions will be challenged, opening up still more possibilities for insights and new understandings. Because of the richness of possible reader responses, the life offered in this gospel is certainly abundant.

Reading for my church

Part I of this book contains seven sermons reflecting on stories found in the first half of John’s gospel. They represent a reading from a particular point of view—my point of view. I am a Seventh-day Adventist Christian who serves my church by teaching New Testament studies classes in the divinity school of one of its universities. After being asked by the president of my denomination to speak to the employees at the church’s

world headquarters for a week of worships in 2004, I prepared by reading John's gospel with that specific task in mind.³ My interpretations on that occasion were shaped by a particular audience I knew quite well.

Since my parents gave most of their professional lives to serving at our church's world headquarters, I grew up walking its halls and hearing employees—both local employees and visiting international employees—discuss and debate various actions and visions for the world church. Some employees I have known all my life. Some employees have children who were my classmates through elementary school, high school and into college. Some employees had been my parishioners, and a few recently hired employees had been my students in college religion classes. In preparing the sermons for that week, this diverse community of church leaders kept joining me in my imagination as I read. Their issues, questions and convictions shaped my reading of John's gospel. As I prepared I was—in my mind and heart—in conversation with people I knew would be present during that week.

This would not be the first time I experienced a week of worships at the church's world headquarters. When my brother and I were in elementary school, we attended a week of morning devotional meetings for the employees. We really did not have a choice. It was necessary because our parents had agreed to provide the music for the week, and we were too young to stay home alone.

At the end of that long week, then-General Conference president, Neal Wilson, presented the two of us with a gift. He said it was for sitting so quietly on the front row all week! The gift was a book by writer Marye Trim, entitled *Tell Me About Sister White*.⁴ It was a slim volume that introduced children to Ellen White, the most important founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I remember the moment President Wilson handed me that book. It was a moment when I could tangibly feel and appreciate that my church community had special stories, traditions and ideas it valued, and it was passing these on to me.

I believe the Adventist Church has valuable insights and important ideas to pass on to others. Of course, our most cherished beliefs are those we share with Christians of all denominations. But there are other beliefs that are important and that distinguish this particular faith community. Later in

graduate school, I was delighted to find people of various faith traditions eager to hear what my Adventism contributes to conversations about God, community, the life of faith, salvation and the future. It is important to ask what Adventist Christianity contributes to such conversations.

While considering ways the Fourth Gospel addresses current questions and issues within Adventism, these readings and responses are prepared with a desire to be inclusive of friends, neighbours or work colleagues who might not identify with the Adventist community. The gospel of John has spoken to people of various religious convictions for almost 2000 years—and continues to do so. So in a book such as this, we join “a great cloud of witnesses” that expands far beyond any one particular church family. When I use Seventh-day Adventist Church-speak, it is not meant to be exclusive but to allow for specificity, to be able to talk candidly about the faith tradition I know and love.

As readers, we all read and retell the Jesus story in light of our own concerns and questions, stories and experiences or in the light of the concerns of those to whom we are reading. We do this even as we “take the Bible as it is.” The author of John’s gospel was no different; he did the same thing. In his 2011 book *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, Paul Anderson points out how John’s gospel functions in a distinctive way as a “dialogical” text.⁵ By this he means that the issues and questions that concerned John and his community of fellow believers shaped the particular way he told the story of Jesus. And that kind of shaping is inevitable.

Describing the Fourth Gospel as a “dialogical” text means that the author of the gospel is in conversation with others in his community—for John that means Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians and Jews. These conversations helped create the work just as they create the interpretations readers will give to the stories. As the signs, encounter stories and dialogues were being selected by the author and shaped in their telling, the issues, questions and convictions of those first-century believers were never far away.⁶

At the same time, in his careful and thoughtful crafting of the story of Jesus, inspired by the Spirit, this author did not have the questions and issues of our particular communities in his thoughts while composing the

gospel. It was not like he leaped over all the centuries between his world and ours. But we bring to the reading of his story our 21st-century hopes and fears and questions. And the Spirit speaks to us today through the story.

Uniquely, the writer of the Fourth Gospel uses the language of “signs” to explore the life of Jesus and its implications for the present. This gospel contains seven signs—all placed in the first half of the book. Commentators often refer to this first part of the book as the “Book of Signs,” some even wondering if such a book existed prior to the writing of the gospel as a whole. Most of the signs are miracles unique to this gospel.⁷ When the signs finish, the narrative shifts to the death of Jesus. In this study, we will consider the signs in light of the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of the final events of Jesus’ life.

The readings represented in the seven sermons are inevitably shaped by my journey as an Adventist who grew up “sitting beside” other Adventists as we read Scripture together. For example, I knew that the “signs” language comes with baggage for an Adventist community anxiously awaiting the “signs of the end” for almost 170 years.⁸ John’s scenes of abundant water bring to mind the Adventist commitment to adult baptism by immersion. Sabbath miracles remind many in my community of childhood checklists of proper Sabbath behaviour. John’s scene of the Eucharist with Jesus talking about “eating his flesh” would not typically be chosen for Communion Sabbath in an Adventist church lest the uninformed visitor mistakenly think we were Catholic. Lazarus’ bodily resurrection affirms the Adventist understanding—and fundamental belief—concerning the “state of the dead.”

The seven sermons in this book illustrate the important hermeneutical principle that when we read a biblical text within the context of a faith community’s current questions and convictions, we are being faithful to the way the text was originally created. And being aware of the fact that we read in this way, we are more likely to respond to the ways the text both affirms and challenges our convictions. The same Spirit who was at work in the gospel’s creation remains with readers in every age.

Other readers and responses

Part II of the book contains the contributions of four other Adventist readers reflecting on their reading of—and their responses to—John’s gospel in their here and now. In some cases, the reader responds to one of the seven signs narrated in the text. In other cases, the reader considers a passage or passages in the gospel not discussed earlier. This second section highlights the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary interpretations. Reading is enhanced by readers who bring new questions, presuppositions and insights to the texts.

All four of these readers are associated with Avondale College of Higher Education, located in Cooranbong, New South Wales, north of Sydney, Australia. Adventism in Australia has had a long history with John’s gospel. A Bible institute organised at Avondale in 1896—even before the school officially opened—featured seminars on the Gospel of John by church administrator W W Prescott. His focus for the future faculty emphasised John’s “I am” statements (for example, “I am the Good Shepherd”) and its emphasis on the divinity of Christ.⁹

Almost 120 years later, Adventists in Australia continue to wrestle with the meaning of John’s unique telling of the Jesus story. Carolyn Rickett, DAarts, is a senior lecturer in Communication and English in the School of Humanities and Creative Arts. Daniel Reynaud, PhD, is dean of the Faculty of Arts and Theology, specialising in history, literature and media. Jane Fernandez, PhD, currently serves as the college’s vice president for learning and teaching. Nathan Brown, book editor at Signs Publishing Company in Melbourne, Victoria (Australia), is an established author and currently a postgraduate student at Avondale.

What does a communications specialist who has written research articles on grief hear in the voices of Mary and Martha as they mourn their brother’s death? How does a historian and literary scholar understand John’s presentation of Jesus as he notices the repeated use of irony in the work? What does an academic administrator who has written on the psychology of violence see in the story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman? How does a senior graduate student used to editing the stories of others understand the footwashing scene found only in John’s gospel?

The readings and responses of a variety of readers make the study of biblical texts an experience of abundant life. Readers of this book are encouraged to re-read John's gospel and consider their own presuppositions and perspectives. What do you see in the "signs" stories? What do you hear in the dialogues between Jesus and other characters? How do you follow John's use of irony?

Listening with the heart

In the years between the initial creation of these sermons and preparing them for publication, another important book shaped my appreciation of the complexities of John's gospel. For three years, from the beginning of 2002 to the end of 2004, 150 groups of people from many different walks of life, located in 22 countries, agreed to enter into a project together called "Through the Eyes of Another." The main question addressed in the project was: "What happens when Christians from radically different cultures and situations read the same Bible story and start talking about it with each other?"¹⁰

They agreed to read one scene of the New Testament—the story found in John 4 of the Samaritan woman Jesus met at a well. This story is a unique part of the narrative as it records the longest conversation between Jesus and any single person. This reading project was interested in what happens when people read and interpret a passage, then interact with other groups doing the same thing. Since stories always invite readers to "fill in the gaps" and readers do this from personal life experiences, what happens when readers do this in conversation with each other?

It is moving to hear the reports of this project. There are many ways in which our cultural assumptions, including our faith communities, shape how we hear and interpret the stories of Scripture. "We learned to listen with the heart," stated one participant.¹¹ "Looking through the eyes of another is not simple, but it is a very exciting and challenging search. It requires courage and openness. We are practising this as best we can, in the footsteps of Jesus and the Samaritan woman."¹²

In this present book, the five of us who share our readings hope these reflections on reading John's gospel, his account of Jesus' encounter with

the Samaritan woman and his narrating of Jesus' seven signs will both exhibit and inspire "listening with the heart." As Seventh-day Adventist women and men, we bring particular questions to these stories. As does each reader. It is our prayer that as you listen in on our conversations about how we read and respond to John's gospel that you, too, may find your own voice. Each new reading continues to enrich John's story of Jesus.

When we read in this way we also read with humility, understanding that new eyes will see new parts of the story. I am convinced of the wisdom of the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, that it is in listening carefully to the voice of the other—respecting its true distinctive otherness—that we find our own voices.¹³ This book is an occasion to consider our sacred texts as providing opportunities for hearing new voices, perhaps even our own. The questions for further reflection at the end of the book are designed to encourage more readings and more opportunities to respond to John's gospel.

The story of a book

Every book has its journey. As noted above, this book began life as a series of sermons on John's gospel. Each morning of that week in late March with its own signs of the arrival of Spring, I preached a sermon on a Johannine sign. Employees gathered in the large worship hall of the General Conference headquarters building. Following that series, I adapted the sermons and shared them with other congregations.

Five years later, I preached again from John—this time on "The Wedding at the Well"—in the Opal Room worship service at the Fox Valley Community Church in Wahroonga, New South Wales (Australia). A friend, Carolyn Rickett, who was with me that Autumn day, became enthused with a vision of what might be. Why not gather these sermons together in book form and make them more widely available to church members and local congregations? Perhaps, she also suggested, a CD could be included at the back of the book, providing a recorded version of the sermons. Also part of that first brainstorming session, our mutual friend, Robyn Priestley, joined in the many conversations that followed as we talked about how we could make it happen. As a result of those discussions, they wrote up a grant proposal to Avondale College to seek

funding for the project. I am grateful to Carolyn and Robyn and to Avondale for the vision and resources that have made this book possible.

I am also grateful to students in my undergraduate “Jesus and the Gospels” classes over the past 20 years with whom I have read the Gospel of John. These classes have met on three different campuses: Columbia Union College (now Washington Adventist University) in Takoma Park, Maryland (USA); La Sierra University in Riverside, California (USA); and Avondale College. In addition, graduate courses in the Gospel of John that I taught at La Sierra University have further shaped my thinking and preaching, as has a recent course “Sacred Texts: Theory and Practice of New Testament Interpretation” where we read John’s gospel from a variety of reader perspectives. Congregations from Brisbane, Queensland (Australia), to Sacramento, California (USA), to Markham Woods in Longwood, Florida (USA), have at various times invited me to share my reflections in a seminar series on John. Closer to my home in southern California, I am grateful to local church congregations who have shared a passion for Scripture as we read John’s gospel together: Bonita Valley, Chino Hills Spanish, Corona and Loma Linda University.

John Brunt, senior pastor of the Azure Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Kit Watts, retired associate editor of *Adventist Review*, read the seven sermons and offered encouragement as well as valuable suggestions for clarity. I am very grateful to both of them.

My parents, Bert and Mary Haloviak, have sat through this series of sermons more than once. In untold conversations over meals, they have expressed their love of John’s gospel. My gratitude for their encouragement at each step of my journey with Scripture cannot be adequately expressed. They were present during the first delivery at the General Conference headquarters. Their prayers eased my nerves that week in 2004, and their enthusiastic responses each morning made it a week I will always remember.

My husband, Gil Valentine, aided in the transitioning of sermons to book chapters. It is a true gift to be able to share life with a writer who loves Scripture and these kinds of projects.

2. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
3. In our denominational tradition, we call this a “Week of Prayer.” I am grateful to Dr Jan Paulsen, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1999-2010), for the invitation to speak for this series in March, 2004. The General Conference headquarters building is located in Silver Spring, Maryland (USA).
4. Takoma Park, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1975.
5. Paul N Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011.
6. The Fourth Gospel suggests that its author had access to many stories about Jesus and had to be very selective about the ones he chose to relate. See John 20:30, 31; 21:25.
7. The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle found in all four canonical gospels (John 6:1–15; Matthew 14:14–21; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:12–17). The miracle at sea (John 6:16–21) is similar to miraculous events in Matthew 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–53; Luke 8:22–25.
8. Officially formed in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist Church began as a Millerite Advent movement with its earliest members experiencing the “Great Disappointment” of 1844.
9. The sermons would later become a year-long series of Sabbath school lessons for the world church. For more information about Prescott’s influence on Adventism in Australia, see Gilbert M Valentine, *W W Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism’s Second Generation*, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2005, pages 111–30.
10. Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool, Daniel Schipani (editors), *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004, page 4.
11. *ibid*, page 112.
12. *ibid*, page 81.
13. This value of the other’s voice is a key idea for Bakhtin. In the context of encounters between different people and cultures, Bakhtin writes: “Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched.” See his “Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff” in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, edited Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, translated Vern W McGee, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, page 7. Bakhtin’s convictions concerning the responsibilities of readers to respond to literature comes through in his famous statement (“Art and Answerability” in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M M Bakhtin, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, translated by Vadim Liapunov, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, No 9, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990, page 1): “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.”

Part I
Signs To Life

A READER'S RESPONSE

Chapter 1
Signs of Salvation
John 2:1-11

In the Fourth Gospel's narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, characters first meet him through John the Baptist's proclamation (1:29–34). The next day people begin following Jesus and telling others about him (1:35–51). And “on the third day” the narrative highlights the first miracle performed by Jesus:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them [the servants], “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him (2:1–11).

Whenever I teach my “Jesus and the Gospels” class—a freshman-level university course—I have my students read this story together. The predictable question that arises in the minds of my 18-year-old Adventist students is: “What’s with the wine?”

One student—the kind who likes to get a heated discussion going—can always be counted on to say something like: “This story shows that it is OK to have wine with our meals.” Another Adventist student will then declare, “No, it does not! Jesus didn’t make alcoholic wine!” And the verbal battle is off and running. Students from other faith traditions will shake their heads in wonder. Suddenly, a particularly Adventist issue takes over a first-century story.

About the time John’s gospel was written, another work not included in the New Testament, called 2 Baruch, described the Messianic Age as one when there will be plenty, including plenty of wine. In fact, the work says that one of the signs of the Messianic Age will be that each grape will yield the equivalent of 120 gallons (about 450 litres) of wine.¹ We notice in the Cana wedding story how much water became wine: at least 120 gallons—without even one grape!

John wanted his readers to understand that the Messianic Age had arrived in Jesus. In him, there was an abundance of all that humanity needed and desired. The writers of Baruch and the Fourth Gospel knew that in the traditions of Israel, descriptions of a better future included the presence of plenty of wine. The prophet Amos wrote about a time when “mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13). Jesus’ presence in Cana created an abundance of wine. The story concludes with this affirmation: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11).

It isn’t about the “signs”

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus performed miracles that proclaimed the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. By contrast, in John’s gospel, the miracles, referred to as “signs,” revealed truth, not so much about the kingdom itself, as about Jesus, the God of the kingdom. The signs in the Fourth Gospel focused on Jesus’ glory, and they were meant to lead readers to reaffirm belief in him. When John came to the end of his gospel account, he took pains to explain to readers his purpose in writing out his story about these “signs” of Jesus. They are written, he noted significantly, “so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the

Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name” (20:31). John’s carefully selected “sign” stories are intended to focus the reader on Jesus in a particular way and for a particular purpose.²

The people in the stories who witnessed Jesus’ signs, had one of three reactions:

- They refused to believe in him;
- They believed in the signs instead of in him; or,
- They believed in what the signs pointed to—that Jesus was indeed the Christ!³

I think the second of these responses is the most challenging for contemporary readers. We might feel pity for those who refuse to believe and possibly assume we fall into the third group, those who believe in Jesus Christ. But the people in the second group—those who liked signs and wonders, although they did not really care to what they pointed—are not where the Jesus of John’s gospel wanted his followers to be. They were intrigued with the signs as phenomena but did not understand—or perhaps even want to understand—the real purpose of the signs.

Imagine you are visiting a significant building in your city. After a few wrong turns, you see outside along the highway the sign that has the name of the building on it. Now imagine if, in your delight to find this sign, you pulled your car over onto the shoulder of the road close to the sign, and you sat there gazing at it. What a well-designed, attractive sign, you think to yourself. I am finally here! I have always wanted to visit this place, meet the employees, tour the building and see the visitors’ centre.

But you have not arrived! You are merely at the sign, which points to another reality—and you have not seen anything yet. The whole point of that sign on the highway is something far greater than the sign itself, however well designed and attractive it might be.

The first miracle in the Fourth Gospel concluded with these words: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11, emphasis supplied). In this first sign—and in all the signs of this gospel—some people rejected Jesus, some fixated on the sign itself, and still others saw Jesus’ glory and came to believe in him. The author of this gospel longed for his readers to see beyond the signs to Jesus’ glory, and to continue to believe.

When Seventh-day Adventists hear the word “signs,” do we think about Jesus’ glory in the way John wanted us to? Probably not. We are possibly more conditioned to think about flagship magazine titles such as *Signs of the Times* and focus on things like doom and gloom, destruction and disaster, war and violence.⁴ Some Christians—including Adventist Christians—spend a lot of their time counting down these “signs” rather than focusing on the Jesus to whom they point. They experience fear and anxiety about the future, instead of the assurance and hope that breathes life throughout the Fourth Gospel. Let us not stop at the signs, but look through them to see the Saviour.

Continuing to believe

Although there is much debate about the particular kind of readers to which this gospel was first written, most scholars think it was written primarily for and within a community comprised of people who were already followers of Jesus. Most likely, the Fourth Gospel was not written to evangelise pagans or to make new Christians as much as it was to encourage the faith of those who were already believers.⁵ Here is another way in which the Fourth Gospel has relevance to people who perhaps have been associated with a church group for a long time. Members of such a community might know well the oft-rehearsed stories of Scripture, the memory verses, the words of the confession or the fundamental beliefs. Some might still remember their early lines from the catechism or from their Pathfinder pledge!⁶ Mission stories inspire them as they listen each week. Some people may even recall being involved in annual fundraising campaigns for mission projects.⁷ Many give regularly to charities, in addition to paying tithes and giving local church offerings. Such believers already know the story of Jesus and appreciate something of what it means to live as disciples.

Recall again the purpose statement at the end of the Fourth Gospel, which can be translated from the original language as “these [stories about signs] are written that you may continue to believe” (20:31). When John’s first readers heard his gospel being read, they already knew about Jesus. So do many of John’s contemporary readers. Many of us have read about

Jesus' ability to cast out demons as told in Mark's gospel. We have heard the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's account. We know about Jesus' miraculous birth as told in Luke. But the Fourth Gospel quickly invites us to experience a new encounter with Jesus. John invites us to look again, to look deeper, to look further and to see Jesus' glory in a more meaningful life-changing way. He wants us to be guided by his signs that point beyond any particular unusual or out-of-the-ordinary event, to the wonder of Jesus himself!

From its beginning, the Fourth Gospel hints at what is to come. As readers follow the first words of the gospel, they are being prepared for the rest. This gospel is the only one of the four that starts the story at creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (1:1–3a). The first chapter of this gospel associates the divine word at Creation with Jesus who came in the flesh of humanity: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14a). Somehow he was the embodiment of the divine glory (1:14b).

Occasionally those among whom Jesus grew up, lived and worked perceived this glory. The Fourth Gospel selected some of the stories about these occasions and called them "signs" because they pointed to the glory of God dwelling on earth! Jesus was the "Word," the creator of everything. Jesus was the "Word," the re-creator of everything. John invites his readers to see Jesus' creative power and transforming glory, that is, to see that he is able to make things new again.

While the first half of the Fourth Gospel emphasises the signs that point to Jesus, the second half of the Fourth Gospel is often referred to as the "book of glory." Beginning in Chapter 12, Jesus refers to being "lifted up." This phrase has a double-meaning in this gospel. Believers know Jesus will be lifted up on a cross, which Romans thought to be the lowest, most shaming event a person could experience. Yet believers also know that Jesus' moment of crucifixion will be his moment of glory and exaltation. An event of shame is transformed into an experience of glory. The event of suffering transformed into glory can be the experience of all who continue to believe.

Echoes of another story

The wedding-at-Cana story is one of the first stories in the Fourth Gospel. But for the careful reader, it is clear that there are some fascinating connections with one of the last stories in this gospel. As you listen or read the words of the last story, notice words that are also found in the wedding story:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out (19:25b–34).

We should have noticed that there are words, images and characters mentioned both here and in the Cana story. In both scenes, Jesus' mother was present—the only two places in John's gospel where she enters the narrative. In both scenes, Jesus called her "woman." While this may sound strange, perhaps even harsh to our ears, and while unusual for a son to use of his mother, this term would probably have been understood as a term of respect or honour. It does not carry the disrespectful connotations it does

in many cultures today.

Both wedding and death scenes briefly refer to Jesus' "hour." At Cana, Jesus lets his mother know that this is not his hour. Jesus will repeat this over and over again throughout the gospel: "My hour is not yet come" (2:4; 7:30; 8:20), until finally "the hour has come" (12:23, 27–36; 13:1; 17:1), the hour of the cross—his hour of greatest glory; the hour God is glorified. At the cross, Jesus made sure that his mother was cared for from "that hour."

Both scenes also involve liquid. In Cana, the wine had run out and Jesus brought it back with great abundance. The water jars previously used for purification would be filled with the best wine ever. There would be plenty for all! At the cross, the wine is sour.⁸ The One who had created the best wine was thirsty and asking for water. But he was given sour wine instead. Part of the torture of crucifixion was the agony of the elements. Hanging, sometimes for days, in the heat of the day and in the cold of the night, the crucified person's suffering was excruciating. Jesus was thirsty. We are meant to notice the irony. The "Water of Life" was thirsty.⁹

Unique to the Fourth Gospel's account of the crucifixion is the symbolism of water flowing out when Jesus died. The water came from Jesus' side after he was stabbed with a spear (19:34). The water in the wedding story was used to fill up the jars for the Jewish rite of purification. In the crucifixion story, water flowed because Jesus was stabbed. The authorities wanted him dead early because of the Jewish rite of the Sabbath. The Jews said, "We must get him down before the sun sets"—and they misunderstood the cross, that it was his moment of greatest glory. The best came last. Once again water flowed from God, the source of all life.

Adventist Christians—among others—believe in baptism by immersion, a special ceremony typically taking place in worship services that is only possible through the presence of abundant water. What if we celebrated each baptism as a reminder of Jesus' first sign, that of the water of purification becoming the sign of the Messianic Age?

When we celebrate baptisms, we also remember that water flowed from Jesus' side, that it "cleanses us from all sin." It is a sign of abundance and the sign of a glorious future. Each baptism is a beginning, the beginning of

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