

Thru the Bible: Gospel of John: The Book of Signs [Part 1]

Review: The Word became *flesh* and tabernacle among us:

A. Signs, Faith and New Beginnings: In 1 Cor. 1:22 Paul characterizes the Jews as a people who need “signs” in order to believe. To illustrate and answer the question “Who is Jesus?” John presents a series of seven *signs* which show that Jesus is more than a great teacher, a godly man or even an inspired prophet. He is the *Christ*, the Son of God, as designated in John’s “purpose statement” for the whole Gospel: “*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” (20:30-31).

The concept of a *sign* for John is more than simply a miracle - it is something which points to Jesus’ true divine identity. Signs in the Gospel of John often symbolize some important spiritual truth, using the common everyday elements and traditions of the hearers/readers. We are called to look beyond the *physical* details of the story to a deeper and more significant meaning. It is in the “Book of Signs” in chapters 2-12 that John follows a pattern of illustrating a spiritual quality of Jesus by an earthly analogy or miracle:

1. **John 2: The wedding at Cana:** Jesus as the *new wine*
2. **John 2: ‘Cleansing’ of the Temple:** Jesus as the *new temple*
3. **John 4: The Samaritan woman at the well:** Jesus as the *living water*
4. **John 5: Healing on the Sabbath:** Jesus as *Lord of the Sabbath*
5. **John 6: The feeding of the 5000:** Jesus as the *bread of life* (6:35)
6. **John 9: The healing of the blind man:** Jesus as the *Light of the world* (9:5)
7. **John 10: Stories of sheep and shepherds:** Jesus as the *good shepherd* (10:11)
8. **John 11: The raising of Lazarus:** Jesus as the *resurrection and the life* (11:25)



B. New Wine and Old Wineskins: The first “sign” in the Gospel is Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. This is John’s version of the Synoptic statement of Jesus that “new wine must be put into new wineskins.” John follows this with a series of replacement themes in which Jesus fulfills or supersedes the “old wineskins” of the Jewish religious system or fundamental traditions (Jn.1:17).

1. **The spiritual privilege of Jewish descent:** “*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him...he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision...but born of God*” (Jn.1:11-13) This announcement in the Prologue prepares for later encounters with Nicodemus (3:5ff.); with the Jewish leaders who argue that they are “Abraham’s descendants and children” (8:33-41); and Jesus’ revelation that he has “other sheep that are not of this fold” (10:16).



2. **An emphasis on ritual purity:** It is not by accident that the water Jesus turns into wine came from six stone jars used for ceremonial washing. In his parenthetical side note on Jewish ritual cleansing traditions, the Gospel writer Mark notes, “The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands...and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it...[along with] the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles” (Mark 7:2-4). In the next chapter of John there is even an argument between John the Baptist’s disciples and a Jew over the issue of “ceremonial washing.” (John 3:25).

“If any [unclean thing] falls into any earthen vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break the vessel...any liquid that could be drunk shall be unclean if it was in any such vessel” Lev. 11:33-34

- **The Messiah, wine and wedding traditions:** “*The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when...the mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it*” Amos 9:13; “*The LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines*” Isa. 25: 6. “*O LORD my God...you bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart*” Ps. 104:1, 14; “*Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb*” (Rev. 19:9)

3. **Worship centralized around the Temple:** In contrast to the three synoptic Gospels, John places the “Cleansing of the Temple” story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry rather than at the end (2:12-22). And then in a debate with the Samaritan woman over which temple and location is legitimate, Jesus announces a coming revolution in worship, “*Believe me woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth*” (John 4:21-24)

4. The limitations of the Sabbath: Jesus heals a paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, and in response to criticism from the Jewish leaders says, *“My Father is always at work to this very day, and I, too, am working”* (5:1-18)

5. Emphasizing the written word (Scriptures) over the Living Word: In another controversy with the religious leaders, Jesus points out that extreme devotion to the Bible can lead one astray and obscure the most important revelation of God in Jesus (5:39-40)

6. The celebration of traditional Jewish Feasts:

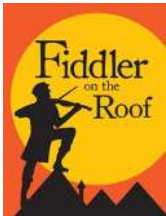
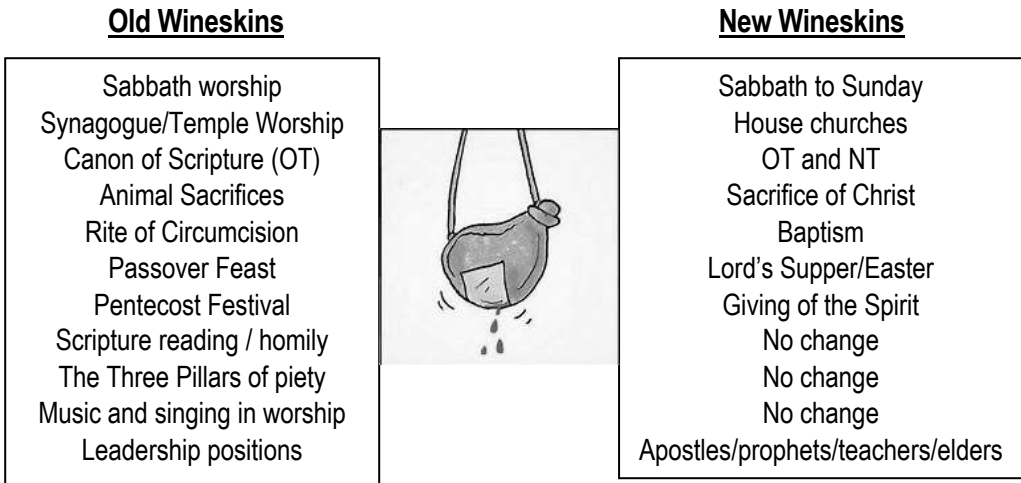
- **Passover:** physical vs. spiritual bread: John 6
- **Tabernacles:** physical vs. spiritual water: John 7:2, 37-39
- **Hanukkah** (Dedication): physical vs. spiritual light: John 10:21-22 (cf. Jn.9)



“It is noteworthy that most of the Gospel’s major symbolic images come from the common experience of all people of the time: light and darkness, water, bread, vine and wine, shepherd and sheep, judgment and witness, birth and death. Many of these images also have a background in the Jewish Scriptures and Jewish tradition, which would enhance their meaning for readers who knew this background...It is also true that most of the major Johannine images have some place in the Synoptic teaching of Jesus and would therefore not be wholly unfamiliar to non-Johannine Christians. What is distinctive in John is the extensive development of these images.”
Richard Bauckham, The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple, 123

Application: When Jesus didn’t follow the cultural and religious ‘playbook’ of his day, he used an analogy which his hearers were familiar with, *“No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine would burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins”* (Mark 2:22). This set in motion a gradual (and divisive) transformation of worship practices, as the early Jewish followers of Jesus wrestled with how to integrate the new wine of the Gospel with their longstanding religious traditions and cultural heritage, particularly in the incorporation of Gentiles into the faith community. If Jesus were to incarnate himself among us today in disguise and visit our homes and churches, what sorts of traditions and practices would he find at odds with a “new wineskin” outlook?

But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, ‘The old is better.’
Luke 5:39



“Jesus distinguishes here between something essential and primary (the wine) and something secondary but also necessary and useful (the wineskins). Wineskins would be superfluous without the wine...There is that which is new, potent, essential – the gospel of Jesus Christ. And there is that which secondary, subsidiary, made by human hands. These are the wineskins – traditions, structures and patterns of doing things that have grown up around the gospel...Good old Judaism could not contain the new wine of Christ. The Christians faith would have to grow and burst the old wineskins...[Today] we try to contain the new wine of the gospel in old wineskins – outmoded traditions, obsolete philosophies, creaking institutions, old habits. But with time the old wineskins begin to bind the gospel. They must burst, and the power of the gospel pours forth once more...Wineskins are not eternal; not sacred...New wine must be put into new wineskins – not once-for-all, but repeatedly, periodically.”
Howard Snyder, Radical Renewal: The Problem of Wineskins Today, 13-16