

Unit 4

Signs, Symbols and Salvation

If Christology represents the core of John's Gospel, the aim of the narrative is to demonstrate how belief in its christological message can lead to salvation. Traditional soteriological language, such as 'saviour' (4:42), 'salvation' (4:22) and 'save' (3:17), do feature occasionally in John's expressions of the promise of salvation, but his favoured terminology is that of 'eternal life' (*zôê aiônios*). This term occurs 36 times in the gospel, either simply as 'life' or, on seventeen occasions, as 'eternal life', thus giving it the prominence accorded by the Synoptic Gospels to the language of 'the kingdom of God'. The significance of 'eternal life' as an overarching theme is demonstrated by its key role at the beginning and end of the Johannine narrative. The brief summary of intention in 20:30-31 states explicitly that the Gospel was written in order that people might believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, and that, through faith, they may find life. But already in the Prologue readers are informed that not only were all things created through the Logos (1:3), but that in him was life (1:4). As the expression of God's self-revelation, the Logos partakes of the divine life, and his mission (as outlined in Jn 1:10-13) is to come into the world to mediate this life to those who have been alienated from God and are held in death's destructive grip (cf. 5:24; 8:51-52; 11:26). This life is made available, in a new creative initiative, through the act of divine birth. Those who possess human life are therefore offered a new beginning, a relationship with God as his children, by receiving divine life from the Logos who, through the incarnation, has identified with human fleshly life.

The Centrality of ‘Life’

John, throughout his narrative, can juxtapose these two forms of existence, the heavenly and earthly, the spiritual and physical, because of the various Greek terms for ‘life’ at his disposal. John contrasts the one mode of existence, the created or natural life for which physical death is the inevitable end (denoted by the term *psuchê* with the divine life (invariably described as *zôê*). This distinction is succinctly expressed in 12:25: ‘And those who hate their life (*psuchê*) in this world will keep it for eternal life (*zôê aiônios*)’. ‘Eternal life’ in this respect is not to be understood solely in quantitative terms, with the emphasis placed on its long duration, but qualitatively, as suggested by its few precedents in Jewish Scripture and tradition. This expression occurs only once in the Septuagint, in Daniel 12:2, to refer to the righteous ones who, after death, will awaken to ‘the life of the eternal age’ (*zôê aiônios*). Second Temple Judaism provides further examples. Evidence from Qumran states that all the sons of the light who walk in the spirit of truth will have ‘eternal joy in life without end’ (1QS 4:7),¹ while other first-century Jewish traditions (particularly apocalyptic traditions) distinguish between this world and the world to come both in terms of time (one world following the other) and quality. *IV Ezra*, for example, describes eternal life as ‘the blessing’ of immortality in the age to come (7:12-13; 8:54), and *I Enoch* states: ‘The righteous ones shall be in the light of the sun and the elect ones in the light of eternal life which has no end, and the days of the life of the holy one cannot be numbered’ (58:3).

These Jewish texts focus on the life of the resurrection which will be received after the present earthly life has come to an end, but for John the life of the age to come, with all its blessings, can be experienced in the here and now. Thus, in accordance with its emphasis on realized eschatology, on the salvation made available by Jesus in his own person and

¹ 1QS is the standard abbreviation for the Qumran text known as the Manual of Discipline.

ministry, the language traditionally reserved for the end time (judgement, resurrection, eternal life) become present eschatological realities in John's Gospel (note the example of the Son of Man descent followed by ascent pattern). The offer of life and the judgement of the world have definitively taken place in the earthly mission of Jesus. He is 'the resurrection and the life' (11:25), the one whose death is the present judgement of this world (12:31) which brings about the casting out of Satan (16:11). God's judgement on human beings is based on their response to him; rejection of Jesus can only lead to condemnation (the negative aspect of judgement), but believers can experience life and resurrection in the hour that 'is coming...and now is' (4:23; 5:25; 16:23). This assessment in realized terms is particularly prominent in John 5:19-29, which highlights the significance of 'eternal life' by connecting it with resurrection. As the eschatological agent of God Jesus is able to share in the divine prerogatives of judging and giving life: 'Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomsoever he wishes' (5:21). The one who believes on the basis of Jesus' word receives eternal life in the present; such a person does not come under condemnation but has *already* passed from death to life (5:24).

But what does this new life signify? It certainly implies life without end, as suggested by the adjective 'eternal', but, as in the case of possible Jewish parallels, there is more to the Johannine use of this term. It denotes the kind of life intrinsically different from ordinary physical existence that is caught up in the cycle of death. Its otherness, as distinct from physical life, is brought out by the fact that this is the life which the eternal God himself lives and gives, and which Jesus, as Logos/Son, also possesses: 'For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself' (5:26; cf. 6:57). This expresses the unity between the Father and the Son, and believers partake of

this life by abiding in Jesus who himself abides in the Father. Eternal life therefore becomes, for John, the goal of human search for salvation, as summed up in John's own definition of the concept in 17:3: 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. Eternal life consists of the believer's knowledge, that is, in the sense of intimate communion with God and Jesus. It is through union with God as a present experience that believers come to share in the divine life, a life for which physical death poses no threat. It is by accepting eternal life that believers can be rescued from darkness, judgement and wrath, and pass from death to life.

John's Concept of 'Life' and Eschatology

Does this reassessment and reorientation of eschatological language mean that, for John, the life of the age to come, has moved totally out of the future into the present? What about those occasional passages which seem to adhere to a more traditional understanding of promised salvation as belonging to the future? In 12:48 Jesus declares that 'the word that I have spoken will be his judge *on the last day*', and, according to 6:54, 'he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up *at the last day*'. Some attempt to show that two such different strands of eschatology (future and realized) cannot be traced back to the same author, leading Rudolf Bultmann to claim that the future eschatological statements represent the work of a later ecclesiastical redactor who attempted to bring John more into line with early Christian belief. But resorting to the theory of later redactional tampering with the text of the Gospel is not the only or most plausible solution, since the sequence in a passage like John 5:19-29 indicates that eternal life is a present possession which will be brought to its consummation in the future. Jesus' claims hold together both the present and the future: 'the hour is coming and is now here'

when the spiritually dead hear the voice of the Son of God and live (5:25), but, within a few verses, this same terminology is subtly modified to point to a future hour: ‘the hour is coming’ (this time without reference to ‘now here’) when this same voice will be heard inaugurating the physical resurrection of the dead (those who are in their graves) for a judgement of either life or condemnation (5:28-29). Consequently the present gift of eternal life anticipates but is not substitute for physical resurrection in Johannine eschatology. There is no doubt that the realized aspect plays the greater role in John’s Gospel, but the future aspect has not been totally ignored.

Salvation and Symbols

What is at work in a passage like John 5 is a deliberate interplay of two spheres through the use of symbolic language – the physical and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly – in order to bring together the present and future role of Jesus as the giver of life. The future expectation of the opening of graves for physical resurrection lends its terminology of life and death, of hearing the voice, to a symbolic description of the spiritual death transformed into life in the present and which is the result of a positive response to the ‘voice’ of Jesus. The symbolic nature of Johannine language has long been recognized, but only in recent scholarship has its nature and function been subjected to thorough scrutiny. At the beginning of his study, Craig Koester asks how John expresses the reality of salvation and then proceeds to explore symbols as the means to communicate things that cannot otherwise be adequately expressed in human language. While symbol is, in a general sense, something that stands for something else, Koester offers the following more precise definition: ‘A symbol is an image, an action, or a person that is understood to have transcendent significance. In Johannine terms, symbols span the chasm between what is

‘from above’ and what is ‘from below’ without collapsing the distinction’ (*Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 4). The words and actions of Jesus are his vehicles of revelation, and he reveals divine truths primarily through earthly images which, on a sensory level, can be seen, touched, and tasted. How do Jesus’ symbolic words and actions therefore express the gift of eternal life?

Johannine Metaphorical ‘I AM’ Statements

The Johannine metaphorical ‘I am’ statements are undoubtedly symbolic expressions of Jesus’ life-giving significance. Attempts have been made to distinguish between the so-called ‘absolute’ *egô eimi* declarations and those followed by a predicate by associating the former with Jesus’ identity and the latter with his activity. This distinction is inadequate for several reasons (not least because it is precisely his identity as the agent of God’s eschatological salvation that is encompassed by both categories), but Jesus’ role as the giver of eternal life is certainly made more explicit in the metaphorical statements. All the images attached to *egô eimi* have life as a primary referent and, in many cases, are drawn from daily life and can be perceived by the senses: Jesus is the source and sustainer of eternal life (bread, light, resurrection, life, vine), because it is only through him that one gains access to this life (door, way). He leads believers towards this life (shepherd) and reveals (truth) the life that is equivalent to communion with God. All these metaphors serve as symbols of spiritual gifts, and the challenge for readers as well as for characters within the text is to move from a literal level (such as bread) to its metaphorical or spiritual meaning (‘I am the bread of life’). Jesus’ Jewish audience, following his feeding of the multitude, expect him to reproduce traditional messianic signs like the miracle of the manna (cf. *Qohelet Rabbah* 1:9: ‘As the former redeemer caused manna to descend, as it is

stated, ‘Behold I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you’ (Exod. 16:4), so will the latter redeemer cause manna to descend’), but their unwillingness to look beyond Jesus’ human origins as son of Joseph (6:42) to his heavenly origins as Son of God prevents them from moving from the physical to the spiritual. This spiritual blindness prevents them from engaging with another level of reality, and recognising Jesus as the source and giver of the ‘bread of life’.

Johannine Symbols and Signs

Not all the ‘I am’ metaphors are drawn from the earthly or physical sphere, and yet, even in the case of such metaphors as resurrection and life (11:25), they serve to explicate the ongoing connection between earthly and divine realities by acting as a kind of commentary on Jesus’ miraculous activity. Jesus’ miraculous deeds are predominantly depicted in John’s Gospel as ‘signs’, of which seven are described in some detail in the narrative of his public ministry (the miracle of the wine at Cana (2:1-11); the healing at a distance of the official’s son (4:46-54); the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18); the multiplication of the loaves (6:1-15); Jesus walking on water (6:16-21); the cure of the man born blind (9:1-41); the raising of Lazarus (11:1-53)). This number seven is itself symbolic because, as in the case of the seven metaphorical ‘I am’ sayings, it represents that which is of divine and heavenly origin. But to what extent is the term ‘sign’ itself symbolic? In the Septuagint the term ‘sign’ (*sêmeion*) can denote miraculous acts, particularly with reference to the Exodus events, while in Isa 66:19 it is connected specifically with the proclamation of God’s glory to the nations: ‘And they shall come and see my glory, and I will set a sign among them’. This prophetic tradition, like John, connects the *sêmeion* to the manifestation of God’s glory (cf. 2:11; 11:40) and it acts as a visible and symbolic

anticipation of things to come, which in the case of Jesus, is supremely manifested in his death and resurrection.

As symbolic acts, Jesus' signs therefore operate primarily on the material or physical level (he changes water into wine, heals a lame man and a blind man, feeds a crowd with bread, walks on water, raises a dead man), but the true meaning of his signs are to be found at the spiritual level. But once again, from a narrative perspective, the signs bear witness to the challenge of moving from one level (physical) to another (spiritual). If the first-level meaning relates to material and tangible reality, it is the more profound and spiritual level that truly needs to be perceived. In some instances the signs lead to true Johannine faith and eternal life, but in others to darkness and rejection. While no one in the Gospel denies that Jesus is performing spectacular deeds and manifestations of power, less often do people move from the material to the spiritual and come to grasp that these deeds are indicators or signifiers of his true identity as the revelation of God. Each event is intended to reveal Jesus' true identity and, by pointing to the spiritual reality that lies behind the material signs, is symbolic of his present gift of eternal life to the world. The signs are intended to lead people to the only one who can give them eternal life (6:68). The first sign, the supply of wine at Cana, anticipates the significance of Jesus' mission; the water of the Jewish rites of purification is transformed into the wine and joy of the new life provided by Jesus. And in all the remaining signs, whether it is through a subsequent discourse (Jn 5-6) or an interpretation intertwined with the sign (Jn 9, 11), the reader is ultimately directed to the eternal life that Jesus offers to the world: whether it is through the restoration of health and sight, the provision of bread that points to the bread of life, the guidance through water to the other side and, above all, through the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

It is therefore striking that John places little emphasis on the visible results of the signs. When the lame man is healed in Jerusalem, the main message of the explanation that follows is that Jesus offers spiritual life (5:21, 24: 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life'). He restores the sight of the blind man, and again the main emphasis is upon spiritual sight (9:39: 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'). Physical health, sight and life are gifts that 'signify' Jesus' power to give eternal life.

And yet, the Johannine understanding of life possesses many dimensions, embracing the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine, the present and the future. The material, for John, is not an irrelevance, but an essential vehicle for revelation and salvation. In the same way as John expresses spiritual realities through the symbolic significance of the material signs, he does not intend eternal life to be viewed as divorced from physical created life or as existing on a separate spiritual level. This is the message already set out in the prologue: it is by becoming incarnate, embracing physical life, that the one who already possesses eternal divine life is able to mediate that life to the world. Eternal life is rather a gift that transforms physical life, so that present existence is shaped by the living relationship to Jesus and God that comes through belief. John also makes clear that death will be followed by resurrection, both for Jesus and for his believers, as demonstrated symbolically by the raising of Lazarus. This seventh sign brings to a climax the first half of the Gospel. It completes Jesus' public ministry, and sets in motion (through the response of the Sanhedrin) the events that will lead to Jesus' hour and the manifestation of his divine glory.

The fact that Lazarus' miraculous raising is temporary, in that he is still subject to death (12:9-11), demonstrates that this episode is intended as a sign. First, the importance of this scene has in fact already been prefigured in Jesus' earlier declaration that the hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and will come out of their graves (5:28-29); this is now given concrete expression when Jesus, with a loud voice, comes to awaken Lazarus by calling him out of his grave (11:11, 14). Secondly, Lazarus' death and appearance from the tomb also serve as a foretaste of Jesus' own resurrection, which itself anticipates the final resurrection. Relevant to this are the clear parallels between the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus. In both cases there is emphasis on the grief and faith of women who arrive at the tomb, which, in both accounts, is a cave-like tomb with a heavy stone that must be removed. In both narratives, moreover, explicit reference is made to the grave clothes, especially the head cloth (cf. 11:44; 20:7). But at this point there is an important difference: Lazarus comes out of the tomb still bound in the linen cloths (he must face death once again), but in Jesus' resurrection they are left behind and rolled up, indicating his decisive defeat of death.

The sign of Lazarus' restoration to physical life therefore points beyond itself to the resurrection and eschatological life provided by Jesus through his own death and resurrection. These theological issues are highlighted in Jesus' earlier dialogue with Martha. When he assures her, 'Your brother will rise again', Martha responds with a confessional statement: 'I know that he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day' (11:24). She acts as a mouthpiece of traditional Jewish eschatological beliefs, and has not truly understood the force of his words, now clarified by his declaration: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25). Jesus' words evidently focus on his person as the resurrection and life: he embodies the power to raise from the dead and is the source of

eternal life. Resurrection and eternal life are no longer reserved solely for the end-time; they are presently available through belief in Jesus. An elaboration of this ‘I am’ declaration follows in 11:25b-26a through its play on the verbs ‘to live’ and ‘to die’: ‘Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die’. The first clause therefore declares that believers in Jesus will, at some point, undergo physical death, but that cannot affect the eschatological life already in their possession. Eternal life beyond death is assured. The second clause then states that those believers who have such life will never experience spiritual death (i.e. it does not signify a disruption of the experience of eternal life with God and Jesus until the final resurrection). The believer who is spiritually alive will never experience the death of alienation from God. Jesus acknowledges that the believer’s physical death is real but not the end; believers are brought into life everlasting and the raising of Lazarus points to the truth of this promise. His return to physical life is a sign of the gift of eternal life; it also anticipates Jesus’ death and resurrection through which this life is made available.

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