

## READING THE SIGNS

We are approaching our immersion into the world and words of the priestly prophet Ezekiel and the beloved apostle John's gospel through a particular argument. Our [underlying assumption](#) is that John models his account of the person and work of Jesus (*thematically, structurally, in the sharing metaphors and motifs, through fulfillment of promises, and in reversals of curses*) after Ezekiel's account of his service as a spokesperson for God and interpreter of God's workings, present, and future. In short, John is establishing Jesus as a **priestly prophet**.

By way of reminder, a priestly prophet was a representative of God whose primary concern was the relationship and mutual partnership between God and his people. His words and his dramatizations were meant to draw attention to this relationship, revealing its quality, deficiency, and potential. His purpose was to urge people to trustingly submit to God alone and hold singularly to that allegiance. His words and his dramatizations exposed hidden naive alliances and ignorant hopes, accused willful, rebellious betrayal, and encouraged memory of God's faithfulness. The priestly prophet aspired to awaken a recognition of the cosmic story in which the people's lives were played out; employing creation language, opening the invisible realm to human eyes, unmasking all the characters in global, historical performance. All this the priestly prophet spoke and dramatized to give *weight* to the everyday roles and relationships of those who would listen and believe.

The weight of which the prophets spoke is contained in this all too familiar and all too passed-over word: *glory*. [It's this word that let us look into the connection between the two books](#). Ezekiel and John [share a beginning sequence](#) that sets the tone and course for the actions, accusations, conversations, conflicts, pronouncements, and promises that follow. While sharing no less than eighteen parallel's in their opening lines, we focused our attention last week upon one particular prophetic connection: the presence of the glory of the Lord.

Now the glory of the Lord can be summed up as *the power and beauty of God's tangible rule and reign*.<sup>1</sup> The removal of his glorious presence allows darkness to fill the void. Destruction and chaos, oppression and violence, hatred and selfishness, disease and famine, anxiety and depression descend at its absence but flee from it's in breaking (Jn. [1:5](#); [3:19](#)). The power and beauty of God's tangible presence will pop up over and over as we continue our dive into these books, so it's a word worth meditating on even as the shared narrative flow of the books propel us into what most of us imagine when we think of prophecy: **signs**.

Signs in our everyday life are helpful. They help us know where we are going, what we are about to walk into, what is available on the other side of the door or down the road or around the corner. Signs also help us avoid danger, urging us to pay attention to our surroundings and the contents of the package. Signs are helpful even in their brevity because they reveal more than is immediately seen, if we have learned how to interpret that meaning. A sign is useless if we cannot read it, which is why signs were a standard tool of the prophets. Theologian and missiologist Christopher Wright explains signs in general and in Ezekiel this way,

"...it was often a part of the prophetic repertoire to accompany their verbal message with 'sign-acts'--that is, actions or demonstrations which not only acted as a visual reinforcement to the message but even in some way **prefigured and guaranteed the event which the prophecy spoke of**. The action *sign*-ified the message, while the message would sometimes explain and interpret the sign." (Wright, 74)

While nearly all the Old Testament prophets performed "sign-acts" to accompany their message and validate their prophetic role; it is Ezekiel who makes explicit that his theatrical performances are indeed signs with a specific interpretation: "This is a **sign** for the house of Israel." (4:3) "...for I have made you a **sign** of the house of Israel." (12:6) "Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a **sign** according to all that he has done you shall do. *When this comes*, then you will know that I am the Lord GOD." (24:24) In turn, chapters 2-12 of John's gospel are referred to as "the book of signs." (Carson,

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible Project's latest podcast is actually about this often used but seldom pondered word, glory. You can [listen here](#).

166) Like Ezekiel, John too explicitly indicates the revelatory nature of Jesus' acts: "This, the first of his **signs**, Jesus did...and manifested his glory." (2:11) "...many believed in his name when they saw the **signs** that he was doing." (2:23) "'What are we to do with him? For this man performs many **signs**.'" (11:47) "Though he had done many signs before them, they still did not believe in him." (12:37)

While there is some disagreement in the biblical scholar world around just how many signs are in each book, generally the number is somewhere between seven to nine, and more often, lands in the middle at eight.

SIGNS IN EZEKIEL	SIGNS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL
Modeling the siege of Jerusalem (4:1-3)	Turning water into wine (2:1-11)
Bearing the punishment on his side (4:4-6)	Cleansing the temple (2:14-21)
Anxious & unclean provision (4:9-17)	The healing of the official's son (4:46-54)
Shameful shaving (5:1-4)	The healing of the man by the pool (5:1-9)
Mimicking fleeing into exile (12:1-20)	The feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15)
Resisting mourning (24:15-24)	The healing of the blind man (9:1-7)
Muteness removed at confirmation (24:25-27)	The raising of Lazarus (11:1-44)
Unifying of two sticks (37:15-28)	The miraculous catch of fish (21:1-11)

After the grand and foretelling beginnings, both books move into the "ministry" of the prophets. In this time frame (Ezekiel 4-24; John 2-12), the signs of the prophets are revealing things to come as well as the nature of what is happening at the moment. While not relating sign to sign, Ezekiel and John do share some overarching trends. For both, all but the final sign takes place before the "judgment" event. In Ezekiel's case, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. In John's case, the death of Jesus on the cross. For both, the final sign takes place amid the promise of peace after judgment, and the expansive characteristic of the peace that is coming (or has come in John's gospel). And yet, it is where they differ that is most important.

Ezekiel's signs are primarily signs of warning. Helping the people in exile understand what was coming and arouse a sense of caution and ultimately, the confounding shame of repentance ([Ezek. 36:22-32](#)). Only the final sign is a sign pointing to unqualified hope—a day of resurrection of being born again ([Ezek. 37:1-14](#)). In John's gospel, the signs of Jesus are primarily directive advertisements—although, in their appeal, there is a warning of choosing something lesser—helping the people who would follow him understand what God was doing in and through him. Only the second sign ([Jn. 2:14-21](#)) is a sign pointing to judgment—hidden alliances exposed and destroyed—although this judgment would be relatively swift in comparison to the former.

John makes it clear at the end of his gospel story that he specifically chose the signs he included because he had a particular purpose in mind:

"Now Jesus did many more **signs** in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are **written so that you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that **by believing you may have life** in his name."

Commentator Andreas Kostenberger claims, "In John's Gospel...a sign is a symbol-laden, but not necessarily 'miraculous' public work of Jesus selected and explicitly identified as such by John for the reason that it **displays God's glory in Jesus** who is thus shown to be God's true representative." (quoted in Peterson, 73) What power and beauty do you read in the signs of God's tangible rule and reign in the life of Jesus?

**PRACTICE:** Take some time this week to read through the signs in John's gospel account. As you do, ask the Holy Spirit for insight into the following:

- *What vision(s) of "religious" life is Jesus confronting & correcting with this sign?*
- *What does this sign reveal about the nature of God & the characteristics of a life lived in response to his nature?*