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"When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?" (John 7:31): Signs and the Messiah in the Gospel of John

Abstract

The Gospel of John is not unique in representing Jesus as performing miracles, but the way that John uses signs to point to Jesus's Christological identity stands out among the canonical gospels. In John, when Jesus is called χριστός—Christ, messiah—it is often in the context of a sign being performed. However, the relationship between Jesus's signs in John and his depiction as messiah is curious, since most early Jewish texts that describe messiahs focus on other characteristics: their ability to defeat enemies, their royal lineage, or their priestly characteristics, for example. Nonetheless, there are brief references to other examples of ancient Jews considered to be messiahs who are likewise associated with miraculous events, for example, Theudas and "the Egyptian." Given that signs are also used to point to false prophets and evil beings in other texts that depict Jesus as Christ, this paper explores the connection between the signs in John and the Gospel's messianic Christology.

Keywords

Gospel of John; signs; messiah; early Judaism; Christology

Introduction

The way that John uses signs to point to Jesus's Christological identity stands out among the canonical Gospels even if the Gospel of John is not unique in representing Jesus as performing miracles. In John, when Jesus is called χριστός—Christ, messiah—it is often in the context of a sign being performed (e.g., John 11:27). This is in contrast to the Johannine John the Baptist, who is *not* χριστός (John 1:20) and does not perform signs (John 10:41). I will focus on, first, the signs in John, and second, the function of signs in other texts from around Jesus's era. John Painter has suggested that "John builds on the tradition that the Messiah emerges out of obscurity, being hidden,"[1] and thus the signs serve to point to this secret identity. John's Gospel takes for granted that a messiah would be expected to perform signs. However, the relationship between Jesus's signs in John and his depiction as messiah is curious,

[1] John Painter, "Signs of the Messiah and the Quest for Eternal Life," in *What We Have Heard From the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 248.

since most early Jewish texts that describe messiahs focus on other characteristics: their ability to defeat enemies, their royal lineage, or their priestly attributes, for example. Many scholars have accepted that in general, ancient Jews did not expect messiahs to perform miracles.[2] Nonetheless, there are brief references to ancient Jewish messiahs associated with the miraculous; for example, Theudas and the Egyptian mentioned in Josephus and Acts. Given that signs are also used to point to false prophets and evil beings in other texts that depict Jesus as Christ (e.g., Rev. 13:13, 16:14, 19:20), this paper will explore the connection between the signs in John and the Gospel's messianic Christology.

Signs and Christology in the Gospel of John

The notion of a Johannine Signs Source has pervaded the study of this Gospel since Rudolf Bultmann's commentary in 1941[3] and, among many others,[4] Robert Fortna's *Gospel of Signs* in 1970.[5] For the purpose of this discussion, I will set aside any questions around the redaction history of the text and instead focus on the role the signs play in the narrative as we currently have it, since at some point, at least one

[2] E.g., Michael Labahn, "'Winds of Change'—Jesus as God's Envoy of Eschatological Transformation: Jesus and the Memory of His Extraordinary Deeds Between the Hope of Israel and Early Christian Interpretation," in *Jesus in Continuum*, ed. T. Holmen, WUNT 289 (Tübingen: J. C. B Mohr [Paul Siebeck]), 296, and those he cites in n. 91. Labahn states that "early Christian miracle stories about Jesus clearly demonstrate a difference to early Jewish traditions, which Jesus as well as early Christian communities shared" because "the messiah of Israel was not expected as a miracle worker."

[3] Rudolph Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941); ET: *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).

[4] See, for example, Jürgen Becker, "Wunder und Christologie: Zum literarkritischen und christologischen Problem der Wunder im Johannesevangelium," *NTS* 16 (1970): 120–148; J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 166; Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 37; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 1:64–67; James M. Robinson, "The Johannine Trajectory," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, by J. M. Robinson and H. Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 232–68, esp. 238–52.

[5] Robert T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

community was content with its current form. In its present state, the Gospel uses the term σημεῖον ("sign") 17 times, more than any of the other canonical Gospels or any other New Testament text.[6]

In terms of semantic meaning within an early Christian context, σημεῖον can refer to a mark by which something is known; an event that goes against what is usually expected from nature, such as a miracle or wonder; or a portent of the *eschaton*.[7] In the wider Greco-Roman world, the semantic range includes omens from the gods, but σημεῖον could also refer to ordinary landmarks. In both of these cases, σημεῖον signals to the one who sees it that it is necessary to perform an action: appease a god or turn left at the big oak. Finally, σημεῖον can also refer to a birthmark or a symptom of some medical ailment.[8]

The Gospel itself tells us its purpose for the signs: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31). The text is explicit that the purpose of recording these signs, reporting them, is to make it clear that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. In other words, the actions performed by Jesus are understood as signs only to those who comprehend their meaning—signs point to something other than themselves in John, which is Jesus's identity.[9]

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[6] Matt 13 times; Mark 6 times [+2 in the longer ending]; Luke 11 times; Acts 13 times; Paul 8 times, of which 2 are in 2 Thess; Hebrews 1 time; Revelation 7 times.

[7] Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 920–21.

[8] Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), sc. σημεῖον.

[9] This is what distinguishes a sign from a work. Painter, "Signs of the Messiah," 244. See also, John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature, and Theology of the Johannine Community*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

Early on in John's Gospel, the author is determined to distance Jesus from those who are messianic harbingers. First, in the prologue, we read that there is a witness to the Light who is not himself a messiah. John the Baptist is explicitly *not* χριστός (1:8, 15). John is said to bear witness to the light, but the Gospel is careful to clarify that John himself is not the light. Likewise, in 1:15, the text reiterates how John "bore witness" to the Word, overtly removing John the Baptist from potential messiahship. Further, there is an extended conversation about the Baptizer's identity in 1:19–42. The section begins by describing the testimony of John the Baptist, who, when explicitly asked, "he confessed, he did not deny but confessed, 'I am not the Christ'" (1:20); neither is he Elijah or the Prophet (1:21). Again, the Pharisees ask, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?", taking the time to restate the potential mistaken identities available to one in the Baptizer's position. John's Gospel is also careful to articulate that the Baptizer himself, while he was a good witness to the Christ, did not perform signs: "and they said, 'John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man is true'" (10:41). This establishes a contrast between John the Baptist, who does no signs and is not a messiah, and Jesus, who does perform signs.[10] The emphatic denials—John the Baptist is not a messiah and did not perform signs—intersect in a way that suggests that John's Gospel puts stock in the messiah's sign-working abilities. This is especially curious given the dearth of parallels in contemporaneous literature to any expectation that messianic figures would be particularly known for their miracle-doing.

It is likewise clear that in John signs appear to be at least one of the criteria for messiahship in the views of those who meet Jesus. John 7:31 depicts onlookers

[10] Painter, "Signs of the Messiah," 249.

coming to believe that Jesus is a messiah: "Yet many of the people believed in him; they said, 'When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?'" In the world of the Johannine text, it seems as though signs were a commonly expected feature of messianic figures among those who were on the lookout for one. Yet signs are not explicitly an expectation in the Synoptic Gospels, which do nonetheless depict Jesus as performing miracles. The depiction of signs in John and of miracles in the Synoptics are very different: the miracles in the Synoptics seem to require faith in order for them to be performed, for example Mark 6:5 and Matt. 8:5–13; or, as in Luke, tend to provide examples of Jesus helping the oppressed, as in 13:10–17.[11] In John, on the other hand, those who understand the signs believe. John never speaks of miracles. Rather, in John the sign must be understood, not just observed.[12] In other words, those who only see the miracle have not seen the sign; this is indeed the case for several onlookers in John.[13] The signs set up a dichotomy for those present: understand the sign and believe, or miss the point and die.[14]

At the very least, the Gospel of John does not seem to find its own association of signs and messiahship as anything out of the ordinary; indeed, when Jesus is called χριστος—Christ, Messiah—it is often in the context of a sign being performed. The signs serve the function of signifying the divine messiahship of Jesus. For instance, there is a particularly memorable example in the story of the raising of Lazarus. At the outset, Martha makes a confessional statement:

> Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives

[11] E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 144–149.

[12] Peter Riga, "Signs of Glory: The Use of "*Semeion*" in St. John's Gospel," *Interpretation* 17 (1963): 402–424, here 402.

[13] E.g., John 7:31; 9:16; 11:45.

[14] As Riga puts it, "the *sēmeia* are judicial, prophetical, messianic, and eschatological." Riga, "Signs of Glory," 403. E.g., John 3:36; 5:24; 11:25–26, 40; 12:37.

> and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (11:23–28).

This statement, associating Jesus with a messiah, occurs just before Lazarus is raised up. After, in 11:45, we read that the result of Jesus raising up Lazarus from the dead is that "many τῶν Ἰουδαίων therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him." Some, however, tell tales to the Pharisees, who wonder, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him" (11:47). There is a clear association in this, the seventh of John's signs, between Jesus's identity and people's belief in it and the signs that Jesus performs.

The question remains: what type of Jewish messiah performs signs?

Messiahs in Other Jewish/Christian Texts

The Hebrew Bible frequently uses signs (אוֹת; LXX = σημεῖον) to point to the divine authority of the one performing the act: the wondrous work signifies that the miracle worker is sent from God. Examples can be found, for instance, in Exod. 3:12; Deut. 34:10–12; Judg. 6:17; and 1 Sam. (=LXX 1 Reg.) 10:1–7.[15] However, these Hebrew Bible texts do not connect wonder-working to anointing; of the three examples given in the previous sentence, only 1 Sam. connects signs and anointing, and in that case the signs come directly from God and are not performed by Saul. Likewise, it seems that the vast majority of messiahs expectantly described later in Second Temple texts are not known for their wonder-working. James VanderKam outlines the general characteristics of messiah types in the literature of early

[15] Riga, "Signs of Glory," 403; see also John Liermann, "The Mosaic Pattern of John's Christology," in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Liermann, WUNT 2/219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 210–34, who discusses the passage in Deut about Moses on pp. 213–4.

Judaism.[16] Tracing messianic development chronologically, VanderKam finds that the concept of a messiah is not consistently present in apocalyptic literature, and as such, neither are messianic characteristics consistent. But signs are not an indication of messiahship in any of the sources examined in this article. Indeed, John Collins's work, "Pre-Christian Jewish Messianism: An Overview," describes several categories of messianic figures prominent in the Second Temple period, including priestly-, royal-, and warrior-types, but again, the ability to perform signs is not a characteristic of these types.[17] It is curious, then, that characters in John's Gospel seem to expect that they will be able to identify a messiah by the signs he will perform.

Prophet-Type Messiahs

One type of messianic expectation is the prophet-type, to which Jesus's biographers seem to have alluded in their characterization of him.[18] This characterization may shed light on the sign-performance John attributes to his Jesus. The expectation of an eschatological prophet is preserved in some Dead Sea Scrolls, and appears to have roots in Deut. 18:18: "A prophet like you I shall raise up for them from the midst of their brothers…" John's Gospel alludes to Jesus as prophet in a few places, for example in 4:44 and 6:14. In John 4:44, the narrator reports that "Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet's own country," and then observes that when Jesus arrives in Galilee he is welcomed specifically because of "all he had done in Jerusalem," i.e., signs. In 6:14, onlookers conclude that Jesus is

[16] James C. VanderKam, "Messianism and Apocalypticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Vol 1: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 2002), 193–228.

[17] John J. Collins, "Pre-Christian Jewish Messianism: An Overview," in *The Messiah: In Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Magnus Zetterhom, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1–20; Gerbern Oegema, *The Anointed and His People: Messianic Expectations from the Maccabees to Bar Kochba* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

[18] See Paul Barnett, "The Jewish Sign Prophets," *New Testament Studies*, 27.5 (1981): 679–697; John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature, and Theology of the Johannine Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 260–267.

"the prophet that is to come into the world" after his feeding of the five thousand, once more associating the signs that Jesus performs with his identity as a prophet, and perhaps then as a messiah. Indeed, after the people conclude that Jesus' signs must mean that he is the anticipated prophet, Jesus himself connects prophetic works to anointing: "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.[19] It is therefore in the context of the prophet messiah that the connections between signs and Christology in the Gospel of John are most clearly understood.

One relevant comparator is a text from Qumran that associates miraculous works, and even necromancy, with the anointed one. It is not clear that this text is the product of the community at Qumran, as elsewhere in the recovered Dead Sea Scrolls raising the dead is not found.[20] The text seems to record an anointed individual performing miraculous deeds:

> For the heavens and the earth will listen to his anointed one/Messiah … For the Lord will seek out the pious and call the righteous by name, and his spirit will hover over the poor and he will renew the faithful with his strength. For he will glorify the pious on the throne of an eternal kingdom, liberating captives, restoring sight to the blind, straightening the bent…And the Lord will do glorious things which have never been as … he will heal the wounded and give life to the dead, he will bring good news to the poor (4Q521, frg. 2, col. II, extracts).[21]

This excerpt seems to associate the anointed one, a messiah, with certain acts, including both healing acts and giving "life to the dead."[22] The fragmentary nature of

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[19] Also 7:40, 52, where the prophet and the Christ identities are collapsed.

[20] See John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 139 n. 116.

[21] For discussion of this fragment in the context of messianic identity, see John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 131–141, whose translation this is; see also Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 272–73.

[22] Charlesworth states: "This is an obvious reference to the resurrection of the dead…What has not been disputed is the presence of resurrection belief in *Messianic Apocalypse* [sc. 4Q521]; what has been disputed is the means and actor. It seems clear though, that God, either directly or through God's Messiah, will raise up, "bring life," to those who are dead." (James H. Charlesworth, "Prolegomenous Reflections Towards a Taxonomy of Resurrection Texts (1QHa, 1En, 4Q521, Paul, Luke, the fourth Gospel, and Psalm 30)," in *Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed. Ian H. Henderson, Gebern S. Oegema, and Sara Parks Ricker, *JSHRZ* 2 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 256.

the manuscript is highly problematic for its use in reconstructing ancient messianic expectations. As it stands, the Lord is clearly the subject of many of the actions, and thus it could be the Lord, rather than the anointed one, who will heal the wounded, give life to the dead, and bring good news to the poor. However, Collins notes that "it is surprising […] to find God as the subject of preaching good news. This is the work of a herald or messenger."[23] The text likely relies on Isa. 61:1–2,[24] which reads:

> The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God.

James Tabor and Michael Wise note that the temporal setting of Isaiah here is probably the eschaton, making it reasonable that a Second Temple reader (including the author of 4Q521) might understand the text as referring to a messiah.[25] Isaiah describes a messianic figure who preaches good news to the poor and liberates captives, as the messenger figure does in 4Q521, but in Isaiah, the voice is clearly that of one sent in the name of God, not the Lord himself. In addition, the messenger in Isaiah considers himself anointed. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets are rarely anointed (cf. Ps. 105:15//1 Chron. 16:22), but there are references to anointed prophets in two other Dead Sea Scrolls besides 4Q521.[26] Thus, when 4Q521 is read in combination with Isaiah 61, it is possible that this text from Qumran provides evidence of a prophet-type messiah preaching good news as well as performing great works including resurrection. If so, this text provides an important corollary to the messianic expectations expressed in the Gospel of John. 4Q521 raises the very real possibility of

[23] Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, 132.

[24] James D. Tabor and Michael O. Wise, "4Q521 'On Resurrection' and the Synoptic Gospel Tradition: A Preliminary Study," *JSP* 10 (1992), 149-262, here 157.

[25] Tabor and Wise, "4Q521," 157.

[26] Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 133. Collins cites CD 2:12 and 1QM 11:7 as other examples of anointed ones as prophets.

a prophet-type messiah whose wondrous works include raising the dead;[27] this is a role that we do not see in many other texts, but which nonetheless appears to have been one mode of messianic type.

Other early Jewish texts may also support this association. In 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra a messiah is portrayed as a catalyst for resurrection but is likewise not clearly the agent behind it. Second Baruch 30:1 reads: "And it will happen after these things when the time of the appearance of the Anointed One has been fulfilled and he returns with glory, that then all who sleep in hope of him will rise."[28] The text certainly anticipates that the appearance of an anointed messiah precipitates the resurrection of presently dead individuals; the righteous, the text continues, will rise to pleasant experiences while the wicked will be tormented, but both groups appear to be included in the resurrection. Fourth Ezra 7 likewise depicts an expectation that resurrection of the dead accompanies the arrival of God's anointed:

> For behold, the time will come, when the signs which I have foretold to you will come to pass […] For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. And after these years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the beginnings; so that no one shall be left. And after seven days the world, which is not yet awake, shall be roused, and that which is corruptible shall perish. And the earth shall give up those who are asleep in it;[29] and the chambers shall give up the souls which have been committed to them (4 Ezra 7:26–32).[30]

In 4 Ezra, it is not clear what the precise connection is between the messiah and the rousing of the souls, but the text does apparently consider them closely related. However, like 2 Baruch, the association is not causal such that a direct comparison

[27] According to Tabor and Wise, "4Q521," 158: "The Messiah resurrects the dead as God's agent. The author of 4Q521 seems to make that point specifically."

[28] Trans. A. F. J. Klijn, "The Fourth Book of Ezra," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 517–59.

[29] Cf. Dan. 12:2.

[30] Trans. Bruce M. Metzger in Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.*

could be made between a messiah figure and one who performs resurrections as signs.[31]

For comparison, some rabbinic texts, such as Mishnah Sotah 9, report that "the resurrection of the dead comes through Elijah"[32] (cf. 1 Kings 17; Pesikta de R. Kahana 76a). This kind of behaviour and characterisation is not totally distinct from the messiahship described in 4Q521—in both cases the messiah described is a prophetic type, like Elijah,[33] rather than a royal, priestly, or warrior type depicted more prominently in other texts.[34] The relationship between the expectation that a messiah is recognisable because of his ability to resurrect the dead apparently preserved at Qumran and the expectation preserved in the Gospel of John that messiahs are known by their signs, such as in 7:31, is not clear.[35] However, 4Q521 does suggest that the variety of ideas about what kinds of actions a messiah might be expected to do was complex and diverse, and suggests that signs including raising the dead might have had a greater prominence in messianic expectations than we might assume based on the extant evidence. As I will demonstrate below, the prevalence of sign-type messiahs is supported by other scant evidence about historical (rather than only literary) messianic hopefuls. This suggests that Jesus's signs in John's Gospel may be fulfilling non-elite or non-scribal expectations about how messiahs can be recognized.

Signs in Other Jewish/Christian Texts

[31] In 1 Enoch 51, the resurrection of the dead precedes the chosen one who will sit on the throne.

[32] Thanks to Eva Mroczek for confirming the translation of the Hebrew of this passage.

[33] Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 135, 137.

[34] John J. Collins, "The Works of the Messiah," *DSD* 1, no. 1 (1994): 98–112, here 101.

[35] Collins does not address John 7:31 or 20:30–31.

A glance at how signs are used in other texts of the first century complicates the relationship between messiah and miracles in John's Gospel. While the texts I am about to outline do seem to associate signs with the end times, in several cases the associated figure is an anti-messiah rather than a messiah himself; signs in these examples serve to point away from the true messiah and towards a pretender, making the use of signs in John all the more curious.

Pauline Literature

In the authentic letters of Paul there are six uses of the term σημεῖον. In Rom. 4:11, the term is used to refer to Abraham's circumcision, "as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." This is clearly a different semantic use than the term's range in John; here it points to a characteristic of Abraham that relates to his relationship with God, but the sign is not miraculous. The occurrence in Rom. 15:19 is more pertinent to the present discussion. We read:

> For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ… (Rom. 15:18–19).

This section states that Paul has performed "signs and wonders" because Christ is working through him "by the power of the Holy Spirit," and that because of these signs and wonders, Gentiles have been convinced. However, this section does not associate messianic expectations with signs and wonders, except that the risen Christ works wonders through earthly disciples.

First Corinthians provides additional clues as to the relationship between signs and messiahship. In 1 Cor. 1:22, Paul writes that "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek

wisdom." In this context, Paul appears to be talking about the message of the crucified messiah, that is Christ. Given that wonders were apparently not expected in apocalyptic literature discussing messiahs, it is odd that Paul takes for granted that Jews look to signs; even if the statement is highly rhetorical, the rhetoric functions through an assumption that a generally accepted truth is being uttered. However, it is possible that Paul here refers to signs performed by the followers of Jesus rather than wonders enacted by a messiah. Later in the letter, in 14:22, Paul uses the term to refer to glossolalia as a sign for unbelievers, suggesting that signs do promote belief in the truth of Paul's message, that is Christ, but this is not an activity that is expected of a messiah himself; rather, it is the followers of Jesus that enact these signs. This is again the sense in which Paul uses the term in 2 Cor. 12:12: apostles perform signs in order to point to the truth of the message of Christ, but there is no mention of Christ's own miracles.

A letter of disputed authorship, 2 Thessalonians, indicates that signs, rather than identifying a messiah or the return of Christ, actually announce the coming of "the lawless one." These "signs and wonders" will be pretended (ψεύδους) rather than true. This theme, that Satan or some oppositional force to Christ will perform signs and wonders so as to deceive humanity, is also found in Revelation.

Revelation

The book of Revelation, with which the Gospel of John shares a provenance and much of its theological imagery, does not share John's views of signs. Revelation 12 uses the term to describe both the portent of the Woman clothed with the Sun (12:1) and the Great Red Dragon who pursues her (12:3). Later, in chapter 13, the

term is used to describe the works done by one of the beasts, the one who rose out of the earth and is clearly an antagonist of God, luring people to worship the first beast:

> It works many great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived (13:13–14).

It is apparent that these signs that the beast does do not point to the omnipotence of God nor to the messiahship of Christ, but rather are meant to mislead people into incorrect worship. It is in this same vein that σημεῖον is used in 16:13–14:

> And I saw, issuing from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, three foul spirits like frogs; for they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

Likewise, "sign" in 19:20 refers to the miracles performed by the false prophet of the beast, again used to deceive "those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image" (19:20).

Σημεῖον is also used to describe the actions carried out by the angels with the bowls full of plagues in 15:1; in this instance, the portent points to God's dominion but not to Revelation's Christology. There is nothing about a messiah in this section. Revelation, then, is overwhelmingly negative about σημεῖα — of its seven uses, five refer to works performed by the beast and its helpers; only two instances refer to works associated with God. In neither of these two examples is Jesus mentioned. Revelation does not appear to associate signs with messiahship.

Messiahs Who Do Miracles in Other Jewish/Christian Texts

The Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus performing many miracles, which are indeed one of the hallmarks of his ministry. The signs that we see Jesus performing in Luke and

Matthew, for example, may have caused some early readers to associate Jesus with the miracles done by Elijah and Elisha, in turn causing Matthew and Luke to direct readers away from the idea of Jesus as *Elijah redivivus*; both Matthew and Luke describe John the Baptist (rather than Jesus) as an Elijah-type.[36] The Gospel of John, however, offers another comparison for Jesus, that of the prophet like Moses. John's Mosaic Christology and the evidence we have from other sign-performing messianic characters from the first century supports a Mosaic or prophet-like signs messiah.

The tradition of Moses as prophet performing great works of course pre-dates the Second Temple period. Deuteronomy 34:11–12 reads, "He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel." Further, the Deuteronomist places a promise by God to "raise up for [Israel] a prophet" (Deut. 18:15) like Moses at some future time, which may have contributed to the development of a Mosaic-type messianic expectation. In these passages, as in 4Q521 discussed above, the prophet is specifically the agent of God, who gives the power and authority to perform signs. It is perhaps this connection, between the worker of the signs and God, that signs play such an important role in John, where the identity of Jesus vis-à-vis God is of crucial importance.[37]

Aside from 4Q521, Josephus provides evidence of two other such potential prophetic messiah characters. First, he describes Theudas, a Jewish leader with a large

[36] Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 140. E.g., Matt. 11:7–15 and Luke 7:24–28. See 1 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 4; 5; 6:18, 20. The idea that Elijah must come before the Messiah may be a Christian innovation. See, e.g., Morris M. Faierstein, "Why Do the Scribes Say That Elijah Must Come First?" *JBL* 100, no. 1 (1981): 75–86; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 429–30.

[37] See Meredith Warren, *My Flesh is Meat Indeed: A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6:51–58*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

following, who was apparently enough of a nuisance to attract the attention of a governor around 45 CE.

> When Fadus was governor of Judea, a charlatan (lit. magician, γόης) named Theudas persuaded most of the common people to take their possessions and follow him to the Jordan River. He said he was a prophet, and that at his command the river would be divided and allow them an easy crossing. Through such words he deceived many. But Fadus hardly let them consummate such foolishness. He sent out a cavalry unit against them, which killed many in a surprise attack, though they also took many alive. Having captured Theudas himself, they cut off his head and carried it off to Jerusalem (*Ant.* 20.97–98).

Theudas is described as a magician, γόης, which infers some kind of wonder-working. Certainly, this example has clear parallels with Moses. Theudas seems to identify as a prophet rather than a magician (which is hardly surprising), and the gesture of parting the river obviously alludes to Joshua, before whom the River Jordan parted (Josh. 3:13–17; 4:23), as well as to Moses's parting of the Red Sea in Exodus.[38] Although this paragraph lacks any mention of messiahship, several scholars have pointed out possible connections between Theudas and early Jewish messianic expectations.[39]

Acts also mentions Theudas: "For before these days Theudas arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing" (Acts 5:36). The context of this quotation is a discussion among Jewish council members about how to discourage Jesus's disciples from teaching in Jesus's name; it is "a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel" (5:34) who makes the comparison between

[38] Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 216. Elijah and Elisha also part the Jordan by striking it with Elijah's mantle in 2 Kgs 2:8, 14; Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 AD*, trans. David Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 230.

[39] E.g. Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah*, 261–269, esp. 261. Painter goes on: "Thus we are warned against insisting that the categories of eschatological prophet and messianic king were always viewed separately. Clearly they are closely related by those depicted in Jn 6.14–15 and this should not be seen as as [sic] a Johannine or early Christian construction but as a popular perception of Jesus in response to his signs and the the [sic] feeding sign in particular" (263).

Jesus and his followers and Theudas and his. Clearly, then, some equivalence was assumed between the two leaders; messiahship might therefore also be understood for Theudas. It seems likely that Theudas's claims to miracle-working (i.e., his prophet-magician reputation) is what made the comparison to Jesus seem appropriate to the author of Acts.

Another such movement is described elsewhere by Josephus, a movement led by someone known to Josephus simply as "the Egyptian." In *The Jewish War*, Josephus writes that this figure, promising signs,

> made himself credible as a prophet and rallied about thirty thousand dupes and took them around through the wilderness to the Mount of Olives. From there he intended to force an entry into Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison and become ruler of the citizen body, using his fellow-raiders (*Jewish War* 2.261–262).

Josephus adds another detail when discussing this movement in *Antiquities*: there, the Egyptian is described as hoping to command the walls of Jerusalem to fall down (20.169–171). This clearly alludes to Joshua's destruction of Jericho in Josh. 6:1–27. However, the reference in *Jewish War* also points to a connection with the Exodus, since the Egyptian led his "dupes" into the wilderness. This re-enactment of the Exodus by a contemporary political leader who also promised signs connects biblical prophetic traditions with contemporaneous political movements and with miracles.

These two leaders, Theudas and the Egyptian, both appear to have employed prophetic characterization in order to bolster their support. Although in neither case is the terminology of messiahship mentioned directly by Josephus, the context in which Theudas is mentioned in Acts suggests that these figures can be compared to Jesus, who is an accepted messiah among his own followers. It is important, too, to remember how Josephus's caution in describing Jewish political leaders who were

opposed to Rome might influence his description of these two figures.[40] In both instances, the signs of Theudas and the Egyptian indicate their credibility, and potentially their identification as eschatological prophets in the line of Moses and Elijah. As Collins points out, the intersection of political action and biblical paradigms is significant for understanding messianic typology in early Judaism.[41] We should not immediately assume that prophetic imagery is antithetical to messianic expectations.[42] In light of Theudas's and the Egyptian's use of signs in this way, the expectation of a prophetic-type messiah among Jewish groups in antiquity is a possibility, and one that sheds light on the function of the signs in the Gospel of John.

The Mosaic model of prophet-messiah is key for reading the connection between John's signs and Jesus's messiahship. Much has been written on the role of Moses in the Fourth Gospel.[43] Moses seems to serve as a counterpart to Jesus, one to whom Jesus is both likened and is superior. Jesus is placed in comparison with Moses, but whereas Moses was the mediator of the Law handed down from God, Jesus is the source of divine truth (1:17).[44] Likewise in John 6, John includes an extended discussion of the superiority of what Jesus provides over the manna given in the wilderness, which John denies was from Moses; nonetheless, the discussion explicitly situates Jesus as comparable to Moses. Both give bread, but Jesus's bread is the bread of life—those who ate the bread distributed by Moses still died (6:49). Thus, there is a continuing theme in the Gospel associating Jesus with Moses, a theme

[40] Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 217.
[41] Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 219.
[42] Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah*, 263.
[43] Probably the most well-known scholar to make this connection has been Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet King: Moses Traditions and Johannine Christology*, NovTSup 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), who demonstrates that Jesus is characterized as God's direct agent through references to Mosaic traditions in the Hebrew Bible. See also Stanley Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques*, LNTS 229 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Dorothy A. Lee "The Significance of Moses in the Gospel of John," *ABR* 63 (2015): 52-66; and Liermann, "The Mosaic Pattern of John's Christology." See also the essay by Andrea Taschl-Erber in this volume.
[44] Harstine, *Moses As a Character in the Fourth Gospel*, 48.

which I suggest illuminates the association between signs and messiahship that John puts forward. That Theudas and the Egyptian are also Moses-like suggests that John is not unique in associating messianic figures as Moses-types.

Signs and the Messiah in the Gospel of John

The above discussion on the existence of a prophetic-magician messianic type operating in grass-roots popular movements in first-century Judea offers a potential solution to the prominence of signs in John's Gospel and their connection to Jesus's identity. John clearly is not attempting to portray Jesus as Elijah. Although the text does not at any point deny that Jesus is Elijah, neither does it present him explicitly as Elijah. Rather, a different characterization is apparent throughout the Gospel. The book of Exodus is referred to consistently in John; Moses is explicitly mentioned six times, and alluded to in another five cases.[45] Clearly, John's Christology depends to a certain extent on the comparison of Jesus with the prophet Moses.[46] I suggest that this comparison is how the association between messiahship and signs is most readily understood, and that, far from being a Christian innovation, this association emerges from grass-roots, non-elite Jewish movements in which prophets "like Moses" performed miracles as signs of their messiahship. This connection among signs, Moses, and the Gospel of John may therefore also shed light on other ways of understanding grass-roots messianic expectations in early Judaism, but it also illuminates one of the ways that signs play a role in John in identifying Jesus as a messiah.

[45] References to Moses: John 1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19–23; 9:28–29; allusions to Moses: 1:21; 6:14; 12:34; 17:12; 18:28. Moses is also alluded to in 7:53–8:11, but this passage has a debated manuscript tradition. See Harstine, *Moses As a Character in the Fourth Gospel*, 40.

[46] It is important to note that Mosaic characterization in antiquity is not uniquely tied to the idea of a prophet; Philo combined the descriptions of priest, king, and prophet in his understanding of Moses (see Meeks, *The Prophet King,* 100–31). In light of the various messianic characterizations in early Jewish literature, it might be best to imagine them as overlapping rather than competing.

One of the expected qualities of a messiah is the ability to bestow life. Of particular importance is the reference to raising of the dead, for example in 4Q521. There the anointed agent of God is empowered by God to perform great signs, including resurrection. In John, resurrection as performative sign technically occurs only once, with the raising of Lazarus; Martha's words in 11:27 connect Lazarus being raised with Jesus's messiahship, and again, in 11:45, his sign causes belief. But in other cases resurrection appears symbolically within other signs. Of Jesus's other signs in John, those that point to resurrection include, for example: the healing of the official's son (4:46–54) where Jesus says, "your son will live" (4:50, cf. 53); the healing of the lame man at the pool (5:1–9) after which Jesus states that "just as the father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes" (5:21); the multiplication of the loaves and the bread of life discourse (6:1–14, 22–59); and even the healing of the man born blind (9:1–7). After that healing and the dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus launches into the Good Shepherd discourse: "whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:9–10). Thus, there is a connection between Jesus's signs in John and the idea of resurrection; signs are a way of showing the power of Jesus as a divinely-sent messiah, one who will raise up the dead, as other early Jewish texts from this period anticipate.

Indeed, the Gospel tells us as much: the signs demonstrate Jesus's identity as the messiah, and in understanding the connection between the messiah and his signs, eternal life is attainable. The fact that other prophetic-type messiahs, associated with Moses through their behaviours, are likewise identifiable to their followers because of their wonder working, suggests a three-fold connection between messianic identity,

sign-working, and resurrection in John. John's use of Mosaic Christology, his preoccupation with signs, and his explicit and implicit understanding of signs as a means of gaining eternal life combine to suggest, in light of other evidence about signs-prophets and resurrection, that messianic wonder-working may have been more common than we assume. At the least, it certainly influenced how John understood his messiah.

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