

σημείον (sēmeion)

‘Semeion’ derives from ‘sema,’ a word that was commonly used in early Greek epic outside the religious sphere. Both words can be translated into the English word ‘sign.’ A sign is a communication tool by which someone or something is distinguishably known. Signs (1) can be used to show direction in the landscape, (2) they can have the meaning of a visible or audible signal that is agreed upon, (3) they can have the nuance of a warning, (4) or they can be like seals to mark someone or something as authentic. In the religious context, signs are predominantly but not exclusively miraculous. Then, the word ‘sign’ points out to the significance and meaning that lies beyond the miraculous event itself.

A miraculous sign is of supernatural character. It cannot be performed by naturally restricted human power. Miracles interrupt the ordinary course of human life that is fixed by the laws God established. As God violates these laws, He interacts with His creation and reveals Himself to mankind. Presuming the existence of an almighty Creator-God, miracles are realistic and a probable way of God’s self-revelation. We can distinguish between the miracles worked by God or the Messiah Jesus Himself and those worked by God’s messengers. Performed by a human being, miraculous signs indicate or evidence divine commission of the sign worker and testify about the truthfulness of the message that accompanies the miracle. Miracles performed by Satan and his messengers are pretended signs worked with the intention of deception. The word study follows the outline below.

(I) Signs in the Old Testament

- (1) Signs and the Covenants
- (2) Signs and the Exodus
- (3) Signs and Prophecy

(II) Signs in the New Testament

- (1) Signs and Jesus
- (2) Signs and Believers
- (3) Signs and Satan

(III) The Significance of Signs

- (1) Signs and Faith
- (2) Signs and Glory

(I) The word ‘semeion’ is found about 125 times in the Septuagint. Signs recorded in the Old Testament are particularly related to (1) God’s covenants, (2) Israel’s exodus out of Egypt and (3) various prophetic contexts.

(1) In the early days of history, God set His rainbow in the clouds (Gen 9:13), He commanded circumcision (Gen 17:11) and He installed the Sabbath day (Ex 31:13) as ‘signs of the covenant’ between Him and His people. The signs reminded both parties of the given promises and confirmed the validity and reliability of God’s words spoken to Noah, Abraham, Israel and their descendants. Some signs sealed God’s acceptance and protection. The sign of circumcision was given to Abraham as a seal for the righteousness

God credited to him based on his faith. (Rom 4:11) Similarly, the blood sign at the door-frames of God's people sealed their protection from God's judgment on the Passover day (Ex 12:1-13), and Cain was marked with a sign for divine protection. (Gen 4:15) Some signs were given for commemoration. The Sabbath day was given as a sign for the people with the intention that they may know God (Ezk 20:12, 20), and the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the sacrifice of every male firstborn are established signs for the remembrance of God's works done for His people during the exodus. (Ex 12:14-20; 13:1-16) Some signs were given to reassure the divine authenticity of God's spoken words. (cf. Ex 3:12; Jdg 6:16-21, 36-40) All these signs are one of God's ways to intimately communicate with His people. Besides, God gives general revelation for all people through the sign of His creation. (Gen 1:14; cf. Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:20)

(2) During the period of Israel's redemption from Egypt, Moses performed many "miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do." (Dt 34:11) God sent Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt and testified to his divine commission with miraculous signs. (Ex 4:1-9) When Moses performed signs and talked to the Israelites, they believed and worshipped God. (Ex 4:29-31) In contrast, the Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and God multiplied His miraculous signs. (Ex 7:3-5) (1) He turned the river waters into blood (Ex 7,14-24); (2) He sent plagues of frogs, (3) of gnats and (4) of flies (Ex 8); (5) He caused the Egyptians' horses, sheep, camels, donkeys to die (Ex 9,1-7); (6) He caused all Egyptians to have terrible boils (Ex 9,8-12); (7) He sent a terribly destructive hailstorm (Ex 9,13-35); (8) He sent plagues of locusts (Ex 10,1-20); (9) He sent darkness over all Egypt for three days (Ex 10,21-29); (10) He "struck down all the firstborn in Egypt." (Ex 12,29) The Scriptures repeatedly emphasize on the sign miracles which were given so that

the Israelites as well as the Egyptians may know God. (Ex 7:5; 10:2) During Israel's journey through the desert, God continued His miraculous deeds for Israel, e.g. giving bread from heaven and water from a rock. (Ex 16:1-15; 17:1-7) In response to Israel's unbelief, God pointed to His signs. (Num 14:11,22) Signs are part of God's self-revelation and significant in regard to people's faith. (cf. Dt 4:32-35; 6:20-25; 7:17-19; 11:1-8; 26:1-11; 29:2-9)

(3) God spoke to the people through signs interwoven with prophecy. The prophets themselves were signs to the people, together with symbolic actions that intensified their message. (Is 20:1-4; Ez 4:1-3; 12:3-11; 24:15-27) Signs often authenticated the prophet's message and marked its credibility. Samuel spoke to Saul and predicted certain signs that were fulfilled soon after. (1 Sam 10:1-9) A man from God prophesied to the King Jeroboam, and God testified to his prophecy by a sign. (1 Ki 13:1-5) Isaiah's message to Hezekiah was confirmed with a sign. (2 Ki 19:29, 20:8-11) Sometimes, the sign itself was subject of prophecy. Isaiah foretold the coming of the Messiah by birth of a virgin. (Is 7:14) In general, signs were predicted and expected to accompany the promised Messiah. Thus, responding to questions about His person, Jesus the Messiah pointed out to the 'signs of the times.' (Mt 16:3) He sent message to John the Baptist referring to His healing miracles as the signs that revealed Him as "the One who was to come." (Mt 11:3-5) Accordingly, some Jews interpreted the signs worked by Jesus as an indication that He would indeed be the Christ (Jn 7:31), and the apostles preached that Jesus was "accredited by God ... by miracles, wonders and signs." (Acts 2:22; 10:38) Additional signs of Messiahship were His Davidic family line and His place of birth Bethlehem as prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures. (2 Sam 7:16; Mi 5:1; cf. Jn 7:42)

(II) In the New Testament, the word ‘semeion’ appears 77 times. It is found 48 times in the Gospels (17 times in John), 13 times in Acts, 8 times in the Pauline epistles, once in Hebrews, and 7 times in the book of Revelation. We can distinguish between (1) the signs worked by Jesus and (2) signs worked by His messengers. The following chart shows a categorized overview of the concerning passages recorded in the four Gospels.

The Jewish people ask for a miraculous sign.	Mt 12:38; 16:1; Mk 8:11-12; Lk 11:16, 23:8; Jn 2:18; 6:30
Jesus refers to His death and resurrection that is the ultimate sign.	Mt 12:39-40; 16:2-4; Jn 2:19
Jesus himself is a sign to the people.	Lk 2:34; Lk 11:29-30
Jesus performs various miraculous signs.	Jn 2:11; 4:48, 54; 20:30
People respond to Jesus’ signs.	Jn 2:23; 3:2; 6:2, 14, 26; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:18, 37
Jesus talks about the signs of His coming and the end of the age.	Mt 24:3; Mk 13:4; Lk 21:7, 11, 25
False prophets will perform deceptive miraculous signs.	Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22
Jesus predicts the sign of the Son of Man.	Mt 24:30
Apostles and other believers perform signs according to God’s word.	Mk 16:17, 20
Angels confirm their message about Jesus by predicting a sign.	Lk 2:12

John the Baptist did not perform any sign. Jn 10:41

Judas betrays Jesus with a sign. Mt 26:48

(1) During His ministry, Jesus performed many miraculous signs in order to reveal truth about His person and the nature of His kingdom. Jesus performed nature miracles, healing miracles and resurrection miracles. In demonstration of His miraculous power, Jesus gradually revealed more about the truth He proclaimed. Though most of the miracles are not explicitly recorded as 'signs', it is appropriate to include them in this context. John writes about the 'many signs' Jesus performed, though he only chose to record a few of them in his Gospel. (Jn 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:37)

Jesus worked in harmony with His teaching, that He has "...come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (Jn 10:10b) As the life-giving Creator, He provided in abundance. At the wedding feast in Cana, He turned about 600 liters water into wine to secure a joyful feast. It is recorded twice that He caused a miraculous catch of an abundant number of fish. Two events are written when Jesus took some bread and fish and fed a multitude of people. When His disciples were in danger, Jesus interacted and calmed the storm on the sea of Galilee to prevent the boat from sinking. Jesus used His power to protect and to provide, and revealed secure and abundant life that is part of the nature of God's kingdom.

Jesus' healing miracles were done in accordance with the Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah prophesied that "the eyes of the blind will see." (Is 29:18; 35:5; 42:7) The healing of the blind is a typical miracle that proclaimed the Messianic kingdom. Neither in the Old

Testament nor in the New Testament is blind-healing recorded apart from the healings worked by Jesus. In contrast, the most frequently healed illness recorded in the Gospels is blindness. It is further prophesied that "the deaf will hear" (Is 29:18; 35:5), "the lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." (Is 35:6) Jesus healed deaf, lame, and mute people. The fulfillment of messianic prophecy brought revelation in regard to the person Jesus as the Messiah and proclaimed a kingdom of God without disease or disability.

Jesus came "to destroy the devil's work." (1 Jn 3:8) He drove demons out of possessed people. Jesus powerfully demonstrated His authority that is given to Him over the visible and invisible world. Ultimately, "the last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Cor 15:26) Jesus' work of miracles reached its climax three times when He raised dead people to life. Biblical prophecy about the messianic kingdom includes the resurrection of the dead. (Is 26:9; Ps 16:10) Eventually, Jesus' own resurrection was the supreme sign for all people. In response to the Jew's demand for a sign, Jesus referred to 'the sign of Jonah', talking about His own death and resurrection.

The Gospels record 35 specifically detailed miracles. Apart from those specified, there are 13 accounts of unspecified multiple miracles. (Mt 4:23-24; 8:16; 9:35; 12:15; 13:58; 14:14; 14:35-36; 15:30; 19:2; 21:14; Lk 6:17-19; 7:21; Jn 2:23) John writes, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (Jn 21:25) The specified miracle accounts are listed below.

1. Jesus heals a man with leprosy. (Mt 8:2-3; Mk 1:40-42; Lk 5:12-13)
2. Jesus heals the paralysed centurion's servant. (Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10)
3. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law's fever. (Mt 8:14-15; Mk 1:30-31; Lk 4:38-39)
4. Jesus calms the storm on the lake. (Mt 8:23-26; Mk 4:35-39; Lk 8:22-24)
5. Jesus heals the demon-possessed Gerasenes. (Mt 8:28-32; Mk 5:1-13; Lk 8:26-33)
6. Jesus heals the paralytic brought by friends. (Mt 9:1-7; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-25)
7. Jesus raises Jairus' daughter. (Mt 9:18-25; Mk 5:21-42; Lk 8:40-55)
8. Jesus heals a woman suffering from bleeding. (Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48)
9. Jesus heals two blind men. (Mt 9:27-30)
10. Jesus heals a demon-possessed mute man. (Mt 9:32-33)
11. Jesus heals a man with a shrivelled hand. (Mt 12:9-13; Mk 3:1-5; Lk 6:6-10)
12. Jesus heals a demon-possessed blind and mute man. (Mt 12:22; Lk 11:14)
13. Jesus feeds 5,000 men with some bread and fish. (Mt 14:15-21; Mk 6:35-44; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:5-13)
14. Jesus walks on water and calms a storm. (Mt 14:22-32; Mk 6:45-51; Jn 6:16-21)
15. Jesus heals a demon-possessed daughter of a Canaanite. (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30)
16. Jesus feeds 4,000 men with some bread and fish. (Mt 15:32-38; Mk 8:1-9)
17. Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy. (Mt 17:14-18; Mk 9:14-27; Lk 9:37-42)
18. Jesus provides for a coin in a fish's mouth. (Mt 17:27)
19. Jesus heals two blind men on the way to Jerusalem. (Mt 20:30-34; Mk 10:46-52; Lk 18:35-43)
20. Jesus causes a fig-tree to wither. (Mt 21:18-19; Mk 11:12-14)
21. Jesus heals a demon-possessed man in the synagogue. (Mk 1:21-26; Lk 4:33-35)
22. Jesus heals a deaf man. (Mk 7:31-35)

23. Jesus heals a blind man. (Mk 8:22-25)
24. Jesus causes a catch of numerous fish. (Lk 5:4-6)
25. Jesus raises the son of a widow in Nain. (Lk 7:11-15)
26. Jesus heals a woman who had been crippled by a spirit. (Lk 13:10-13)
27. Jesus heals a man with dropsy/edema. (Lk 14:1-4)
28. Jesus heals ten men with leprosy. (Lk 17:11-14)
29. Jesus heals the ear of the priest's servant. (Lk 22:50-51)
30. Jesus turns water into wine. (Jn 2:1-11)
31. Jesus heals the official's son from fever. (Jn 4:46-52)
32. Jesus heals an invalid man at the Bethesda pool. (Jn 5:1-9)
33. Jesus heals a man born blind. (Jn 9:1-7)
34. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. (Jn 11:1-44)
35. Jesus causes a catch of numerous fish. (Jn 21:6)

(2) God continued to authenticate the message or mission of His witnesses through miraculous signs and testified to their preaching about salvation. (Hebr 2:4) It is recorded in the book of Acts that the apostles did many miraculous signs by the power of God. (Acts 2:43; 5:12) Paul mentions in his letter to Corinth the signs, wonders and miracles, "...that mark an apostle." (2 Cor 12:12) Following the example of their master, the apostles frequently linked their sign miracles with the preaching of the gospel.

When Jesus sent His disciples, He gave them order to "...heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons." (Mt 10:8) Similarly, when Jesus sent His disciples into the world, He prophesied about the accompanying signs of believers.

(Mk 16:18) The gift of speaking in tongues is a sign for unbelievers which Paul might have used during his missionary journeys. (1 Cor 14:22)

Apart from the gospel age, God notably worked miracles through messengers during the period of Israel's redemption from Egypt, during the time of conflict with paganism under Elijah and Elisha, and at the time of Israel's exile in Babylonia. (cf. Dan 4:2; 6:27) It is noteworthy that John the Baptist, who was honoured by Jesus with the words, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Mt 11:11), never performed a miraculous sign. (Jn 10:41) In conclusion, not everyone of God's messengers has to be authenticated by signs. Likewise, not every messenger who performs miracles is necessarily sent from God. Not every miracle is of divine origin.

(3) A miracle can be performed by false messengers in the power of spiritual forces hostile to God. Such a miracle is pretended to be a sign of divine origin and works out the purpose of deception. Jesus predicted great signs and miracles performed by false Christs and false prophets in the last days. (Mt 24:24) Moreover, the Antichrist himself will be authorized to perform all kinds of miracles, signs and wonders. In this way, God will send a powerful delusion so that many will believe 'the lie.' By working pretended signs, the Antichrist will appear to be the Christ. (2 Thess 2:9-11; cf. Rev 13:13; 16:14)

In the Old Testament, God warned His people about false prophets who would perform a miraculous sign but preach to follow other gods. (Deut 13:1-3) God tests the people's faith by offering deception. In any case, God the Almighty is the only source of power. He gives such power for His purposes. Signs are given according to His wisdom.

(III) The divine signs reveal the glory of God and demand a response of the people in regard to their faith. Both aspects are particularly addressed in the Gospel of John.

(1) In continuity with the Old Testament, the signs written in the New Testament were intended to point people to God. During the exodus experience, God rebuked His people for their unbelief despite all the signs He or His messengers performed. (Num 14:11) Likewise, John records that "even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs, they still would not believe in Him." (Jn 12:37) The Evangelist explicitly records Jesus' miracles with the intention, "...that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." (Jn 20:31) Whereas the Synoptists define Jesus' miracles as 'teras' (wonder) and 'dumanis' (power), John uses the word 'semeion' (sign) to exclaim the significance of these events for one's personal belief. In chapters two to twelve of the fourth Gospel John records seven prominent signs worked by Jesus: (1) The Changing of Water into Wine, (2) The Healing of the Official's Son, (3) The Healing of the Invalid Man at the Bethesda Pool, (4) The Feeding of the Five Thousand, (5) Jesus Walks on the Water, (6) The Healing of a Man Born Blind, and (7) The Raising of Lazarus from the Dead. Jesus Himself appealed to His miracles as a proof of His divinity. (Jn 5:36; 10:25,38; 14:11)

Five of these seven miracles were performed in private to a certain group of people. At the wedding feast, Jesus kept secret the change of water into wine to the majority of guests. The sign was addressed to His disciples, whose faith grew stronger. (Jn 2:11) The official's son was healed in secret, "so he and all his household believed." (Jn 4:53) The healings of the invalid and the blind remained unrecognized until reported, and Jesus'

walk on the water was only seen by the disciples on the lake. Jesus revealed Himself to individuals and they responded intimately, like the formerly blind man confessed to believe. (Jn 9:38) Jesus' signs were ultimately an intimate call to believe.

As recorded in the synoptic Gospels, the public miracles regularly led to amazement and praise. (Mt 9:8; 9:33; 12:23; 15:31; 21:20; Mk 1:27; 2:12; 4:41; 5:20; 5:42; 6:51; 7:37; Lk 4:36; 5:9; 5:26; 7:16; 8:25; 8:56; 9:43; 18:43) In contrast, rarely did someone respond with a confession of personal faith. (Mt 14:33) John records two signs performed in public, the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee and the raising of Lazarus in Judea. After the feeding of the multitude, the people believed in Jesus to be 'the prophet' (Deut 18:16) but not the suffering Messiah as portrayed in the Old Testament. (Is 53) After the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the people's standpoint was divided – many "put their faith in Him", but the Sanhedrin plotted to take Jesus' life. (Jn 11:45,53) Jesus clearly revealed Himself by healing the demon-possessed, raising the dead (in particular Lazarus), and ultimately by His own resurrection – whereas miraculous signs can also be of demonic origin with the purpose of deception, Satan can only be tied up by a stronger force and life can only be given by the One who has life in Himself. (Mt 12:29; Jn 1:4) Despite such evidence, the majority rejected Him.

The signs were linked to Jesus' person and word. Jesus' third, fourth and sixth sign written in John are followed by a long discourse with the Jews. After healing the invalid man, Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Son of God who is given authority to raise and to judge. After feeding the five thousand men, Jesus taught about the resurrection life based on the new covenant in His blood. After healing the man born blind, He proclaims

Himself to be the true shepherd in contrast to the worthless shepherds. (cf. Ez 34) In Galilee, the Jews were disillusioned that Jesus would not meet their messianic expectations. Because the people expected Him to be Israel's earthly king who would redeem them out of Roman oppression, "many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him." (Jn 6:66) In Judea, Jesus' claims threatened their authority, and they were unwilling to accept Jesus' words despite all the signs He performed.

Jesus' seven sign miracles as recorded in John took place three times in Judea and four times in Galilee. With regard to the synoptic Gospels, the great majority of miracles were performed during Jesus' time in Galilee, which was degraded by the Judean Jews as the 'Galilee of the Gentiles' and was inhabited by people who were regarded irreligious and unclean. In contrast to the expectations of the Jewish leaders, Jesus the Messiah reached out to irreligious people like the Samaritan woman and offered them salvation. (Jn 4:1-42) He often healed unclean people like lepers (Mt 8:2-3; Lk 17:11-14) or a woman suffering from bleeding. (Mt 9:20-22) The differing expectations in regard to election were additional reason for the wilful decision of the Jewish leadership to reject Jesus.

Jesus' followers believed in His name because of their submissive attitude towards God. They accepted Jesus' works and words despite disappointment or confusion and were gradually strengthened in faith through His signs. The signs were the supportive layer that authenticated Jesus' word, which is the primary source of faith. (Jn 14:10-11) Those who based their faith solely on signs soon turned back, again. (Jn 2:23-25; 6:66)

(2) In working sign miracles, Jesus progressively manifested the glory of God to the people according to His Father's will. (Jn 1:14; 2:11; 11:4) The Johannine Gospel does not present Jesus' miracles as an immediate response to a certain human expectation. Rather, Jesus acts in sovereign grace and by His own initiative. People like Mary at the wedding feast in Cana (Jn 2:3), the invalid at the pool Bethesda (Jn 5:7), Andrew on the mountain (Jn 6:9), and Mary and Martha (Jn 11:3) simply report to Jesus about the situation and then submit to His reaction. In the first miracle, Jesus reminds Mary of His 'hour', the divine schedule according to His Father's will. In the seventh miracle, Jesus stays away from Bethany but comes to Lazarus two days later to reveal His glory by raising him from the dead. In both cases, the revelation of God's glory was the higher purpose of the signs.

Jesus often used the term 'work' when He referred to His miracles. (e.g. Jn 5:17; 14:10) He revealed the glory of God His Father by doing the work that the Father has given Him. (Jn 5:36; 9:3; 10:32; 14,10) Jesus' deeds proclaim the character and power of God. Particularly, Jesus worked several miracles on the Sabbath day in unity with His Father, who never ceases to work for His people. (Jn 5:17) God has given the Sabbath day as a foreshadow of the final and eternal messianic rest (Hebr 4:1-11), thus it was the proper time for Jesus to reveal the nature of God's messianic kingdom. Whereas the Synoptists use the word 'sign' predominantly in the context of coming eschatological events, John also regards Jesus' miracles as eschatological significant. The signs reveal the eternal glory of the Father, which is already present in the person and work of His Son.

Jesus revealed His own glory of Sonship through His signs. He performed signs that also symbolize spiritual truths about His person. He healed the people physically but also gives spiritual life. He gave sight to the blind but also offers spiritual insight. He raised the dead but also proclaimed the gift of eternal life. Jesus worked in connection with the Jewish feasts and traditions and taught to be the bread of life and the light of the world. (Jn 6:35; 8:12) His abundant provisions of wine, bread and fish are symbolic truths in view of the eternal reality of His kingdom. Jesus revealed His glory as the Son of God and the Giver of true life. Jesus manifested the divine glory through signs. It is the responsibility of the people to respond in the presence of His glory.

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