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CREATION
REBIRTH
GRACE
& LOVE

Love is patient.
Love is kind.
It does not envy
or boast.

It is not proud,
rude, or self-seeking.
It is not **easily** angry
and keeps no record

of past mistakes.
It does not delight
in evil.

It rejoices in the
truth.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

John 1:1-2

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The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

John 1:9-10

Faces of Grace

by Anastasia R. Arvin-DiBlasio

Many people who are not personally acquainted with the Bible, and most probably, many who are, often see a stark contrast between the Old and New Testaments. Not only are the names in the Old Testament undeniably longer and funnier, but the very character of God seems much changed. Could the same God who routed Egyptians like a kid roasting ants with a magnifying glass be the same gentle father who opened the Heavens to say "This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17)?

God's actions across the two portions of the Bible are certainly different. It will come as no surprise, then, that Christians are called to different actions in each Testament. The beginning, it's said, is a very good place to start, and so the Old Testament it is. It is all too easy to boil the Old Testament down to a simple game of rules and punishments. To be certain, the first 39 books of the (Protestant) Bible are

awash with rules. Perhaps the most well-known, the Ten Commandments, are only the tip of a rather gargantuan iceberg. A sampling of lesser known rules in Mosaic law includes things such as not wearing clothes intended for the opposite gender, not tattooing the body, men not clipping the edges of their beards, not yoking two animals of the same type together, and not muzzling an ox while it treads grain. The list goes on and on.

Traditionally, 613 *m i t z v o t* (commandments) appear in the Torah, some self-evident (such as abstaining from murder), some commemorating Jewish history, and others that have no obvious rationale and are seen as purely divine will. Needless to say, flawed humans haven't a prayer of keeping up with all the rules all the time. The Biblical Israelites were no different, and they wrecked their own Titanic on the iceberg of Mosaic law time and time again. What could possibly be the

the consequence? This highlights the large problem with a common interpretation of rules in the Christian faith. The religion becomes a game, with points, winners, and losers. Follow a rule, earn a point. Earn enough points, go to Heaven. Don't earn enough and be sent to Hell and jabbed at by little red men with pitchforks for all eternity. This interpretation, by all accounts as far as I'm concerned, is entirely false. It ignored the biggest and most beautiful part of the Biblical narrative, the crossroads that changed everything: the cross.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross allowed the rules of Mosaic law to be replaced by something with much stronger longevity than the fallible will of humans. Jesus communicated this change clearly throughout his teaching, both highlighting the obsolete nature of many laws and offering a new solution. When asked if healing on the Sabbath – traditionally a day of rest on which no work should be done – is lawful, Jesus asks if the Pharisees would

not pull their son or even their ox out of a pit if he had fallen in on the Sabbath.

In this question, Jesus was not seeking to undermine Mosaic law, but to draw attention to its importance for the lives of believers, which goes far beyond the rules themselves. This is even clearer in Mark 7, when Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples eat unclean food without the proper washing traditions and ceremonies. Jesus answers that "Nothing outside a man can make him unclean," by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him "unclean." Thus, it is not the law that has the ability to save, but something else. Jesus offers himself as this alternative solution. John 11:25-26 reveals "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Belief, and the grace of God, are all that matter. Adherence to 613 rules does not. Grace is even seen during his crucifixion, as he speaks to the two men being crucified alongside him. Both are

criminals, but while one mocks Jesus as his executioners do, the other states Jesus' innocence and expresses belief in Jesus' identity as ruler of the Kingdom of Heaven. This prompts Jesus to tell the man that "you will be with me in paradise." The man was a criminal, having committed a crime grievous enough to earn a punishment so excruciating and humiliating that it was illegal to be used on Roman citizens. Safe to say that he had very few "points" in his cache. But his belief and recognition of the Christ was enough to gain him access to eternal life, and prize bestowed through the grace of God.

Another illustration of this point comes from a beloved childhood picture book. In Max Lucado's *You Are Special*, funny wooden people called Wemmicks award each other gold stars or grey dots based on how they feel about each other. Although the moral of the story is mostly focused on not bothering about what other people think of you, one Wemmick, Lucia, illustrates my alternative point perfectly.

After spending time with the wood carver on the hill, the Wemmick's creator, none of her ugly dots stick. Still, none of the pretty gold stars do either. Her creator is not interested in points, for or against, but in her spending time with him.

This may not seem fair to the early Jewish believers of the Old Testament. After all, Jesus wasn't an option for them, and rules were all they had available. Simply *believing* seems much simpler than following 613 rules and being blasted with Heavenly fire for a dingle misstep. This is all true. However, the grace-filled, forgiving God who sent His son to die for us in the New Testament still existed in the Old Testament as well. Yes, the Old Testament God was quick to anger, but He was also quick to forgive. The Old Testament reads like a slow, stressful yo-yo or a spiraling record. Time after time, God introduces a covenant to the people, who manage to keep up their side of the bargain for a few years until they fall off the wagon. God exercises His right to turn them over to their

enemies until they beg for His mercy and forgiveness. Even a two-bit lawyer is capable of telling someone that entering into a contract with a party who has already broken an earlier version of the same agreement is foolish. But God did. Through wars, across continents, over oceans and deserts, God followed His people and continued to enter into contracts and relationships with them. The methods and stories may be different, but the grace, love, and forgiveness we expect in the New Testament is still very much present from Genesis to Malachi.

The beauty of God's grace and forgiveness, especially in a post-crucifixion world, can, however, be just as problematic as treating Mosaic law as steps in the ladder to Heaven. Rather, people's *reactions* to God's grace can be problematic, not the gift itself. The trap to avoid here is that of asking forgiveness before we ask permission. That is to say, if God's love and grace are infinite, then why bother following any rules at all, even the ones Jesus highlights in the New

Testament? There are two reasons, at the core, to follow rules: out of fear, and out of love. The "points system" that many Christians (and non-Christians) follow or believe must be followed relies on fear – follow the rules or be smote with eternal damnation. Following rules out of love is a different sort of attitude. Believers may know they will be forgiven, but out of pure desire to please and emulate the Christ and the God they love, rules are followed. Over time some believers even begin to enjoy "following the rules" so to speak, and they become a lifestyle. This only becomes dangerous when the reason for the rules is forgotten and they become gods themselves. The point to be made is that God's character of love, grace, and forgiveness does not change over the course of the Bible, although His methods may. Jesus' dying on the cross was the beginning of a new covenant, one that hasn't changed for believers today. The rules or commandments themselves – although from God and therefore by definitions good – are

not rungs to climb to Heaven, nor landmines to keep us from getting there. They are to be followed out of love for a God who has refused to abandon us through centuries, despite our inherent disability to keep up our side of every single bargain.

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Reading the Bible: What does love have to do with it? by Dr. Ben Pascut

Why do people read the Bible? Is it because it makes a good dramatic story? No doubt, some are drawn by its literary achievement, others are thirsty for its moral wisdom or the life it envisions. Those with historical inclinations are interested in questions of credibility. Others are attracted by its influence on Western culture. Still, others just find themselves pulled into its story to develop their inner critic for pointing out the wrong in others. Whatever the reason, the Bible is being read and that's a good thing. But is the act of reading the Bible good enough? When you open the Bible with the intent to grow in knowledge or to develop your moral conscience that's a good thing. But when is doing something good ever good enough? Saint Augustine's insight into this question deserves our attention.

It is to be understood that the plenitude and the end of the Law and of all the sacred Scriptures is the love of a Being [that is, God], which

is to be enjoyed and of a being [that is, our neighbor] that can share that enjoyment with us ... Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them in such a way that it [i.e. his interpretation] does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand [the Scriptures] at all (*On Christian Teaching*, Book I).

Augustine lights a path for readers to see just how much life is available when the Bible is taken on its own terms. Many read the Bible with human eyes, with what scholarship calls the objective approach. The reader is the subject, and the object of study is the Bible. The object is examined thoroughly but only to satisfy the purpose of the subject's investigation. There is the text and the text has words. These words have embedded meaning that needs interpretation. With much scrutiny does the

reader read and re-read the text to uncover meaning only to put the Bible back on the shelf. The exercise is over, and the reader is pleased for having accomplished his given purpose. It is a worthy task to regard the biblical text deeply, to weigh ideas with insight, and walk away with improved knowledge.

For Augustine, however, an ideal reader allows the text to transform the reading into a subjective experience. The Bible is no longer the object but the subject of investigation. The reader has spent significant time being the subject but now becomes the object placed under the interpretative eye of the Bible (Hebrews 4:12). Have you ever been in this position? After studying the Bible, you come to realize that the Bible is studying you. The moment you start making judgments, you learn that it has much more to say about you than you have to say about it. Meaning is not something you give, but something you receive. This subjective approach has a way of seeing your own typos. In the best of

circumstances, you let the Editor cross them out with a red marker. Before you know it, your reading experience is editing your life.

Two different approaches, two different outcomes. Both of them may be said to be good, but only the latter is known to make a real difference. Yet even that's not good enough. Augustine's point goes well beyond reading the Bible to have our typos corrected. He insists that the primary purpose is to build the double love of God and of neighbor. What is important about the Bible is love. It was the Apostle Paul who said that if we speak with eloquence, but do not have love, our efforts are in vain. If we teach God's truth with power, revealing all its mysteries and meanings, but don't display love, we are nothing. If we become practical theologians or even martyrs for the gospel, but don't love, we have accomplished nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Saying the right thing, doing the right deed, and being the right person is not good enough. In the absence of love, all human endeavors, even those of superior

purpose and function, are meaningless. Without love, Augustine asserts with Paul, one doesn't even know the Bible much less live biblically.

The words of the book of life, summarized by the double love command (Mark 12:30-31; cf. Romans 13:8), are meant to reorganize human life around vertical and horizontal love, the key to all human flourishing. These words, once written in stone and on paper, have also taken on flesh in the incarnation of the Word (John 1:14). Written words can only go so far in the face of the real world, but they speak volumes when they come alive in the personified Word. It's one thing to read the command "love God and thy neighbor," and quite another to see God's own Son fulfill such love with utter devotion (13:1). The ideal is no longer in the abstract; it is rather seen and lived in Jesus, whose extravagant love defies humanity and leaves readers wanting more. Why is such love required? Why is such love revealed? It is well for human beings to see and seek the

very essence of God. Love, the utmost attribute of God's nature (1 John 4:8, 16), forms the greatest commandment because it serves the greatest purpose: to unite people with God and each other in a way that reflects the unity within the Godhead (John 17). The love revealed most fully in Jesus serves both as a means to restore lost humanity into a relationship with God and as a model to reshape human relations. It is an extended invitation to become one. Love is never supposed to be static; it is expected to live a life of bouncing back and forth. God loves human beings (3:16; 15:9). Human beings love God (15:9c). Human beings love each other (13:35). God loves them back and loves them more (14:21, 23). Love is designed to form a chain reaction, continually expanding to include outsiders and form new relationships (13:34; 15:12; 1 John 4:11). God's way of building a family is marked by this chain. But how can a human participate in it? Is human unconditional love even possible? By abiding in God's word one abides in

love (John 14:24; 15:10; 8:31). It's not rocket science: the words of God, when accepted in the heart, generate love for God and neighbor. But there's something in the way. A person naturally loves himself unconditionally (3:19). *Love is* – love is always present in each human being but in a corrupted form, consumed by the interests of the self (5:42; 12:25; cf. 12:43). It is strong, sometimes shared only with a select few, but mostly misdirected to satisfy the self in alienation from God. When the object of love is the self, that love drags the self into a false self-sufficiency and robs all parties, God included, of its true potential. The lover sees the loved in the mirror. Like a heresy that blurs the distinction between true and false, misdirected love deviates from God's intended purpose.

The only way out of this notorious state is accepting the sacrificial and self-giving love of God, the highest transformative power, which sets in motion a love altogether renewed and redirected toward God himself. At this point, the

reader sees himself, while strongly resisting, liberated to love, drawn along a new set of desires. In turn and by sheer force, this love toward God knows no other way but to rush into generating more love toward other fellow beings, from friends all the way to foes (1 John 4:12, 20). That's what love does and that's how it lives.

So what does reading the Bible have to do with love? Every reader approaches the biblical text with a particular interest and draws conclusions that typically correspond with that interest. However, the task of reading the Bible is not meant to end with conclusions, but with beginnings that redirect and enlarge a reader's love. Without such beginnings, readings are misreadings, meanings are meaningless, morality misses the mark, martyrs die in vain, and readers fail to enjoy God's own purpose for humanity. God is love and however reads the Bible on its own terms abides in love. Reading and knowing the Bible is not good enough. Love is.

The Professor Returns to School

by Josiah Langworthy

Nicodemus was a highly esteemed Jewish teacher of the law, but the gospel of John describes a narrative in which this learned scholar finds himself in the place of a student in his meeting with Jesus. In the third chapter of the gospel of John, we meet Nicodemus who secretly approaches Jesus at night to inquire about his identity. Nicodemus is intrigued by the miraculous acts that Jesus has performed, and as he greets Jesus, he refers to him as "a teacher come from God." Jesus has gained an increasing amount of attention through his miracles, and Nicodemus has come to inquire about the identity of this mysterious teacher.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is a highly-respected teacher of the law and an elite member of the Jewish ruling class. As a Pharisee, he is tasked not only with the job of teaching the law, but also upholding and implementing a set of rules and regulations that would be unfeasible for an ordinary

person to uphold. The average Pharisees thus had a sense moral and intellectual superiority.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would also have been thoroughly educated. Nicodemus would have both memorized and meticulously studied the entire Torah. Nicodemus was smart. Being called a ruler of the Jews implies that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Pharisees. The Pharisees as a group were threatened by Jesus' growing popularity, and they would not have taken kindly to one of their own engaging in this curious dialogue with Jesus. But Nicodemus is also curious. He respects Jesus for his knowledge of the law and the miraculous acts which he had performed has peaked Nicodemus' interest. Not wanting to risk his position of authority within the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus safely approaches Jesus under the cover of darkness.

Nicodemus is cautious, respectful,

and inquisitive in his approach to this mysterious man. When he first meets Jesus, Nicodemus addresses him as Rabbi, a respectful term for "teacher". He observes that Jesus is a teacher who necessarily was sent from God given his supernatural power to do miraculous acts.

In the Gospel of John, we read that the author has his own statements about the Jesus' identity in the beginning of the book. In John 1:1-5, John describes him as the Word of God, and then goes on to state that Jesus is in nature God himself. In the very first chapter of his gospel, John makes the very bold statement about Jesus' divinity. Later in his thesis statement in John 20:30-31, he proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. As John describes this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, the reader of the gospel knows that from John's perspective, he is describing an encounter between Nicodemus and the Word of God himself. John unfolds in chapter 3 the meeting of a confused

Nicodemus with God made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus is looking for an answer to his question regarding Jesus' identity, but Jesus takes the conversation in another direction. Jesus responds to Nicodemus with a puzzling statement about the necessity of a spiritual rebirth in order to find entrance into the Kingdom of God. He redirects the conversation to put a magnifying glass on Nicodemus' own spiritual condition. Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus' teachings on spiritual rebirth, and Jesus continues his explanation. Jesus emphasizes that it is essential for him to be "born again", or more specifically, "born from above". Jesus states that this rebirth can not occur by human will, but by the Spirit of God himself. Despite all of his knowledge of the law, we now find Nicodemus utterly perplexed by Jesus' words. As he admits in his own words to Jesus, "how can this be?" Jesus then delivers the difficult news that Nicodemus, while being a ruling teacher of Israel, is spiritually

blind to these truths. Nicodemus is an expert on spiritual things, but he is walking in spiritual ignorance.

One of the scriptures that Nicodemus would have memorized is Ezekiel 11:19-20 which reads,

“and I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

Nicodemus is looking for these promises of God, but isn't fully understanding them in Jesus.

John closes this scene with Jesus' last statements to Nicodemus about his lack of understanding. We do not get the opportunity in chapter 3 to know if Nicodemus comes to a full grasp of how to experience his own "birth from above". We can, however, track Nicodemus through subsequent chapters in John to get a better picture of his spiritual transformation. In John 7:50, Nicodemus defends Jesus from the attacks of his fellow Pharisees. Perhaps

the most compelling suggestion of his spiritual rebirth is found in John 19:39 after the crucifixion of Jesus. We read that Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathea, another previously secret disciple of Jesus, in openly preparing and burying Jesus' body according to Jewish customs. The text also notes that Nicodemus contributed a significantly costly amount of burial spices, which speaks even more to his ultimate reverence and sacrifice for Jesus. Nicodemus appears to have undergone a slow but continual metamorphosis of the heart from their initial encounter to Jesus' burial. Nicodemus, who had previously leaned on his education to bring him understanding, later found a knowledge of the truth that was taught not by man's instruction but rather directly from the Spirit of God.

The Signs of Jesus and the Study of Creation

by Rob Gregory

Our study of Creation at the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center at Bowdoin College has been focused on the Gospel of John. "*In the beginning was the word.*" John 1.1 This article will propose that the seven signs contained in the Gospel of John work much like the parables of Jesus. They both begin with the more accessible realities about the material universe in order to point by analogy, correspondence, and parallelisms to an unseen reality. They are divisive in the way that they separate belief and non-belief. The signs, like the parables, appear in the gospels as a pedagogical response to hostility against Jesus that requires him to be as clear as he needs to be to gain a hearing, but as obscure as it is possible to keep his enemies temporarily at bay. The signs (and parables) are given for the formation of belief, but do not result in belief in all cases. Finally, by the signs, belief is made possible, and yet Jesus is not altogether affirming of those whose belief

relies only on the signs or are demanding a proliferation of such signs for the formation and strengthening of that belief.

Belief and Unbelief

Jesus had his purposes for performing the signs recorded in the Gospel of John. John had his literary purposes for recording them. The signs, intended in some sense to aid the formation of faith, left many untouched and unmoved in their paralysis of unbelief. There was, some might say, a failure by the signs of Jesus to create faith.

John constructed his gospel around these signs with a purpose oriented to faith formation. These signs are recorded, he writes, "*so that you may believe... and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" John 20:31 with no embarrassment to this stated purpose, John is willing to grant that the signs did not accomplish that purpose of generating belief in every case: "*Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him...*" John 12.37

Signs in the Gospel of John, much like the parables of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, may result in belief but do not accomplish that purpose in every instance. Yes, even the words and deeds of Jesus, shaped for the formation of belief in the Savior, fail to accomplish that objective, so it seems.

Borrowing from the insights of the prophet Isaiah, however, John says of these signs and their possibility of life generating belief, that they are serving another purpose when they fail to do so. John continues in John 12.38-40:

“so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”

Matthew records Jesus directing his disciples to the same passage in Isaiah as he regards the mixed results to faith formation when Jesus taught and preached to the crowds and his disciples in parables (Matt. 13.10-17):

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear.

The Objective Order of Creation

The signs and the parables have as a common starting point that there is an objective world – the visible, created universe which we occupy as witnesses – and that world can be perceived sacramentally. This familiar world points to an invisible Kingdom where there is presupposed a governance over created reality. That Kingdom further presupposes a King who presides over all that was created. Hans Boersma refers to this as "sacramental ontology." [*Heavenly Participation - the Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*, by Hans Boersma; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (2011) pp 9-11.] Calvin speaks of a contemplation of the present life that "arouses us to meditate on a future life". Andrew M. Greeley refers to this as the "Holy lurking in creation".

The seven signs share a similar development with the synoptic parable in that they proceed *from* understandings of the things of creation, that which is most accessible to us, and point sacramentally *to*

truths about an invisible kingdom which is centered on the work and the person of Jesus Christ. The signs point to the King, and the parables point to the Kingdom he governs.

Man as Creature

This point, that man is a creature given life with a direction, cannot be overstated. It profits little to venture into questions of our human agency, our ethical duties, and our endeavors for justice as a human achievement within a morally ordered universe, unless and until we have rested that inquiry properly on our own creatureliness. That awareness of man as creature is the proper acknowledgment by mankind that the God of Israel is the God who creates, the God who governs all that he creates, and the God who stands by his creation by redeeming acts making "*all things new*". (Revelation 21.5)

The signs and the parables pointing to the King and his Kingdom are given to help the audience of hearers in Jesus time, and overhearers in our time, to overcome

the barriers to belief in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Signs and parables which are possibly formative for faith, are equally possible for strengthening the rejection, refusal and stubbornness of unbelief. Speaking to those who searched the Scriptures and professed to believe in the life-giving Messiah he claimed to be, Jesus said, "*yet you refuse to come to me that you may have [that] life.*" John 5.40

The central place given to man as creature in the New Testament writings generally is evident in the way so many of the apostolic letters begin. The first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, the first chapter of Colossians, the first chapter of the letter to the Hebrews and the early chapters of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to St. John all point us to the priority of Christ the Creator (Romans 1.20-11; Colossians 1.15-17; Hebrews 1.1-3; Revelation 1.4-8; Revelation 4.11). The Gospel of John opens with a reminder that the doctrine of salvation is continuous with this doctrine of creation: "*In the beginning was the word...*"

The narrative of Israel's history is told in such a way that the bread, water, wine, temple, light and life serve to point from the imperfect representations of the world that Israel experienced, to another world, invisible, but pregnant with hope and a promise for a marriage between heaven and earth. Israel was to carry the traditions that disclosed these connections to all the nations (John 1.49; 6.15; 12.13-15). It is a kingdom to be born into (John 3.5), and it is not "*of this world*". John 18.36

The synoptic gospels have their way of disclosing the kingdom by recounting the parables of Jesus, and the directional teaching of Jesus, beginning with the simple truths and patterns about the visible universe pointing toward the providential governance of the heavenly kingdom over the economies, political authorities and institutions of legal judgment that he authorizes for our shared and public life. The gospel of John similarly discloses one King over that Kingdom and who rules over

every other rival Kingdom. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Revelation 11:15 "Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth." John 18:37

Divisiveness by Design

It is characteristic of the seven signs of Jesus performed in the Gospel of John, and of the parables of Jesus found in the synoptic gospels, that they divide the listening and observing audience. This very divisiveness is the paradox of the signs and the parables. What was given so that some may believe results in continuing and even entrenched disbelief for others. In his essay entitled, "*Signs of Glory, The Use of 'Semeion' in St. John's Gospel*" [*Interpretation*, volume 17 (1963), pp 402-424] Peter Riga helped us see this connection between the parables and the signs. Riga argues that the signs in John's

gospel, like the parables in the synoptic gospels, each contain a divisive element that points to a separation between those who do believe in Christ and those who do not. Those who do not believe would remain in their purely material understanding of the signs, unable to penetrate their deeper spiritual significance. Others do believe on account of the signs by admitting the need for resources and directions beyond that which they self-possessed.

That divisive element in the parables separates those who will see the kingdom and those who refuse. John is neither constrained nor reluctant to acknowledge a connection between those who *do not* believe and those who *cannot* believe. "*Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him...Therefore, they could not believe.*" John 12:37, 39. The parables and the signs are similar also in that those who see the signs, and yet continue in unbelief in the King, are culpable for that reason in the

same way as those who hear the parables, and refuse to recognize and conform to the truth they teach about the Kingdom, are culpable for that reason.

Evidence of the kindness of Jesus is that he does not reject faith that may rest on these signs. If John's purpose clause is to be credited, the signs were performed by Jesus and then recorded by John for the very purpose of awakening faith, directionally as we have suggested. It is a condescension toward mankind that Jesus would begin with the order of creation and direct us to an upward gaze toward something more, something future, and something certain in the coming Kingdom and King who will triumph over all resistance and opposition. Yet there remains a sense in which Jesus may have favored a faith which was not sign seeking and did not demand a sign, as he said about the generation of critics from organized Judaism who asked Jesus, "*What sign do you show us for doing these things?*" John 2.18 Jesus responded, as he did to an official in Capernaum, "*Unless*

you see signs and wonders you will not believe." John 4.48

What will you make of the signs given to you by John that authenticate the divinity of Christ the King? Will you be one, like Thomas the disciple, whose demand to see and touch the wounds of Christ was overwhelmed to the point of worship when he beheld the risen Christ?

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."
John 20:26-29

We observed during the course of our readings through John that the signs function in a similar way to the parables in the pedagogy of the other canonical

gospels. They are given for the *possibility* of the formation of belief in the invisible realities of the Kingdom of God and the Heavenly King who presides over it. The paradox is that signs and parables given for belief may fall short of that belief formation for the same reason. In John 6, after Jesus has fed the multitude (and walked on water!) he told his critics that "the work of God [is] that you believe in him whom he has sent." The sign failed and all they could ask was for another sign. "*Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you?*" John 6.27-28 Understanding the truth to which the sign points presupposes a disposition to believe. "*But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.*" John 8.45.

That the signs will not ensure the reality to which they point is inherent in, and presumed by, the purposes for which they were given. The signs, like the parables, point from some aspect or feature within the objective order of creation which we dimly perceive, toward an invisible

reality which is the Kingdom of God, wholly inaccessible apart from the instruction whereby the disciple is "*taught by God*". John 6.45 The signs and the parables are divisive by design, confirming belief in some and cementing unbelief in those who refuse that instruction.

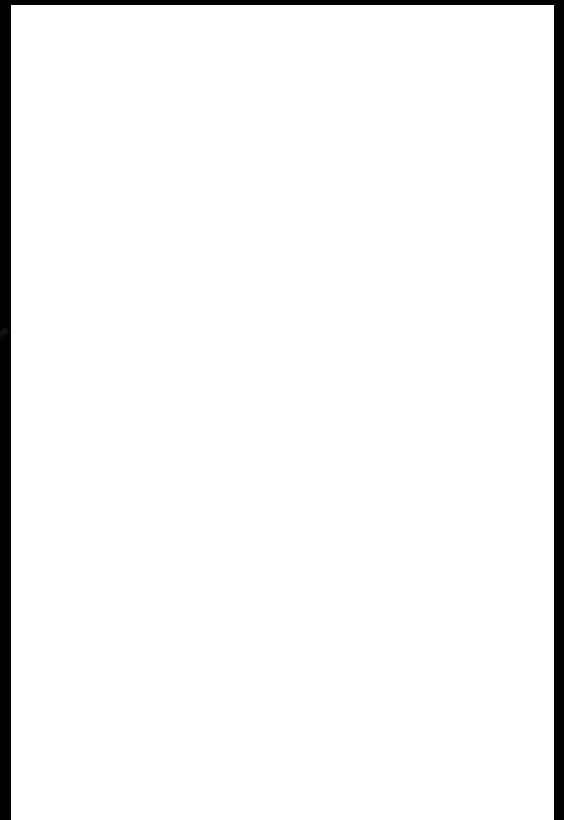
Equally important to the signs and parables is not only the Heavenly Kingdom to which they point, but the glory of the creation order from which they originate. Directional thinking, from the objective order of creation toward the One who gives meaning, purpose and structure to human existence, runs throughout the prophetic writings presupposing that the creation itself points as a sign to its Creator:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.
Psalm 19:1-3

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