

Cana and the Well: Why John Starts with Wine and Centers a Samaritan Woman

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December 25, 2025

Why does the Gospel of John begin Jesus' public "signs" with wedding wine rather than with a healing, an exorcism, or a courtroom-style proof? And why does John place the Samaritan woman at the well between the first and second numbered signs, even though her encounter is not labeled a miracle at all? This paper argues that John is not merely reporting events, but composing a theological overture. The Cana sign functions as a symbolic inauguration: joy instead of scarcity, covenant celebration instead of anxiety, and transformation of purification water into festival wine. Immediately after, John offers a different kind of "wonder" at the well: a revelatory conversation in which Jesus discloses personal knowledge, offers "living water," and draws an outsider community into belief. Read together, Cana and the well establish a two-track pattern that runs through the Gospel: visible signs that disclose glory and invisible conversions that re-order identity, worship, and belonging. By bracketing the Samaritan episode with sign language, John teaches readers how to weigh miracles without idolizing them, and how to recognize that the kingdom advances as much through truth-telling and reconciliation as through power displays.

Keywords: Gospel of John, Cana, water into wine, signs, Samaritan woman, woman at the well, living water, purification jars, glory, belief, revelation, Messiah disclosure, outsider inclusion, worship in spirit and truth, narrative theology, Johannine structure, covenant symbolism, sacraments, miracle and meaning, conversion narrative.

A collaboration with GPT-5.2-Thinking. 50 pages. CC4.0.

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1. Framing the Question: What Counts as the “First” Miracle

The question “What was the first miracle?” sounds like a simple request for a timestamped fact. But in the Gospels, “first” is not only a matter of sequence; it is also a matter of meaning. John, especially, trains the reader to ask a more disciplined question: first by what rule? Is “first” the first public act that amazes a crowd, the first supernatural intervention, the first disclosure of identity, the first moment that produces belief, or the first narrated event in a given Gospel’s theological architecture? Different answers emerge depending on what we count as a “miracle,” what we think the evangelist is doing, and whether we assume the Gospel is arranged like a modern police report.

This section sets the ground rules. It distinguishes miracle, sign, and revelation as related but not identical categories, then explains why John’s own labeling should govern interpretation inside John’s narrative. Finally, it identifies a common interpretive failure mode: treating the Gospel as a neutral timeline, which collapses John’s literary theology into a chronology contest and misses what he wants “first” to do in the reader.

1.1 Miracle, sign, and revelation as distinct categories

A “miracle” is typically understood as an event in which God acts in a way that exceeds ordinary expectation and ordinary causal explanation. In the Gospel stories, miracles are often public, sensory, and reportable: a fever leaves, sight returns, water becomes wine, bread multiplies. They can be described as “mighty works,” “wonders,” or “acts of power.” As a category, miracle is about effect in the world.

A “sign,” in John’s usage, is narrower and more purposeful. A sign is not merely a marvel; it is a meaningful act that points beyond itself. It is a chosen disclosure, an enacted statement. A sign can be miraculous, but its defining feature is not raw power; it is interpretive direction. In John, the sign is written so that the reader learns what the act means, not only that it happened. The narrative does not let the event remain neutral. A sign functions like a window: the point is not the glass, but what the glass reveals.

“Revelation,” by contrast, can occur with or without a physical miracle. Revelation is disclosure of identity, truth, or divine intention, often mediated through words, personal encounter, or unveiled knowledge. Jesus revealing the heart of a person, exposing a hidden history, or naming himself directly may not involve a sensory disruption like healing a limb, yet it can be more existentially disruptive than any miracle. Revelation is about unveiling; it changes what is seen and what can be said, even if nothing “supernatural” happens to the material environment.

Once these distinctions are in place, the woman at the well becomes easier to locate. Her encounter has the structure of revelation: a disclosure of Jesus’ identity, an exposure of her life that reconfigures her self-understanding, and a redefinition of worship that changes the map of

religious belonging. It produces communal belief. But John does not frame it as a numbered sign. That does not demote it. It clarifies the kind of “wonder” it is: not an outward transformation of matter, but an inward and communal transformation of recognition, speech, and allegiance.

1.2 Why John’s labeling matters more than chronology

John is unusually explicit about his own narrative logic. He does not merely recount events; he assigns them interpretive roles. When John calls Cana “the first of his signs,” he is doing more than noting that it happened early. He is saying, in effect: “This is the first sign by which I want you to understand the rest.” John is giving the reader a lens.

This matters because John is not primarily writing a day-by-day itinerary. He is composing a theological narrative with deliberate placement, thematic echoes, and internal cross-references. Inside such a work, the author’s own labels are a stronger guide than our impulse to reconstruct an external chronology. If we ignore John’s labeling, we may still be able to list events. But we will miss why John selected these particular events, arranged them in this order, and attached this particular interpretive weight to them.

In other words, “first” in John is a category of meaning before it is a category of time. John’s “first sign” is an inauguration of how glory is revealed: not through domination, not through humiliation of opponents, not through public coercion, but through generous transformation in a setting of human joy and communal celebration. John’s “second sign” then stabilizes and extends the pattern. Between them, the Samaritan woman episode functions as a bridge that teaches the reader: the kingdom advances not only through signs that alter the physical world, but through revelation that reorders identity and worship, including outsiders.

So if the reader asks, “Was it wine, or was it the woman at the well?” John’s narrative can answer: wine is the first sign; the woman at the well is a different kind of first, a first major display of open messianic disclosure to an outsider and a first large-scale harvest beyond the expected boundary. John’s labeling gives the categories. The reader’s task is to respect those categories rather than force everything into a single bucket called “miracle.”

1.3 The interpretive risk: reading John like a neutral timeline

A frequent modern misreading is to treat the Gospels as if they were neutral, chronological reporting with minimal authorial shaping. Under that assumption, the question “first miracle” becomes a puzzle of harmonization: which event happened earliest across all narratives, how do we sequence them, and which Gospel “got it first”? The danger is not that chronology is uninteresting, but that the method silently changes the genre and purpose of John’s writing.

When John is read like a neutral timeline, several distortions follow.

First, the reader may treat “sign” as a synonym for “miracle” and thereby miss John’s insistence that signs are interpretively loaded. A sign is not merely a supernatural interruption; it is a narrative cue. If we flatten “sign” into “miracle,” we flatten John’s theology into a spectacle catalog.

Second, the reader may undervalue revelatory encounters because they do not produce obvious physical anomalies. This is precisely what John does not want. John repeatedly shows people who see miracles and remain blind, and others who receive a word and truly see. Reading John as a miracle ledger can train the reader in the opposite posture from what John is cultivating: attention to meaning, to glory, to who Jesus is.

Third, the reader may mistake John’s ordering for accidental or purely historical, rather than deliberate and pedagogical. John places Cana early because it sets themes that will recur: transformation, abundance, glory disclosed in an understated way, and the movement from older forms of religious life toward fulfilled life in Jesus. Then John places the Samaritan woman episode early to set another theme that will recur: the breaking of boundary lines, the centrality of worship “in spirit and truth,” and the possibility that a marginalized witness becomes the conduit of communal belief.

Finally, a neutral-timeline reading can create a false competition between “power” and “person.” It can sound like the real action is the miracle, and the conversation is just commentary. John is moving the other way: the sign is meaningful because it discloses the person, and the conversation is decisive because it unveils worship, truth, and Messiahship. If we read John as a timeline, we may keep the events but lose the architecture.

So the framing question becomes more disciplined: not “Which happened first?” but “Which did John present as first, and what does John mean by calling it first?” Once that question is asked, the wine and the well are no longer rivals. They become paired inaugurations: the first sign announces the joy and transformation of the kingdom, and the revelatory encounter announces the reach and re-centering of the kingdom among outsiders.

2. John’s “Signs” Framework: How the Gospel Teaches Its Readers

John does not scatter miracles through his Gospel as random proofs of divine power. He shapes them into a teaching instrument. “Signs” are not merely things Jesus did; they are the Gospel’s way of training the reader in how to see. John is forming a particular kind of perception: not thrill-seeking, not adversarial proof-hunting, not superstition, but recognition. The sign is an event that points beyond itself to the identity of Jesus and the character of God, and then presses the reader toward a decision about allegiance.

This is why the “signs” framework matters for your original question. John’s first sign is not just “the first miracle,” as if the Gospel were a scientific logbook; it is the first disclosed pattern. It introduces the logic by which the reader should interpret everything that follows: glory is revealed in a way that confounds expectations, belief is invited rather than coerced, and the visible act is meant to awaken the inward response. At the same time, John is careful to show that not all belief is the same. Some belief is anchored to the sign and collapses when the sign is absent; other trust grows into a stable relationship with the person to whom the signs point.

2.1 The function of signs in John: disclosure, not spectacle

A spectacle is designed to overwhelm. It aims to force attention by volume, surprise, and emotional impact. A spectacle asks the audience to become passive: to stare, to react, to be impressed. It can create fascination without understanding, and it can create compliance without love. John’s signs operate differently. They are disclosures. They do not exist for their own dramatic value; they exist to reveal.

This distinction shows up in how John narrates the signs. He often includes interpretive commentary, thematic cues, and relational consequences. The sign is not only that the water became wine; the sign is that this transformation “revealed his glory.” The sign is not only that a boy recovered; the sign is that a household moved into belief. The sign is not merely power; it is power disciplined into meaning.

John also emphasizes the selective visibility of signs. Cana is not a public mass demonstration. It happens within a wedding context, with limited witnesses: servants, disciples, the hosts. The lack of public theater is a clue. John is implicitly saying: the point is not to compel the whole town by force of astonishment. The point is to reveal the identity of Jesus to those who are close enough to hear and see, and to let belief arise as a free, morally meaningful response rather than a coerced surrender.

When John later depicts crowds chasing Jesus because of signs, he often exposes the ambiguity of that pursuit. The crowd’s interest can be real, but it can also be shallow. Signs can attract, but attraction is not yet trust. This is why John uses signs but refuses to make them the foundation of faith. Signs disclose, but they do not substitute for the personal and spiritual recognition they are meant to awaken.

2.2 “Glory” as the interpretive key for the first sign

In John, “glory” is not merely brightness or majesty. It is a way of naming the disclosed reality of God: God’s character, God’s presence, God’s self-giving life made visible. Glory is what you see when you truly see who Jesus is. And John’s first sign is explicitly framed as a glory-revealer.

This is important because it tells you what John thinks the first sign is for. If Cana were simply an impressive act, John could have described astonishment, rumor, or public acclaim. Instead he says that the sign “revealed his glory,” and that the disciples believed. The first sign is meant to initiate recognition in those who will walk with Jesus.

The content of the Cana sign also teaches a particular shape of glory. The glory revealed at Cana is not domination. It is not humiliation of enemies. It is not even primarily public vindication. It is generous transformation within the ordinary fabric of human life: a wedding, a potential social shame, a quiet intervention, an overflowing provision, a “best wine” surprising the steward. John’s first sign portrays divine glory as restorative, abundant, and celebratory.

That becomes a theological overture for the whole Gospel. John will later present glory in ways that invert expectation: glory is revealed not only in power but in self-giving love; not only in triumph but in suffering; not only in signs that fix problems but in a cross that looks like defeat. The first sign begins this inversion gently: the glory of God is shown as a gift that rescues human joy from collapse, and it does so without turning the event into a circus.

So “glory” becomes the interpretive key: the sign is meaningful because it reveals who God is in Jesus, and it reveals that glory in a way consistent with John’s larger portrait of God’s self-disclosing love.

2.3 Belief as the intended outcome of signs

John regularly links signs to belief. That does not mean he thinks belief is a mechanical reaction to wonders, like a reflex. John understands belief as a relational posture: receiving truth, trusting the person of Jesus, and reorienting life accordingly. Signs are invitations into that posture. They are not mathematical proofs; they are enacted appeals.

This is why the signs are narrated with attention to response. John is less interested in the chemistry of the wine than in what the sign does to perception and allegiance. The sign is designed to draw the observer into a decision: will you interpret what you have seen as mere anomaly, mere luck, mere party trick, or will you see it as a disclosure of the One who stands before you?

Yet John is simultaneously honest about the fragility of sign-based belief. Signs can produce belief of a certain kind, but that belief can remain dependent on continued demonstrations. John shows people who “believe” because they see signs, and then he shows that such belief can evaporate when the signs cease, or when Jesus’ words offend, or when the demanded political Messiah does not appear. In this sense, signs are powerful but not foolproof. They can open the door, but they do not automatically produce mature faith.

The Samaritan woman episode, placed between sign one and sign two, expands this point. Many Samaritans come to belief not because they witnessed a material miracle but because of testimony and encounter. Their belief matures from “we believe because of what you said” to “we have heard for ourselves.” John is teaching that belief can arise through different modes of disclosure: through signs, through words, through personal recognition, and through the slow persuasion of truth.

So the intended outcome of signs is belief, but John is careful: belief is not mere amazement, not mere agreement, and not mere crowd enthusiasm. It is a transfer of trust toward Jesus as the revealer of God.

2.4 The difference between sign-faith and deeper trust

John’s Gospel repeatedly distinguishes between two layers of “belief.”

One layer is sign-faith: belief sparked by visible wonders. This can be sincere. It can be the beginning of faith. But it tends to be conditional. It rests on continued satisfaction of expectations: show me more, keep proving it, meet my needs on demand. Sign-faith may attach to Jesus as a powerful figure without yet receiving Jesus as the One who defines reality, reorders worship, and claims the whole person.

The deeper layer is trust anchored in who Jesus is, not only in what Jesus can do. This trust can remain when signs are absent, when circumstances worsen, when understanding is incomplete, and when obedience costs something. It is the difference between being impressed by power and being formed by truth.

John dramatizes this difference in multiple ways: crowds that pursue Jesus for bread, leaders who demand proofs while resisting the implications, disciples who struggle when Jesus speaks of hard realities, and individuals whose trust grows through encounter rather than spectacle. Even the Cana story hints at this distinction. The sign is not broadcast; it is quietly witnessed. The disciples’ belief is not presented as a mass reaction but as a relational deepening: they see and begin to recognize.

This difference matters for the “first miracle” question because it tells us why John might begin with Cana. The first sign is calibrated to invite a particular kind of faith: faith that perceives glory in gift, faith that follows without coercion, faith that begins in wonder but is meant to mature into trust. And by placing the Samaritan woman episode so early, John shows what deeper trust looks like: it emerges through truth-telling, self-exposure, and worship re-centered away from location and status and toward God’s self-disclosure.

In sum, John’s signs are a pedagogy. They teach the reader to look through the event to the person, to interpret power as revelation, to seek belief as allegiance rather than entertainment,

and to mature from sign-faith into durable trust. The first sign at Cana is the opening lesson in that curriculum.

3. Cana as First Sign: Wedding Joy, Abundance, and Newness

John's decision to introduce Jesus' public ministry with a wedding is not an incidental detail. The setting is doing theological work before a single drop of water changes. A wedding is not merely a happy backdrop; it is a covenant-shaped social event, a public declaration that binds two households, and a community moment where joy is not private but shared. By choosing Cana as the first numbered sign, John signals that the ministry of Jesus begins, not in the temple courts with a debate, nor in a battlefield with displays of force, but in the midst of ordinary communal life where honor, generosity, and celebration are at stake. The first sign is, in other words, an inauguration in the key of joy.

But the story is not sentimental. The wedding feast moves toward crisis: the wine runs out. That shortage threatens social shame and relational harm. Jesus' intervention is therefore not only a supernatural act; it is a rescue of dignity, a preservation of community joy, and an enactment of abundance where scarcity would have authored the story's final tone. The "best wine" arriving late carries programmatic weight: it hints that the new thing God is doing will not be a mere continuation of the old, and not a thinning-out of human life into austerity, but a surprising overflow that redefines what "enough" looks like.

At the same time, Cana is curiously non-theatrical. The sign is real, but it is not staged as a mass proof. It is witnessed partially: by servants who draw and carry, by disciples who interpret, and by a steward who tastes without knowing. John begins with a sign that reveals glory without compelling assent by spectacle, thereby training the reader from the outset: the kingdom is disclosed to receptive eyes, not imposed by coercive display.

3.1 Why a wedding is a loaded theological setting

A wedding is a concentrated symbol. Even at the purely human level, it gathers themes of promise, belonging, future, and public witness. It is a moment when time is felt differently: people look back at what has brought the couple to this point, and forward to a shared life whose meaning will be tested over years. That makes a wedding an ideal stage for a "first sign" because it already carries the grammar of covenant and inaugurated future. The story is not just about liquids; it is about a beginning.

In Scripture's broader imagination, weddings and feasts often become metaphors for divine-human relation. A wedding suggests covenant rather than contract: not a mere exchange of services, but a pledged fidelity that changes identity. A feast suggests abundance and

fellowship: the sharing of goods as the expression of shared life. John does not need to explain all of this overtly for the setting to resonate. The choice of a wedding makes it plausible that what will be revealed is not merely power but a new kind of relational order.

The wedding setting also quietly frames Jesus' role. He is not introduced first as an argument-winner or a spectacle-producer, but as a present guest whose actions preserve joy. Even the social position implied here matters: Jesus participates in the life of a community, not as a detached moral critic, but as one involved enough to feel the weight of their potential shame. That closeness is theological: the Word made flesh does not hover above human events; he enters them.

So the wedding is loaded because it concentrates covenant meaning, communal joy, and future-oriented promise. John's first sign begins in the semantic neighborhood of commitment and celebration, setting an interpretive tone for the Gospel's portrayal of what God is doing in Jesus.

3.2 Scarcity and shame: the social stakes of running out of wine

Modern readers can miss how serious the shortage is. Running out of wine at a wedding is not merely an inconvenience; in an honor-shame culture, it can be a public failure of hospitality. The wedding feast is an event where the hosts' generosity is on display, and where the community expects abundance as a sign of respect. To fail in provision is to fail in honor. It can stain the memory of the day and create relational strain between families.

This is why Mary's awareness matters. She recognizes the crisis before it becomes public humiliation, which means the story is not about indulgence but about hospitality and dignity. Wine, in this context, is a symbol of the feast's joy and of the hosts' capacity to honor their guests. When it runs out, the celebration risks collapsing into embarrassment.

John's narrative therefore casts the sign as a mercy that protects human life from unnecessary diminishment. Jesus is not conjuring luxury for luxury's sake; he is meeting a social need that, if unmet, would inflict harm. That harm is not physical like a disease, but it is real: the damage of shame, the fracture of relationships, the lasting story people tell about the day. A healing miracle restores a body; this sign restores a communal event and shields a household from disgrace.

There is a deeper theological suggestion here, too. Scarcity is not only material; it is also existential. Humans live under the threat that joy will run out, that celebration will end in embarrassment, that the good will not last. Cana puts that fear on the table immediately. And the first sign answers it not by preaching at people, but by acting: the lack is met, the shame is averted, and the feast continues. This is a quiet parable of what "good news" feels like when it enters ordinary life.

3.3 Abundance as the signature of the inaugurated kingdom

John's Cana story is not merely about meeting the bare minimum. The quantity is extravagant, and the quality is unexpectedly high. The steward's comment that the "best" has been saved for later functions as an interpretive hinge. Even if we refrain from over-allegorizing, the narrative clearly wants the reader to notice excess and surprise. The sign is abundance with a particular flavor: not waste, but overflow; not indulgence-as-moral, but generosity-as-kingdom.

This abundance matters because it defines the tone of Jesus' inauguration. John could have begun with a sign of judgment, or a sign of dominance, or a sign of self-protection. Instead, the first sign is provision that increases joy. It is the kind of abundance that says: God's new work does not begin by shrinking life into survivalism, but by expanding life into shared celebration. That does not mean John denies suffering; the Gospel will move toward the cross. But it means that the beginning is not bleak. The beginning is gifted.

Abundance also serves a theological purpose: it differentiates the kingdom from mere moral reform. Moral reform often speaks in the voice of subtraction: stop this, avoid that, reduce this appetite, tighten that control. There is a place for discipline, but if the Gospel begins and ends as subtraction, it risks becoming sterile. Cana suggests that the newness Jesus brings is not only restraint; it is renewal. It is a positive life: joy restored, community honored, a feast that does not collapse.

The abundance at Cana also foreshadows a pattern: Jesus does not merely patch; he transforms. Water does not become slightly improved water; it becomes wine. Scarcity does not become minimal sufficiency; it becomes surplus. The old is not merely maintained; it becomes new in kind. John is teaching the reader to expect qualitative transformation, not merely quantitative adjustment.

3.4 Hiddenness: a sign witnessed partially, not a public stunt

One of the most striking features of Cana is how quietly it happens. There is no announcement to the crowd. No public challenge to skeptics. No dramatic invocation. The transformation occurs in the flow of ordinary labor: fill the jars, draw some out, take it to the steward. The servants know what happened in a practical sense, because they handled the water and then handled what became wine. The steward knows only the result, not the mechanism. The guests simply receive and enjoy. The disciples are told that the sign reveals glory, and their belief is emphasized.

This partial visibility is not accidental. It signals John's posture toward faith and coercion. A public stunt compels attention and can pressure assent. A hidden sign invites recognition without forcing it. It leaves room for freedom: people can still misunderstand, still miss it, still

interpret it as luck or oversight in supply management. John begins with a sign that is powerful but not manipulative.

This hiddenness also clarifies what John thinks glory is. If glory were merely overwhelming display, Cana would be the wrong choice. But if glory is self-disclosure consistent with God's character, then Cana fits: God's generosity revealed without vanity, God's power exercised without theater, God's mercy expressed in a way that protects ordinary people rather than using them as props.

Finally, the partial witness pattern anticipates the Gospel's ongoing theme: some will see and not see; some will hear and not hear. John is less interested in maximizing spectacle than in cultivating true perception. Cana begins that training immediately. The sign is real, but it is not engineered to dominate the senses. It is engineered to disclose glory to receptive observers, and to initiate a kind of belief that can grow beyond the need for constant demonstrations.

Taken together, Cana as the first sign establishes a set of governing themes: joy as an inaugurating note, scarcity met with generous mercy, abundance that signals newness, and a mode of revelation that refuses coercive spectacle. John begins not with a bang meant to win arguments, but with a gift meant to open eyes.

4. The Purification Jars: From Ritual Water to Festal Wine

John could have told the Cana story with minimal props: a shortage, a quiet intervention, an unexpected abundance. Instead, he zooms in on a specific detail and insists that we see it clearly: large stone jars "for the Jewish rites of purification." This is not decoration. John is teaching the reader how to interpret the sign. The material objects are not only containers; they are meaning-bearers. They locate the miracle within a world of religious practice, embodied habit, and inherited categories of clean and unclean. In other words, John places the first sign inside the symbolic economy of Judaism, not outside it.

That placement matters because it immediately frames Jesus' work as more than rescue of a party. The sign becomes a declaration about transformation at the level of religious life itself: how cleansing is understood, how joy relates to holiness, how the old order is treated when the new arrives. John's first sign does not mock purification or tear it down as stupid. It reconfigures its materials into a new register. The story suggests continuity and discontinuity at once: the old vessels remain, but their content is repurposed; the old practice is not simply denied, but carried forward into a greater gift. The water of ritual cleansing becomes the wine of festal joy. The point is not that purity was evil and wine is good; the point is that the old system is being fulfilled and transformed into something fuller than it could generate by itself.

This section explores why John emphasizes the jars, how the transformation implies fulfillment rather than rejection, how to read the symbolism without turning it into a free-association exercise, and how this “old/new” logic becomes a signature pattern throughout the Gospel.

4.1 Why John emphasizes the stone jars and their purpose

John tells us three things that are easy to skip and hard to replace: the jars are stone, they are large, and they are explicitly connected to purification practice. Each element is a narrative cue.

First, stone jars carry an aura of durability and seriousness. They are not disposable partyware. They belong to a household’s stable practices. A reader feels, even without technical knowledge, that these are not casual containers. The sign therefore intersects with something established and weighty. John’s first sign is not performed with a random bowl; it touches the apparatus of religious and social cleanliness.

Second, the size matters. John notes capacity, and even without turning the story into arithmetic, the reader is meant to feel the scale. This is not a trickle of improvement; it is an overflow. The quantity communicates the character of the gift: abundant, not minimal; generous, not stingy. If the jars had been small, the sign could have been read as a localized fix. Their largeness makes the sign feel like an inauguration of a new mode of provision.

Third, the stated purpose anchors interpretation. “For purification” places the sign in the realm of cleansing, boundary maintenance, and religious preparation. Purification rites are about readiness to approach, readiness to participate, readiness to be with others and with God without defilement. John is effectively saying: the first sign is not only about keeping a wedding pleasant; it is also about what prepares human beings for fellowship, for worship, for life together. The jars link the problem of “wine running out” to the deeper human problem of what makes us fit for communion at all.

So John emphasizes the jars because he wants the reader to see that Jesus’ first sign is materially enacted within the grammar of purification. The sign therefore carries a theological insinuation: whatever Jesus is bringing, it is connected to cleansing and readiness, but it will not be merely a repetition of inherited ritual.

4.2 Transformation rather than rejection: fulfillment logic

A shallow reading might treat Cana as a story of replacement: old Jewish purification is out, new Christian joy is in. John’s story, however, is more subtle. Jesus does not smash the jars, ridicule the practice, or declare purification worthless. He uses the jars. He fills them. He works through the inherited forms, and then reconfigures what they carry.

That “working through” is significant. It implies a continuity of divine intention: the old was not meaningless. It served a purpose. But it also implies the old is not final. It cannot, by itself,

generate the fullness now arriving. The sign therefore performs a kind of fulfillment logic: the old is honored as real, but surpassed in a way that makes the surpassing intelligible.

Fulfillment logic differs from contempt logic. Contempt logic says: the past was stupid, the present is smart. Fulfillment logic says: the past had a true role in preparing a people to recognize what is now being given. John repeatedly portrays Jesus as standing inside Israel's story while re-centering it on himself. Cana fits that pattern. The purification jars are not treated as junk. They are treated as vessels whose meaning is being elevated.

There is also a moral dimension to this. If Jesus begins by humiliating inherited practices, the Gospel becomes a story of cultural conquest: the new wins by despising the old. Cana instead suggests that the new arrives as gift that completes, deepens, and transforms. The jars remain jars; the household remains a household; the wedding remains a wedding. But the content changes in kind, and the joy of the feast intensifies rather than collapses. John's first sign therefore models the way the Gospel handles inherited religious structures: not by scorched-earth rejection, but by transformative fulfillment that produces more life.

4.3 Symbolic reading without allegory runaway

Because the jars are explicitly tied to purification, symbolism is not optional. John invites it. Yet symbolism can be abused. There is a difference between disciplined symbolic reading and allegory runaway.

Disciplined symbolic reading begins with what the text highlights and contains. John himself points to purification. John himself notes abundance. John himself connects the sign to glory and belief. A disciplined reader therefore allows the jars to signal themes of cleansing, readiness, transition, and fulfillment, while staying tethered to John's narrative aims.

Allegory runaway happens when every element becomes a private code with unlimited meanings. The danger is that the text becomes a mirror for the reader's imagination rather than a window into John's intention. If the number of jars becomes a numerology project, if the stone becomes a speculative metaphysics of hardness, if the servants become a prophecy of modern professions, then the story is no longer being read; it is being used.

A simple guardrail is this: the symbol must serve the sign's purpose. The purpose of the sign, as John states, is disclosure of glory and the awakening of belief. The jars, then, should be read as supporting that disclosure. They do this by showing that Jesus' glory is not alien to holiness but redefines it; not hostile to purity but transforms its materials into joy; not contemptuous of the old but able to complete it with abundance.

Another guardrail is proportionality. The story is about a real wedding and a real social crisis. A symbolic reading that denies the human level becomes brittle and unnatural. John is not writing

a riddle detached from life; he is showing how divine meaning inhabits ordinary events. So the symbolism should deepen the human story, not erase it.

In short, the Cana jars invite symbolic reading because John marks them for attention. But the symbolism should remain bounded by textual cues, narrative purpose, and moral coherence, resisting the temptation to turn the story into a free-floating allegory machine.

4.4 Implications for how John treats “old” and “new” throughout the Gospel

Once Cana is read through the purification jars, a broader Johannine pattern becomes visible. John consistently stages the “new” not as a mere novelty, but as the deep fulfillment and reconfiguration of the “old.” The new is not simply later in time; it is different in kind. It is not a cosmetic update; it is a re-centering around Jesus as the locus of God’s presence and life.

This pattern shows up repeatedly in John’s narrative logic. John often places Jesus in relation to established institutions, festivals, and symbols, and then portrays Jesus as the one who brings their meaning to completion. The result is rarely pure demolition. It is typically a claim of surpassed fulfillment: what you sought there, what you practiced there, what you longed for there, is now being given in a fuller way here.

Cana therefore functions like a template. The old structure is present (purification jars). The new gift arrives (wine). The shift is not mere cancellation but transformation. The result is abundance, not scarcity; joy, not embarrassment; glory revealed, not merely rules reinforced.

This has interpretive consequences for the entire Gospel.

First, it suggests that John wants the reader to see continuity of divine purpose across covenants without collapsing them into sameness. There is real continuity, because the old vessels can be used. There is real discontinuity, because the content becomes something the old could not generate on its own.

Second, it suggests that “newness” in John is not primarily innovation in technique but a new mode of access to God. Purification is about readiness to approach. Cana hints that the mode of readiness is changing: access is being re-centered on Jesus’ person and gift, not merely on ritual compliance.

Third, it reframes holiness itself. If holiness is imagined only as separation and anxiety about defilement, then a wedding feast seems like a poor setting for revelation. But John suggests holiness can include festal joy when it is grounded in the right source. The jars signify holiness-as-cleansing; the wine signifies holiness-as-restored joy. The two are not enemies, but the second completes and transfigures the first.

Finally, it helps explain why John can place the woman at the well so early and treat her episode with such weight. The old map of worship and purity boundaries is being reconfigured. The “old/new” pattern is not abstract doctrine; it becomes lived re-centering: who is included, where worship happens, and what counts as true readiness to meet God. Cana establishes the pattern at the level of symbolic objects; the well story will establish it at the level of persons and communities.

So the purification jars are not a footnote. They are the hinge that turns Cana from a charming miracle into an inaugural sign: the old rites are not mocked, but transformed; the materials of cleansing become the medium of joy; and the Gospel’s larger “old/new” logic is introduced in a way the reader can taste.

5. Why Wine: Thematic Resonances without Overclaiming

If John wanted a simple demonstration of supernatural power, he could have chosen something more overtly “religious” or more publicly incontestable: a leper cleansed in front of the town, a cripple walking at a distance, a dramatic exorcism. Instead, John presents a sign that is almost scandalously ordinary: a beverage at a wedding. That ordinariness is part of the meaning. Wine is not primarily an argument; it is an atmosphere. It belongs to the human register of celebration, hospitality, and shared table life. John’s first sign therefore begins with a gift that people receive before they analyze it. The sign touches the body and the community before it touches the intellect.

Yet wine in biblical imagination is never just chemistry. It carries layered resonances: joy that is more than mood, communion that is more than proximity, and feasting that gestures beyond the present moment. These resonances help explain why John might choose wine as the medium of his first sign. But a disciplined reading must also restrain itself. The story is not a blank canvas for whatever we want wine to symbolize. John gives cues, and those cues warrant a set of thematic resonances. The task is to let the symbol be rich without making it infinite.

This section explores why wine plausibly functions as a meaningful “first sign” symbol in John, while maintaining interpretive sobriety: we can trace resonances John’s narrative invites, but we should refuse to claim more than the text supports.

5.1 Wine as joy, communion, and eschatological feast motif

At the most immediate level, wine belongs to joy. It is a sign of celebration in a feast context: not because joy requires intoxication, but because the shared cup signifies that the gathering is not merely functional. It is relational. It is festive. It is a moment of life enjoyed rather than merely endured.

In Cana, this matters because the crisis threatens joy itself. The wedding is moving toward a narrative of lack, embarrassment, and social failure. Jesus' act reverses that trajectory and restores the feast to its proper tone. The sign therefore embodies an early thesis about Jesus' mission: he is not only a teacher of truths; he is a giver of life in a way that re-stabilizes human joy. The first sign is not a moral lecture; it is an enacted restoration of celebration.

Wine also belongs to communion. A feast is not simply individual consumption; it is shared life performed at a table. When wine is present, it is served and received in a social rhythm of giving and gratitude. In that sense, wine is a communal medium: it "means" togetherness. If John begins with wine, he begins with an image of a community held together by gift. This subtly fits John's later emphasis that what Jesus brings is not only private spirituality but a new kind of fellowship: people drawn into a common life grounded in God's self-giving.

Finally, wine resonates with feast motifs that extend beyond the immediate moment. A wedding feast is already future-facing: it points to a life to come for the couple. But biblical imagination often uses feasting as a picture of ultimate restoration: the world set right, shame removed, enemies no longer defining the table, and joy no longer precarious. Without importing a full system onto the story, we can still say: Cana's wine acts like an anticipatory sign. It tastes like "more than now." It is abundance arriving early, as if the future is leaking into the present. John's Gospel often works this way: eternal life is not only later; it begins now. Wine at Cana is an embodied way of saying that.

So wine as joy, communion, and feast motif fits Cana's narrative function: the first sign signals that the kingdom's initial note is not austerity but gifted life, and that this gifted life has a communal and horizon-expanding shape.

5.2 The bridegroom theme and covenant horizons

A wedding naturally evokes the figure of the bridegroom. John's Gospel and the wider Gospel tradition repeatedly draw on bridegroom imagery for Messiah and covenant. Even without making claims beyond Cana itself, the setting invites the reader to consider covenant horizons: the idea that God's work is not merely legal adjustment but relational union; not merely rule enforcement but pledged faithfulness.

In Cana, Jesus is a guest, not explicitly the bridegroom. That is an important restraint: the story does not directly identify him with that role in the plot. And yet, the sign's effect is to preserve the bridegroom's honor and to keep the wedding's covenant joy intact. Jesus' action safeguards the relational center of the celebration. This allows a thematic echo: Jesus appears in a wedding setting and ensures that the joy of the covenant event does not collapse into shame. That is at least consistent with a broader portrait of Jesus as one who comes to secure covenant joy rather than allow it to fail.

The covenant horizon deepens when we notice how Cana ties a “new gift” to a “purification apparatus.” Covenants, in biblical logic, often involve cleansing and renewal. If purification water becomes wine, the implication is not that covenant holiness is discarded, but that covenant fulfillment arrives in a form that includes joy and abundance rather than fear and scarcity. The bridegroom setting becomes a stage for a more expansive kind of holiness: holiness compatible with celebration because it is grounded in divine gift rather than human performance.

So the bridegroom theme is not something we must force into Cana, but something Cana naturally harmonizes with. John begins with a covenant-shaped event, then offers a sign that preserves and amplifies its joy. This prepares the reader for later Johannine claims that God’s relationship with humanity is being re-centered and made new through Jesus’ person and work.

5.3 The “best wine kept until now” as narrative program

The steward’s line about the “best wine” being saved for later is one of John’s sharpest narrative signals. It is an interpretation offered within the story itself. The steward does not know the miracle’s mechanism, but he speaks a truth that the reader is meant to hear as more than a comment on catering strategy.

At minimum, the line establishes surprise and inversion: the expected order is reversed. Usually the best comes first, and later offerings decline. Here, the quality rises late. That inversion functions as a program for John’s Gospel, which repeatedly overturns human expectation about how God reveals glory. The best is not necessarily first in the way we expect. The deeper gift arrives later, and often in forms that do not match conventional prestige.

More broadly, the line provides a narrative grammar for “newness.” The “now” matters. John is announcing an arrival: something has begun that alters the normal sequence. In the story’s human register, the feast is rescued. In the story’s theological register, the gift hints that the advent of Jesus brings a quality of life that is not merely equivalent to what came before, but qualitatively “better” in the sense of fuller, more abundant, more joy-sustaining.

Read carefully, this does not require the reader to demean the old. The line is not “the earlier wine was poison.” It is: the best has come now. That is fulfillment language again: the earlier was real, but the later is richer. John often speaks this way about revelation: Moses matters, but grace and truth arrive in a new fullness; the temple matters, but God’s presence is re-centered; purification matters, but cleansing is reconstituted around Jesus. Cana’s “best wine” line is an early, compact form of that theological movement.

So the phrase acts like a narrative program: expect reversals, expect a late-arriving fullness, and expect “new” to mean richer rather than merely different.

5.4 A disciplined boundary: what the text suggests vs what it doesn't prove

Because wine carries many biblical and theological associations, Cana invites interpretive overreach. A disciplined reading needs explicit boundaries. The goal is not to impoverish meaning but to preserve honesty: to let the text be rich where it is rich, and silent where it is silent.

What the text strongly suggests includes the following.

First, the sign is intentionally set in a joy-laden, communal context and results in abundance. John's narrative invites the reader to associate Jesus' inaugural revelation with gift, joy, and transformation rather than with coercion or spectacle.

Second, John's emphasis on purification jars warrants a theme of transformation in the sphere of religious readiness and holiness. Wine is not merely beverage; it is the transformed content that occupies a vessel of purification, inviting the reader to see continuity plus elevation.

Third, the steward's "best wine now" comment warrants a theme of inversion and late-arriving fullness. John wants the reader to anticipate a Gospel in which the deepest disclosure does not necessarily arrive in the expected order or expected form.

What the text does not prove should also be stated plainly.

It does not prove a comprehensive sacramental theory by itself. Readers may see resonances with later Christian practices of cup and table, but Cana alone is not a full doctrinal blueprint. The narrative points toward communion as a theme of shared life, but it does not explicitly expound liturgy.

It does not prove that Jesus endorses every use of wine or every form of celebration. The story is about hospitality and communal joy, not a blanket moral statement about consumption. Drawing moral absolutes from Cana without additional textual support is a category error.

It does not prove that Cana is designed as an encoded, one-to-one allegory where each detail has a precise doctrinal counterpart. John marks certain details for meaning, but he does not invite infinite codebreaking.

And it does not prove that the wedding setting means Jesus is literally the bridegroom in this scene. The setting resonates with covenant imagery, but the story's plot role assignments remain what they are: a bridegroom exists, Jesus is a guest, Mary speaks, servants act, the steward comments. The thematic horizon can be acknowledged without collapsing the literal narrative into symbolism.

These boundaries matter because they preserve the credibility of the reading. Cana is meaningful, and wine is a potent symbol, but John's meaning is not license for interpretive

inflation. A restrained reading can still be strong: wine functions as a medium of joy and communal gift; the “best wine now” line signals inversion and fulfilled newness; and the sign’s quiet abundance initiates John’s program of glory disclosed through generosity rather than spectacle.

In this way, the question “Why wine?” can be answered without overclaiming: because wine is an embodied grammar of joy and shared feast, because it suits John’s desire to inaugurate the ministry in gift rather than coercion, and because it allows the narrative to signal that the fullest gift is arriving “now” in Jesus.

6. The Woman at the Well: A Non-Miracle That Acts Like a Revelation

John places the Samaritan woman at the well in one of the most structurally important locations in the early Gospel: after the first numbered sign and before the second. That placement alone tells the reader to pay attention. If Cana inaugurates the “sign” pattern, the well inaugurates something equally decisive: a mode of disclosure that does not look like a miracle, yet functions as revelation with comparable force. Here the disruption is not in chemistry but in perception, identity, and worship. The story changes a person’s self-understanding, reorders a community’s beliefs, and demonstrates that the kingdom’s center of gravity is moving outward to those presumed marginal.

The narrative also shifts tempo. Cana is short, event-driven, and partially hidden. The well story is long, dialogical, and psychologically intense. John slows down because he wants the reader to learn how revelation works when it comes through words, not wonders; through truth-telling, not theatrical power. The scene becomes a model of spiritual encounter: gift offered, resistance met, personal truth exposed, and worship redefined. In this way, the well episode “acts like” a miracle in its effects: it produces recognition, witness, and communal belief. It shows that the glory disclosed in Jesus is not confined to signs that alter matter; it includes disclosure that alters persons.

6.1 Why John slows down for a long conversation

John’s pacing is a theological decision. In a Gospel where signs can be narrated quickly, John chooses to linger over dialogue when the dialogue itself is the action. The well episode is not filler between miracles; it is a primary display of Jesus’ method of revelation.

There are at least four reasons the long conversation matters.

First, it shows that truth is not only declared; it is drawn out. Jesus does not drop a doctrinal package and leave. He engages in a progressive unveiling. The woman’s understanding changes step by step: curiosity, skepticism, provocation, recognition, and testimony. John slows down so

the reader can watch the movement. Revelation is presented as a process of encounter, not a single informational download.

Second, the conversation allows the reader to see the interplay of misunderstanding and clarification, a signature Johannine pattern. John often uses layered language in which a phrase can be heard in more than one register (earthly and heavenly, literal and spiritual). “Living water” is a prime example. The woman initially hears in the ordinary register; Jesus speaks in the deeper register. John slows down so the reader can learn how to read: do not stop at the first level; let the words open into larger meaning.

Third, the slow dialogue foregrounds dignity and agency. In many ancient narratives, an outsider woman might be a plot device. John refuses that. He allows her to speak, question, object, and reason. The encounter is not a monologue; it is a contested exchange that respects her as a real interlocutor. This makes the revelation morally serious. It is not manipulation; it is engagement.

Fourth, the conversation’s length creates contrast with spectacle-based persuasion. John is demonstrating that Jesus is not dependent on wonders to create belief. He can produce recognition through truth, personal address, and worship reorientation. The slow scene therefore functions as a counterweight to sign addiction. After Cana, the reader might be tempted to look for the next miracle as the “real” event. John interrupts that impulse by making the next major event a conversation whose spiritual consequences exceed its outward drama.

So John slows down because he is teaching his readers what “seeing” looks like when no fireworks occur: it looks like a person being met, addressed, and remade by truth.

6.2 The gift language: “living water” as an offer of life

The controlling metaphor of the scene is gift. Jesus does not begin with accusation, even though the woman’s life will be exposed. He begins with request and then pivots to offering. “If you knew the gift...” is the tonal center. The language of “living water” introduces a kind of life that is not merely improved circumstances but renewed interior source.

In the immediate setting, the metaphor is brilliantly ordinary. They are at a well. Water is the substance of daily survival. The woman has come for a practical necessity. Jesus uses the material context to speak of a deeper necessity: the thirst that is not satisfied by a better bucket or a deeper well. John’s strategy here parallels Cana. In both scenes, ordinary material life becomes the medium of revelation. But in the well story, the material does not transform; the meaning transforms. The water remains water. The revelation is about what truly sustains a person.

“Living water” carries a double resonance that John exploits. In everyday speech, “living water” can mean fresh, running water, as opposed to stagnant. The woman can therefore

misunderstand without being irrational. But Jesus' intent is to speak of life in a deeper sense: a gift that becomes an interior spring, a new source not dependent on external cycles of scarcity.

The gift language also establishes a moral posture: Jesus is not recruiting by flattery or coercion; he is offering life. The offer is free, but it is not cheap. It will entail truth and reorientation. Still, John makes the order clear: gift comes first. Exposure comes within the gift, not as a prerequisite for it. The sequence matters because it reveals God's character as John wants it known: the encounter begins in grace.

Finally, the gift language expands the Gospel's definition of "miracle." If a miracle is God acting beyond ordinary capacity, then an interior spring of life in a person who has been defined by shame and marginalization is arguably as miraculous as water becoming wine. John places this scene early to teach that spiritual vivification is not a lesser category. The sign may not be numbered, but the gift is no less real.

6.3 Jesus' personal knowledge and the exposure-to-healing pattern

At the heart of the well story is a moment that can feel like a psychic display: Jesus names the woman's marital history. But John's narrative intent is not to portray Jesus as a parlor mind-reader. The purpose is moral and healing: exposure that liberates rather than exposure that humiliates.

The woman's life, as John depicts it, is socially vulnerable. Whether her history results from sin, tragedy, exploitation, abandonment, or some mixture, the key narrative fact is that she is located at the margins. The time of day and her solitary presence suggest social distance. In this context, Jesus' knowledge does something paradoxical: it reveals that she is seen fully, and yet she is not despised. She is known, and still addressed with gift.

This produces an "exposure-to-healing" pattern that John uses elsewhere: truth that wounds by unveiling, but heals by ending concealment. The woman's initial posture includes deflection and misunderstanding. Jesus does not accept deflection as final. He presses gently but firmly toward reality. Yet the pressing is not punitive. The proof is in the outcome: she does not leave crushed; she leaves activated. She becomes a witness.

That outcome is crucial. If exposure were merely condemnation, the story would end in silence or flight. Instead, the exposure becomes the catalyst for confession-like honesty and renewed agency. The woman's testimony is not, "He shamed me." It is, "He told me everything I ever did," spoken with awe rather than resentment. That tone indicates what John wants the reader to see: the knowledge is revelatory, and the revelation is directed toward life.

There is also an epistemic point here. John is showing a kind of knowledge that is not weaponized. In a world where knowing another's secrets often becomes leverage, Jesus'

knowledge becomes invitation. This anticipates a broader Johannine ethic: truth is not merely data; truth is a person-centered disclosure that aims at reconciliation with God and with reality.

So the personal knowledge functions as a revelation marker. It signals that Jesus sees deeper than social surfaces, and that this seeing is not for domination but for restoration.

6.4 Messiah disclosure and its unusual directness

One of the most striking elements of the well story is how openly Jesus identifies himself. In John's narrative, this directness is unusual, especially this early and in this particular setting. The disclosure is not given first to the religious elite, not delivered in the temple as a formal announcement, and not wrapped in protective ambiguity. It is spoken to a Samaritan woman in a private conversation at a well.

This is a theological statement in narrative form. John is telling the reader where revelation is willing to land. Messiah disclosure is not distributed according to prestige. It is distributed according to divine purpose, often along lines that human status hierarchies would not predict.

The directness also clarifies what "revelation" means in this scene. It is not only that Jesus knows the woman; it is that Jesus names himself. The conversation has been building toward this: gift offered, worship redefined, personal truth exposed. Then the culmination arrives: identity disclosed. The result is not merely personal comfort; it is mission. The woman becomes a messenger to her town, and the town moves from secondhand report to first-person conviction.

By placing such direct messianic speech here, John also deepens the contrast with Cana. Cana's sign is partially hidden. The well's disclosure is verbally explicit. The first sign reveals glory quietly through transformed substance; the well reveals identity directly through speech. John is teaching that God's self-disclosure uses multiple modes: quiet signs, direct words, private conversations, public outcomes.

Finally, the unusual directness becomes an inclusion statement. If Messiah disclosure is given here, then no boundary line is absolute. Geography, ethnicity, religious history, and moral reputation do not veto the possibility of encounter. John places this story early to make that rule feel foundational, not exceptional.

In sum, the woman at the well is "non-miracle" only if miracle is defined narrowly as altered physics. In John's terms, it is a revelation event: a gift offered that becomes life, a truth exposed that becomes healing, and an identity disclosed that produces communal belief. John slows down because he wants readers to see that this kind of encounter is not secondary to signs. It is one of the Gospel's primary ways the glory of Jesus enters the world.

7. Outsider Inclusion: Samaritans, Worship, and the New Center

If Cana teaches the reader what a “sign” does, the Samaritan episode teaches the reader where the sign points: toward a new center that redraws the map of belonging. John does not place outsider inclusion at the margins of the Gospel as a late, optional application. He embeds it near the beginning, adjacent to the early sign sequence, so that inclusion becomes part of the Gospel’s operating system rather than a footnote. The question is not merely, “Can outsiders be saved?” but, “Where does worship now happen, who can speak as a witness, and what authority structures are being re-formed around Jesus?”

The well story is not only interpersonal. It is geopolitical, religious, and social. A Samaritan woman stands at the intersection of boundary lines: ethnicity, contested worship sites, gendered credibility, and moral reputation. John deliberately chooses that intersection to make a claim: the revelation of Jesus is not distributed along the familiar prestige corridors of the religious world. It breaks through places and persons that “should not” be primary, and in doing so it announces a relocation of the center. The center is no longer a mountain or a temple as such. The center becomes Jesus’ disclosure and the worship that aligns to it.

This section traces how boundary crossing functions as a Johannine signal, how “spirit and truth” redefines worship, how the woman becomes a credential-less witness whose testimony is nevertheless effective, and how the town’s belief matures from borrowed certainty to direct encounter.

7.1 Social and religious boundary crossing as a Johannine signal

In John, boundary crossing is rarely accidental. When Jesus steps into contested space, John is signaling theological movement. The Samaritan encounter carries multiple boundaries at once.

There is an ethnic-religious boundary. Samaritans and Jews shared sacred texts in some form and shared certain ancestral claims, yet their histories diverged sharply. Their worship centers competed, and mutual suspicion was entrenched. John does not require the reader to master the entire historical controversy to feel the tension. The narrative itself carries it: the woman’s surprise that Jesus speaks to her indicates that the boundary is socially real.

There is also a gendered boundary. Public religious discourse often ran through male channels. A woman’s testimony could be discounted, her presence in certain spaces policed, and her social vulnerability amplified by rumor. John’s decision to depict Jesus engaging her seriously is therefore a signal: the Gospel will not preserve the world’s credibility rules as if they were holy. Jesus treats her as a theological interlocutor.

There is a moral boundary too, at least as the narrative frames her social perception. Her marital history is complex and publicly visible. She is not introduced as an honored matron but

as someone whose life is likely discussed. The boundary is not only “outsider by ethnicity” but “outsider by reputation.”

When John stacks boundaries, he is making a point about the reach and logic of revelation. The kingdom does not advance only by reinforcing boundaries; it advances by crossing them in a way that produces truth and life. Importantly, the crossing is not a denial that boundaries exist. John does not portray the dispute as imaginary. He portrays the dispute as real, and then shows Jesus addressing it by relocating the center of worship away from the contested geography and into a deeper criterion.

This is a Johannine signal because John repeatedly uses encounters with outsiders and marginalized persons to disclose central truths about Jesus. Outsiders in John often become early recognizers. They are not inherently better. But they are sometimes less invested in the prestige structures that resist Jesus. The boundary crossing therefore reveals both the generosity of God and the fragility of human systems that confuse status with truth.

So the Samaritan inclusion is not merely kindness. It is a narrative signpost that the Gospel’s axis is shifting: revelation flows outward, and the old maps of religious centrality are being rewritten.

7.2 “Spirit and truth” as a worship redefinition

The conversation moves from personal life to theology with striking speed. That is another Johannine move: Jesus does not separate the moral and the worshipful. The woman raises the central dispute of her world: where is the right place to worship? She names the competing mountains, the contested legitimacy of traditions, the historical argument. In doing so, she represents an entire people and their inherited conflict.

Jesus’ answer is not a cheap compromise. He does not say, “Both are equally right.” Nor does he merely pick a winner and end the conversation. Instead, he introduces a third category that relativizes the dispute without treating it as meaningless. Worship, he says, is being redefined. It will be “in spirit and truth.”

This phrase functions as a relocation of the center.

“Spirit” names the mode of worship as inwardly vivified rather than geographically constrained. It does not mean worship becomes merely private emotion; it means worship is animated by God’s own life and presence, not dependent on access to a privileged site. “Spirit” implies that the capacity to worship is now portable, because God’s presence is not locked to a mountain.

“Truth” names the content and orientation of worship. Worship is not merely sincerity. It is alignment with what is real, with who God is, and with God’s self-disclosure. In John’s Gospel, “truth” is not an abstract principle; it is bound to Jesus’ revealing presence. So “truth” implies

that worship is being anchored to God's revelation rather than to tribal custody of a sacred location.

Taken together, "spirit and truth" implies that worship will be both empowered and re-aimed. It is empowered because it is not limited to those who can travel, those who have the right access, those who belong to the right institutional gate. It is re-aimed because it is not a free-for-all. It is not "anything goes." It is oriented to the truth God reveals.

This is why the Samaritan setting is decisive. Jesus announces the redefinition of worship precisely in the context of a disputed worship geography. The new center is not a negotiated settlement between rival sites; it is a deeper relocation: worship is being re-centered around divine presence and divine disclosure.

In narrative terms, the implication is radical. If worship is "spirit and truth," then the outsider is not excluded by geography. The Samaritan is not disqualified by contested mountain. Worship becomes accessible where Jesus is known and where truth is received. The inclusion is therefore not an afterthought. It is built into the redefinition of worship itself.

7.3 The woman as witness: testimony without institutional credential

John does something socially subversive here: he makes the woman a missionary to her own town. Her testimony is not polished; it is raw. It is not framed as an official sermon; it is a personal report that carries the shock of being seen. "He told me everything I ever did" is not a systematic theology. It is an existential proof: I was known, and I was not destroyed; I was exposed, and I was given life.

This is witness without credential. She has no formal authorization, no priestly office, no temple endorsement, no rabbinic training. She is not even portrayed as a moral exemplar in advance. John's choice here reveals a Gospel logic: testimony is grounded in encounter, not status.

This does not mean John is anti-institutional in a simplistic way. It means John refuses to make institutions the gatekeepers of revelation. In John's narrative world, institutions can preserve and transmit truth, but they can also become resistant to it. By empowering a Samaritan woman as a witness, John demonstrates that Jesus' authority can generate credible testimony from the margins.

The woman's witness also illustrates how evangelism works in John: it is invitational and relational. She does not drag the town by force. She speaks in a way that invites them to come and see. Her testimony functions as a bridge, not a replacement for their own encounter. John thereby models a humble form of witness: honest report that points beyond itself.

There is also a subtle ethical point: her credibility comes from vulnerability. She is not claiming superiority. She is confessing exposure. That kind of witness is difficult to counterfeit. It does not

rely on power; it relies on truth. John seems to suggest that this is precisely why such a witness can be effective: it is not the performance of religion; it is the report of revelation.

So the woman as witness is a decisive element of outsider inclusion. Inclusion is not merely “they get to receive.” Inclusion here includes agency: they get to speak, to testify, to be a conduit of belief for others.

7.4 The town’s response: belief that matures beyond secondhand report

The town’s response completes the pattern John wants the reader to learn. The Samaritans initially believe because of the woman’s testimony. That is a real beginning. John does not mock it. Secondhand belief can be the first rung on a ladder. But John then depicts maturation: the townspeople come to Jesus themselves, hear him, and then articulate a deeper basis for belief. Their faith moves from borrowed confidence to direct encounter.

This two-stage movement is one of John’s most important epistemic themes. It shows how truth is transmitted without becoming mere hearsay.

Stage one is testimony. Someone says, “Come and see.” Belief begins as trust in a witness. This is normal human knowing. Most of what we know begins this way.

Stage two is encounter. Belief becomes more stable when the community hears and sees for itself. The town’s language expresses that shift: not only “we believe because you said,” but “we know because we have heard.” John is teaching that testimony is not an end; it is a doorway. Mature faith does not despise testimony, but it does not remain dependent on it. It seeks the reality to which testimony points.

This maturation also functions as a defense against charisma traps. If belief were meant to remain permanently attached to the personality of the witness, the community would be fragile. John instead depicts belief moving beyond the witness to the one witnessed to. The woman is essential, but she is not the center. The town’s belief stabilizes in Jesus, not in her authority.

Finally, the town’s response underscores the outsider theme with force. A Samaritan community becomes one of the earliest collective groups in John to confess Jesus in expansive terms. This is not a minor subplot; it is a sign that the “new center” is already operating. The Gospel’s reach is wider than the old boundary maps. The inclusion is not only theoretical. It is narrated as a real social outcome: a community of outsiders receives revelation, recognizes Jesus, and moves into direct confession.

In sum, outsider inclusion at the well is not merely a story about kindness to an individual. It is a structural declaration that the center has moved. Boundary crossing signals the new reach of revelation. “Spirit and truth” relocates worship away from contested geography to divine

presence and disclosure. A credential-less witness becomes effective because she speaks from encounter and vulnerability. And a whole town demonstrates mature belief by moving from testimony to firsthand hearing. John places this early to teach the reader: the kingdom's first movements are not only power displays but re-centering acts that redraw who belongs, how worship is defined, and where truth takes root.

8. The Bracketing Effect: Between the First and Second Sign

John's early chapters do not drift from episode to episode; they are built. One of the clearest indicators is the way John uses explicit "sign" language to frame a sequence: Cana is named as the first sign, and the healing of the official's son is identified as the second. Between those two numbered signs John places the Samaritan woman narrative, a long scene that is not labeled a sign at all yet produces one of the earliest and most expansive movements of belief in the Gospel. This is not accidental placement. It is narrative architecture. John is teaching his readers how to evaluate miracles and how to evaluate conversions, and he does so by bracketing a revelation-by-conversation between two revelation-by-power events.

The effect is both interpretive and pastoral. Interpretively, it tells the reader that John is not simply listing wonders; he is constructing a curriculum of recognition. Pastoral or practical, it guards the reader against a subtle idolatry: treating miracles as the "real" work and conversion as a secondary consequence. John's bracketing says the opposite: the conversion of an outsider, the redefinition of worship, and the emergence of a new witness community belong right next to the first two signs as if they are part of the same opening declaration. John is saying, in narrative form: do not rank the spiritual transformation lower than the physical sign. Both disclose glory, and both are essential to understanding who Jesus is.

This section unpacks the architecture itself, what the placement teaches about the primacy of conversion, how John runs a two-track system of revelation (power signs and truth encounters), and what kind of hierarchy is implied by the difference between "counted as sign" and "glory revealed."

8.1 John's narrative architecture: sign one, then the well, then sign two

John explicitly marks Cana as "the first sign" and later identifies the healing at Cana (the official's son) as "the second sign." That explicit numbering is rare enough that it should be treated as structural scaffolding. John is telling you, "Track these."

Now observe what he does with the space between them. He does not immediately rush to another miracle. He inserts a long, layered account of a Samaritan encounter that accomplishes at least three major narrative goals:

1. It reveals Jesus' identity more openly than many early scenes.
2. It redefines worship in a way that relocates religious centrality.
3. It generates communal belief among outsiders.

So the architecture is not “miracle, miracle, miracle.” It is “sign, then revelation-conversation that yields conversion, then sign.” John thereby pairs and contrasts modes of disclosure. The bracketing creates an interpretive corridor: the reader is meant to carry the meaning of Cana into the well scene, and carry the meaning of the well scene into the second sign. The well episode becomes a hinge that affects how the reader understands what signs are for.

The architecture also creates a subtle map of movement. Cana begins in a Jewish social setting with purification jars in the background. The well moves into Samaritan contested space with worship and boundary issues in the foreground. The second sign returns to Cana with a healing that reaches across distance, involving a royal or official figure. The sequence therefore expands outward: from local celebration to cross-boundary inclusion to a sign that demonstrates authority beyond immediate presence. John is broadening the reader's imagination of Jesus' reach: socially, geographically, and spiritually.

In short, the architecture is a designed pattern. John uses numbering not merely to count events but to frame the meaning of what falls between them.

8.2 What the placement teaches: conversion is not secondary

By placing the Samaritan conversion narrative between the first and second signs, John teaches the reader a valuation principle: conversion and worship reorientation are not the “after party” of miracles. They are central.

If John believed the main evidence for Jesus was sheer miracle output, he could have stacked signs with minimal interruption, letting dialogue serve as commentary. Instead, he makes the longest early scene one where the “miracle” is essentially personal and communal transformation. That suggests John wants the reader to treat that transformation as an event of first-rank theological importance.

This matters because religious readers can easily become consumers of signs. We can think: show me the power, prove the authority, demonstrate the divine. John refuses to train that appetite. He interrupts it. He says, in effect: you will not understand what the first sign means if you do not watch what happens when truth meets an outsider and produces worship and witness. The well scene is therefore not a detour but an interpretive key.

There is also a moral claim embedded in the placement. The first sign rescues a wedding from shame by abundance. The well scene rescues an outsider from a life of alienation by truth and

gift. The second sign rescues a child from death by healing across distance. John is teaching that Jesus' mission is not only to fix bodies or provide material goods; it is to create a new people whose worship is re-centered and whose identity is re-formed. If the reader ranks conversion below miracle, the reader has not learned John's Gospel. John's placement is a corrective.

So the bracketing teaches that the greatest "evidence" is not spectacle but the emergence of durable belief, new worship, and reconfigured community. Miracles may open doors, but conversion is the goal.

8.3 Two-track revelation: power signs and truth encounters

John's bracketing makes visible a two-track system of revelation that runs throughout the Gospel.

Track one is power signs: events where Jesus acts in ways that surpass ordinary capacity and thereby disclose divine authority. Water becomes wine. A dying boy is healed at a distance. These are acts that can be reported as phenomena.

Track two is truth encounters: events where Jesus discloses identity and reality through conversation, exposing hearts, re-centering worship, and producing recognition. The Samaritan woman scene is the clearest early example, but the pattern recurs elsewhere: Jesus meets individuals, speaks into their lives, and revelation occurs through the collision of truth and personal address.

The two tracks are not competitors. John's bracketing implies they are complementary, and each corrects the possible misreadings of the other.

Power signs correct a purely inward reading that could reduce Christianity to subjective feelings. They assert that God's action is real, not merely psychological. They anchor revelation in concrete acts.

Truth encounters correct a purely spectacular reading that could reduce Christianity to entertainment or proof-chasing. They assert that the point of the sign is recognition and worship, not thrill. They train readers to see the moral and relational meaning of what Jesus does.

The bracketing, then, is pedagogical. John is saying: if you only want power signs, you will miss the purpose. If you only want private spiritual talk, you will miss the embodied reality. The Gospel proceeds by both: acts that disclose authority and conversations that disclose identity.

This two-track framing also helps answer your original "first miracle" question in a deeper way. Wine is "first sign" in the power-sign track. The well is "first major outsider conversion and

worship relocation” in the truth-encounter track. John gives both early because he wants both to define the Gospel from the beginning.

8.4 The implied hierarchy: glory revealed in both, counted as sign in one

John’s explicit numbering creates an interesting hierarchy question: if both Cana and the well reveal Jesus, why does John call one a sign and not the other?

The answer is not that the well is less important. The answer is that John is distinguishing categories without ranking value. A “sign” in John is a particular kind of revelatory act: a public-enough, concrete-enough event that functions as a pointer. Cana fits that. The second sign fits that. The well scene is revelatory, but its mode is primarily dialogical and relational. It reveals through speech, exposure, and worship redefinition rather than through a discrete physical transformation that can be pointed at as an external phenomenon.

So the implied hierarchy is not “signs are higher than conversations.” It is “signs are one class of disclosure, and conversations are another.” John counts signs because they serve a certain narrative and evidential function, but he places the well between them to show that the “counted” items are not the only items that matter.

What is common to both is glory. Cana explicitly “reveals glory.” The well reveals glory by disclosing Jesus’ identity and producing belief among outsiders. The glory is manifested differently, but the glory is real in both. John’s bracketing implies: do not confuse what can be numbered with what is most significant. What can be counted as a sign is not necessarily what most deeply transforms a community.

The bracketing also suggests a subtle priority: the goal of signs is not the sign itself but the belief and worship the sign is meant to awaken. That means the well scene, which yields direct confession and communal belief, actually illustrates the telos of signs. It shows what the signs are for. In that sense, the “non-sign” episode interprets the signs. John’s architecture makes conversion the interpretive center even when the signs are the numbered markers.

So the hierarchy is paradoxical but coherent: signs are counted as signs, but conversion is the intended fruit; glory is revealed in both; and the well scene is positioned as the living commentary that tells the reader how to value the miracles. John brackets the well with sign language so the reader will never be able to say, “Miracles were primary; conversions were secondary.” The placement forbids that conclusion.

9. Miracles without Idolatry: John's Guardrails for the Reader

John is not embarrassed by miracles. He does not treat them as primitive superstition or narrative padding. He uses signs deliberately, and he expects them to matter. Yet John is equally clear that signs are spiritually dangerous if the reader relates to them wrongly. A sign can become an idol. The very thing meant to point beyond itself can become the object of fixation. The reader can begin to seek “power” rather than the person, “effects” rather than truth, “proof” rather than communion. John anticipates that drift, and he builds guardrails into his Gospel so that signs remain servants rather than masters.

These guardrails take several forms. John refuses to narrate signs as spectacles engineered to dominate crowds. He places long truth encounters between sign events. He shows ambiguous “belief” that remains shallow when it depends on continual display. He centers socially low-status witnesses and recipients to make clear that God’s glory does not ride on prestige. And he repeatedly tests faith for durability: can you remain with Jesus when the wonders stop, when the words offend, when the outcome looks like loss?

In this way, John offers a miracle-rich Gospel that nonetheless trains the reader to avoid miracle-idolatry. Signs are given, but they are not enthroned. The point is recognition of Jesus and the formation of a community that lives by truth, not by adrenaline.

9.1 Why John uses signs but refuses spectacle addiction

John’s use of signs is pedagogical: signs are meant to disclose glory and invite belief. They provide concrete moments where Jesus’ authority becomes visible in the world. This concreteness matters because it resists the reduction of faith to mere interior sentiment. John’s Gospel is not “spirituality in general.” It is a claim about God acting in history through a particular person.

But John refuses spectacle addiction because spectacle trains the wrong kind of faith. Spectacle faith is reactive. It chases stimulus. It demands constant reinforcement. It is easily manipulated, because it depends on ever-increasing display. It is also easily disappointed, because any ordinary day feels like abandonment.

John’s narrative choices consistently resist that formation.

First, many signs are narrated with limited audiences or ambiguous public impact. Cana is a prime example: servants know, the steward tastes, the guests enjoy without knowing, and only the disciples are explicitly said to interpret it as glory. The sign is real, but it is not a mass coercion device.

Second, John often pairs signs with words that deepen or complicate. The sign is not allowed to remain a simple “wow.” It becomes a pointer that demands interpretation, and interpretation demands commitment. This protects the reader from treating miracles as entertainment.

Third, John repeatedly depicts Jesus refusing to be used as a wonder-vending machine. When crowds pursue because of bread, John shows that desire can be shallow, even if it looks like “faith.” John thus trains the reader to suspect their own motivations: am I pursuing Jesus for life, or for benefits?

So John uses signs because they disclose, but he refuses spectacle addiction because it produces counterfeit faith: faith attached to outcomes, not to truth; faith attached to sensations, not to Jesus.

9.2 Misreadings John anticipates: proof-hunting and thrill-chasing

John anticipates at least two common misreadings, and he writes against both.

The first is proof-hunting. Proof-hunting treats signs as courtroom exhibits that should compel assent in any rational observer. Under this model, belief becomes a mere conclusion: if the evidence is strong, you must believe. John’s Gospel undermines this by showing that signs do not compel in that way. People can witness astonishing works and still resist, reinterpret, or harden. The problem is not that evidence is irrelevant; it is that the human heart is not a neutral calculator. Proof-hunting assumes the observer is detached and unbiased. John assumes the observer is morally and spiritually implicated.

Proof-hunting also tends to reduce Jesus to an instrument of apologetic victory. If the main point of signs is to win arguments, then the “best” sign is the most undeniable one, and the “best” audience is the most prestigious skeptic. John consistently destabilizes that ranking. He shows revelation landing where pride does not control the terms of engagement. He shows belief arising through encounter and testimony, not only through “decisive proofs.”

The second misreading is thrill-chasing. Thrill-chasing treats signs as spiritual entertainment. It wants the rush of wonder more than the weight of truth. It seeks God as a source of extraordinary experiences, and it quietly judges God by whether life remains exciting.

John writes against thrill-chasing by showing how signs can be misunderstood, commodified, and pursued for the wrong reasons. He also inserts long sections where the “action” is not external wonder but internal confrontation with truth. The woman at the well is the clearest early example: the scene is riveting, but not because something explodes. It is riveting because a life is exposed and healed, and worship is re-centered. John is training the reader to recognize that the deepest drama is often truth meeting the human heart.

So John anticipates proof-hunting and thrill-chasing, and he refuses to feed either one. He offers signs, but he keeps them from becoming either a rationalist weapon or an emotional drug.

9.3 The ethics of attention: who gets centered (disciples, servants, a Samaritan woman)

One of John's strongest guardrails is ethical. He controls the reader's attention by controlling who is centered in the stories.

At Cana, the first people who "know" are servants. Not elites. Not the steward. Not the crowd. Servants who fill jars and carry cups become the closest witnesses to the sign's mechanics. This is a theological statement: God's glory is not reserved for the socially elevated; it is often entrusted to the lowly and the obedient. The sign reveals glory in a way that honors hidden labor rather than public status.

The disciples are also centered, not as heroic figures, but as learners. John emphasizes that they believe. The point is formation: the sign is for those who will follow and be shaped. John is depicting discipleship as perception. The disciples are trained to see glory where others only taste wine.

At the well, the center is a Samaritan woman. This choice is not incidental; it is moral instruction. John is teaching the reader how to allocate attention: do not fixate on the impressive at the expense of the marginal. The kingdom's decisive moments occur in conversations with outsiders, in boundary crossings, and in the emergence of witnesses who lack institutional credential.

This is an ethics of attention because it disciplines what the reader learns to value. If you are trained to value only public power, you will center elites, debates, and spectacles. John centers servants, disciples-in-formation, and an outsider woman. That re-centering protects against idolatry because it reveals that the kingdom is not a theater for ego or prestige. Signs are given in contexts where they preserve dignity, create belief, and expand worship, not in contexts where they glorify human status.

John's guardrail here is subtle but firm: the way you watch a miracle reveals your heart. If you ignore the servants and chase the headlines, you are reading the story like a consumer. If you notice who is trusted with the knowledge of glory, you are reading like a disciple.

9.4 Faith tested by durability rather than amazement

The ultimate guardrail is the test John applies to faith: durability. John repeatedly distinguishes between belief that flares and belief that abides.

Amazement is immediate. It is the natural response to surprise. But amazement is unstable. It can turn into disappointment the moment the surprises stop. John shows that amazement is not the goal; it is, at best, the beginning of attention.

Durable faith is different. It remains when the stimulus disappears. It persists through ambiguity. It continues when obedience costs, when outcomes disappoint, when the path leads toward suffering rather than toward public triumph. John's Gospel is structured to move the reader from fascination to endurance, from signs to abiding.

The well story models this durability in miniature. The Samaritans move from secondhand testimony to direct hearing. Their belief matures. It becomes less dependent on the initial witness and more anchored in their own encounter with Jesus. That is durability: belief that does not collapse when the messenger is gone.

Cana also hints at durability by its hiddenness. Because the sign is not public theater, it cannot easily become a mass frenzy. It is a sign that forms disciples rather than a sign that fuels crowd addiction. This suggests a kind of faith that grows in quiet recognition rather than in public excitement.

John's larger narrative will continue to apply this test. Signs can spark, but only truth can sustain. The reader is invited to ask: will I follow Jesus when the "wow" fades, when the story becomes costly, when glory looks like self-giving rather than like display?

So John's guardrails culminate here: the real measure of faith is not intensity in the moment of wonder, but endurance in the long corridor after wonder. Signs are true, but they are not enough. They are invitations to a trust that must prove itself by durability.

In sum, John gives miracles without idolizing miracles. He uses signs as disclosures but refuses to cater to spectacle addiction. He anticipates proof-hunting and thrill-chasing and writes against both. He disciplines the reader's attention by centering servants, disciples, and outsiders rather than elites and showmen. And he tests faith by durability rather than amazement. These are John's guardrails: a way to receive miracles as gifts without turning them into gods.

10. A Unified Reading: Cana and the Well as the Gospel's Overture

If Cana is read alone, it can shrink into a charming miracle story about hospitality. If the well is read alone, it can shrink into an inspiring conversion narrative about personal encounter. John does not allow either shrinkage. He places them early, links them structurally through the “first/second sign” bracketing, and loads both with programmatic themes. Together, Cana and the well function like an overture in an opera: they introduce the main motifs in compressed form, so that when those motifs return later the reader recognizes them as part of one coherent composition.

The overture logic is this: John opens Jesus’ ministry with paired inaugurations that reveal the kingdom’s tone and method. Cana inaugurates in the register of joy, abundance, and transformation of inherited religious materials. The well inaugurates in the register of truth, personal exposure that heals, worship re-centered, and inclusion of outsiders as genuine participants and witnesses. The two scenes are not competing candidates for “first miracle.” They are two halves of a designed beginning. John is saying that the ministry begins where life is celebrated and where life is told the truth; it begins with gifts that prevent shame and with words that uncover it; it begins with abundance that sustains joy and with inclusion that relocates the religious center.

A unified reading therefore treats Cana and the well as a single opening statement: the Word made flesh arrives not as spectacle but as gift and truth; not merely to impress but to form; not merely to preserve insiders but to create a new people gathered around worship in spirit and truth.

10.1 Joy and truth as paired inaugurations of the ministry

John’s beginning is not one-dimensional. If the Gospel began with truth alone, it could feel like an austere manifesto: correction, exposure, doctrinal rectification. If it began with joy alone, it could feel like mere consolation: comfort without confrontation, celebration without reorientation. John begins with both, and the pairing matters.

Cana is joy. It is not joy as denial of reality; it is joy rescued from collapse. The wine running out threatens shame, and Jesus’ intervention keeps the feast from devolving into embarrassment. The sign therefore says: God’s arrival in Jesus is not primarily an interruption of human celebration but a restoration and intensification of it. The kingdom’s first taste is not scarcity or fear but a generosity that preserves communal life.

The well is truth. It is truth not as cold information but as relational disclosure. Jesus speaks into the woman’s life with knowledge that exposes. He refuses to let the conversation remain on the surface. He redefines worship, names contested realities, and claims an identity that demands a

response. Yet the truth is offered within gift: “living water” is extended before moral sorting is completed. The revelation is therefore healing truth, not weaponized truth.

When these scenes are read together, John’s opening claim becomes balanced and strong: the kingdom is joy that is not sentimental and truth that is not cruel. Joy without truth can become intoxication. Truth without joy can become condemnation. John pairs them so the reader learns the shape of Jesus’ ministry from the first pages: he brings a joy that can endure honesty, and a truth that aims at life rather than shame.

This pairing also has a pastoral implication embedded in narrative form. Some readers are drawn to religion for comfort; others for certainty. John begins by giving both, but in a way that makes each accountable to the other. The Gospel’s overture teaches the reader: if you want Jesus’ joy, you will also meet his truth; if you want Jesus’ truth, you will also receive his gift.

10.2 Purification and living water as two transformation registers

Cana and the well both revolve around water, but in different registers. That shared element is not incidental; it is a unifying motif that John uses to signal transformation.

At Cana, the water is located in purification jars. It belongs to a ritual system of cleansing and readiness. The transformation is external and material: water becomes wine. But the deeper transformation is symbolic: the inherited apparatus of purification becomes the vessel for a new kind of gift. The transformation register here is liturgical and communal: the structures that governed readiness and cleanliness are being reconfigured into celebration and abundance. The story suggests that what “cleanses” and what “prepares” is being reframed around Jesus’ gift rather than around anxiety-driven maintenance.

At the well, the water is ordinary well water. It does not transform into a new substance. Instead, Jesus transforms the meaning of water into a metaphor of life. The transformation register here is personal and interior: thirst becomes a symbol of deeper need, and “living water” becomes a promise of an internal spring. The key change is not in the liquid but in the person: from a life of repeated drawing and repeated thirst to a life sustained by a new source.

So Cana and the well offer two transformation registers: reconfiguration of religious practice and reconstitution of personal life. One transforms the material content inside purification vessels; the other transforms the person who approaches the well. John places these early to show that Jesus’ work is comprehensive. It touches the rituals and the heart, the public structures and the private thirst, the inherited religious economy and the individual’s story.

The shared water motif also creates a quiet unity: both scenes say that what you thought water was for is not the whole story. Water for purification becomes wine for joy. Water for daily survival becomes living water for eternal life. In both cases, the ordinary becomes an index of

something greater. John is teaching the reader how to see transformation: not as magic for its own sake, but as a sign that the meaning of life's basic realities is being rewritten around Jesus.

10.3 Abundance and inclusion as kingdom signatures

Cana and the well also function together as a double signature of the kingdom: abundance and inclusion.

Abundance appears at Cana as quantity and quality. The sign is not stingy. The feast is not barely salvaged; it is richly renewed. This abundance is not merely material; it is also social and emotional. The hosts' honor is preserved. The community's joy continues. The "best" arrives late. John signals that the kingdom's arrival is characterized by overflow, not by mere survival.

Inclusion appears at the well as boundary crossing and center relocation. Jesus engages a Samaritan woman in theological conversation, offers gift, reveals identity, and makes her a witness. Her town responds in belief. This inclusion is not token; it is formative. It redefines where worship happens and who can testify. The outsider is not merely permitted to observe; she becomes a conduit of revelation to others.

Together, abundance and inclusion mark the kingdom as gift that expands rather than contracts. Many human systems preserve abundance by excluding, and include only by thinning abundance. John's overture suggests a different pattern: the kingdom expands by giving. Abundance does not require hoarding; it flows outward. Inclusion does not dilute truth; it spreads worship in spirit and truth.

This pairing is also a safeguard against two distortions. One distortion is to imagine the kingdom as primarily material prosperity without moral and relational re-centering. Cana alone could be misread that way. The well corrects it: the gift includes truth, worship redefinition, and transformed allegiance. The second distortion is to imagine the kingdom as purely ethical inclusion without the reality of divine provision and power. The well alone could be misread that way. Cana corrects it: God's action is concrete, transformative, and generous.

So abundance and inclusion together form a balanced signature: the kingdom is materially and spiritually generous, and it re-centers community around worship and truth rather than around boundary policing.

10.4 What “first” finally means: first in meaning, not only in time

The original question “Why was wine the first miracle, or was it the woman at the well?” becomes clearer in light of the overture. John’s answer is that “first” has two layers.

First in John’s sign sequence is Cana. John labels it. It is “first” as the first public sign that reveals glory and initiates disciples’ belief. It establishes the sign-pattern: revelation through transformative gift, offered without spectacle, producing belief in receptive followers.

But the woman at the well is also “first” in another sense: first major outsider conversion narrative in John’s early ministry, first explicit worship redefinition placed in contested geography, and one of the first direct messianic disclosures in private conversation. It is first as an early demonstration of the kingdom’s social reach and the relocation of the religious center.

So “first” is not a single contest. It is a layered program.

John’s deeper point is that the beginning of Jesus’ ministry cannot be summarized by one kind of event. It begins with both a sign that transforms matter into joy and a revelation that transforms an outsider into a witness. The question “which was first?” becomes less important than the question “what did John choose to put first, and why?” John put Cana first to establish the tone of gifted abundance and fulfilled transformation. John placed the well immediately after to establish the tone of truth, inclusion, and worship relocation. Together, they are first in meaning: they are the Gospel’s opening thesis in narrative form.

In that sense, the best answer to the original question is not a mere fact-check but a unified reading: wine is first as sign, the well is first as revelatory inclusion, and John intends you to see them together as the overture that tells you what kind of Messiah this is and what kind of kingdom is arriving.

11. Contemporary Implications: How This Reading Shapes Christian Speech and Practice

A unified reading of Cana and the well is not only an interpretive exercise; it is a practical discipline. John’s overture is designed to form readers, not merely inform them. If the first sign and the first major outsider encounter establish the Gospel’s tone, then they also establish patterns for how Christians should speak, preach, disciple, evangelize, and worship. The implications are not modern add-ons; they are extensions of John’s own guardrails: miracles without idolatry, truth without cruelty, joy without sentimentality, inclusion without surrender of truth.

The key practical result is a recalibration of what “faithful” ministry sounds and looks like. John does not train the church to be either a moral scolding machine or a miracle entertainment

venue. He trains the church to present Jesus as the giver of life and the teller of truth, to treat conversion as central rather than secondary, and to center the marginal as genuine agents of witness. He also trains the church to relocate worship from place-based prestige into “spirit and truth,” which has immediate consequences for identity formation and public religious speech.

This section sketches four contemporary implications: preaching that resists moralism and miracle-theater, discipleship that forms through celebration and exposure, evangelism that treats marginal witness as normative rather than exceptional, and worship that measures itself by the “spirit and truth” criterion rather than by geography, brand, or cultural dominance.

11.1 Preaching: resisting moralism and miracle-theater

Cana and the well together warn preachers against two common distortions that can quietly define a pulpit.

The first distortion is moralism. Moralism treats the sermon as a weekly behavior upgrade, centered on “try harder” and “be better.” It often uses biblical characters as cautionary examples or as heroic models, while Jesus becomes either a moral teacher or a distant standard. A Cana-and-well reading corrects this at the root because John begins with gift. Cana is not a lesson in wedding planning or moderation; it is a sign of divine generosity that rescues joy. The well is not primarily a lesson in sexual ethics; it is a revelation scene where gift precedes exposure and truth serves healing. Preaching shaped by these scenes therefore begins, not with moral demand, but with divine initiative: God gives life, God meets shame, God offers living water, God reveals glory.

This does not eliminate moral seriousness. The well story includes exposure. Jesus does not flatter. He does not leave the woman’s life untouched. But exposure comes within grace, and it produces agency rather than despair. That is a preaching model: truth told in a way that aims at life, not leverage.

The second distortion is miracle-theater. Miracle-theater turns preaching into hype: stories of signs become the main attraction, and the congregation learns to evaluate God by the intensity of the latest spectacle. This often produces fragile faith and spiritual consumerism. John’s guardrails cut against that. Cana is a hidden sign. The well is a “non-miracle” that becomes the decisive moment of belief for an entire town. John is essentially saying: if you build your preaching around spectacle, you will train people to chase spectacle. But the kingdom does not begin with a circus; it begins with gift, truth, and the formation of durable belief.

So preaching shaped by this overture will major on Jesus’ identity and the meaning of his works rather than on “power moments” as ends in themselves. It will resist manipulative emotional pressure and resist the temptation to reduce the Gospel to self-help ethics. It will preach gift and truth together: joy restored and worship re-centered.

11.2 Discipleship: formation through both celebration and exposure

Cana and the well also provide a balanced model for discipleship: formation through celebration and exposure.

Many discipleship cultures lean hard to one side. Some emphasize celebration without exposure: belonging and positivity, but little truth-telling that confronts hidden wounds, addictions, or self-deception. Others emphasize exposure without celebration: constant correction, heavy introspection, and a spiritual atmosphere of scarcity where joy feels suspicious. John's opening refuses both imbalances.

Cana teaches that celebration is not peripheral. Joy is not a guilty pleasure appended to "real religion." The kingdom's inaugural sign appears in a context of shared festal life and preserves it from shame. Discipleship should therefore include practices that honor joy as a legitimate fruit of God's presence: gratitude, hospitality, shared table life, beauty, and a capacity to receive good gifts without anxiety or self-justification. The disciple learns to live as if abundance is real, even when the world trains them in scarcity.

But the well teaches that discipleship also requires exposure. Jesus' gift does not leave the person unexamined. Living water is offered, and then the truth of the woman's life is named. The naming is not shaming, but it is not evasive. Discipleship shaped by this pattern will cultivate honest confession, truth-telling, and the dismantling of protective fictions. The disciple becomes someone who can be known without being destroyed, because the knowing occurs within grace.

Put together, these scenes suggest a formation rhythm: feast and truth, celebration and confrontation, gift received and life unveiled. Healthy discipleship will not define "maturity" as perpetual grimness, nor as perpetual exhilaration. It will define maturity as the ability to remain joyful under truth and truthful within joy. The disciple is formed into a person who can celebrate without denial and face exposure without despair.

11.3 Evangelism: witness from the margins as normative

John's early outsider inclusion challenges a subtle evangelistic bias: the assumption that "effective witness" must flow through prestigious channels. Churches can become convinced that credibility must be purchased by status, platform, or institutional endorsement. John undermines that assumption by making the Samaritan woman a central evangelistic agent.

This is not a romanticization of marginality. John is not saying outsiders are automatically wiser. He is showing that encounter with Jesus creates witness, and witness does not require institutional credential to be real. The woman's testimony is simple and personal: she points to

her experience of being known. That is enough to draw a town. Then the town moves beyond her testimony to direct encounter with Jesus.

This yields several practical implications.

First, the church should expect witness to emerge from unexpected places. New believers, the socially disregarded, and those with complicated histories are not merely “projects” to be managed; they can be primary messengers precisely because their testimony carries the realism of grace. When such people speak, they often speak without the defensive polish that can make religious speech feel like marketing.

Second, evangelism should be invitational rather than coercive. The woman effectively says, “Come and see.” She does not demand instant agreement. She does not build a power dynamic. She opens a door.

Third, evangelism should be structured so that testimony points beyond itself. John’s two-stage belief model matters here: the community’s faith should not be permanently dependent on the charisma of a witness. Witness invites encounter; encounter stabilizes belief. Evangelism therefore aims not at building loyalty to the messenger, but at bringing people into a hearing and seeing of Jesus that becomes their own.

Finally, evangelism shaped by Cana and the well will not make signs the centerpiece. If signs occur, they are received as gifts and interpreted as pointers. But the core evangelistic engine in John’s overture is revelation through truth, worship re-centering, and lived testimony. The conversion of the Samaritans is not driven by public spectacle; it is driven by encounter with Jesus’ words and presence.

So marginal witness is not a special-case exception. In John’s early narrative, it is normal kingdom behavior: grace creates witnesses, and outsiders often become the first heralds of the new center.

11.4 Worship: place, identity, and the “spirit and truth” criterion

The well episode places worship at the center of the inclusion question. Outsider inclusion is not only about social welcome; it is about worship legitimacy. “Where do we worship?” becomes “What counts as real worship?” and Jesus’ answer relocates the center.

For contemporary practice, the phrase “spirit and truth” functions as a criterion that can cut through several modern confusions.

First, it challenges place-idolatry. Place-idolatry can take traditional forms (a sacred site, a denominational heritage treated as ultimate) or modern forms (a brand church, a revered aesthetic, a platform-driven identity). Jesus’ answer does not say place is irrelevant in every

sense, but it says place is no longer ultimate. Worship cannot be measured primarily by geography, architecture, or cultural prestige.

Second, it challenges identity-idolatry. Religious identity can become tribal: “we” are the true worshipers because we belong to the right lineage, the right tradition, the right political bloc, the right cultural style. John’s well story confronts that directly by granting revelatory primacy to a Samaritan woman and by redefining worship in a way that breaks the monopoly of inherited status.

Third, it provides a positive criterion that is not mushy. “Spirit” insists worship must be alive, God-enabled, not merely mechanical performance. “Truth” insists worship must be aligned to God’s self-disclosure, not merely sincere emotion or communal consensus. Together, they resist two opposite errors: dead formalism and untethered subjectivism.

Practically, this means worship should be evaluated by questions like these: Does this worship cultivate dependence on God rather than dependence on atmosphere? Does it form people in truth rather than in brand loyalty? Does it welcome outsiders into real participation rather than into spectator status? Does it produce durable faith and transformed life, or merely intense moments?

Cana contributes here as well. Cana suggests that worship and holiness are not defined by austerity alone. There is room for festal joy, for hospitality, for shared table life that honors God’s goodness. Worship is not only what happens in a service; it is also how a community receives gifts, preserves dignity, and lives as if joy is permitted under God.

So “spirit and truth” becomes a worship compass, and Cana adds a tonal correction: true worship is not joyless. It is truthful joy and Spirit-animated truth.

Taken together, these contemporary implications can be summarized simply: John’s overture trains Christian speech and practice to be gift-first, truth-honest, anti-spectacle, and outsider-welcoming; to form disciples through both celebration and exposure; to expect credible witness from the margins; and to define worship by Spirit-enabled alignment to truth rather than by place, prestige, or performance.

12. Conclusion: The First Sign and the First Outsider Witness

John answers the “first miracle” question by refusing the narrow frame. Yes, Cana is the first sign John explicitly labels and numbers. But John then places, between the first and second signs, a revelation scene so potent that an entire outsider town moves into belief. John is teaching that “first” is not merely chronology; it is program. The Gospel’s beginning is a paired inauguration: joy rescued by abundance and worship re-centered by truth. The first sign

discloses glory through a hidden transformation that preserves communal dignity. The first outsider witness discloses glory through a truth encounter that exposes and heals, then generates testimony and mature communal belief. Together, these two beginnings form the Gospel's overture: the kingdom arrives as gift and truth, abundance and inclusion, signs without spectacle addiction, and faith tested by durability rather than amazement.

12.1 Restating the thesis in one paragraph

John's first labeled sign is Cana, where water in purification jars becomes festal wine, revealing Jesus' glory through hidden generosity that preserves joy and averts shame. Immediately afterward, John narrates the Samaritan woman at the well as a "non-miracle" that functions like revelation: Jesus offers living water, exposes personal truth for healing, redefines worship in "spirit and truth," and directly discloses his messianic identity, producing witness from the margins and belief that matures beyond secondhand report. By bracketing the well story between the first and second signs, John shows that miracles are real but not ultimate, and that conversion, worship re-centering, and outsider inclusion are not side effects but central outcomes. "First," in John, therefore means first in meaning: the ministry is inaugurated by both joy-gift and truth-encounter, revealing glory in abundance and in inclusion.

12.2 What is gained: a richer account of glory, belief, and inclusion

This reading gains at least three things that a flat "timeline" approach loses.

First, it yields a richer account of glory. Glory is not reduced to raw power. At Cana, glory is revealed as generous, shame-averting gift that intensifies joy without public theater. At the well, glory is revealed as truthful, life-giving disclosure that sees a person completely and still offers grace, then relocates worship away from prestige geography into Spirit-enabled alignment with truth. Glory, in John's overture, is power disciplined into mercy and truth aimed at life.

Second, it yields a richer account of belief. John's Gospel does not treat belief as mere assent produced by stronger evidence. Signs can awaken attention, but belief matures through encounter, interpretation, and durable trust. The disciples believe at Cana not because the crowd is forced, but because they learn to see. The Samaritans believe first through testimony and then through direct hearing, modeling belief that grows beyond dependence on a messenger and anchors itself in Jesus. This guards against both proof-hunting and thrill-chasing by framing faith as allegiance formed over time, not a reflex to spectacle.

Third, it yields a richer account of inclusion. Outsider inclusion is not an optional social add-on. It is embedded in the Gospel's early architecture as a primary revelation outcome. The first outsider witness is not granted honorary status; she becomes a real agent of testimony whose words draw a town. Worship itself is redefined in a way that breaks the monopoly of inherited

place and identity. Inclusion, for John, is part of what the kingdom looks like when it arrives: truth goes outward, and the center moves.

Together, these gains make John's opening not merely a debate about "which came first," but a formation of the reader's expectations: expect gift and truth, abundance and boundary crossing, signs that point beyond themselves, and conversions that reconfigure communities.

12.3 Closing charge: read signs as invitations, and conversions as the true miracle

John's closing lesson in this opening sequence is simple and demanding. Do not enthrone signs. Receive them as invitations to recognize Jesus and to follow him into durable trust. Refuse spectacle addiction and refuse proof-hunting that treats miracles as courtroom leverage. Instead, learn to see glory where John places it: in hidden generosity that preserves joy, and in truth that exposes to heal.

And do not treat conversion as secondary. John places the well story between the first and second signs to teach that a person being met, known, and remade into a witness is not a lesser event than water becoming wine. A community re-centered into worship "in spirit and truth" is not a footnote to miracles; it is what miracles are for. So read the signs as pointers, but read the conversions as the real goal. In John's overture, the deepest wonder is not that nature can be transformed, but that hearts can be opened, outsiders can become witnesses, and belief can mature into a stable confession. That is the miracle John wants you to seek: not amazement that fades, but life that abides.

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