

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF JOHN 4:46-54 AND ITS THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

Otunaya Abdulazeez Olalekan

Introduction

The four books of the New Testament are called Gospels, but the first three gospels are referred to as 'Synoptic Gospels'. The question that comes to mind is why John was not included in the Synoptics? Perhaps, the literature and theology of John's gospel is significantly different from that of the synoptic gospels. For a very long time, the gospel of John has been studied by different scholars especially its theological themes applying thematic and structural approach. The structure of John's gospel is commonly categorized under three components; the Prologue, the body, and the epilogue (Du Rand 1990:36; Carson & Moo 2005:225; Johnson 1999:534; Achtemeier, Green & Thompson 2001:179; Brown 2003:298-299). The gospel of John laid more emphasis on Jesus' pre-existence that is, before he came to earth, he had been from the beginning (John 1:1-5). Unlike synoptic gospels that described His earthly ministry, but John went beyond His ministry on earth.

John used long discourses to reveal and confirm the pre-existence of Jesus but in the synoptic gospels, writings about Jesus were done proverbially or controversial dialogue. Goppelt, in this regard submits that, the gospel of John passed on the words of Jesus predominantly in another genre that is different from that of synoptic gospels; it did not do so in sayings, parables, and controversial dialogues, but in connected or dialogical discourses. The purpose of this gospel, as stated by John himself, is to show that Jesus was Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, and that believers in him might have eternal life (John 20:31). In the recent times, scholars have centered the fourth gospel around the prologue which serves as introduction to the whole gospel story. However, some scholars strongly uphold the book of signs and glory in the fourth gospel. The central theme of the fourth gospel has been subjected to criticisms among contemporary scholars.

The gospel of John has been categorized into four parts:

- (i) the Prologue (1:1-18);
- (ii) Book of Signs (2-11);
- (iii) Book of Glory (12-20)
- (iv) Epilogue (21:1-25)

Authorship

The issue of authorship of the fourth gospel has been subjected to serious debate among scholars. Scholars holding to traditional belief submit that the fourth gospel was written by John the apostle, the son of Zebedee at Asia minor (Ridderbos, 1991). Conversely, some scholars posit that the authorship of John's gospel should be given to John the Beloved based on some internal evidence using John 21:20, 24 as evidence. Although, the identity of this 'John the beloved' was not disclosed. As such, the issue of authorship has not been resolved till today and it has become a point of dispute among scholars.

Concept of Healing (θεραπεύω) in New Testament

According to all four canonical Gospels, Jesus devoted a substantial portion of his ministry to performing miracles of healing for a wide variety of people. These miracles sometimes occurred in response to faith and sometimes to instill faith. They demonstrated Jesus' compassion and his concern to break down social barriers. These miracles challenged the Jewish Sabbath Laws and exposed Israel's faithlessness. Above all, they supported his teaching that the kingdom of God was arriving with his ministry and that he himself was God's unique Son.

Kinds of Healing Miracles in the Gospels

Two major kinds of healing miracles in the Gospels would be explained. Each requires slightly different interpretation, and some scholars would evaluate the historical reliability of the various categories differently as well.

Exorcisms: This is not uncommon among others. Jesus casts one or more demons (out of individuals who have been possessed by them. The gospel accounts differ from many other exorcism stories of antiquity in the immediacy of the exorcisms, the lack of a struggle or extreme violence by the demons and the lack of magical paraphernalia customarily used by the exorcist. Many modern scholars have assumed that what ancient people believed to be demon-possession was simply some severe psychological or physical affliction which today would be treated by medicine or therapy. But the Gospels themselves distinguish between the two (e.g., Mt 10:1; Mk 3:10–11), and contemporary experiences of possession and exorcism which science has been unable to explain are too numerous to support this reductionist approach.

Physical Healings: Jesus regularly helped blind people to see (e.g., Mt 9:27–31; Mk 8:22–26), the deaf to hear (e.g., Mt 11:5; Mk 7:32–37) and the lame to walk (e.g., Jn 5:1–15). He cleansed lepers (e.g., Lk 5:12–16; 17:11–19), cured fevers (e.g., Mk 1:29–31; Jn 4:43–53), stopped a hemorrhage (Mk 5:24–34), restored a withered hand (Mk 3:1–6), replaced a cut-off ear (Lk 22:51) and healed a wide variety of unspecified illnesses. He healed with a word (e.g., Mt 8:16), without praying to God or invoking his name (John 4:46–54) (except in one instance when he specifically declares that it is for the crowd's benefit—Jn 11:41–42) and sometimes at a long distance from the one who was sick (e.g., Mt 8:5–13). On two occasions he used

indirect means and two stages in the healing (Mk 8:22–26; Jn 9:1–7), but normally the cures were instantaneous and unmediated. Many scholars are willing to grant that people were genuinely healed after their encounters with Jesus, but they attribute the healing to a psychosomatic power of suggestion. The Gospels, however, are clear that Jesus' healings were genuinely supernatural events. In this regard, H. C. Kee has helpfully delineated the differences in ancient thought concerning medicine (building on the foundation of natural order), miracle (based on belief in divine intervention), and magic (manipulating mysterious forces for personal benefit). Kee demonstrates that Jesus' healings normally belong to the second of these three categories.

Concept of Miracle in John's Gospel

John structured his account of Jesus public ministry around seven (7) signs. The miracles that illustrate Jesus' supernatural power to demonstrate his hero's divinity. John deliberately chose seven signs. John's purpose is to emphasize Jesus' status that is, he is more than an ordinary man. John deliberately left out some miracle stories found in the synoptic (temptation of Jesus Christ, the passion prayer at gethsemane etc.). Many scholars believe that in composing His narrative, the Johannine author used an older document known as "signs gospel" (Bultmann, 1971). Those scholars thought that the signs gospel was the first written account of Jesus' public ministry composed as Q "quelle" (a similar hypothetical). There is an ongoing debate over this source. The seven signs of John gospel were recorded in John 2 – 1

Exegesis Proper of John 4:46-54

Jesus's Arrival to Cana in Galilee

v46: So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Caperna-um there was an official whose son was ill. *“Now after two days he departed thence, and went into Galilee.”* This resumes and completes what is said in verses 3 and 4. The Lord, accompanied by His disciples, left Judea because of the jealousy and enmity of the Pharisees. He “departed again into Galilee” (verse 3). But before He goes there, “he must needs go through Samaria” (verse 4). The beginning of this account shows that Jesus had come to Cana before and performed a miracle that is, (Now or therefore, he [Jesus] came again - *ἤλθεν οὐ πάλιν*). It also shows the interconnectedness between the preceding verse and subsequent verse. This text fits together in the larger context of the gospel. John gospel accounted for seven signs from chapter 2 to 11. What occurred when Jesus came to Cana at first was brought forward to show the relation between the former and the latter event (...where he had made the water wine... *οπου εποιησεν τουδωροινον*). This statement also depicts the cordial relationship between Jesus and the people of Cana. Cana (*τὴν Κανᾶ*) is a village in Galilee (*γαλιλαία*).

Therefore, Cana is where the miracle of healing (second sign) took place that is, the location of this powerful event. There was a government official whose son is very sick - *βασιλικου ο υιοσθηθενειν καπερναουμ*. *Βασιλικος* means a nobleman from the word *βασιλευς* (king). *Βασιλικός* could have been one of the courtiers of Herod, tetrarch of Galilee; Some have identified him with Chuza, Herod's steward (Lk. 8:3), or with Manaen (Acts 13:1); but this is only a guess-work. This shows that the man is related to the king. Although the identity of the man was not revealed, he could have been a very closed official to the King. This text retells the same incident recorded in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 8:5, Luke 7:6) but there are clear discrepancies between these stories according to each gospel account. In John, the beneficiary whose son was ill is *βασιλικος* (Nobleman – related to the king, a royal official) but in Matthew and Luke's gospel – he is (*ἐκατόνταρχος* – centurion which means a professional officer of the Roman army).

In John, the son is sick of a fever; in Matthew. he is *παραλυτικός* (the man's son is paralyzed). Fever is an abnormally high body temperature, usually accompanied by shivering, headache, and in severe instances, delirium (Soanes, 2004). Though, there is tendency for fever to rise or result to paralysis. Probably in Matthew and Luke's account, the fever has gone beyond its limit resulting to non-movement of the Official son.

In Matthew and Luke's account, the man only asked Jesus to speak the word of healing, but He (Jesus) offers to go down to the man's house. In John's gospel, it was recorded that, the nobleman requested for Jesus' presence in his house, to follow him, but Jesus only says that the boy will recover (v. 50); Jesus was not surprised about the man's faith as recorded in Matthew and Luke's gospel. In Matthew and Luke, the patient is the servant (Mt. *has παῖς*, Lk. *has both παῖς and δούλος*), while in John's gospel, he is the man's son (*υἱός, παιδίον*). There are two

sets of variation: $\pi\alpha\iota\varsigma$ // $\upsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$ and $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ // $\sigma\upsilon$. In the former case, it must be observed that, though Matthew and Luke use $\pi\alpha\iota\varsigma$ freely, this word appears nowhere else in John, who prefers $\upsilon\iota\omicron\varsigma$ (Metzger, 1994:178).

There is a clue in guessing the identity of the official man. To a very large extent, that official man could have been a gentile or Jew because Jesus marveled at his faith and said according to Matthew and Luke's accounts, "Even in Israel, I have never found a man with such faith". Although, there is no clear evidence. In Matthew and Luke's account, Jesus went to Capernaum (Mat 8:5, Luke 7:1), while John revealed that Jesus was in Cana of Galilee again. The location of Jesus has been subjected to criticisms. Bultmann contends that there is a considerable amount of agreement in detail, which does not prove the literary dependence of John on the Synoptics. However, it must be accounted for by their similar usage of traditional material and the conventionality of the narrative style (Bultmann, 1946). In the same vein, Bultmann posits that (v54) shows clearly that the evangelist used the sign gospel *σημεριον* – *source*.

In Luke's account, the centurion sent elders to Jesus to convey his predicament to Jesus while in John and Matthew, the official man came to Jesus himself begging. Bultmann and Ridderbos have contended that in (sign source), the story originally takes place in Capernaum, comes from this source and apparently formed the introduction to the second sign. Supporting Bultmann's view, Ridderbos affirms that part of vs 46 was later injected into the text. That originally, the story began with "Now there was a royal official at Capernaum" though this statement lacks textual support as it runs into conflict with vs 52 – yesterday.

The Meeting Point of Jesus and the Official Man

v47 When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. – $\text{ουτος ακουσας οτι ησους ηκει εκ της ιουδαιας εις την γαλιλαιαν απηλθεν προς αυτον και ηρωτα αυτον ινα καταβη και ιασηται αυτου τον υιον ημελλον γαρ αποθνησκειν}$. No doubt, the nobleman knew or heard of the miracle the Jesus performed. The official man that travelled from another city to Cana in Galilee would definitely be aware of Jesus' previous miracle (first sign) in Cana – turning water to wine. This must have led him to travel all the way from Capernaum to Cana. The man was eager to invoke any help that might cure his son, quite independently of his religious principles or position.

$\etaμελλον αποθνησκειν$ – "he was going to die". The phrase is used at 11:51, 12:33, 18:32 of the impending death of Jesus; but in the present passage there is no suggestion in $\etaμελλον$ of the inevitability or predestined certainty of the boy's death; – "was going to die."

v48& 49 Jesus therefore said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." The statement Jesus uttered showed his refusal and reluctance at first when the official came to him. He had travelled all the way from Capernaum to Cana of Galilee for a

request but Jesus picked him up and spoke about his faith. From the preceding verse, v47 -(οὗτος ακουσας οτιησουςηκειεκτησιουδαιας ειςτην γαλιλαιαν), he only came probably because someone has informed him of Jesus' location at Cana and table his request. For the official man to come, despite his position at the royal family, that shows that the official man had little faith or if not more in Jesus. The answer of Jesus was neither "Yes" nor "No" at that point. It almost conveys a feeling of disappointment that the working of "signs" should be expected of Him. The Samaritan villagers had accepted Him because of His words alone, without any signs (4:41, 42).

Jesus Speaks About Sign and Wonders

Jesus' comment in 4:48 that ἐὰν μὴ σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα ἴδῃτε, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε ('unless you see signs and wonders, you(p) will not believe') comes as a bit of a surprise, since the royal official came all the way from Capernaum to ask Jesus to heal his son. Despite the unpleasant response from Jesus, the official does not react directly to Jesus' rebuke. Rather, he tables his request again seemingly with a little more urgency (use of πρὶν - before). The function of Jesus' comment highlights one of the major issues in this narrative. At the first glance verses 48-49 do not seem to fit here and could just as well have been left out by Evangelist. Scholars like Schnackenburg (1968, 468-469), Haenchen (1980) and others think that the rebuke in 4:48-49 with the second petition of the royal official are editorial additions.

Even Bultmann, in his commentary submits that the evangelist added this text to the whole narrative for his own purpose. Clearly by his treatment of the story, the evangelist wanted to correct the naïve faith in miracles such as exhibited by the Synoptic tradition. For Bultmann, the progress of the narrative is stopped at this junction, even in vs49, the father could not answer Jesus' question. He had no choice but to repeat his request. In Matthew and Luke's account, the statement ('unless you see signs and wonders, you(p) will not believe') was not included. All these scholars including Bultmann reason that the rebuke and second petition break the logic of the narrative (i.e. the official seemingly does not seek a sign or wonder in order to believe) and it is not clear why Jesus later goes ahead with the healing. Moreover, the rebuke is unduly harsh. In any case, 4:48-49 seems redundant to the flow of the narrative thus making no difference if it were removed. Schnackenburg (1968, 468-469) explains the editorial addition as an effort by the editor to encourage true faith by expressing criticism of superficial faith. However, because of this insertion, the official is required to repeat his request (4:49).

Nevertheless, these words are part of the text and should be considered as such. The problem is not that Jesus rebukes somebody; he also does that elsewhere (John 2:4; 11:4; Mk 7:27). The question is why Jesus would rebuke a man who came so far to ask for his help. Surely he had not gone to all that trouble simply to see a sign so that he may believe. In that scenario vs4:48, the issue of the dependence of faith on signs and wonders is addressed and is most probably

related to the suspicion of ‘signs-faith’ already expressed in 2:23-24. There is also a subtle grammatical change in this verse which further clarifies the picture.

Jesus addresses the man (πρὸς αὐτόν – to him) but in his next sentence switches to the second person plural when making his statement: Unless they see (ἴδῃτε – you see 2nd person plural) Knowing who they in this remark are would help the reader to understand the words of Jesus more clearly. They could be the surrounding Galileans of whom the context speaks (Schnackenburg 1968, 466; Köstenberger 2004, 170) or it could be a more general rhetorical statement, addressing the intended readers too, warning them against signs faith (Keener 2005, 630; Nicklas 2008, 100). Both options seem plausible. If this is accepted then the royal official seems to represent a group, most probably the Galileans.

There are views on the interpretation of 4:48. In this respect, Busse (2002, 124-125) points out that the miracle plays out what verse 48 warns against: the royal official and his family only fully believed after he realized that a miracle had taken place (vv. 52-53). His perspective of Jesus’ word changes to faith based on the miracle. Thus the miracle does not illustrate what true faith is, but becomes a practical illustration and confirmation of Jesus’ warning: people only believe if they see signs(v. 48).

In the same line of thought, Keener (2005:633) concludes that the nobleman only had sign inspired faith in line Jesus’ previous statement. The more common interpretation of this miracle tends to move in the opposite direction, namely that the rebuke (Jesus’ rebuke) against a faith based on miracles introduces a process in which the faith of the royal official dynamically grows and matures (Kysar 1986,74): he is warned against a faith that is based upon works; he shows his faith by believing the word of Jesus, i.e. faith in a word (v. 50 - Brown 1971, 191) and then he fully believes (v. 53 – the verb believe is used absolutely). The narrative reflects a growth in faith from a sign inspired faith to a mature faith, expressed by the verb used absolutely.

In the story of the healing of the official’s son, there are some problems in regards to the literary unity of the narrative. The first problem is that the man journeyed a long distance to ask Jesus to heal his son. Besides, when Jesus reprimanded him, he still insisted that Jesus should go to heal his son. The question now is, “would someone who simply wishes to see a miracle truly go to all this trouble?”– the underlying theme of caring for the life of his son seems to point away from just wanting to see a wonder or sign. The second problem seems to be that there is little reference to Jesus when it comes to faith, a point Busse (2002:124) rightly notes. What does the man believe in when the narrative records that he and his family believed (absolute)? Is it that the man had faith in Jesus and later had faith after the healing of his son. The reference to the “sign” in 4:54 might be an indirect reference to Jesus, since the function of signs in John is indeed to refer to the person of Jesus. Another alternative for interpreting the comment in 4:48 is to read it as a statement: “Seeing signs and wonders would lead you to faith” (Bittner 1987, 128-134).

Jesus Heal the Official's Son

50 & 51: Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was living. Jesus response here was to put the official man's faith into test in regards to Jesus' previous harsh statement Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.... The word – ζῆ means live, to live, to breathe among the living. And the man believed in Jesus' word and he went his way. This verse contradicts verse 49 when Jesus picked the official man up for his little faith by saying...unless you see signs and wonders... If the official had no faith in Jesus, he would not have left and probably he would have insisted on bringing Jesus down to his house. Instead, he left. But the only assurance that Jesus gave was that the boy was still living.

For expositors, a problem was found in the statement of vs 52, that the anxious father did not reach home until the next day, although Jesus' words of assurance had been addressed to him at 1 p.m. But even if we are to apply such strict tests of time and circumstance to the Johannine stories, there is no special difficulty here. It is 20 miles or more, the way being rough and hilly, from Cana to Capernaum. Presumably the βασιλικός had a retinue with him, and it would take some time to get them together for the journey. Even if an immediate start had been made in the midday heat, it would not have been easy to reach Capernaum the same evening. If we are to speculate about such a matter, it seems probable that the father got home early the next morning, for his anxiety would have prevented him resting at night on the way. If he left Cana at 3 p.m. and got home at 2 a.m. next morning, all the time conditions of the story would be satisfied.

v53: The royal man (Himself) believed, and his whole house. Henceforth this household was among the believers. It is a natural and pardonable curiosity that leads us to seek their further history. He was an officer of Herod, and the fact that "Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, " was one who ministered to him in his Galilean ministry, has suggested that he may have been the nobleman. Acts 13:1, names Manaen, "who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, " as a prominent Christian of Antioch. He may have been the man whose son was healed. The healing event instill or concretize the little faith in the official and his household.

v54. This is again the second miracle. The word is "sign" in the Greek. He had wrought other miracles in Judea, but this was the second wrought in Galilee. The seat of the first was Cana; the Lord was at Cana when he wrought the second, but the subject of it was at Capernaum. The first beginning and the end of the narrative shows a close link between the text in a larger context. The first verse (46) depicts that Jesus had performed a miracle in Galilee before which was the first sign while (v54) encapsulates the whole story and affirmed that this was the second sign.

Analytical Imports of the Text (John 4:46-54) for Christians Today

From the above exegetical analysis, it could be deduced that the text would be of immense benefit to different individuals in different situations that is; the required faith for a Christian and the needed faith in the time of problem. The text clearly depicts the supernatural power of Jesus as the main purpose of the gospel of John points out. This shows that the passage is not alien to the rest of the gospel, it is evident that the author of John's gospel truly incorporated the second sign with the rest of sign's gospel. Besides, the most protuberant theme of this passage is that Jesus is confirmed as powerful giver of life. It also confirms the status of Jesus as extraordinary being that is; beyond natural realm.

The significant subject of the true nature of faith was emphasized as rightly pointed out by many scholars (Schnackenburg 1968, 475-477; Brown 1971, 197; Keener 2005, 633; Nicklas 2008, 90). Unimportantly, the passion of a father for his child as well as the acceptance by Jesus of a royal official who may not have been popular may have some deeply human connotations. The wonder narrative is described as a "sign", i.e. an event that illustrates the glory and power of Jesus and underlines the spiritual truths he came to teach. The double meaning in which ζάω (give life/heal) is used, invites the reader to see the miracle not only on a human level, but to place it within a spiritual realm. This also confirms the spirituality of the gospel of John that is; Jesus gives life in an absolute sense.

The miracle performed for a royal official breaks a social barrier associated with the people especially among the Galileans in the antiquity. In respect of this, Keener (2005: 633) states that, "the heart of the story is the assertion that even a royal official in Galilee could respond to Jesus...". Jesus and the life he gives, knows no borders. It is also evident here that the ministry of Jesus is limitless irrespective of gender, position, ethnicity and other related things. It has no restriction as regards the type of people or position of people. In the same vein, Jesus offered life to Nicodemus (3:3, 5, 15-17), to the Samaritan woman (4:10), both of who came to believe what he was preaching. In all, Jesus offers his life to three completely diverse personalities as explained above. The message of Jesus' offers eternal life that supersedes all borders opens up the scope for conveying this message even today. According to Schnackenburg (1986:475), if a "sign" is not accepted in faith, it remains just a miracle.

Another area of import of the text is that, "true faith is required" not sign-faith (4:48), or word-faith (4:50), but faith in Jesus, and that in an absolute sense (4:53). This motif pervades the text in 4:46-54. The need for genuine faith came up in the analysis. The royal official's persistence when Jesus shunned him shows that he truly believed and has faith in Jesus. No wonder why Nicklas (2008:104) describes the text (4:46-54) as a "*Glaubensgeschichte*". The gospel made direct mentioning of some cases of insufficient faith. Cases like; 2:23-25 where there is faith on the basis of signs, or 6:60ff. where people doubt the accuracy of the message, or 8:31ff. where there is a lack of correct and obedient action. The essence of this text is that true faith is seriously needed for manifestation of a sign. Besides, faith is very

crucial for Christian faith, faith like that of the blind man that was healed (John 9). Again, it is possible that Jesus was trying to instill “candid faith” when he first rebuked the official man. Also, he brought into the passage what happened between Him and the Samaritan woman. This gives us a clue about how Jesus cherished genuine faith and not faith attached with miracle. As the case may be, the requirement for true faith still remains, even today. On the whole, Jesus is pictured as the healer of families, the one who really cares, not only for spiritual matters; he is also prepared to physically heal the son of a royal official.

Conclusion

The difficulty of this short narrative, the use of semantics and linguistic accessories made it a literary gem in its own right. The treatment of the subject ‘faith’ showed that it is indeed true that there is little in the text that is entirely ‘new’ or different from the rest of the Gospel. It is very obvious that motifs like life and faith are common in the rest of the Gospel. The immediate context of this narrative shows the literary unity of the text as the passage is preceded by that of Nicodemus (Ch. 3) and of the Samaritan woman (Ch. 4). In both cases, the identity of these people was very important to the narrative. The author made sure that the reader understood the identity of these two clearly in the passage. The text is very significant in differentiating true faith from sign-based faith.

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