

An Investigation of the Relationship between Signs and Faith in the Gospel According to John and its Application to the Zimbabwean Context

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Introduction

This article endeavours to determine whether signs are useful in the pursuit of faith in Zimbabwe today. In this enterprise, the work views the contemporary Zimbabwean understanding of miracles¹ exhibited in Prophets Makandiwa's United Family International Church (UFIC) and Magaya's Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) ministries in the light of Jesus' signs in John's gospel.² The work limits itself to John's first three signs: the changing of water into wine (2:1-11), the healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54) and the healing at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18). The enquiry seeks to determine the extent in which Jesus' signs which were relevant to the original Johannine community correspond to the prophets' miracles that seem to bear significance to the Zimbabwean people. Since Johannine signs are designed to produce faith of a particular kind,³ the work also seeks to examine the quality of faith that is demonstrated by Zimbabwean Christians in the sight of the miracles performed by the prophets and pastors of their time.

The Significance of Signs in John's Gospel

Signs appear to be given a fundamental role in respect to the purpose of John's writing. The evangelist clearly states at the end of his gospel that their purpose is to make people believe in Jesus' Messiahship and

¹ Miracles are referred to as *minana* in Shona.

² The work shall use 'the gospel according to John' or 'the gospel of John' or 'John's gospel' or 'the Fourth gospel' or simply 'John' as referring to the same work.

³ It is faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Divine Sonship (20:30-31).⁴ This means that, in John's context, the correct understanding of signs should culminate in faith, the faith that ultimately leads to a deeper recognition of the revelation of God in the word and person of Jesus. For this reason, in John's framework, one cannot divorce signs from faith. Any attempt of this sort leads to major problems in relation to the meaning and significance of those signs. Signs and faith could simply be understood as two sides of the same coin. In all instances, it is not so much about the externals of the sign exhibited but that for which the sign calls, which is, faith in God through Jesus Christ, His Son.

With the above general understanding, one is safe to state that signs are significant to John's gospel because they lead to faith. To sustain this argument, it is important to first of all attest to the point that signs confer life. Marianne Meye Thompson puts this correctly, "Jesus' signs lead to faith when one discerns in them the manifestation of the character of God as life-giving and responds to Jesus as mediating that life" (96). Even though the healing of the royal official's son is the one that vividly demonstrates the theme of life, each of the three signs illustrates the truth of Thompson's statement. As argued by C. F. D. Moule, although death does not threaten the crippled man at the pool, Jesus reinstates him to the fullness of physical life in granting him health and strength (122). The gratuitous generosity and abundance demonstrated by Jesus in the changing of water into wine is also symbolic of something else that Jesus also provides. His freedom and power in initiating this sign⁵ is an upshot of the belief that God alone is the source of all life and that life is a gift to be received from the gracious and autonomous hand of God (Thompson 103).

⁴ John 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name."

⁵ Where someone approaches Jesus with a request to act or to heal, for instance, in 2:3 and 4:47, he first of all distances himself from the petitioner (2:4, 4:48), showing that he acts only in his own hour and only at his Father's bidding (Giblin 197-211).

The life-giving character of the signs thus provides the basis for the discernment of God's work and one's decision for or against Jesus (Theissen 297). This is because, in Marinus de Jonge's words, "A *semeion*⁶ is a demonstration which asks for reaction. In the case of positive reaction, the principal question is, 'What power and authority do you believe to be demonstrated here?'" (122). In answer to this question, one is right in stating that the power and authority demonstrated through Jesus is God's power and authority. This is known not simply by the sheer manifestation of power, but through what is offered and effected by the sign, and that is, life. The response sought is not simply wonder, but trust and obedience (Thompson 105; Kasper 97-98). In fact, because the signs are God's works, His deeds of grace and deliverance, serve to call people to repentance, obedience, and faith.⁷

John also understands the signs of Jesus to be a continuation and manifestation of the activity through which God calls out a people (106). This is mainly deduced from the judgemental character of Jesus' signs. However, when it serves to judge, the sign has not failed. Neither in the Old Testament nor in John's gospel is unbelief an indication that signs have failed. It is rather an indication of judgment as explicated in John 3:18.⁸ The purported failure of the signs is actually a failure of seeing, discernment and faith on the part of the people to whom the sign is directed. Unbelief and disobedience are not

⁶ *Σημεῖον* is a Greek noun for 'sign.'

⁷ The Old Testament provides the crucial backdrop for understanding this point (see. Deut 29:2-4 and Jer 32:20-23).

⁸ John also summarises Jesus' ministry by quoting Isaiah 6:10 and 53:1 which show the reality of unbelief. Although neither of these speaks explicitly of signs, it is clear that in John's view the unbelief of which Isaiah spoke has its counterpart in the unbelief which Jesus encountered in the healing at the pool of Bethsaida.

surprising, though in the light of God's gracious deeds on the people's behalf, they are culpable and guilty of sin (107).⁹

The Notion of Miracles in the Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe

Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing religious movements in Zimbabwe and one of its main attractions today is 'miracles.' Ngonidzashe Marongwe and Richard S. Maposa comment, "The deployment of mystical power in the terrain of miracle-making continues to grow amongst the high profile Pentecostal religious luminaries in Zimbabwe today" (12). This segment reconnoitres the notion of miracles in Prophets Makandiwa's UFIC and Magaya's PHD ministries in light of Johannine signs. Despite the point that the two movements are known by different names, prophecy,¹⁰ healing and deliverance¹¹ are their three cornerstones in Zimbabwe today. Although the three ministries are interlinked, this work mainly explores the latter two as they are reported in Zimbabwean newspapers and other parts of the media.

The Zimbabwean newspapers report about the 'miracle gold' and 'miracle money' that are claimed to have been eye witnessed by Makandiwa's congregants. On the 21st of January 2013, the Newsday Online records that some UFIC members became "ecstatic when they found themselves clutching pieces of gold and diamonds in their hands during a Church service conducted (by Makandiwa) at City Sports Centre in Harare." Takunda Maodza, reporter of The Herald Online,

⁹ According to Keener, it is not the purpose of signs to control one's response (275).

¹⁰ Prophesying can be defined as simply the ability to foresee and foretell the future, the ability to interpret dreams and other events in one's life, as well as the ability to diagnose problems in an individual's life (Marongwe and Maposa 13).

¹¹ Healing and deliverance mostly involves demonic exorcism and is meant to cast away demons that are accused of stalling individual successes in various endeavours of life.

confirms this miraculous experience on the 6th of February 2013 when he also notes more miracles that were experienced on the same day. Veneranda Langa of the *Newsday* also reports about the birth of a ‘miracle baby’ on the 21st of February 2013. The baby is said to have been delivered after a three-day-pregnancy following a miracle prayer by Prophet Makandiwa. According to *Nehanda Radio*, Mrs Moffat, the miracle baby’s mother, confirmed this event when interviewed on radio by Tilda Moyo on the 4th of February 2013. Besides the ‘miracle baby,’ the Bulawayo staff reporter reports the ‘miracle-weight-loss’ by Prophet Makandiwa on the 23rd of January 2013. According to the video clip posted on You Tube on the 11th of February, Prophet Makandiwa prayed for healing powers to descend upon his congregants and a woman who identified herself as Margaret Scubu and two others testified that they had miraculously lost weight.

Similar to Prophet Makandiwa’s miracles, Prophet Magaya is also claimed to have performed miracles during his so-called “the service of miracles.” The *Standard* newspaper of 28 July 2013 points to three miracle cases by Prophet Magaya. The first case is that of Sophia Njanina from Chitungwiza who had exceeded her expected date of delivery by four weeks. Once she attended the PHD ministries and was touched by Prophet Magaya, she gave birth the following day. In the second case, Theresa Mandishaya from Nyazura was miraculously healed of breast cancer and went home free of pain. The third case is that of Shuvai Mavhondo from Budiriro who also claimed that she was cured of a growth on her right leg.¹²

Makandiwa and Magaya’s Miracles in the Light of Johannine Signs

This section begins by outlining the similarities and differences between the alleged miracles and Johannine signs and, in a third subsection; it presents an overall assessment of the alleged miracles.

¹² The growth is reported, had “burst(ed) into a festering wound which emitted a horrible smell.”

Similarities with Johannine Signs

Deducing from the miracles of the two prophets, the notion of miracles as life giving, which is also emphasised by Johannine signs, is fundamental. D. Stinton comments that life is of cardinal value in African societies that it has become the starting point of some theologies (120). As a way of preserving this life, Tabona Shoko notes that health is of primary significance (87). For this reason, it is plausible to conclude that the promotion and preservation of life is one of the major reasons behind these prophets' venture into healing and deliverance ministries. Kudzai Biri actually states this as the reason for the dominance of the theology of deliverance in these prophets' services in Zimbabwe today. From that conviction, he concludes that the African concept of life is fundamental to the ways in which Christians interpret and appropriate the gospel today (4).

Similar to John's gospel, Prophet Makandiwa, in particular, also used a popular Johannine expression, 'signs and wonders' in Jesus' first sign at Cana (John 4:48) as he explained the character of his miracles. According to the *Newsday* of 21 January 2013, Prophet Makandiwa claimed that, "These are not miracles, they are signs and wonders. God does them to prove a point." In order to justify his assertion, Makandiwa then alleged that miracles were for those who did not believe. Analysing this, one can conclude that Makandiwa's point is that his miracles happen to a person who has faith, a point somehow similar to the notion of faith leading to a sign exhibited in Jesus' healing of the royal official's son.

Just like the crippled man and the Jews in the healing at the pool of Bethesda, it is equally unclear whether the two prophets' miracles also make specific reference to a faith response. David Bishau's interview and analysis puts it clearly that, "Some of the respondents who attend these gatherings openly acknowledge that they attend to have their problems solved not necessarily to have faith in Jesus Christ" (73). Isaac Zhou backs this up when, in one of his interviews on miracles in

Makandiwa's UFIC, he notes that most of his interviewees dodged the question of faith and only concentrated on how they felt when the power of healing was operating in them. Although some of them, following Prophet Makandiwa's assertion, confirmed that they were not just miracles but 'signs and wonders' that point to the presence of God in UFIC, according to Zhou, few of them pointed out that the miraculous experiences of the power of God working in their church strengthened their faith (34, 37).

Differences with Johannine Signs

Having highlighted the similarities that can be drawn between the two presentations, it is also fundamental to pay adequate attention to some differences. Important questions that can help to indicate these are: firstly, when one assumes that the deliverance ministry of the two prophets seeks to promote or give 'life,' what specifically is this kind of 'life?' Secondly, if these two prophets' miracles are signs in the real sense of Johannine signs, what is it that they point to? Thirdly, when these prophets' miracles do not get a faith reaction, is the implication the same as in Jesus' third sign in John's gospel which seems to share the same fate?

In the first three signs, although John indicates the restoration of the physical life of people, his ultimate focus is on the eternal or spiritual life.¹³ The physical life only serves as a symbol of the later. This life is realised in genuine discipleship and in a right relationship with God.¹⁴ Viewing prophets Makandiwa and Magaya's miracles with these Johannine eyes, it is plausible to conclude that it is not clear as to the type of life which they seek to promote. Besides it not being specified or depicted in their ministry as in John's gospel, one can also cast doubts if their primary concern is the Johannine eternal life basing

¹³ See John 20:30-31.

¹⁴ See Thompson 99-100.

on some observations. The first is the quest for material wealth¹⁵ that accompanies these miracles. As noted by Biri, the love of material wealth advocated in the message of prosperity betrays these prophets' interpretation of the Bible. Her basis for this is that, in this quest, spiritual matters (focus on eternal life) are often ignored and material wealth (the physical life) is often overemphasised (8). This theology betrays Jesus' teaching about the cost of discipleship implied in Johannine signs when one makes a faith response.

Arguing further, Biri also highlights that miracles in these churches are not offered free of charge (8), a phenomenon that has no evidence in Johannine signs. He indicates that, for instance, in UFIC people are categorised into three groups: "the gold class, composed of those who pay \$1000 (US) per month, the silver class, who pay \$500 (US) a month, and the bronze class who pay \$100 (US)." In addition, anyone wishing to participate in Makandiwa's deliverance sessions is supposed to pay a certain amount (8). This has also culminated in the belief and practice which these churches coined as 'seeding' or 'sowing,' that sometimes the person in need of a miracle has to give money, especially to the prophet, in order for their petition to be granted (8).¹⁶ Given this, one can question, what about those like the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda who have nothing to offer? Is it that there is no salvation for them, and if so, how can that be reconciled with Jesus' ministry and mission, and with the gospel values? Such questions trigger comments by scholars like Fortunate Sibanda, Tobias Marevesa and Prosper Muzambi who allege that these pastors use the 'gospel of prosperity' as a way of amassing wealth at the expense of the people's spiritual development (256).

The second observation can be stated as the confusion or illogicality that some of these prophets' miracles contain. A typical example is

¹⁵ The so-called 'Gospel of Prosperity' gives more information on this point.

¹⁶ This is a gospel that appears to function as financing the ever-expanding movements and the lavish lifestyles of their founders.

that, on Nehanda Radio, Charles Mushinga reports the death of Mrs Moffat's 'miracle baby' which happened on 20th of May 2013, few months after the miraculous conception and delivery. This first of all provokes questions as to the humanity of this 'miracle baby' given that it contradicts human nature. Besides, if Jesus Christ himself, as fully human, stayed in the womb of Mary for nine months, what message does this three-day-miracle-baby seek to convey? Another contradiction can be drawn from Sibanda *et al*'s research in Masvingo. They note reports of some people in this area who are said to have gained property miraculously, but which then vanished mysteriously (258). These are some of the issues that are difficult to reconcile in these miracles. They provoke questions as to the type of 'life' that these prophets advocate for. Hence, one can be forgiven to ask, do these prophets offer physical life as a symbol of eternal life as in Johannine signs or they consider physical life an end in itself? The temporality and quest for immediate gratifications and quick fix solutions evident in these movements suggest the latter.

In response to the second question, it is important to highlight that signs in John's gospel are meant to point the attention to the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁷ In the light of this, David Bishau puts to question the veneration of the person of some of these prophets instead of Jesus who stands beyond them. He notes that in one of the services he attended, "devotees actually bowed down, hands clasped together as if in prayer, as the prophet passed by to the stage with his entourage of body guards" (73). Highlighting the same point, Sibanda *et al* also note that the scepticism that some people hold on the prophets of this generation has been summarised in a Shona proverb that says "*Makandiwa kana Magaya havasi Jesu Kristu*" (Makandiwa or Magaya are not Jesus Christ). They further explain that this saying has been coined to describe the qualitative difference that exist between Jesus Christ and those who claim to possess the same authority and

¹⁷ In Kasper's words, "A miracle turns people's eyes upwards, towards God" (92). The envoy revealer model gives more on this (See the Johannine Prologue 1:1-18).

power as him (257). This makes it clear that unlike the Johannine signs, there is a shift of focus from the person of Jesus to the persons of the performers of these miracles. This shift can force one to conclude that if their miracles are real signs which point to something beyond, that something is the prophet or pastor. In this regard, commenting on Makandiwa's miracles, the *Newsday* of 21 January 2013 which states that, "Makandiwa declared that the miracles were meant for people who doubted 'his' ability to perform supernatural wonders" says it correctly.

In relation to the above point, there are also statements that are made by the congregants of these churches that categorically applaud these prophets, for instance, "*Ndiri mwana we Muporofita*" (I am the prophet's child), either verbally or visually presented on T-shirts, plastic bangles and other regalia of these churches across Zimbabwe. As Sibanda *et al* put it, "This shows that most congregants are held at ransom in some instances as they are hypnotised by miracle performers whom they end up hero-worshipping" (257). Taking this further, other expressions by these churches' congregants like "*Tiri vana veminana*" or simply "*Vana veminana*" (children of miracles) also drive Sibanda *et al*'s, point home. The expressions mean that these people's lives are shrouded by miracles. Precisely, their lives and everything that they do is simply a miracle. This goes contrary to John's understanding of a miracle which is presented as an extraordinary and unexpected event which happens when need arises, provoking amazement and wonder (Kasper 92). Deducing from Jesus' statement to the royal official in the second sign, Jesus is actually against people who come to him intentionally looking for a sign or who want to believe when they have seen a sign.¹⁸ This is the attitude that is demonstrated by many Zimbabwean Christians today. They yearn for miracles to redeem all the problems of their lives (Sibanda *et al* 258). This quest, as Michael Mukwati states, has obviously overtaken the value of the cross, the need for persistence in prayer and

¹⁸ Cf. John 4:48

has led to a utility kind of relationship with God (Mbanje, *The Standard*).

The answer to the second question also determines the response to the third question. In the gospel of John, that which the sign testifies to is that which the people put their faith in, that is, the object of their faith. Although there is no specific reference to faith in John's third sign, it is clear that Johannine signs are presented in such a way that they evoke a faith response and a deep commitment to Jesus Christ as a person. Failure in this regard does not mean failure on the part of the sign, but it actually says more about the people to whom the sign is intended. This is a different case when one wants to imply the same understanding to these prophets' miracles because the first premise, that is, Jesus as the real object of faith is not clearly specified or cannot be categorically determined. Specifically, the lack of clarity in terms of that to which these prophets' signs point to, have a strong bearing on determining the person to whom the people are supposed to put their faith in. Thus, unlike in John's gospel where the failure of a faith response is not because of the problem of the sign given, the opposite is most likely true in these prophets' miracles.

An Assessment of the Alleged Miracles

An analysis of the similarities and differences between prophets Makandiwa and Magaya's miracles and the Johannine signs can force one to be very sceptical and more reserved about the whole notion of miracles in Zimbabwe today. This, however, does not explicitly suggest that all the miracles performed by these prophets are fake, but that they need to be put into serious questioning when they are juxtaposed with Johannine signs by any Johannine reader. The disparity between the two raises many questions about the true identity of the performers, the real character of their miracles and the source of power beyond them all.

According to Sibanda *et al*, the nature of some miracles evokes the question of the spirit working in them (258; 2 Cor 11:4). The three

base their argument on the foundation that in a theological sense, it is possible that one may have the right word but employ the wrong spirit (cf. Acts 16:16-18). In these scholars' language, in contemporary times, "false prophets, anti-Christians and Satanists are masquerading as servants of Christ in order to lure people to themselves instead of Christ through counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders that deceive those languishing" (258). In other words, when these people make themselves the answer instead of God (Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess 2:9), the result is the replacement of the rightful place of Jesus Christ in these churches and in the lives of all their adherences.

Albert Chikuni also warns that people should take heed of some prophets and pastors who claim to perform miracles. He notes that some prophets exaggerate the power of God present in their ministry stressing miracles at the expense of the salvation of souls; and desire personal gain by making merchandise out of people's ignorance. As he puts it, they "offer prosperity on a gold platter, success without struggling [...] sweet without sweat" (qtd. in Sibanda *et al.* 259). Deducing from this, it can be argued that instead of emphasising the God of miracles as in the gospel of John, it is undeniable that some contemporary Zimbabwean prophets and pastors are now emphasising the miracles of God, above all, miracle money. Thus, according to F. Kwaramba, when money multiplies miraculously the rationalists may be justified to suspect the use of magic and manipulation in such miracles (2).

All this leaves the question of how one can separate a true from a false miracle in the contemporary times open-ended (Sibanda *et al.* 259). Putting this in context, the question of miracles today remains an unsolved puzzle to many Zimbabweans. A lot of prophets and pastors have abused the pulpit to the extent of hosting 'stage managed miracles' due to a wide range of motives. This is not to deny that real miracles do happen today. The point is, as Bishau notes, to question their significance as real signs that manifest the character of God as life-giving that evokes a true faith and deep commitment to Jesus who

mediates that life (72; Thompson 96). For John, this is, in fact, the source of eternal life. Hence, any understanding of the New Testament that does not culminate in such a conclusion regarding the symbolic meaning of miracles is most likely dubious (Bishau 72).

Conclusion

Signs as God's work, for John, serve to call people to repentance, commitment and faith. Johannine signs produce genuine faith when they bring those observing them to a single-hearted conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This comes about when one discerns in them God's character as life-giving and responds to Jesus as the only door to that life. Thus, signs in John's gospel are a stage on the way to belief, and ultimately to Sonship and life for those who optimise true faith. However, it should be highlighted that this faith is not a once-for-all intense possession. It gradually matures through a willingness to see and hear the continuous activity of God in his Church, and in the nexus of life, love and glory authenticated by Jesus Christ.

Looking at the phenomenon of miracles in prophets Makandiwa's UFIC and Magaya's PHD ministries in Zimbabwe today in light of the Johannine understanding of signs, one notices some similarities. They both seek to promote life, can be considered as signs¹⁹ and do not present all miracles as culminating in a faith reaction. However, given that Jesus' signs in John's gospel restore physical life only as a symbol of eternal life, one is justified to still seek for a clarification in terms of the type of 'life' which these two prophets' miracles purport to offer since one cannot deduce clear references to eternal life from them. Unlike Johannine signs which point to theological and Christological portraits of Jesus, it is difficult to have a clear sight of that which the two prophets' miracles point to. Although there is no specific reference to faith in John's third signs, Johannine signs are presented

¹⁹ This is in the sense of them not being ends in themselves but pointing to something beyond them.

in such a way that they evoke a faith response and a commitment to Jesus Christ as a person. This is unlike these prophets' miracles which do not specify their object of faith, given that there is hardly any faith response at all.

It is from the above backdrop that the author of this work is justified in stating that any community of believers which relishes miracles above the God who gives them is treading on dangerous grounds. The sign they see glare and blind them to the God who loves and extends eternal life. This is the category in which some Zimbabwean Pentecostal pastors and Christians are prone to be found. The discrepancies that are evident when the whole notion of miracles in these churches is contrasted with the Johannine signs should hint the Christian faithful that not all miraculous works performed by various pastors and prophets in Zimbabwe today must be taken at gospel value. Some of these miracles are not innocent, but a product of cunning and nature manipulations. As a result, strange elements characterising some so-called 'miracles' in Zimbabwe today should continually be interrogated and John's gospel gives crucial pointers that can be used to help in that regard.

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