



James Tissot, Interview between Jesus and Nicodemus, 1886–1894, watercolor over graphite on paper, 23.2 x 17.8 cm, Brooklyn Museum, New York. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

JOHN 2-4

COME, FOLLOW ME: NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

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Overview of Jesus's First and Second Miracles and Sermons

The first of the Lord's seven miracles that John records is Jesus turning water to wine at the wedding at Cana. John records seven of Jesus's discourses, and the first two, those to Nicodemus in Jerusalem and to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, are found in chapters 3 and 4.¹

John's Gospel attacks false traditions in favor of *restoring* a holier way. Repeatedly John includes miracles and sermons that show how Jesus replaced a Jewish custom with a higher law. At a wedding in Cana, He uses the miracle of changing water to wine to demonstrate the fulfillment of the Mosaic purification with His atoning sacrifice (Jn 2:11; 4:46). He teaches the difference between the lower law and higher law in His conversation with Nicodemus on being born from on high. He denounces the corrupt practices performed in the temple by cleansing it. He attacks the social customs of segregation, divorce, and marriage in His conversation with the Samaritan woman.

Jn 2:1–12. Water Changed to Wine

John carefully highlights Jesus’s first miracle, or “sign” as the word is rendered in most modern translations, to symbolically teach a higher meaning of purification and foreshadow the cleansing power of His blood. This miracle also parallels the first miracle Moses performed at Pharaoh’s court—turning the water to blood (Ex 4:9; 7:17–21).

Cana

Cana of Galilee is mentioned at three points in the New Testament: as the location of two of the seven miracles mentioned in John’s Gospel—the wedding at Cana and the healing of a royal official’s son (Jn 2:1; 4:46)—and as the hometown of Nathanael (Jn 21:2). The most likely location of Cana is the rocky ruins of *Khirbet Qana*, nestled in the middle of Galilee about ten miles north of Nazareth.

The miracle

Jn 2:1. “third day.” John emphasizes *days* throughout His Gospel. If all the days are added up from chapter 1, this is the seventh day—again harking back to the Creation. But these numbers are probably used for symbolism rather than for literal calendaring—they are not twenty-four-hour days for sure (travel time for the journey of about sixty to one hundred miles to Galilee appears to be only one day; Jn 1:43). The “third day” may refer to the third highlighted day, or two days after the call of Philip in Galilee (Jn 1:43). The first day was the day of Jesus’s baptism, and the second was the day that Jesus called Apostles (see Jn 1:29, 35, 43).

Figuratively, the phrase “third day” brings to mind the promise of the resurrection, reflecting the three days that Jesus’s body lay in the tomb and Jonah’s three days in the whale (compare Mt 12:39; 16:4). This is important because the miracle of the red wine symbolizes Jesus’s atoning blood. John emphasizes numbers symbolically throughout all his writings.²

Jn 2:2 (NIV). “invited to the marriage.” Jesus’s family and His newly called disciples appear to be actively involved in the wedding celebration. Jews at the time of the New Testament honored marriage as a religious duty to fulfill God’s commandment given in the Garden of Eden (see Gen 2:20, 24). Marriages were arranged by fathers or guardians when children were young. Marriage ceremonies took place in two stages—betrothal and wedding—usually a year apart.³ Typically, both ceremonies were performed with witnesses under a wedding tent, or *chuppah* (“canopy”), at the groom’s parents’ home.⁴ If the couple’s families had the means, family and friends gathered for a reunion and week of feasting.⁵ See my notes on Lk 1:27 for more on the marriage customs of the time.

Jn 2:3. “They have no wine.” In the ancient world, extending proper hospitality to guests was a serious obligation. Running short of wine could even end in a lawsuit.⁶ A wise hostess held back food and drink for later. Since Mary was worried about the wine, she was probably a close relative or friend of someone in the wedding party. Mary’s comment, “They have no wine,” was used by John as a leading tone to symbolically highlight what Judaism was lacking.

Jn 2:4. “Woman.” Throughout his Gospel, John never uses his own name nor the name of Jesus’s mother, Mary. He also lives in a culture that does not utter the name of God. John refers to Mary twice as the “mother of Jesus” (2:1–2; 19:25–26). Both times he has Jesus addressing her by the title “woman.” The JST changes to this verse show Jesus’s love and respect for His mother. The Greek word used here for “woman” is a polite way of addressing a woman or wife but one is strange for a son to use. Perhaps using “woman” harks back to the creation of Eve in Gen 2:22–23—consistent with all the Creation themes in John’s early Gospel. A summary of John’s use of Creation themes follows:⁷

1. The prologue begins with “In the beginning”—the same as the opening line of Genesis.
2. Jesus is called ‘the light that shineth in the darkness’ (Jn 1:3), a connection to the Creation themes of light and darkness.
3. The Spirit descends and remains on Jesus after His baptism just as the Spirit of God moved upon the waters and breathed life into man.
4. Mary is the woman of Eve’s promise. God tells Eve in Eden that her seed will crush the serpent (Gen 3:15). By calling Mary woman, John may be recalling the promise in Gen 3:15 or making her a second Eve.⁸
5. Between day one of Christ’s ministry (His baptism) and the seventh day (when He performs His first miracle in Cana), we see His emergence as a new or second Adam (Paul refers to this in 1 Cor 15:45).

Jn 2:4. “mine hour.” When Mary asks for help, she thinks it is for the wedding. But Jesus’s response shows that He is on a higher plane: He says, “Mine hour is not yet come.” Is Jesus not ready to start His mission with a public miracle? (Priests could start functioning at the temple in their calling at age thirty; Num 4:3). did Jesus refer to the time when He will reveal the symbol of wine as the offering of His blood? Combining Jesus’s words with the fact that He provides wine from purification pots, it appears that He refers to a new wine—His blood—as a miraculous sign of His future purification and glory.

Jn 2:5 (NIV). “Do whatever he tells you.” In reply to Mary’s innocent and faith-filled request, Jesus provides a miracle that is actually a sign of His mission. Mary’s reply shows her faith, and her directions became the model for all disciples: do everything He asks. She also shows her preeminent position at the wedding by directing the servants. (See my notes on Lk 1:38; 3:16 for more information on servants and enslaved people at the time.)

Jn 2:6. “six water pots of stone . . . [for] purifying.” John brings our attention to the fact that the stone pots were specifically used in Jewish purification for ceremonial washings. (Lev 11:29–38 explains that clay pots were unclean.) John emphasizes the number six, too. In contrast to his use of the number seven, John uses six to represent incompleteness or imperfection (compare Rev 13:18). The symbolism implies that the Mosaic ritual cleansing was incomplete or not whole or perfect. Later Jesus taught that lasting purification comes through His blood, which He connected symbolically to wine at the Last Supper (Jn 6:54; Mt 26:27–28).

Jn 2:6. “two or three firkins apiece.” A firkin holds 10.8 gallons of water, so each pot held about 22 to 33 gallons. All six pots could hold 132–198 gallons of water. Since wine was usually diluted with three to twenty parts water, this would be enough wine for the wedding plus a year’s supply as a gift for the couple!

Jn 2:7. “to the brim.” This foreshadows the offering of Jesus’s purifying blood, which is completely available to all. I love the image of filling our vessels, or lives, *completely* with the Lord’s directions and likewise His Atonement. In making that sacrifice to purify all, Jesus was taken to the brim of His divine capacity (Lk 22:42).

Jn 2:8–10. “the good wine until now.” Prophets foretold an abundance of wine in messianic days (Amos 9:13–15; Gen 49:10–11). When Jesus miraculously made wine, John connected it to these messianic prophecies. The six incomplete purification pots were not enough for complete cleansing. Jesus’s miracle demonstrated a missing ingredient needed for purification: His atoning sacrifice or blood. His higher law of purification through His sacrifice will soon replace the lower Mosaic law of purification through washings. Jesus used wine as the symbol of His blood for His Atonement in Jn 6:56. Also, the other Gospels record that just before His last Passover, Jesus introduced the drinking of wine in the sacrament as a remembrance of His blood. Interestingly, this miracle takes place just before Passover as well (perhaps this is why Jn 2:13 mentions it). The church father Irenaeus (ca. AD 120–200) referred to a tradition that the Messiah will heal the earth of the curse when He comes, and it will yield ten thousandfold.⁹ John saw this miracle as fulfilling a sign of Jesus’s messiahship.

Jn 2:11. “[He] manifested forth his glory.” Jesus proclaimed His mission, and His disciples believed. This first miracle represents the futility of *self*-purification. We need the Savior’s atoning blood—which would be shed in Gethsemane and on the cross. On a different level, when Jesus enters our lives, we are changed and purified into something better.

Jn 2:12. “his brethren, and his disciples.” Jesus and His family and disciples leave Cana and travel about twenty or thirty miles to the north coast of the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum (see my notes on Mk 1:21). This verse mentions Jesus’s half-brothers. Mk 6:3 and Mt 13:55 list Jesus’s brothers, James, Joseph, Juda, and Simon, and mention that He had sisters. Sadly, Jn 7:5 tells us that Jesus’s brothers did not initially believe in Him. (This may explain why Jesus asked John the Apostle to take care of His mother rather than one of her four other sons.) We know, though, that Jesus’s half-brother James later gained a witness of Jesus’s divinity because he wrote the Epistle of James.

Jn 2:13–22. The Cleansing of the Temple

The author, John, moves the scene from Cana to Jerusalem, where Jesus continues teaching higher meanings of purification. He attacks those using the temple for profit as He purifies it for holier uses.

Timing

John's Gospel mentions three Passovers during Jesus's adult ministry—thus providing evidence for a three-year mortal ministry. On the other hand, the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are organized geographically rather than chronologically. In these Gospels, after Jesus's baptism the setting moves to Galilee and everything happening in Galilee is placed together. Then at the end of Jesus's life, the setting moves to Jerusalem and telescopes everything there together into Jesus's last week. This is helpful as we look at Jesus cleansing the temple. No Gospel mentions that Jesus cleansed it twice. It only happened once, and John's timing is probably more accurate.

By highlighting the baptism in close proximity to the cleansing of the temple, John's Gospel echoes the prophecy found in Malachi 3:1:

I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

Jewish pilgrimages to Jerusalem

The law of Moses called for three annual feasts, during which Israelites came to the temple or tabernacle to worship. By the time of the New Testament, 1,400 years after the law was given, the pilgrimages still brought Israelites across the Roman world to Jerusalem to celebrate the three feasts. The most important of the three feasts was Passover in the spring. It was followed fifty days later by Pentecost and then by the Feast of the Tabernacles or Booths in the autumn.

Passover traditions at the time of Christ

- One month before Passover, preparations began with bridge and road repairs, painting sepulchers white, administering the testing draught to women suspected of adultery, burning the red heifer, and boring slave's ears. Two weeks before, flocks were tithed and the temple treasury opened. One day before, homemakers cleaned out all leaven from their homes (1 Cor 5:7).
- Every male Israelite physically able to walk up Mount Moriah and who lived within fifteen miles was required to come to the temple for the Passover. Those living farther away needed to come to Jerusalem for at least one of the feasts per year.
- Thousands of pilgrims came for the feast week (including all twenty-four courses of priests), but estimating how many thousands is tricky. The number of people in the city of Jerusalem potentially soared to a hundred times its estimated population of twenty to thirty thousand. Josephus claimed that two to three million people came to the feast, which may be exaggerated.¹⁰

- Sacrifices took place on the Temple Mount, which Herod did extensive work on, doubling its size to thirty-five acres and making it the most magnificent temple complex in the Greco-Roman world. But as grand as it was, it was not a place where the Spirit could reside, and the Holy of Holies no longer housed the ark of the covenant.
- Israelites appeared before the Lord in His temple with three offerings: a non-consecrated animal, one animal for joy, and one animal for peace.

The cleansing

Jn 2:13. “up.” Note that people always go “up” to Jerusalem no matter where they are because it is a *holy place*. The Mishnah outlined “ten degrees of holiness” building up to their most sacred space—the temple.

The land of Israel is holier than all other lands. . . .

The cities that are surrounded with walls are holier than it. . . .

Within the wall of Jerusalem is holier than they. . . . The Temple Mount is holier than it. . . .

The rampart is holier than it. . . .

The Court of the Women is holier than it . . .

The Court of Israel is holier than it. . . .

The Court of the Priests is holier than it. . . .

[The space] between the porch and the altar is holier than it. . . .

The sanctuary [or holy place] is holier than it. . . .

The Holy of Holies is holier than them all.¹¹

Jn 2:14. “changers of money.” The Court of the Gentiles made up the majority of the thirty-five acres of the Temple Mount. Israelites as well as Gentiles were allowed to visit (similar to Salt Lake City’s Temple Square). The celebrants could purchase the animals necessary for their offerings and change their money for the temple coin. The temple currency was a Tyrian half-shekel. All financial transactions in the temple had to be in the Tyrian currency. The money changers were allowed a substantial discount. The Tyrian was also used to pay the annual temple tax, sin offerings, and so forth. The money changers positioned themselves outside in the Court of the Gentiles.

Jn 2:15–16. “a scourge.” A scourge is a whip made out of cords. Jesus’s purging the temple was a sign of the messianic purification (later the temple of His body is also scourged). Jer 7:11–14 told the Israelites that impurity would destroy the value of their temple. Mal 3:1, Zech 14:20–21, and Dan 8:14 all point to this as well. Even the apocryphal book of Tobit prophesies of the future cleansing.¹² The crowd’s submission was a sign of the people’s guilt. The Synoptic Gospels record that Jesus cites the prophecy in Isa 56:7 that the temple should be “called a house of prayer” (Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk 19:46).

Jn 2:17. “thine house.” The Jews held the temple at the very center of their worship, but they missed its message, which was to prepare them to recognize Jesus as their Messiah. At the time of Moses and Solomon, the glorious fiery pillar over the Lord’s house represented the presence of God, but now the Jews overlooked their Creator and Redeemer when He dwelled among them.

Jn 2:18. “sign.” Interestingly, the Jewish pilgrims did not condemn what Jesus had done; they only questioned whether this was the sign of the Messiah.

Jn 2:19. “three days.” Jesus consistently answers questions in a way that makes His audience stretch. He tries to teach them, to help them grow, to raise them to a higher plane. The Greek word for “temple” here connotes less the sanctuary and more Jesus’s body. This is Jesus’s first public mention of His death and Resurrection in John. “It was at this moment in this place, to these people that he revealed His calling and early mission and foretold the events that would culminate in the freedom of all mankind from death and sin. The most momentous message in all time, and it fell on deaf ears.”¹³ Nevertheless, the people remember His words.

Jn 2:19. “raise it up.” The temple authorities should have understood Jesus’s words. John illustrates that “the temple” is Jesus, who will be “raised up.” These words had enough of an impact that at Jesus’s death, the people remembered them and asked for a guard to watch the tomb. Herod began expanding Mount Moriah and rebuilding the second temple in 20 BC. It was under construction during Jesus’s entire life and was finished in AD 64 (only to be destroyed between AD 68 and 70). False witnesses at the death trial of Jesus misrepresent Him as having said, “I will destroy this temple” (Mk 14:58).

Jn 2:20–21. “this temple.” John emphasizes another meaning: the temple is the body of Christ. Jesus is the connection between heaven and earth, He is the manifestation of the sacrificial lamb (1 Cor 5:7), the holy altar, the cleansing of the brazen sea, the sanctifying blood, the way to the tree of life (represented by the menorah in the holy place), and the veil. His throne rests on the mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant, as He is the giver and fulfiller of the law. After His Resurrection, more than five hundred disciples see His resurrected, glorified body as if they walked into the Holy of Holies (1 Cor 15:6).

Jn 2:23. “miracles.” John mentions that this first Passover was filled with miracles but gives no specifics.

Jn 2:24–25. “he knew.” The sign of cleansing the temple is marveled at but not yet understood. John describes Jesus as being in control as the omniscient Creator (JST: “he knew all *things*”), even if His people do not recognize Him.

Jn 3. Nicodemus and Being Born Again

Jn 3:1. “Nicodemus.” Nicodemus’s name means “one who will prevail over the people.” John mentions the man here and again in at Jesus’s burial (19:39). Nicodemus is a Pharisee, one of the three main divisions or sects of Judaism at the time (see my Introduction, page 3).

By “a ruler of the Jews,” John means that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. The Sanhedrin leaders consisted of Aaronic priests, Jewish scribes, and the elders. However, King Herod (ca. 73–1 BC) decimated the Sanhedrin to nothing more than a shadowy existence of its earlier fame. The Jews built it back up again, but it functioned by working with Roman leaders. Jesus attacked the lack of spiritual discernment within the Jewish leadership—just as He attacked the purification laws and use of the temple.

Jn 3:2. “night.” John emphasizes the nighttime to evoke images of darkness versus light (introduced in the prologue), reflecting Nicodemus’s state of spiritual darkness. Nicodemus possibly came at night to protect his reputation and leadership responsibilities in the Sanhedrin. I admire him for wanting to meet face-to-face to learn whether Jesus was a prophet. The problem became not the protecting cloak of darkness but Nicodemus’s spiritual darkness. Nicodemus addressed Jesus, “Rabbi,” meaning “master, teacher,” just as Andrew and John did in Jn 1:38. But Nicodemus is not a committed follower yet. In ancient Jewish thought, if a certain rabbi worked miracles, then it was evidence that God approved his teachings. It appears that Nicodemus acknowledged this. Note, too, that Nicodemus used “we” as if a group were involved in the questioning and he represented them (perhaps, for example, Joseph of Arimathea).

Jn 3:3 (NIV). “no one can see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus came to the Lord with a simple question about Jesus’s divine nature. Jesus answered on a different level than Nicodemus expected. Jesus answered him with a discourse on how to enter the kingdom of God. “Knowing the King is the only door to the Kingdom . . . no one can see the kingdoms without first seeing the King and after seeing the King one must acknowledge him, one must commit to serve the King.”¹⁴ Jesus’s answer challenged Nicodemus to receive his own divine witness that Jesus represents God.

Jn 3:3. “born again.” The phrase “born again” has a double meaning in Greek: “born again or anew” as well as “born from above or from the top.” The KJV translators missed the original Greek dual meaning by following the later Latin translation by Jerome, giving Nicodemus’s flippant answer rather than Jesus’s refute. To say “a man must be born from on high” or from heaven is the higher law in comparison to the lower law. The symbolism of rebirth is clear and powerful.

Jn 3:4. “womb.” Nicodemus only saw the natural impossibility of returning to the womb. He remained tied to the physical level of Jesus’s answer without trying to grasp the higher meaning. Yet Jewish interpretation often required symbolism to comprehend.

Jn 3:5. “Verily.” This word is also translated “truly, thus it is” or “may it be fulfilled, amen.” This begins the first of Jesus’s seven discourses in John’s Gospel. Jesus teaches Nicodemus of the need for a spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus would have benefitted from Mose 6:59–60:

That by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and

be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory; For by the water ye keep the commandment; by the Spirit ye are justified, and by the blood ye are sanctified.

Jn 3:6–7. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” Jesus did not bypass Nicodemus’s confusion but directly addressed it. Nicodemus missed the point, so Jesus tried again to teach him. By emphasizing the need for a rebirth, Jesus knocked down another pillar of Judaism: that their salvation came through lineage in God’s chosen race. The importance of being the chosen people loses significance with Jesus’s message. According to Jewish teaching, being a descendant of Abraham automatically saved Jews from eternal torture (see Lk 16:24). But Jesus corrects this falsehood by teaching that our natural birth is not enough to enter the kingdom of God.

The elusiveness in the KJV leaves Nicodemus confused, while restored scripture connects applied faith in the words of God with the result of the manifestation of the Spirit. John’s account states that one must be born again, but notice how the D&C goes further to explain the role of the Spirit in the process of rebirth:

John 3:5–8

Except a man be *born of water and of the Spirit*, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. . . . Ye must be born again . . . : so is everyone that is *born of the Spirit*.

D&C 5:16

Behold, whosoever *believeth on my words, them will I visit* with the manifestation of my Spirit; and they shall be *born* of me, even of *water and of the Spirit*.

Even though both books focus on the promise of the Spirit and call attention to baptism, only D&C 5:16 explains that *belief* fosters the Spirit. The same idea was taught to another branch of ancient Israelites in Mosi 27:25; Alm 5:49; 7:14.

Jn 3:8 (NIV). “The wind blows wherever it pleases.” Nicodemus did not understand, so Jesus gave him an example from nature—which again has a double meaning in Greek. In addition to “wind,” *pneuma* means “spirit” (both God’s Spirit and the spirit of humans). The KJV translates *pneuma* 111 times as “spirit,” 89 times as “Holy Ghost,” and 26 times as “Spirit of God.” Every other time the word “wind” is used in the KJV Gospels, it is the word *anemos*, or “physical tempest.” Here the KJV chose the double meaning of “spirit, wind” because Jesus used the double image for the Spirit—something felt and only indirectly seen. Interestingly, the Hebrew word *ruach* also shares the same multiple meanings of “breath, wind, spirit.” Ezk 36:25–26 taught that in messianic times God would cleanse His people and give them a new spirit.

Jn 3:9–12. “How can these things be?” Nicodemus responded without understanding Jesus’s witness. Nicodemus (and we) need higher or heavenly thinking. “God, not man, determines the spiritual condition of each individual and must ratify any ordinance.”¹⁵

Jn 3:13. “he that came down from heaven.” From now on, Jesus gives a monologue without Nicodemus commenting. Jesus also revealed the nature of the Father by introducing Himself as “Son of Man.” The Father is “Man of Holiness,” the supreme exalted Man (Mose 6:57)

Jn 3:14–15. “lifted up.” Jesus again uses a double meaning. “Lifted up” refers to both the cross and heaven (He uses “Son of Man being lifted up” three times). Jesus alludes to the familiar story of when the children of Israel looked at the brazen serpent on the staff to be saved from the poisonous serpents. The stories from the Exodus cycle and Moses’s prophetic life foreshadow Christ’s mission. Paul uses the same themes in 1 Cor 10:1–6 and Heb 8:14–15.

Jn 3:16–17. “For God so loved the world.” This is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This message makes mortality meaningful. This is the plan of salvation. God is a God of love. The Greek word translated here as “condemn” is the same word for “judge, separate, and so forth.” Jesus will judge and will separate, but that is not *why* He came; His mission is to save.

Jn 3:18 (JST). “before was preached by the . . . holy prophets.” The JST adds power to the perspective that the mission of Christ was taught from the beginning of time.

Jn 3:19–20. “light . . . darkness.” Light and darkness also represents good and evil, ignorance and intelligence. Jesus returns to Creation imagery to understand life. The darkness ignores the light (see D&C 88:49).

Jn 3:21. “truth.” The JST changes “doeth truth” to “loveth truth.” The JST further explains how we love truth: “He who obeyeth the truth, the works which he doeth they are of God.”

Palestine under Roman rule. Image via biblemapper.com.



Jn 3:22–36. John the Baptist’s Last Witness

Jn 3:22–24 “baptizing.” Only the Gospel of John says that Jesus and His disciples baptized during John the Baptist’s mission. Lk 3:19–20 places John the Baptist in Herod Antipas’s prison after Jesus’s baptism, but that placement appears to be for continuity of information on John the Baptist. The Gospel of John’s sequence is more often correct. Especially since John is likely the only author who was a disciple of John the Baptist, we see in his Gospel a greater interest in the Baptist. Here John the Baptist is preaching and baptizing in the Samaritan towns of Aenon and Salim.

Jn 3:25–28. “bear me witness . . . I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him.” In response to his followers’ complaints, John the Baptist offers one last witness of Jesus as the Messiah (Jn 3:28–29). As possibly a

previous disciple of John the Baptist (Jn 1:37), John the Beloved alone includes this. Jn 4:2 states that Jesus’s disciples baptized others, not the Lord, but the JST corrects this to include Jesus as one baptizing.

Jn 3:29–30. “the friend of the bridegroom . . . rejoiceth.” John the Baptist bore testimony in humility and self-abasement. He explained himself by using the Old Testament bridal imagery of God’s people becoming His bride (Hos 2:19). Jewish weddings at that time included a processional through the village. The bridegroom came with his family and friends to the bride’s house to escort her to his family home. “His best friend had been standing guard at the bride’s house to make sure that no one entered before he came. As the friend, the Baptist [heard] the bridegroom coming to claim Israel his bride and rejoiced that he [could] withdraw into the background.”¹⁶ A Judean custom referred to the wedding’s master of ceremonies as the “friend of the bridegroom.”

Jn 3:31. “above all.” These ending verses sound like speech from John the Baptist, but in reality, they are echoes from Jesus’s discourse.

Jn 3:32. “receive.” The JST changes “no man receiveth” His testimony to “few men receive” His testimony.

Jn 3:34 (JST). “dwelleth.” Believers can receive a portion of the Spirit, but the JST adds that “the fulness” of the Spirit dwelled within Jesus during His mortal mission.

Jn 3:35–36. “all things.” All things are given into Jesus’s hands from His Father as a sign of love. The JST and D&C expand this to touch on different degrees of glory in the Resurrection. The fullness of the Father is given to those who receive their exaltation in the celestial kingdom. The glory or presence of the Son is given to those in the terrestrial kingdom, and the glory or presence of the Spirit is given to those in the telestial kingdom (D&C 76:50–81).

Jn 4. Discourse to the Woman at the Well and Healing a Nobleman’s Child

This chapter includes the Lord’s second discourse and second miracle in John. In complete contrast to Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is almost exactly opposite on all fronts—gender, education, religious status, spirituality, and public influence. And yet she is the one who receives Jesus as the Christ, not the influential, well-educated male leader of the Jews, Nicodemus.

Jn 4:1–3. “the Lord knew how the Pharisees.” Even in the first year of His ministry, the Pharisees already wanted to kill the Lord. Jesus and His Apostles were attracting more and more followers. This caused tension in the political and religious climate. Hostility was already rising as Herod Antipas imprisoned John the Baptist around this time.¹⁷ Jesus’s awareness of the angry Jews may have been the impetus for closing His Judean ministry and heading north to open the Galilean mission.

The JST adds another detail to the account. The Lord encouraged His companions to baptize under His direction, allowing them to learn.

Jn 4:2–3.

KJV

JST

They sought more diligently some means that they might put him to death; for many received John as a prophet, but they believed not on Jesus.

Now the Lord knew this, though *he* himself baptized not so many as his disciples; for he suffered them for an example, preferring one another

(Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,) he left Judaea, and departed again into Galilee.

Jn 4:4. “go through Samaria.” Only John mentions Jesus’s Samaritan ministry en route to Galilee. (Later in Act 8:5–8, Phillip baptized many Samaritans. John the Baptist also baptized further in Samaria; see Jn 3:23.) Three major north-south routes traversed Judea and Galilee. The shortest went through Samaria. In AD 70, Josephus reported that Roman troops and some Galilean Jews traveled through Samaria, but only rarely would Judean Jews contaminate themselves by traveling on that impure ground (even Samaritan water and food was unclean). In any case, Jesus chose to go this way possibly to escape those seeking to kill Him or possibly following divine direction to teach there (Jn 5:18; 7:1).

Judeans had felt sharp animosity for the Samaritans for the past thousand years, ever since the kingdom of Israel split after King Solomon. Problems flared up worse than ever in the time between the Old and New Testaments. Historically, the Samaritans, or “Keepers [of the Law],” believed that they did not apostatize—the Jews did. Samaritans claimed their genealogy from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Levi, although they had intermarried with Canaanites, Assyrians, and other Gentiles. They rejected Jerusalem and worshiped on Mount Gerizim.

After returning from the Babylonian captivity around 530 BC, the Jews would not allow the Samaritans to help rebuild their temple without records of their pure genealogy (see Ezr 4; Neh 2:19–20; 4). In retribution, the Samaritans conspired with the foreign overlords of Palestine to prevent the Jews from rebuilding the walls and reconstructing Jerusalem. Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim in the fourth century BC (the time of Alexander the Great). But in 128 BC, angry Jews under the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple.¹⁸

In AD 51, a pilgrimage of Galileans traveling through Samaria was “roughly handled” by Samaritans, and at least one of the Galileans was killed. In retribution, a group of Jewish Zealots indiscriminately massacred throughout Samaria.¹⁹ The New Testament repeatedly mentions Samaritans. Some individuals are not identified as Samaritans, but contextual and literary clues point to their Samaritan background. Stephen is one such individual, and the fact that he quotes Samaritan scripture is evidence that he was one of the early Samaritan converts of the Lord (see Act 7).

Archeological digs across the Roman Empire have unearthed Samaritan synagogues.

The Samaritans' beliefs were all based on the Pentateuch:

1. Belief in one God
2. Acknowledgment of Moses as the greatest and final, or “seal,” of the prophets
3. Acceptance of the five books of Moses (Pentateuch or Torah) as the word of God and rejection of all other scripture
4. Belief that Mount Gerizim was the chosen place for God's temple (not Jerusalem); the temple that used to stand there was God's
5. Belief in a restorer who will come at the end of time to usher in a new dispensation, teach the law, and restore proper modes of worship
6. Expectation of a final day of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked

Jn 4:5–6. “Sychar, near . . . Jacob’s well.” Sychar (possibly ancient Shechem or Tel Askar today) was thirty miles north of Jerusalem. John’s reference to the location evokes important Old Testament memories of God telling Abraham this would become the promised land for his posterity; of Jacob buying his burial plot here; of Joseph being sold to the Ishmaelites and later buried here.²⁰ The reference to Jacob’s well should remind readers of all these important covenantal events. Some archeologists claim this well is outside of town and that the woman walked out of her way to get there, but opinions vary on the exact location.²¹

Jn 4:6. “Jesus . . . wearied with his journey, sat.” Jesus rests on the well while His disciples go into the city to buy bread for lunch. This is unusual because most upstanding Jews would never walk through Samaria, let alone eat anything prepared by someone who was ritually unclean as the Samaritans were. The whole thing would have been repulsive to a Pharisaic Jew from Jerusalem. But Jesus refuses to conform to the unkind social segregation and speaks to a *woman* (another act forbidden by Pharisees in Jerusalem—see Jn 4:27). Jesus is asking for a drink, planning to drink from her “unclean” pot. Culturally, this was disgusting.

Jn 4:6. “it was about the sixth hour.” The sixth hour is noon (the Jewish day was twelve hours, counted from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and the night was divided into three or four military watches depending on if it were a Jewish or Roman watch). This was not a common hour to go for water—one usually got water in the cool of the morning to use throughout the day. The Samaritan woman may have had a reason for wanting to get her water at a time when she could avoid others and potential ridicule. Some archeologists conclude she may have used a water source closer to the village.²²

John uses the number six symbolically in writing. Being one less than seven, this number often represents something that is not whole or not complete (see Jn 2:6; 12:1; Rev 13:18).

Living water

Jn 4:7. “Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink.” The imagery of this story is more poignant when we realize that water was perhaps the most key issue in Israel—politically, financially, socially, and physically. Eastern hospitality ensured service, even in Samaria, but it is very unusual in that culture for Jewish men to speak to any women. I think John emphasizes the woman’s low social status. He juxtaposes the story against that of Nicodemus, who was one of the highest in the Jewish social hierarchy.

Jn 4:9. “How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria?” The woman correctly states that the Jews share nothing with the Samaritans. John assumes that his audience knows that Jewish men were discouraged from speaking to women (including their wives). John repeatedly records Jesus tearing down harmful traditions. Here He attacks the gender and cultural segregation.

Jn 4:10–11. “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee.” The Lord’s response does not directly answer the woman’s question but causes her to stretch and consider a different level of understanding. She had questioned the propriety of the Lord’s request, so Jesus suggests that she ask for living water. Christ’s doctrine of living water replenishes our lives. In the Old Testament, “living water” is spring or running water and is greatly prized (without it, people were forced to drink old water stored in cisterns). It is often associated with the temple. The Babylonian Talmud equated Torah with water and divine revelation: “Oh ye who are thirsty come to the water.” The Mishnah instructs the reader to “drink in their [sages] words with thirst” (Aboth 1:4). The apocryphal literature from the time of the New Testament records, “Open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink . . . and I beheld a full cup and drank” (2 Esdras 14:38). In the Book of Mormon, living waters are affiliated with the tree of life, the love of God, and salvation (1 Ne 11:25). John uses a similar image with living revelation flowing from Christ.

Jn 4:12. “Art thou greater than our father Jacob?” Samaritans venerated the patriarchs. The irony of the woman’s response is the eternal position of Jesus in relation to His servant Jacob.

Jn 4:13–14. “the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” Jesus explains the higher meaning: not well water but life eternal (compare Jer 2:13; Isa 8:6).

Jn 4:15. “Sir, give me this water.” As soon as the woman shows a little interest (fulfilling Jesus’s challenge in verse 10), Jesus helps her understand the seriousness of this commitment. He opens the way for her to see His prophetic mantle and omniscience.

True worship of the Father

Jn 4:16–19. “thou hast had five husbands.” The woman had deliberately come to Jacob’s well to be away from others, and yet a total stranger has now humbled her. We see her humility and honesty in her ability to acknowledge that Jesus has the gift of prophecy. We see her developing faith in her embarrassment.

Jn 4:20. “this mountain . . . [or] Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”

After acknowledging Jesus as a prophet, the woman moves to the logical step of asking for Jesus’s prophetic insight on a doctrinal issue. We see evidence of her expanding faith as she asks Jesus whether the Samaritans or the Jews have the right place to worship. In Samaritan tradition, Mount Gerizim was the site of the true temple because it existed before Creation and it first appeared out of the waters. Additionally, Noah’s flood never covered it, and it would be the only place where one could survive at the end of the world. John again plays with dualism by contrasting a heavenly lens to an earthly lens (as he did previously with Nicodemus and changing the water to wine).

Jn 4:21–22. “Ye worship ye know not what.” Jesus’s response to the woman’s question begins the second discourse in John. He explains that the key issue in worshipping is not location but rather the god one worships. He also testifies that salvation comes through the Jews since the Messiah will come from Judah. Even though the Samaritans had not believed in a prophet since Moses, they believed and waited for a restorer-prophet or messiah.

Jn 4:23. “worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” Jesus expands the conversation to the manner of worship. True worshippers act in harmony with the spirit of truth. True worship comes from the condition of one’s heart. Jesus teaches the woman that He is the manifestation of the Father. In a sense, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, a social outcast, that she can worship in truth and be included in new Israel.

Jn 4:24 (JST). “For unto such hath God promised his Spirit.” The KJV reads, “God is Spirit,” but Joseph Smith’s additions help to separate the act of worshipping from the description of God. Father Raymond Brown sees John recording three different promises in this verse: “God gives Spirit, God gives truth, God gives love.”²³

Jn 4:25. “I know that Messiah cometh, . . . he will tell us all things.” The woman may not understand Jesus, but I see here that she is trying to and is exerting faith by confessing that she believes she will understand someday—when the promised Messiah comes.

Jn 4:26. “I that speak unto thee am he.” The timing of Jesus’s announcement of His eternal role is incredible. He shares the most valuable knowledge of His mission with the lowest of the low on the social hierarchy. She receives the simple beauty of truth.

Jn 4:27. “his disciples . . . marvelled that he talked with the woman.” When Jesus’s disciples return from the mile walk into town to buy their food, they are shocked to see Jesus speaking to a woman. They were tainted by their society’s perspective, which saw His behavior as inappropriate. Yet they will learn that Jesus tried to break incongruous social norms—such as segregating men and women.

Jn 4:28–29. “The woman then left her waterpot.” Even though the woman may not have intentionally left her pot, John’s inclusion of this detail adds a profound message. She left her cares of life, worldliness, and dead water. What do we need to leave behind in order to worship and focus on receiving

the living water? She then goes back to her town to share the good news of the gospel with her neighbors. (The word “men” in verse 28 is translated “people” in most modern translations.)

Jn 4:31–34. “*Master, eat. . . I have meat to eat that ye know not of.*” Just like the woman, the disciples need to expand their understanding of Jesus’s words. The Lord uses the same imagery from Deu 8:3: “Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord.” The disciples focused on their immediate errand and did not catch Jesus’s higher message. In Early Modern English, *meat* was used to refer to food of any kind, so the Lord here expresses that He has been spiritually fed in the disciples’ absence: “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me” (Jn 4:34).

Jn 4:35–37. “*the fields . . . are white already to harvest . . . [gather] fruit unto life eternal.*” In the Gezer calendar from 10 BC, four months separate sowing and harvesting. But in Jesus’s messianic age, the harvest is ripe the same day the seed is sown. Jesus’s proverb may also offer a calendar date for this event: barley is harvested in May, wheat in June, and all the other crops in September, so perhaps this took place sometime between February and May (probably just after Passover; see Jn 2:23). Jesus, however, harvests through missionary work; His food is doing God’s will.

Jn 4:38 (JST). “*the prophets have laboured, and ye have entered into their labours.*” Jesus teaches His Apostles about their new assignment—joining forces with the prophets of old.

Conversion of Samaritan townspeople

Jn 4:39–42. “*He abode there two days. And many more believed.*” Even though Jewish courts of law did not accept a woman’s witness, the Samaritans believe an adulterous woman’s story. The townspeople follow her en masse to Jacob’s well and invite Jesus to stay and teach them. They are receptive, and John records the townspeople’s response like a Greek chorus singing, “We believe.” First the people believe because of the woman, and then they receive their own witness (perhaps the same process we go through in receiving a witness). Samaria becomes one of the first branches of Christianity in the New Testament. After two days in Samaria, Jesus proceeds to Cana of Galilee.

Healing the nobleman’s son

Jn 4:43–54. “*Jesus came again into Cana of Galilee.*” John carefully chooses only seven miracles for his record of the hundreds that Jesus performed. It seems intentional that he mentioned the location of Cana again. Two miracles would take place there on the third day, and both tested the faith of the petitioner.

Jn 4:44. “*a prophet hath no honour in his own country.*” John cites Jesus’s statement in a different context than the Synoptic Gospels do, but it applies to multiple settings.²⁴

Jn 4:46. “*a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum.*” Jesus returns to Cana to learn of a sick child in Capernaum (see Mk 1:21). To review, Jesus established His base of ministry in the small city of Capernaum on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. This vibrant fishing harbor was

home to Peter’s wife’s family. It lay near the intersection of two major Roman roads heading north to south and east to west—which brought plenty of business to the Roman tax collectors stationed there.

Children falling ill was the norm in the ancient world. Only half of the children who survived their first weeks lived to age ten. The kind father felt a desperate urgency to save his son. The Greek word translated as “nobleman” is also used by Josephus as the title for officers of the guard for Herod Antipas. We assume, then, that this nobleman served as an officer for Herod Antipas. He could have heard about Jesus at the court, possibly when John the Baptist preached to Herod Antipas. (We know Herod Antipas’s half-brother is mentioned as one of the Christians in Act 13:1.) This nobleman may have been Chuza, Joanna’s husband and “Herod’s steward” (Lk 8:3).

The nobleman’s faith is evident in his willingness to leave his dying son to travel over twenty miles (approximately a seven-to-eight-hour journey) to find the healer. When asked to perform the more than forty miracles mentioned in the New Testament, Jesus never refused. Once He paused, testing the woman of Syria, but He *always* heals, consoles, and responds.

Jn 4:48–50. “*Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.*” Jesus speaks in the plural, meaning He addresses more than just the father. The beseeching nobleman does not take offense but continues to trust. Proximity does not seem to matter; all we need is faith. This tears down the false tradition that healing could only occur within arm’s length.

Jn 4:50–53. “*thy son liveth. And the man believed.*” The healed son and the nobleman’s household also believed. The timing of the healing was part of the miracle. John uses numbers to emphasize his message: the *seventh hour* the boy was made whole. John uses the number seven (seven miracles, seven sermons) most often to symbolize wholeness, completion, or perfection.

Book of Mormon Additions

In the Book of Mormon, we find common doctrines and principles that are taught in Jn 2 and 3. For example, the discussion on being born again in Jn 3:3–5 is found in an expanded view in Mosi 27:25, Alm 5:49, and Alm 7:14. As you compare these verses on being born again side by side, you can see the extra depth and insight found in the Book of Mormon passages. The same is true with similar themes, such as purity, cleansing, and baptism.

Notes

1 The seven miracles mentioned in John are the wedding at Cana (2:1); healing the official’s son (4:46); healing the paralytic (5:1); multiplying loaves (6:1); walking on water (6:19); healing a blind man (9:1); and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1). The seven discourses during His public ministry (that is, before His Last Supper) are Nicodemus (3:3–21); Samaritan woman at the well (4:10–26); Jesus’s work is the Father’s work (5:19–47); bread of life (6:26–58); know the doctrine (7:16–29); light of the world (8:12–59); and good shepherd (10:1–18).

2 John uses the number seven to represent completion, wholeness, or perfection throughout the book of Revelation, and we find the number six in this miracle and combined to be 666 as the devil's number in Rev 13:8.

3 Mishnah, Ketuboth 5:2: "A virgin is granted twelve months wherein to provide for herself." See also Ken M. Campbell, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 186. W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 7: "The penalty for fornication with one person while betrothed to another was death for both guilty parties."

4 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit MI: MacMillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Marriage, Marriage Ceremony and Legal Aspects."

5 Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 178: "There are many stories about rabbis who make feasts for their sons (but almost never for their daughters), often at the home of other rabbis." For more details on Jewish weddings at the time, see chapter 4 in Lynne Hilton Wilson, *Christ's Emancipation of New Testament Women* (Palo Alto, CA: Good Sound Publishing, 2015).

6 Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet, *Studies in Scriptures*, vol. 5, *The Gospels* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1986), 113.

7 Raymond Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict, 1988), 28–29.

8 Gen 3:15: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head." Paul refers to Jesus as the "second man [*adam*]" (1 Cor 15:47).

9 2 Baruch 29:5, in Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 105: "The earth also shall yield its fruit ten-thousandfold and on each vine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch shall produce a thousand clusters, each cluster produce a thousand grapes, and each grape produce a cor [about 120 gallons] of wine."

10 Jonathan J. Price, "The Jewish Population of Jerusalem," *The Jewish Revolt Against Rome: Interdisciplinary Perspectives—Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism* 154 (2011): 410. King Agrippa counted the kidneys from the slaughtered lambs and claimed there were "twice the number of those who departed from Egypt," or 1,200,000. Joachim Jeremias estimated that 180,000 people could squeeze within the old walls of Jerusalem, with probably 125,000 of them as transient pilgrims. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1969), 83. Josephus referred to a census taken in Jerusalem at Passover by Nero's proconsul Cestius Gallus (who died in AD 67). The numbers sound exaggerated, but he cited reliable Roman sources that claim the Passovers in AD 63 and 66 had 255,600 animals slaughtered for over two and a half million Jewish participants. Josephus, *Belium Judaicum*, 6.422ff and 2.280. The Mishnah numbers are higher (Pesachim 64b).

11 Mishnah, Kelim 1:6–9. Although the Jewish Mishnah was compiled by rabbis after the destruction of the temple (AD 68–70), it records what was said and done at the time of the second temple, which overlapped with the New Testament.

12 Tobit is an apocryphal book written centuries before Jesus. Tobit 14:5 reads: “But God will again have mercy on them, and God will bring them back into the land of Israel; and they will rebuild the temple of God, but not like the first one until the period when the times of fulfillment shall come. After this they all will return from their exile and will rebuild Jerusalem in splendor; and in it the temple of God will be rebuilt, just as the prophets of Israel have said concerning it.”

13 Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet, *Studies in Scriptures*, vol. 5, *The Gospels* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1986), 191.

14 H. Dean Garrett, ed., *New Testament and the Latter-day Saints* (Orem, UT: Randall Book, 1987), 110.

15 C. Wilfred Griggs, ed., *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 215–240.

16 Raymond Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict, 1988), 35.

17 Mt 4:12; 1:14; Mk 1:14; Lk 4:14.

18 For more history of the Samaritans, see Bible Dictionary, “Samaritans,” online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

19 F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 342.

20 See Gen 12:6–7; 33:18; 35; 37; 50:12–14; Deu 11:26–30; 27:12, 13; 27:4; Jos 24:32. See also Jdg 8–9 on Abimelech at Shechem.

21 *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), s.v. “Shechem.”

22 Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: John, Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 2877.

23 Raymond Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 37.

24 See Mt 4:13–17; Mk 1:14–15; Lk 4:14–15.