

The Wedding at Cana



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Context

Even though we are in Year C of the liturgical cycle, the first gospel proclaimed in Year C-Ordinary Time is taken from the Gospel according to John – the wedding at Cana. In many ways it is considered a type of “proto” ministry before the very public beginning at the synagogue in Capernaum. In the ancient lectionaries of the church, [John 2:1–11](#) was read on Epiphany, a practice carried over into the Eastern church. In the modern Common and Catholic lectionaries, this text is read at the beginning of the season following Epiphany. In Catholic circles this is labeled “Ordinary Time.” In the Common Lectionary the celebration appears as the “Second Sunday After Epiphany.”

The series of gospel selections from this Sunday into the Season of Lent are, in a way, like the Epiphany in that they reveal more and more about the person of Jesus of Nazareth, ever presenting more witness that this is the promised Messiah. The recounting of the transformation of water into wine is noteworthy at the head of the sequence of readings, because it tells the story of the unprecedented grace of Jesus, it reveals the glory of Jesus, and anticipates his ultimate moment of glorification, his death, resurrection, and ascension. So far, this addresses the liturgical placements of the reading.

With regards to the context in the Gospel of John, the account of the “Wedding at Cana” is placed immediately after the Prologue of the Gospel. The Prologue, “*In the beginning...*,” presents many of the major themes and motifs which reappear later in the gospel. The Prologue proclaims Jesus as the preexistent and incarnate Word of God through whom all things were created (1:3,10), who “*made his dwelling among us,*” (v.14), and who has revealed the Father to us. The rest of the first chapter forms the introduction to the gospel proper and consists of the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus (there is no baptism of Jesus in this gospel—John simply points him out as the Lamb of God), followed by stories of the call of the first disciples, in which various titles said of Jesus in the early church are presented.

The Gospel according to John is a highly symbolic writing. A good monographic [overview of the Gospel](#) is available on the US Catholic Bishops website – and is well worth the time to review. However, let us also review some of the key points

Signs. The larger Johannine gospel narrative contains a series of “signs” (*semeion*) the gospel’s word for the miraculous deeds of Jesus. The writer is primarily interested in the significance of these deeds, and so interprets them for the reader by various reflections, narratives, and discourses. The first sign of seven is the transformation of water into wine at Cana (2:1–11); this represents the fulfillment of the Jewish ceremonial washings and symbolizes the entire creative and transforming work of Jesus. The second sign, the cure of the royal official’s son (4:46–54) simply by the word of Jesus at a distance, signifies the power of Jesus’ life-giving word. The third sign, the cure of the paralytic at the pool with five porticoes in chap. 5, continues the theme of water offering newness of life. In the preceding chapter, to the woman at the well in Samaria Jesus had offered living water springing up to eternal life, a symbol of the revelation that Jesus brings; here Jesus’ life-giving word replaces the water of the pool that failed to bring life. John 6 contains two signs, the multiplication of loaves and the walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. These signs are connected much as the manna and the crossing of the Red Sea are in the Passover narrative and symbolize a new exodus. The multiplication of the loaves is interpreted for the reader by the discourse that follows, where the bread of life is used first as a figure for the revelation of God in Jesus and then for the Eucharist. After a series of dialogues reflecting Jesus’ debates with the Jewish authorities at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7 and 8, the sixth sign is presented in John 9, the sign of the young man born blind. This is a narrative illustration of the theme of conflict in the preceding two chapters; it proclaims the triumph of light over darkness, as Jesus is presented as the Light of the world. This is interpreted by a narrative of controversy between the Pharisees and the young man who had been given his sight by Jesus, ending with a discussion of spiritual blindness and spelling out the symbolic meaning of the cure. And finally, the seventh sign, the raising of Lazarus in chap. 11, is the climax of signs. Lazarus is presented as a token of the real life that Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, who will now ironically be put to death because of his gift of life to Lazarus, will give to all who believe in him once he has been raised from the dead. [*Catholic Study Bible – Reading Guide, 439*]

The New Creation Week. Many scholars have noted that repeats the theme of Creation as he begins the narrative of the Gospel. Where the synoptic gospels focus on the events at the beginning of Jesus’ public life, John seems to assume that the reader is familiar with those accounts and calls our attention to the ways in which people respond in faith to him – yet, at the same time, unlike the other gospel writers, places the beginning events on a timeline. The beginning is the testimony of John the Baptist (v.15) On the “next day” (John 1:29), the Baptist testifies to the more powerful, promised baptism of the Son of God. The Baptist has heralded the Anointed One, now he reveals the him to the world. The first response

in faith comes on the “next day” (John 1:34) where John the Baptist continues his testimony (*maryteria*) to the Son of God. Upon seeing Jesus, the Baptist exclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” Upon hearing this, two of the Baptist's disciples (Andrew and John) are moved by grace to approach Jesus. The “next day” (v.43), Philip and Nathanael are added as disciples. “On the third day...” [following and after the 4th day]] (John 2:1) we find ourselves, according to the Johannine imagery, on the seventh day at the wedding in Cana. It is believed that John is outlining a new “creation week” when on that 7th day this new creation week reaches its climax – the unveiling of the public life of the Anointed One of God.

Possibilities of New Life. Gail O'Day (*John*, The New Interpreter's Bible, 535) neatly provides an overview of the larger context in the section following the Prologue and this “new creation” and possibility of new life:

John 2:1-5:47 is the first realization of the “greater things” promised by Jesus (1:51). The events of this unit – the two “signs” (2:1-11; 4:46-54), the cleansing of the Temple (2:13-22), Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus (3:1-21) and the Samaritan woman (4:4-42), the renewed witness of John (3:22-36), the healing of the man beside the pool (5:1-9) -- all demonstrate the authority of Jesus' words and works. Jews and non-Jews, men and women all see and hear the “greater things” Jesus says and does. These chapters contain the full spectrum of responses to Jesus, from the faith of the disciples (2:11) to Jesus' rejection by the Jews (5:16-18). These chapters establish the central themes and tensions of the entire Gospel: the possibilities of new life and faith made available through the words and works of Jesus, and the decisions individuals are called to in the face of those possibilities.

First Century weddings. Our information about the details of marriage ceremonies (as distinct from marriage regulations) in first-century Judaism is very sketchy. There are later references and details about weddings, and so if one assumes the customs did not change a great deal, then perhaps we know more.

We know that marriage was preceded by a betrothal that was much more binding than our modern-day engagement. It included a solemn pledging of the couple, each to the other, and was so binding that to break it divorce proceedings were necessary. At the conclusion of the betrothal period the ceremony began with the bridegroom and his friends making their way in procession to the bride's home. This was often done at night, when there could be a torchlight procession (such seems to be the case with the “Wise and Foolish Virgins” account.) Undoubtedly there were speeches and expressions of goodwill before the bride and groom went in procession to the groom's house, where the wedding banquet was held. It can be assumed that there was a religious ceremony, but we actually have no details. The processions and the feast are the principal items of which we have knowledge. The feast was prolonged, and might last as long as a week (cf. Judg. 14:12).

Wedding and Wine Imagery in Scripture. The image of a *gamos* = “wedding [banquet]” is used in synoptic gospel parables, as Stoffregen points out:

- "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son" (Mt 22:2-12)
- The kingdom of heaven will be like this....while the ten maidens went to buy more oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut (Mt 25:10)
- "be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet" (Lk 12:36)
- "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet,... (Lk 14:8).
- In Revelation we have the image of the "marriage [supper]" of the Lamb (19:7, 9).

Also from Stoffregen, “Wine was very important. It was the normal beverage at meals -- and especially at festivals. Wine was a symbol of joy. One ancient rabbi stated, ‘Without wine there is no joy.’ At the same

time, drunkenness was a great disgrace throughout scriptures. I don't believe that Jesus intended all the guests to drink up all the wine that night. There was enough wine to satisfy a large number of guests throughout the rest of the wedding feast week.”

“Although the Greek word *oinos* is not used in any of the eucharist accounts -- they all use ‘cup’ and the synoptics also use the phrase ‘fruit of the vine’ -- the Cana miracle and the multiplication of the loaves early in church history became symbols for the bread and wine of the eucharist.”

“In the OT, an abundance of good wine is an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age: On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, (Is 25:6a); The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it (Amos 9:13cd); In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk (Joel 3:18a)”

Minimizing miracles. In many 20th century commentaries, I am always surprised by the tendency among some scripture scholars to seek to explain away the miraculous. More than one (but thankfully not a lot) offers that Jesus, realizing people were well inebriated already, simply ordered the jar filled with water, and then the water taken to the master of the banquet who enters into the merriment while not wanting to embarrass the bridegroom, proclaims this wine to be the best. The bridegroom becomes a silent conspirator as the word spreads – and thus the miracle is born of rumor. Another avenue by which the miraculous is minimized is the suggestion that John adapted an Ancient Near East (ANE) legend. Similarly, several German scholars adopted the position that John had juxtaposed the Cana account with rites associated with the Greek god Dionysos. Gail O’Day [539] writes:

“The central act in the story of the wedding at Cana is the miraculous transformation of water into wine. The contemporary reader, living in a rational, scientifically oriented age, may find this miracle puzzling at best, embarrassing and offensive at worst. Interpreters, therefore, often are tempted to talk around the miracle by focusing on other aspects of the text or to explain away the miracle by focusing on the differences between the biblical worldview and the modern worldview. In preaching this text, however, the preacher should not get caught up in an explanation or apology (just as the preacher should never succumb to the temptation to explain the resurrection). The essence of any miracle is that it shatters conventional explanations and expectations, and this miracle is no exception. It is incumbent upon the preacher not to diminish the extraordinariness of this story in any way. The christological revelation of this story must not be reduced to a discussion about the facticity of the miracle. Contemporary hearers of this story must be allowed to struggle with what this miracle says about Jesus.”

Commentary

¹ *On the third day there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.* ² *Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.* ³ *When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.”*

The very sparse opening of this narrative calls a host of questions to mind. Who is getting married? Why is it that Mary, Jesus, and the disciples are all there? How is it that the wine runs short? [...with only good humor intended, some suggest that as soon as the disciples showed up the wine ran out!] All these points and questions are important to the modern mind, but John is interested in the sign (*semieion*) of the story: water miraculously transformed into wine.

The problem is simply stated: “*They have no more wine.*” This unfortunate turn of events brings to the fore several problems. The obvious and stated problem in our text is that the wine gives out. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*) suggest the great dishonor this creates:

The fact that the family hosting the wedding has run out of wine threatens a serious loss of honor. Friends, especially those from the inner group of wedding celebrants, usually sent gifts such as wine ahead of time to be available for the wedding celebration. Lack of wine thus implies lack of friends. [66]

and later:

By providing wine for the wedding celebration, Jesus rescues the honor of the bridegroom. Traditional Western theological comment that Jesus here usurps the role of host (thus turning this into a sacramental story) misses a key point in the story. By providing wine for this threatened family, Jesus honors the bridegroom. [69]

In the face of all this, Mary approaches Jesus with the information of the situation

Perhaps less obvious is the problem that Jesus' hour has not yet come.

Mary and Jesus. ⁴ (And) Jesus said to her, “Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵ His mother said to the servers, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Jesus' mother asks nothing explicit of him in v. 3, but his response in v. 4 makes clear that her words carried an implied request. Jesus' mother assumed her son would somehow attend to the problem. Why Mary would make such a request is the stuff of speculation. The suggestions range from her desire to save the groom embarrassment, forestalling a legal liability (see notes on v.3), her awareness of Jesus' larger role, or any host of reasons. It seems safe to say, Mary's motivation is not a concern of John the gospel writer. His concern is Jesus, his salvific role, and the meaning of the miraculous sign that occurred.

To our modern ear, Jesus' response seems a bit “cold.” The literal translation seems less so: “Woman, what concern that to you and to me?” Jesus will often use the address “Woman” in speaking to women (e.g., Mt 15:28, Luke 22:57, John 4:21), although addressing one's mother in the same way is unusual. As many have noted, it does create a distance between Jesus and his mother, downplaying the family relationship. The same separation and disengagement is present in the literal “what concern that to you and to me?” Gail O'Day [537] points out:

The reference to Jesus' hour in v. 4b explains why Jesus adopts a posture of disengagement toward his mother. While “hour” (ὥρα *hōra*) is used in the Fourth Gospel to indicate the passing of time (e.g., 1:39), it also is used metaphorically to refer to the time of eschatological fulfillment (e.g., 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28) and, most characteristically, to refer to the hour of Jesus' glorification—i.e., his death, resurrection, and ascension (see 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). Jesus' reference to his hour thus establishes a link between what Jesus does during his ministry and his glorification. Mary's concerns (v. 3) must be placed in the larger context of Jesus' death and resurrection. Verse 4 thus points the reader beyond this particular story to a broader theological context by asserting Jesus' freedom from all human control. Not even his mother has a privileged claim on him. Jesus' actions will be governed by the hour set by God, not by anyone else's time or will. Verse 4 also points beyond the immediate context by alluding to Jesus' passion. Any act of self-revelation by Jesus during his ministry is of a piece with Jesus' self-revelation at his “hour.”

All that being said, Mary is still his mother. Apparently she did not take Jesus' words as harsh and perhaps understands that their relationship is changing because of a larger purpose. But she also understands that Jesus was not aware of the problem of the wine. She simply turns to the servers and tells them “Do whatever he tells you.” These are the last words Mary speaks in this Gospel. They are excellent advice for anyone who would call themselves disciples.

The Jars of Water. ⁶ Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus told them, “Fill the jars with water.” So they filled them to the brim.

The gospel provides an interesting amount of detail: the number of jars, their composition, purpose and size. The half dozen represented a good store of water for carrying out the kind of purification of which we read in Mark 7:1–4. Before the meal servants would have poured water over the hands of every guest. “Stone jars, in contrast to earthen jars, are free from the possibility of levitical impurity (Lev 11:33). The ‘rites of Jewish purification’ probably refers to the ritual cleansing of hands at meals (cf. John 3:25). Even taking into account the possibility of a large gathering at the wedding, the quantity of stone jars and their capacity is unusual. Everything about v. 6 is overdrawn, from the description of the jars to the amount of narrative space the Evangelist devotes to the description. The narrative technique mirrors the size of the jars in order to emphasize the extravagance of the miracle that is about to take place.” (O’Day, 537-38)

A Miraculous Sign. ⁸ Then he told them, “Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter.” So they took it. ⁹ And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from (although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, “Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now.”

We are told what happens before the miracle and what follows, but not the miraculous transformation itself. The jars from which the new wine is drawn were filled to the brim. Since each jar was 20-30 gallons, there is suddenly an astonishing amount of wine available for the wedding celebration. The extravagance is at the heart of the sign John wants us to consider. It is this extravagance which will be on display in the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6) and points to the superabundance of the gifts available through Jesus.

What is also presented is a pivotal question in this Gospel – the question of where Jesus’ gifts come from. It is asked of the wine, the Spirit (3:8), the Living Water (4:11), and the Bread of Life (6:5). The headwaiter, who was responsible for the wine, should have known, but did not. In some ways this character will prefigure Nicodemus, a leader of Israel, who also should have known where Jesus’ gifts come from and their deeper meaning. All those reported “in charge” are clueless as to the source of this superabundance; yet the servants know.

O’Day [358] also points out the quality of wine and its significance: “The steward’s initial words to the bridegroom sound like a hospitality maxim, although no exact parallel has been found in other documents from the period. His final words, “you have kept the good wine until now,” have a double meaning. They work on the level of the story line, but the steward’s words also inadvertently witness to the deeper truth. He attributes the good wine to the beneficence of the bridegroom whose wedding is being celebrated, when in fact the wine derives from the beneficence of Jesus, the true bridegroom (3:29).”

Does this miraculous sign have Eucharistic overtones? One has to acknowledge that the account is fully comprehensible without considering whether such allusions are present. That being said, a Eucharistic interpretation is consistent with the larger theme of the miracle – a superabundant gift available through Jesus. As many commentators have noted, wine (John 2) and bread (John 6) hold central positions in the Johannine narrative.

Believing. ¹¹ Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him.

O’Day [539-40] insightfully notes: “The contrast between the responses of the steward and the disciples can help the contemporary Christian interpret and appropriate this text. Modern Christians distort and oversimplify when they assume that first-century people would have more immediately embraced the miraculous. The steward is perplexed by the sudden appearance of wine of such quality. He summons the bridegroom, the host of the party, because he assumes that the wine can be explained by conventional reasoning. He attributes the wine to the unprecedented hospitality of this man, but this miracle cannot be explained by an irregularity in etiquette. Rational explanations miss the mark. Jesus’ disciples, by

contrast, see in the miraculous abundance of good wine a sign of God's presence among them. They recognize the revelation of God in the prodigious flow of wine, and they recognize Jesus as the one who brought God to them. The miracle of the wine shatters the boundaries of their conventional world, and the disciples are willing to entertain the possibility that this boundary breaking marks the inbreaking of God. The steward tried to reshape the miracle to fit his former categories, while the disciples allowed their categories to be reshaped by this extraordinary transformation of water into wine, and so they "believed in him" (2:11) as the revealer of God

Notes

2:1 on the third day: It may be significant for St John that the wedding feast occurs on the 3rd of 7 days. In Nb 19 these are the days on which the ritually impure were sprinkled with water so that they were (a) rejoined to the people of Israel and (b) could re-enter the Temple. Without this rite of purification they were cut off from chosen people of God. This view is supported when in John 2:6 we are told that the six stone jars were for the Jewish rites of purification. But what purification is needed here? Perhaps John is connecting this event to the baptism of John. That baptism was a call of repentance to Israel as a means of purifying themselves for the arrival of the Consolation of Israel; for a new covenantal relationship with God.

wedding: gamos – In the first century, a typical wedding feast lasted at least seven days. This wedding may have been its third day -- so there are a number of days left for the celebration. The image of a wedding [banquet] is used in synoptic parables. **Cana:** The place name Cana is mentioned in the NT only in John 2:1, 11; 4:46 as the place where Jesus miraculously changed water into wine (4:46ff.) and healed the son of a royal official (according to v.47 Cana was in the mountains above Capernaum) and in 21:2 as the home of Nathanael.

the mother of Jesus was there: Some commentaries speculate on the phrase "was there." Most commentaries seem to look ahead to v.2 and the "also invited" as indicating, Mary, who was not present in the narrative to this point is simply now located in the story and was an invited guest. Others wonder about the distinction and speculate that Mary was "there" in the capacity of service rather than a guest – and hence become aware of the problem.

2:3 wine: In the OT, an abundance of good wine is an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age. **There is no more wine:** In the ANE there is a strong element of reciprocity surrounding weddings – even to the degree that legal action can be brought to bear against guests who fail to bring suitable gifts and hosts who fail to provide appropriate celebrations. *Mishnah B.Bat* 9 addresses some of this.

2:4 "Woman, how does your concern affect me?": literally, "What is this to me and to you?" This is typically a Hebrew expression of either hostility (Judges 11:12; 2 Chron 35:21; 1 Kings 17:18) or denial of common interest (Hosea 14:9; 2 Kings 3:13). In Mark 1:24; 5:7 it is used by demons to speak to Jesus. This verse may seek to show that Jesus did not work miracles to help his family and friends, as in the apocryphal gospels.

2:6 twenty to thirty gallons: literally, "two or three measures"; the Attic liquid measure contained 39.39 liters. The vast quantity recalls prophecies of abundance in the last days; cf Amos 9:13-14; Hosea 14:7; Jeremiah 31:12.

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