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A Crisis of Wine and Joy in Cana

A Contextual Reflection on John 2:1-11

A Long Time Favorite Passage Jesus' first *sign* (miracle) of turning water into wine as recorded in John's second "chapter" has long been one of my favorites. I was a member of a fraternity when I was first drawn to Christ in my college days. Back then it struck me as really neat that in this passage Jesus "kept the party going." Now that was something a frat guy could relate to! Forty-five years later, the marriage feast at Cana is still one of my favorite passages, but for very different reasons. To take this tight rose bud of a passage (from a Western perspective) and allow its intricate petals to open up in full flower (from a Middle Eastern perspective), we need the context John always assumed his readers would know and understand, e.g., background regarding Cana; marriage feasts; village issues of shame, honor and reciprocal hospitality; ritual purification; as well as the Hebrew significance of wine.

Cana Have you ever wondered why Jesus is even in Cana attending a wedding? Geography may offer some insight. Jesus grew up in Nazareth and based His Galilean ministry in Capernaum. While Nazareth is only about 17 miles from Capernaum as the crow flies and because of the often-hilly/mountainous terrain in the Galilee region, you can't always walk the way the crow flies. Thus, the preferred 30-mile Nazareth-Capernaum walking route leaves Nazareth heading north toward Sepphoris and continues northward toward the Beth Netofa valley. Upon reaching this valley, the route then heads east eventually reaching the shores of the Sea of Galilee before moving up the western shoreline to Capernaum.¹ Eighteen miles per day of walking was considered a good day's journey. Hence, Cana, located on the north central slope of the Beth Netofa valley, becomes a convenient over-night stopping place for any two-day walk from Capernaum to Nazareth, and vice versa.

With this geographical context in mind, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus would have repeatedly overnights in Cana when traveling back and forth between Capernaum and Nazareth during the first thirty years of His life. Thus, He most likely either has friends or relatives in this town. The fact that Jesus is welcomed at this wedding feast along with His brand new disciples suggests that He (and Mary) are more than casual acquaintances of the host family. Such a social relationship also raises the possibility of reciprocal hospitality issues that may have implications for more fully understanding Jesus' words and actions.

Seven Days of Public Ministry Reading John's first "chapter" narrative closely, we find that Jesus has just commenced his public ministry. In fact in the way that John chooses to craft his narrative, it appears that Jesus arrives at this wedding feast in Cana on the seventh day² (there is an implied Sabbath in John's seven-day sequence) since being immersed by John the Baptist in the Jordan to initiate His public ministry.³ The symbolism of the seventh day, the Hebrew number signifying Sabbath rest as well as suggesting both a "completion" motif and a (new) creation motif, would not have been lost on John's Jewish audience. Jesus, now a rabbi with disciples, completes His first week of public ministry in John's narrative by attending a wedding, a time of great celebration and joy. Since the church is destined to be His bride, and Scripture will later talk about the *wedding celebration of the Lamb*,⁴ both add foreshadowing "completion" significance to this first *sign* encounter.

Wedding Feast Marriages are typically arranged in this culture. When two families settle on the marriage details, a betrothal contract is drawn up specifying the dowry and other financial considerations.⁵ The completion of this contract means that the young man and the girl are considered legally married even though they will continue to live apart. Their marriage will not be consummated until the girl becomes a woman when she starts to menstruate (typically) around age thirteen (remember, procreation is the role of women in this culture). Then a multi-day marriage feast will be announced to friends and relatives. As part of managing and pacing the marriage feast festivities, a good steward will serve the best wine on the first day of the event when palates are the most discerning. That leaves the less-than-best wine (often diluted with water to “stretch” it) for the latter days of this celebration process when palates are dulled (you can supply your own interpretation here!)

The Social Contract This is the Middle East. That means the host has certain social obligations with regard to his clan and the community (often one and the same) concerning this marriage feast, one of which is reciprocal hospitality. For example, if last year I invited you to my son’s marriage feast, fed you lavishly and provided you with all the wine you cared to drink, it is a given that you will (and must) do the same for me when I attend your son’s marriage feast. Failure to respond in kind comes with severe social consequences:

- The marriage would forever be branded a disgrace; the host family shamed and the newly married couple would carry a social stigma of shame with them for the rest of their days, as would their children and their children’s children. Who would ever want to arrange a marriage with any of their offspring, the legacy of such a disastrous marriage feast!
- Whatever joy has being toasted, experienced and celebrated during the feast up to this point would be immediately transformed to anger, scorn and derision.
- Some commentators suggest that those other families who had previously hosted this family at their respective marriage feasts would have grounds for a lawsuit for damages if they were not treated in kind.⁶ That’s how severe a breach of the reciprocal hospitality code this would be.
- Any steward associated with such a marriage feast disaster would never work another wedding in that community again.

Wine and Joy Marriage feasts were intended to be joyous occasions and in the Hebrew worldview wine was the personification of joy. The Old Testament Scriptures speak to wine being the symbol of joy. Judges 9:13, Psalm 104:15 and Isaiah 55:1 typify this symbolism. Therefore to run out of wine is to run out of joy, both literally and figuratively. Putting yourself in this wedding couple’s place, how would you like to be known for the rest of your days as the only couple in the village’s long institutional memory whose marriage celebration ended up in a joyless state?!

Those Ritual Purification Vessels Ritual purification was a way of life in observant Judaism. The Pharisees and their rabbis had created an elaborate set of rules regarding what constituted ritual purity and ritual impurity (the most extensive Division of the Mishnah is *TOROROTH* – “cleannesses”). As pertains to this marriage feast, these ritual purification jars would be placed near the entrance to the room where the celebration was to be centered. As guests arrived, each would be ritually purified before eating by having a prescribed amount of water taken from one of the jars and poured over the guest’s hands.⁷

Pouring was essential as the water needs to be “moving” in order to serve the purpose of ritually “carrying away” your impurities. This moving water, technically called “living water,” is foundational to the complex hydraulic systems embodied in many of the much larger ritual purification bath systems (*mikvot* and *mikve*)⁸ in the synagogues and in the Temple to carry away all the impurities of those who immersed. The whole notion of ceremonial efficaciousness of “moving” or *living* water factors into the significance and meaning of the *sign* Jesus performs here in Cana and is also an important part of Jesus’ discussion in John 4 with the Samaritan woman at the well.

An Abundance of Fine Wine! Note that we are given the capacity of these jars – *each holding from twenty to thirty gallons* – and are told by John that Jesus instructed that they be *filled to the brim*. Therefore the collective capacity of these jars lies somewhere between 120-180 gallons. Let’s assume 150 gallons as an

average. By way of comparison, the standard-sized wine bottle used today contains 750 ml. To keep things simple between metric and English measurements, let's consider 750 ml to be $\frac{3}{4}$ of a quart. That means that Jesus is going to create 800 bottles of fine wine for use in the latter stages of this wedding feast! Ever been to a wedding reception where the host brought out 800 bottles of vintage wine toward the end of the evening? With this specificity, John wants us to appreciate the enormity of the amount of fine wine that Jesus created. To these new disciples of Jesus, accustomed to the ascetic nature of John the Baptist, this was a very different kind of experience!

Straight to the Point! John knows his early Jewish readers would understand the entire context just put back into place, so he gets right to the point by observing that *when the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to Him, "They have no more wine."* Mary has just informed Jesus of the looming social "crisis." Judging by the response of the steward in verses 9 & 10, he is not aware of this crisis and presumably neither is the host, the wedding couple, nor most of the guests. Jesus responds by saying, *Woman, why do you involve me? ...my hour has not yet come.*

Jesus' Response to His Mother Much has been made of Jesus' response to the information that Mary gave Him. Some have seen it as "put down." Others see in it a declaration of His (now) independence from her direction, as He is thirty and a full-fledged adult. Others have pointed out that the Jewish idiom being used here seems to suggest something akin to "what is that to you and me"⁹ and that *woman* is a term of respect. All these interpretations seem to be inadequate in harmonizing Jesus' words with His resultant actions.

Approaching Jesus' statement from the contextual perspective of Middle Eastern social reciprocity may help illuminate His seemingly puzzling response. It would appear that Mary was simply informing Jesus of a fact – there is now a wine (and therefore joy) crisis at this marriage feast and this host is a friend. Thus, she is not so much making a demand of Jesus as she is reminding Him of their/His social reciprocal hospitality obligations. It is reasonable to assume that in bringing this information to Jesus, Mary knows He can intervene to make a difference. She can still recall the Angel Gabriel's message to her as well as Simeon's words in the Temple. She remembers the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple going toe-to-toe with the finest religious minds of the day.¹⁰ She knows He is the Lord's Messiah and has the capacity to intervene in this situation to keep these friends (or maybe they are even extended family) from public shame for the rest of their days.

It is also reasonable to assume that Mary is now very much aware that Jesus has just publicly initiated His messianic ministry, e.g. He now has disciples, and therefore might be ready to perform a miracle or two. Note that Mary is not put off nor deterred by however Jesus' (tongue in cheek?) response is understood by her. Rather, she seems to continue to assume that, of course, He will do something about this sudden crisis of shame for these dear friends who have (most likely) extended us hospitality in the past. This mandatory reciprocal hospitality theme is picked up by Jesus in the parable of the "Midnight Visitor" where if you have the capacity to meet a crisis of hospitality, you must respond or be shamed.¹¹ Thus she confidently says to the servants, and I like the way that Wuest translates her words, *whatever he says to you, do it with dispatch.*¹² It's as if she is saying to these servants, "Time is of the essence here. This crisis could become public at any moment. So quickly do whatever He tells you to do."

Redefining Purity The water in those purification jars was meant to achieve ritual purity over and over again. Jesus symbolically converts that water into wine (His blood) to signify that the shedding of His blood will result in total and complete purity once and forever for those who make the decision to "Follow Me."¹³ Thus, Jesus is totally redefining purity, and by extension, righteousness. The ritual purification system and the procedural Temple sacrificial system will soon be obsolete. The reference to my *hour has not yet come*, John is using *hour* in a technical sense meaning the period of Jesus' passion, death, resurrection and ascension,¹⁴ suggesting that while it is not yet the time to publicly perform the shedding of His blood for the remission of sins, He is willing to privately (behind the scenes) intervene and perform a miracle that will signify what He will accomplish on that future day in Jerusalem when His hour has indeed come. That's why John calls this first miracle a *sign*. Like a highway sign, it points to something beyond itself further down the road.

Those Servants Note that the servants were obedient to Jesus' command. They did what they were told. Then some of them were singled out by Jesus to draw out some of this new crimson liquid now brimming in these jars and take it to the steward. Remember, at that moment those servants chosen to bring this reddish liquid to the steward are not sure what it is. What if the steward doesn't like what they brought? How would they explain this? When we don't have total knowledge of the eventual outcome in God's economy of a "crisis," there is often a risk associated with following Jesus' commands. Only later, after the steward had pronounced this to be the *best* wine, would it have dawned on these servants that they had been participants in a paradigm-changing miracle.

Too Much Wine? Some commentators from the past seem to have struggled with the amount of choice wine that Jesus creates in this first of John's *signs*. To them, 150 gallons (800 bottle equivalent) seems too excessive and therefore inappropriate for any such party. Thus they conclude that John must be using hyperbole to indicate the amount of fine wine created by Jesus.

Well, let's think about that. If the wine was to (in part) represent the weight and import of His forthcoming Calvary sacrifice, why would He or we want to try and minimize the amount of wine needed to represent that? Furthermore, if that fine wine also represents joy, how much wine would be adequate enough to represent a future *joy unspeakable*?¹⁵ The very excessive amount of the wine created by Jesus is exactly the point that John wants to underscore! When the joy of heaven invades your soul, that joy is intended to flood your soul so that your cup overflows.

Revealing His Glory To further re-enforce this Calvary/joy perspective, John tells us in verse 11 that Jesus gave this first *sign through which he revealed his glory*. That is very helpful in keeping us pointed interpretively in the right direction. From the Hebrew perspective, when God reveals His glory He is accurately representing and portraying "who He is and how He does things."¹⁶ In the beginning of Hebrews 1, we see the functional Hebrew understanding of glorifying God when it is said of Jesus that He *is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being*. Jesus glorifies God by perfectly portraying and representing Him.

So when John says Jesus did this to reveal His glory, Jesus is revealing to us in this *sign* exactly what He is going to do and why. In that sense, John's *sign* is like a portrait of what is to come as well as a compass making sure we are always pointed in the right direction with our understanding of what Christ has accomplished, and why. Jesus is going to shed His blood efficaciously for the remission of sins so that purity can be more than a ritualistic condition. Rather, this new purity is an eternal condition of His disciples that welcomes them into His Father's everlasting presence as part of a new creation. At the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus chose to reveal and portray all this with this *sign* at the very beginning of His ministry. Like a Perfect Storm, this is the Perfect Crisis that will indeed allow Jesus to show His present and future glory. With this *sign*, Jesus launches His ministry with the "It is finished"¹⁷ end in view. In so doing, He provides us with a wonderful "completion" motif!

They Believed John wants us to know that as a result of what these brand new, seven-day disciples have just experienced, *they believed in Him*. Being very familiar with the OT understanding that "the joy of the final days is an abundance of wine (Amos 9:13-14, Hosea 14:7, Jeremiah 31:12),"¹⁸ the disciples likely would have understood this as a sign of the advent of the messianic age with Jesus being the Lord's Messiah. Remembering the restoration promised in Joel 2:24 when *the vats overflow with fresh wine* would have re-enforced this perspective although it will take some time for these disciples to more fully fathom what that realization means.

A New Standard Thanks to Jesus' intervention, a new standard for marriage feast hospitality has just been set in Cana by this host family. The bar has now been raised so high that no other family in the village will ever be able to reach it (800 bottles of fine wine saved for last). Jesus rescues this host family from the brink of lifetime shame and, in so doing, now places them in a distinctive position of honor for the rest of their days that no other family will ever be able to emulate unless they too invite Jesus to their celebration. That is yet another refrain of the Gospel message – unless Jesus comes into your life, your joy will never be complete!

Reflections

- This is a spectacular first *sign*. And wouldn't you expect Jesus' first miracle to be just that? The kind of miracle that would not only initiate His ministry but would also bookend it with what the Cross will accomplish as well as what the ultimate "completion" will be – great joy!
- Have you ever thought about thanking Jesus for the times He protected you from shame (like this young couple) by miraculously intervening in your life in ways you never knew about?
- Have you been part of any miracles lately? That may depend on how close to Jesus you have been as a servant? It's usually true; if you want to be a participant in miracles, stay close to Jesus with a servant's heart.
- This first miracle is rich in gospel themes. There will come a day when humanity will realize it has a crisis. That it cannot clean itself no matter how hard it tries. That no amount of good works, religious acts and ritualistic procedures can make one acceptable to a Holy God. It is only when we avail ourselves of the efficacious blood of Jesus and have been cleansed by it that we become (w)holy righteous in His Father's sight.
- Do you need to make a New Year's resolution to try and glorify God in all that you do? To recommit yourself to accurately revealing and portraying "who God is and how He does things" to a watching world? To be a disciple who always point to Him and not to yourself, e.g., your abilities, capacities, gifts and talents? Only life in the Spirit will empower such a commitment.
- Jesus rescued and sustained the joy of a marriage feast that was about to turn ugly. As we enter this New Year, how is your joy doing? Is it solely rooted in Jesus? Is it overflowing? Or might it have gone stale or even dry? If so, what might need to be done, e.g., faced and dealt with?

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Notes and Sources

- 1 Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible* (Carta: Jerusalem, 2007), pp. 227 & 228.
- 2 James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*, Volume 1 (Baker: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999) p. 163.
- 3 For a fuller contextual treatment of John's "baptism" of Jesus, see Doug Greenwold's "John the Baptist and Repentance" Reflection, number 608, June 2008, Preserving Bible Times.
- 4 Revelation 19:9
- 5 James C. Martin et. al., *Exploring Bible Times: The Gospels in Context* (Bible World Seminars, Amarillo, Texas, 2003), p. 54.
- 6 *The NET Bible*, First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), p. 2024 footnote.
- 7 Mishnah: *Yadaim* 1:1.
- 8 James C. Martin et. al., *Exploring Bible Times: The Gospels in Context*, p. 86.
- 9 *The NET Bible*, p. 2024 footnote.
- 10 Luke 2:41-49.
- 11 For a fuller contextual treatment of this mandatory hospitality theme in the "Midnight Visitor" parable in Luke 11: 5-8, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, Chapter 12, "Pray Confidently or Persistently" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, 2007), pp. 101-108.
- 12 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1961), p. 212.
- 13 Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John I-XII*, (Doubleday & Company: Garden City, New York, 1966), p. 99.
- 14 For the fuller contextual treatment of what it means to follow Jesus as a disciple, see Doug Greenwold's "Follow Me" Reflection, number 908, September 2008, Preserving Bible Times.
- 15 1 Peter 1:8
- 16 A favorite phrase of Dr. James C. Martin, Co-Founder of Preserving Bible Times.
- 17 John 19:30
- 18 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, p. 105.