



PRESERVING BIBLE TIMES^{inc.}

Because Context Matters

A Crisis of Joy in Cana – Part I



In this map (frame of reference – the Jordan River runs N/S) of the Galilee District, the NE route connecting Nazareth and Capernaum is shown here in red. This 30-mile route leaves Nazareth and head northwest toward Sepphoris (Tzipori) continuing north to Cana (Cana is faintly in red on the southern slope of the beautiful Bet Netofa Valley – yellow star). From Cana the route heads East toward the Sea of Galilee where it turns NE hugging the shoreline to Capernaum. When you walk 16-18 miles per day on average, an overnight stay is needed for a 30-mile journey. On the NE route, that logical stopping place is Cana. That helps explain why we find Jesus in Cana. He knows people in Cana. Once again geography matter.

On Tuesday there was a wedding at Cana in the Galil; and the mother of Yeshua was there. Yeshua too was invited to the wedding, along with his talmidim. The wine ran out, and Yeshua's mother said to him, "They have no more wine." John 2:1-3 Complete Jewish Bible (English Version)

Jesus' first *sign* (miracle) of turning water into wine in John's Gospel has long been one of my favorites. I was a member of a fraternity during my college days when I was first drawn to Christ. 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 easily 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 into full flower (from a Near Eastern perspective), we need to set it into the appropriate context.

John wrote assuming his readers would know and understand the background regarding Cana, marriage feasts, village issues of honor and shame, mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, ritual purification, as well as the Hebrew significance of wine. Context allows us to "see" what's going on in the white spaces between the lines of the text that every Near Eastern villager would have readily known and understood.

While providing leadership to five different organizations over 32 years, I came to appreciate that what you do in your first week "in the new chair" matters. Every move, word and decision communicates much to your associates and direct reports who look closely for clues as to your value system, priorities and organizational direction. With each succeeding new management task, I was ever more intentional about choosing my first acts, words and decisions for their symbolic significance. This is why I am particularly intrigued with this miracle that Jesus used to initiate his ministry. But first, we need some geography insights.

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, you can't walk that way because of the semi-mountainous terrain in much of the Galilee region. Thus, the 30-mile semi-circular, northern Nazareth-Capernaum route runs north towards Sepphoris, continuing northward toward the Beth Netofa valley. Upon reaching this valley, the route turns east eventually reaching the shores of the Sea of Galilee before moving up the western shoreline to Capernaum (see above map). Eighteen miles per day of walking was considered a good day's journey. Hence, Cana, located on the slope of the Beth Netofa valley, becomes a logical over-night stopping place for any two-day walk between Capernaum and Nazareth.

With this geographical picture in mind, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus would have repeatedly overnights in Cana when traveling back and forth between Capernaum and Nazareth. He most likely had friends (or relatives) in this town and availed Himself of the mandatory hospitality imbedded in the culture. The fact that Jesus is welcomed at this wedding feast along with His brand new disciples (*talmidim*) suggests that He and Mary are more than casual acquaintances of the host family. Such a social relationship also raises the possibility of social reciprocal (hospitality) issues that help us more fully understand Jesus' words (verse 4) and actions (verses 5&6).

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 day (there is an implied Sabbath in John's seven-day sequence) since being immersed by John the Baptist in the Jordan to consecrate (and initiate) His public ministry. The symbolism of the seventh day, the Hebrew number signifying Sabbath rest as well as suggesting both "completion" and (new) creation motifs, would not have been lost on John's Jewish readers. 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 *marriage of the Lamb* (Rev. 19:7), both bring a foreshadowing of "completion" significance to this first *sign* encounter which no doubt caught John's attention.

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. 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 until their wedding day. 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 wedding and an ensuing multi-day marriage feast will be announced to relatives and friends. 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!)

When John gives us the contextual piece of information that this wedding took place (and the feast commenced) on a Tuesday, he is telling us (in part) that this family wants to do everything “just right.” Tuesday was considered the best day to get married since in the Creation narratives, the third day (Tuesday) is the only day that God twice says “*it was good.*” That tradition continues in Israel to this day as Tuesday is the hardest day to book a site for a wedding reception.

With the news about to publically break that “*they have no more wine,*” this newly married couple (and their families) are totally unaware that they are on the verge of being forever known for hosting the worst wedding feast ever. We’ll explore the reasons for that next time.

Ponderings

- This encounter, like many in the Gospels, is set in a village. That automatically brings issues of social reciprocity, mandatory hospitality, marriage feasts, honor and shame issues and ritual purity to bear on our understanding of the text. Since understanding village cultural dynamics is key to grasping the 3-D implications of a village-based Gospel passage, isn’t it amazing that no one has ever taught a mini-course (either in seminary or in a church) on the cultural dynamics of a Near Eastern Village? That’s why we are considering devoting the better part of a day to understanding the interpretive dynamics of a first-century Near Eastern village (something that has never been done before!) at our upcoming **Institute of Biblical Context (IBC)** Conference on “***Jesus in His Context***” next summer.
- Can you relate to the significance of “first things” when establishing new relationships with people or organizations? How has that played out in your life?
- Can you relate to this family and young couple who, while wanting to do everything “just right,” are about to realize they were going to be known as having done everything “very wrong!?” Ever been on the edge of such an experience, or heard about one?
- Once again geography context helps us understand the “where” of an event and sets the stage for helping us understand Jesus’ upcoming repartee with His mother over the running out of wine. Isn’t it amazing that 99% of pastors and Bible teachers have never been systematically exposed to biblical geography? (We hope to change that by incorporating essentials of biblical geography into the topics at next summer’s **IBC Conference** on “***Jesus in His Context.***” Plan to join us.