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Because Context Matters

A Crisis of Joy in Cana – Part II

On Tuesday there was a wedding at Canah 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."

Yeshua replied, "Mother, why should that concern me? – or you? My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now six stone water jars were standing there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each with a capacity of twenty or thirty gallons. Yeshua told them, "Fill the jars with water," and they filled them to the brim. John 2:1-7 Complete Jewish Bible (English Version)

Continuity In the first installment of this series, we examined the geographic implications of Cana as well as the implied "timing" context for Jesus' first sign/miracle. We also developed the context for marriages and wedding celebrations. Now it's time to sketch the social contract for wedding feasts and drop in on a back room interchange between Jesus and His mother over a looming crisis – "*They have no more wine.*"

The Social Contract This is the Near East. The host has certain social obligations 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 required (consider it a social contract) that you will do the same for me when I attend your son's marriage feast. Failure to respond in kind results in severe social consequences:

- The marriage is forever branded a disgrace; the host family shamed and the newly married couple will carry this social stigma of shame with them for the rest of their days, as will their children and their children's children. Who will 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 previously hosted this family at their respective marriage feasts would even have grounds for a lawsuit for damages if they were not treated in kind. That's how severe a breach of the reciprocal hospitality code 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. Imagine yourself in this wedding couple's place. How would you like to carry the stigma of being 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 integrated into all of observant Judaism life. The Pharisees and their rabbis had created an elaborate set of rules regarding what constituted ritual purity and impurity. (The most extensive Division of the Mishnah is *TOROROTH* – “clean nesses.”) As pertains to this marriage feast, the stone ritual purification jars would be placed near the entrance to the area where the celebration was 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.

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*,” was available in many of the much larger ritual purification bath systems (*mikvot* and *mikva*) in the synagogues and Temple through the use of complex hydraulic systems. 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! Fascinatingly, 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 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 Jesus' new disciples, 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 a “put down.” Others see in it a declaration of His (now) independence from her direction, as He is thirty and a full-fledged adult on his own. Others have pointed out that the Jewish idiom being used here seems to suggest something akin to “*what is that to you and me,*” and *woman* is used as 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 Near 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. She knows He is the Lord's Messiah and has the capacity to intervene in this situation to keep these friends (or even extended family) from public shame for the rest of their days.

It is also reasonable to assume that Mary is 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 Jesus' (tongue in cheek with a smile on His face?) response. 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 them hospitality in the past. This mandatory reciprocal hospitality theme is picked up by Jesus in the parable of the “*Midnight Visitor*” – if you have the capacity to meet a crisis of hospitality, you must respond or be shamed. Thus she confidently says to the servants, and I like the way that *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Kenneth S. Wuest) translates her words, *whatever he says to you, do it with dispatch*. 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.*”

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?
- Ever thought about how to recognize when Jesus is speaking “tongue in cheek”? You’ll never catch it without putting the context of the passage back in place.
- Jesus rescued and sustained the joy of a marriage feast that was about to turn ugly. As we enter the Advent season, 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?

Shalom, Shalom

Doug for the PBT Team

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