



The Gospel of John

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 2:1–11

November 10, 2013

Introduction

When we consider John’s gospel, we must remember that this is an abbreviated account of the many miraculous signs Jesus performed and the things He taught. Also recall that John’s purpose in writing was twofold: 1) apologetic — that we might believe; and 2) evangelistic — that believing we might have eternal life (John 20:30–31). The events recorded in chapter 2 fit the first aspect of John’s purpose. The account of Jesus changing water into wine represents the first recorded “sign” that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

The Wedding at Cana (2:1–11)

Of all the gospel accounts, John’s is the only one to record the events which took place at the wedding in Cana. These events represent the first of several *signs* or miracles that Jesus performed which give us proof of His deity and reason for believing in Him.

The Setting (vv. 1–2)

The phrase “on the third day” refers back to the call of Philip and Nathanael in the previous passage (1:43–51). It is the last in a series of time markers suggesting that all the events from the time of John the Baptist’s interview with the religious leaders until the wedding in Cana took place in the span of one week. Cana can be identified with the modern Khirbet Qana — an uninhabited ruin about nine miles north of Nazareth. It would not have been difficult for Jesus and His disciples to reach Cana on the third day after leaving the vicinity of the Jordan River.

Weddings were major social events in first century Israel, and could easily last as long as a week. Unlike modern weddings which are typically paid for by the bride’s family, the groom was responsible for the expenses of the celebration. The wedding itself marked the culmination of the betrothal period. During that period (usually several months), the couple was considered legally married and only a divorce

could terminate the betrothal (cf. Matthew 1:18–19 where Joseph is considered Mary’s husband during the betrothal period.) On the night of the ceremony (usually a Wednesday), the groom and his friends would go to the bride’s house and then escort her and her attendants back to the groom’s house. This is where the ceremony and banquet would be held (cf. Matt 25:1–10). The whole celebration ended with the actual wedding.

The mother of Jesus was at this particular wedding. She is never called “Mary” in John’s gospel, perhaps out of respect since John was asked to care for her as a member of his own household after Jesus was crucified (John 19:25–27). The fact that both Mary and Jesus attended this wedding suggests that it either involved relatives or friends of the family. This would also explain why Mary seemed more than just a guest. She had some responsibility in tending to the particulars of the celebration. This is why she took notice of the lack of wine and took the initiative to correct the problem. Note also the terminology used: Mary was *there*, but Jesus and His disciples were *invited*. This also suggests she had a role in serving at the event. Since Joseph is not mentioned, it may be assumed that he had already died. How Jesus received the invitation is not clearly stated, but some have come to the unwarranted conclusion the invitation was delivered from Nathanael who was from Cana (21:2). More likely, however, Jesus was in Nazareth and received the invitation there.

By attending the wedding and performing His first miracle there, Jesus sanctified both the institution of marriage and the ceremony itself. Marriage is a sacred union of a man and a woman whereby they become one in the sight of God. The ceremony was an essential element of that union because in it, the couple would publicly vow to remain faithful to one another. Both the Old and New Testaments view the public ceremony as a necessary part of marriage (cf. Gen 29:20–23; Judges 14:10; Ruth 4:10–13; Song 3:11; Matt 22:2; 25:10; Luke 12:36; 14:8). The fact that Jesus attended a wedding celebration set Him apart from His forerunner, John the Baptist. Instead of being a voice in the wilderness, Jesus had the more difficult task of mingling socially with the people and ministering to them in their daily activities.

The Predicament (vv. 3–5)

Wine was a staple drink in the ancient Near East. With the warm climate and lack of refrigeration fruit juice tended to ferment. The

result was an alcoholic beverage with the capability of inducing drunkenness. To avoid intoxication, wine was usually diluted with water to one-third to one-tenth of its full strength.

Alcohol in the Bible

Though the Bible does not forbid drinking of wine and in some places commends it (e.g. Psalm 104:14–15; Prov 31:6; Jer 31:12; 1 Tim 5:23), it strongly condemns drunkenness (Gen 9:20–27; Deut 21:20–21; Prov 20:1; 23:29–35; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:10; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:18; 1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; 2:3; 1 Pet 4:3).

Some have argued that the wine mentioned in this passage could not possibly have been alcoholic, but was in fact unfermented grape juice. They say that Jesus would not have stooped to creating a *sinful* beverage like alcoholic wine. This notion, however, comes from an *exegetical* approach to Scripture — reading in an idea which in this case does not deal honestly with the text. The term for wine in this passage is *oinos* (οἶνος) and means “fermented juice of the grape” (BDAG, p. 701). Furthermore, the phrase in verse 10 is *methuskō* (μεθύσκω), meaning “to become intoxicated” (BDAG, p. 626). There is a word for unfermented wine — *trux* (τρούξις) — but that does not appear in this text. One could become intoxicated with the “choice wine,” which is what Jesus created. Then a servant could bring out the cheaper wine and no one would know the difference. But it is important to remember that wine in biblical times was commonly diluted so that the percentage was much lower than modern wine. The point of this miracle was not to provide the means for people to binge themselves into a drunken stupor. Rather, Jesus providing the solution for a potentially catastrophic social embarrassment.

Since alcohol is not outright forbidden in Scripture, many Christians today have viewed drinking as a Christian liberty. While this may be the case, too often this liberty is either abused or flaunted, making it a stumbling block for the countless millions who have struggled with alcohol addiction. Given the widespread occurrence of alcohol abuse, wisdom would suggest that churches and Christians should avoid alcohol use around other believers. This can have the twofold effect of creating a safe environment for recovering alcoholics and not bruising a weak conscience (1 Cor 8:9–13). When it comes to issues of Christian liberty, many in our culture tend to follow the

American mindset and see them as “inalienable *Christian* rights!” However, the apostle Paul often gave up some of his liberties so that he might better minister the gospel to others. How far are we willing to go to be a help to those around us? Are we willing to set aside the issue of alcohol so that the gospel may have free course?

When the wine ran out a major crisis loomed at the wedding celebration. Such an embarrassing faux pas could have stigmatized the couple and their family for the rest of their lives. It could even have left the groom’s family open to a lawsuit by the bride’s family for failing to meet their responsibilities. Thus this first miracle was not meant to amaze the crowds with His miracle working ability. Rather it met the genuine need of the family and their guests who otherwise faced a social catastrophe.

As I previously mentioned, Mary was helping to oversee the catering of the celebration. When she became aware of the problem, she approached Jesus and said, “they have no wine.” Since it is likely that she was already widowed by this point, she would naturally have learned to depend on her firstborn son. Whether or not she expected Him to perform a miracle was not clear since He hadn’t performed one yet (v. 11).

Jesus’ abrupt reply to Mary signaled a major change in their relationship. “Woman” was a polite, but not intimate, form of address. It would be very much akin to using the English word “Ma’am.” The phrase “What does that have to do with us” could literally be rendered “what to me and to you?” It is an idiomatic expression which rhetorically asks what the two parties in question have in common. Thus it has the effect of distancing them. When Jesus coupled this statement with His address to Mary as “Woman” instead of “Mother,” He politely but firmly informed her that what they had in common in their relationship was no longer to be what it was while growing up in Nazareth. Jesus had begun His public ministry and He would not allow earthly relationships to deter His actions. Mary was to no longer relate to Him as her son, but as her Messiah, the Son of God, and her Savior (cf. Matt 12:47–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 11:27–28).

The phrase “My hour has not yet come” refers to Jesus’ death and glorification. This supports the possibility that Mary was knowingly asking Jesus to reveal Himself at that time, since He had been a fully

mature adult for many years by this point. But Jesus made it clear that He would act according to God's timetable, not hers or anyone else's (cf. 7:2–8). It was not Jesus' appointed time for His full messianic glory to be revealed; and yet this miracle would make His divine power unmistakable and preview His glory to come. The dark hour of the cross would precede the full revelation of His glorious messianic kingdom where wine, emblematic of joy and gladness, will abound. Notice what the prophet Amos said of Jesus' future kingdom:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “When the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; They shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them.” ~Amos 9:13–14

Mary was not deterred by Jesus mild rebuke; but being aware that He had not said no to the request, she turned to the servants and said, “whatever He says to you, do it.” The term here for servants is *diakonois* (διακόνους), from which we derive our English word “deacons,” not *doulois* (δούλους) — “slaves.” This suggests these were not household slaves or servants, but rather friends and family who, like Mary, were helping with the celebration. Her charge to them was necessary because they might have otherwise hesitated to follow the instructions of an invited guest.

Jesus Provides (vv. 6–10)

John mentions the stone waterpots for the benefit of his Gentile readers. These were used for ceremonial washings as part of the Jewish custom of purification. We are told they contained between twenty and thirty gallons each. This much water was not only needed to accommodate the guests, but for cleaning the cooking and eating utensils (cf. Mark 7:4). The servants responded to Jesus' request by either topping off the waterpots or emptying and refilling them. By ordering these pots to be topped off, Jesus also displayed His magnanimous grace. Not only would this be transformed into wine to provide for the wedding celebration, but the leftovers of this 120–180 gallon batch would be a tremendous wedding present that would aid the bride and groom in their new marriage together. So this miracle had

the two-fold effect of avoiding an embarrassing situation for the groom and also providing a gift for the new couple.

The headwaiter had the job of sampling the food and drink before the guests. When the transformed water was brought to him, he was astonished with the quality of this new batch of wine. So he pulled aside the groom and said “every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine.” This was a common practice at the time. As previously mentioned, the phrase “drunk freely” is a clear indicator of intoxication. However, this does not mean that this particular wedding had become drunken binge for the guests. Instead it was merely an observation on the part of the headwaiter, who had no doubt seen this common situation before. The idea is that the guests would become drunk with the better wine first and then not notice that the cheaper wine had been brought out in its place. But much to his surprise (and the groom’s), it appeared as though the best wine had been saved until last. Of course, we know from the narrator’s perspective that this wine did not come about through the normal process of growing grapes and fermenting the juice. This was a miracle of transformation and creation in which Jesus brought about something extraordinary from what was common.

The Significance (v. 11)

This *sign* was the first of Jesus’ miracles. Later pseudepigraphical literature contains stories of childhood wonders performed by Jesus. But these are pure fantasy and are categorically denied by this verse. There are several words used in the New Testament to denote what we call “miracles.” Rather than “mighty works” — *dunamis* (δύναμις) or “wonders” — *teras* (τέρας), John prefers the simple word “sign” — *sēmeion* (σημεῖον).

The result of this first of Jesus’ signs was twofold. First, He manifested His glory (cf. 1:14). In other words, He put His deity on display. Jesus’ miracles were not simply powerful displays of compassion. They were designed to reveal who He really was, because they unmistakably manifest God at work. But miracles alone do not convince people to believe in God or His gospel. There is no record of any of these witnesses following after Him. Jesus left Cana with only the disciples He brought with Him. The obvious fact that He was the Messiah escaped this crowd. They saw the sign, but missed what it pointed to. Satan had blinded their minds to the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ

(2 Cor 4:4), just as he does with all unbelievers. This event was also another tragic illustration of the truth of Jesus' saying, "A prophet has no honor in his own country" (John 4:44; cf. Matt 13:58).

However, the second result of this sign was that His disciples believed in Him. Having heard John the Baptist's testimony that Jesus was the Messiah (1:34), Jesus' own words to that effect (1:39), and they themselves believing in Him (1:41), they now saw miraculous confirmation of their faith. Many others who have read John's gospel would come to the same conclusion they did — and would believe! That is the whole point of this gospel — belief in Jesus as the Son of God, so that we might have life through Him!

~AWB