

John 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] John chapter 2. On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, They have no wine. And Jesus said to her, Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come. His mother said to the servants, Do whatever he tells you. Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, Fill the jars with water. And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast. So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water, now become wine, and did not know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew, the master of the feast called the bridegroom, and said to him, Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now. This the first of his signs

Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money changers, and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, Take these things away. Do not make my father's house a house of trade. His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me. So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that

Jesus had spoken. Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name, when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. It is always important to pay attention to the unique ways each of the gospel writers tell their stories, or relate the details that they share in common. For instance, we have already seen that John the Baptist is not called John the Baptist within the book of John, rather he is the witness.

Something to notice in this chapter, chapter 2 of John, is that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is never referred to by name in John's gospel. She is always Jesus' mother, or addressed as woman. It would be surprising indeed were Mary's name unknown to the readers of the gospel. Presumably they are quite aware of Mary and her name. Indeed, the beloved disciple who writes the gospel takes Mary into his own home, so the omission of her name is most likely significant on account of some symbolic role that she is playing. She probably stands for something more than just a historic individual. In this episode, she seems to shift from functioning more as Jesus' mother to being one of his disciples. Jesus' response to her statement has a sort of distancing effect.

[3 : 41] While he honours her, and as we will see later in the gospel, takes an active concern for her provision and well-being, he makes clear by his response that his father's business must determine his course. Nevertheless, he submits to her request. The chapter begins with the third day. We've noted the presence of a sequence of days moving from the beginning of chapter 1, a sequence which many have speculated ought to be related to the days of creation. This is both the eighth of a sequence of days, and the third day in a sequence within that sequence. Perhaps this

could be taken as a subtle hint of resurrection themes, as the resurrection is both on the third day and on the first day of the week, the eighth day. Themes of water and purification are also prominent in John's gospel, appearing on several occasions. It occurs within this chapter. It occurs within the preceding chapter, with the reference to John's baptism. There's the discussion of being born of water and the spirit in chapter 3. There's the meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, and the conversation concerning the living water. There's the man by the sheep pool in chapter 5.

In chapter 6, there's the crossing of the Sea of Tiberias. In chapter 7, there's Jesus' statement on the great day of the feast, in connection with the pouring out of water, that rivers of living water would flow out of him. In chapter 2, we have a significant water reference, as old covenant waters of purification and water pots are transformed into something new, into fine wine for a feast.

The first half of the gospel of John is often referred to as the book of signs. The signs of John's gospel are more than merely miracles. They have a symbolizing purpose, revealing something about the character of Jesus and of his mission. They have a meaning beyond being powerful acts. Jesus wants people to see beyond the spectacle, to recognize the significance of what is taking place.

John's gospel has a rich literary structure, and there are ways in which we might relate other episodes in the gospel to this one. For instance, this is the first of a sequence of signs, often numbered as seven. This sign could be paralleled with the final sign of the raising of Lazarus. Both involve sabbatical themes, and themes perhaps of resurrection, as we've already mentioned. In terms of sabbatical themes, here we have the themes of the feast and of new life. It could be paralleled with what is, by my reckoning, the fourth of the signs of the gospel, the feeding of the five thousand. The provision of wine by means of instructed servants is paralleled to the provision of bread by means of instructed disciples. We might also see some parallels with the beginning of chapter 7, for instance, where members of Jesus' family request him to manifest his power more publicly, but he resists them, as his hour has not yet come, and yet goes ahead and acts nonetheless.

[6 : 32] The presence of six waterpots has provoked a lot of symbolic interpretation. A number of commentators seeking to deflate such speculations have made the point that this is just probably a historical reference. There just were six waterpots. However, when we read scripture, it's usually quite sparing on such details. The fact that it would mention that there are six water jars suggests that there is a reason for doing so. Yet the meaning is not immediately obvious. Some have observed that there are, to this point, six disciples, and Jesus has already called Simon Cephas or Peter, meaning stone.

On other occasions in the gospel, six is a number of items, which is followed by a further item. So in chapter 4, there are six husbands, or men, followed by a coming man, the Messiah. In chapter 4, there is also six hours, and then the reference to the hour that is to come. I think the most promising solutions to this question, look at the theme of water coming from the rock, living waters from the heart, rivers of living water from the belly. In chapter 7, water and blood from Jesus' side. The large stone water jars may be images of human persons that will be transformed so that living water or glorified wine comes forth from them. This, of course, is nothing other than the spirit. Jesus instructs the servants to fill the water jars and then to take from that water and bring it to the master of the feast.

The master of the banquet would have been different from the host, the bridegroom, and the best man. He may have been chosen by lot, by the hosts, or maybe even by the guests themselves. It was the duty of the bridegroom to ensure that all of the people had the wine that they needed. The turning of the water into wine is the first sign of Jesus. It might draw our minds back to another initial sign, the turning of the waters of the Nile into blood. In both of these cases, water is transformed into something else, in both cases a red liquid. However, there is a clear contrast to be observed, whereas the water of the Nile was transformed into blood, something that could not be drunk. The waters at the feast of Cana are transformed into a more glorious form of drink, a drink for celebration rather than for judgment.

Jesus has already been identified as the Lamb of God, presumably the Passover Lamb, and the scene has been set for a new exodus. However, now, instead of performing great acts of decreation, tearing down the creation, Jesus' first sign heralds a glorious new creation, a place of wine, feasting, and celebration.

The fact that there are subtle associations between the figure of Miriam, from whom Mary gets her name, and the provision of water in the wilderness, perhaps suggests the possibility of a deep connection to be pursued here between Mary's petitioning of her son and the provision of water to the Israelites in the wilderness. The setting of the wedding feast, the bringing of new wine, and the statement of the master of the feast, all suggest that the miracle is a sign of the character of Jesus' work more generally. Indeed, this is where it all begins. This is where we see Jesus entering into his public ministry in the Gospel of John. He is the bridegroom. He replaces the water of the old covenant with the wine of the new. In the wedding feast of God's kingdom, the best comes later. The notion of Jesus as the bridegroom pervades the Johannine literature. Jesus is the man meeting the woman at the well.

[9 : 52] His feet are anointed at Bethany in language redolent of the Song of Songs. He is laid to rest in a scented garden chamber, and a distraught woman looks for him, and the chamber is opened so that its spices can be borne out on the wind of the released spirit. In the book of Revelation, he is introduced as the glorious bridegroom, and the book ends with the wedding supper of the Lamb. By beginning the story of Jesus' public ministry with the wedding feast, John sets us up for all of this. It's also worth noting the way that Jesus' word is given great prominence within this sign. This is a sign done in secret. No one actually sees the water turned into wine. We don't even know when exactly in the process it takes place. It is a sign done in secret, and the power is that of Jesus' word, which is experienced when people obey it. The sign is confirmed by the master of the feast, and the conversation that occurs afterwards seems to be a significant part of the sign. It discloses aspects of its meaning. While the synoptic gospels record a temple cleansing in the last week of Jesus' ministry,

John records such a cleansing at the beginning. There are two main ways of taking this. We could argue that there are two separate cleansings that occur. In that case, we might see the pattern of the leprous house in Leviticus. It is tested once and cleansed, and then the second time it is tested and condemned. Perhaps this is placed here to suggest that there are two such events, and to bring to mind the ritual for the cleansing of the leprous house. Another possibility is that it is situated out of chronological sequence. The purpose then would be theological framing of the account. John, unlike the other gospels, focuses far more upon Jerusalem and upon the feasts at Jerusalem. He doesn't give so much attention to the Galilean ministry as you'll find within the other gospels. By placing the temple cleansing at this point, he would situate the entire narrative that follows under the shadow of the Passion Week. The cleansing of the temple is an event that in the other gospels propels much of the plot to kill Jesus. And so by placing it at the very outset here, he's presenting all of Jesus' ministry under that threat, while the other gospels climax in Jerusalem. In John's gospel, what precipitates the plot to kill Jesus is more the raising of Lazarus. It's his love for his friend, his action for his friend, that precipitates the plot. And here the temple cleansing may have been put forward so that that could come into sharper relief. That John is centred upon Jerusalem throughout might also help to introduce a movement through the temple that we can see in these chapters. John presents Christ as the ark in chapter 1, upon which God's presence rests. He's the lamp as the light of the world. He's the altar from which things ascend and descend between heaven and earth.

[12 : 39] In John chapter 2, he's the temple, and he's the one that provides the structure for the whole thing. And the next chapters focus upon the laver with their baptismal themes. Then there's the feeding of the 5,000 and the manna discourse, which might be associated with the table of showbread.

Chapters 8 and 9 bring us to the lamp within the temple. In the high priestly prayer, we might see the altar of incense. In Christ's death, he passes through the Holy of Holies. And in chapter 20, we see the open ark in the Holy of Holies, with the angels on either side.

And so presenting the temple action later on might disrupt that theological sequence. Zeal for your house will consume me. Jesus' identity and destiny is bound up with the temple.

His very body is the temple. In the Old Testament, we see a connection between the body and the temple. The temple or the tabernacle is a blown up body, and the body is a miniature temple.

Jesus is God tabernacling among us, and he is concerned for the house of his father, that it not be made into a place of trade. Whereas the other gospels' temple cleansing accounts focus on the temple as a den of thieves, drawing upon Jeremiah, here Zechariah chapter 14 verse 21 might be more prominent background.

