

John 2a, The Marriage in Cana

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Overview

Recall Mlakuzhyil's comparison of the introduction to the gospel with the conclusion in 20:30,31.

30 And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book:	2:1-11, Initial Sign in Cana of Galilee
31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God;	1:19-51, John's testimony to Jesus as the Christ
and that believing ye might have life through his name.	1:1-18, the spiritual birth of those who believe on his name (1:12 at center of chiasm)

The chapter break would be better at v.13. "The third day" in 2:1 clearly continues the series of temporal notices throughout ch. 1, and brings us to the end of the first week in the new Genesis, the counterpart of the Sabbath. God's eschatological Sabbath will be marked with a great feast (Isa 26), the marriage supper of the lamb, and this first week of the gospel of John ends similarly with a marriage feast, whose joy is enhanced by the Lord's supernatural provision of wine.

Borchert wants to keep the break, on the grounds that this begins the "Cana cycle," which ends at the end of ch. 4 with another miracle in Cana. But one could just as well see a parallel between the two sections in that they both end in Cana.

1-11, The Marriage in Cana

1 the third day.—This is thus the seventh day of the "new creation week" described by the evangelist.

a marriage.—These were major festive occasions. The marriage of Jacob and Leah lasted a week (Gen 29:22, 27). Borchert: "those in charge were expected to supply plenty of food and wine. To fail in the supplies was a major embarrassment for the married parties and their families."

the mother of Jesus was there: 2 ... Jesus was called.—Note the contrast in the verbs. Mary was there, but Jesus was invited. It sounds as though Mary was helping to arrange for the hospitality. The wedding feast was the responsibility of the groom's family, not the bride's as in modern practice (Matt 22:1-10; this passage, where the groom is assumed to be responsible in 2:9). Perhaps Mary was related to the groom, and is helping the family with the arrangements. This would also explain how our Lord was invited: as a member of the family.

Joseph is absent, perhaps because he has passed away by this time. (*6:42 may be in the sense of Mark 1:24, that they knew who his father was, not that they knew him personally at this time.*)

and his disciples.—Chapter 1 recounted how the Lord gathered a small band around him, including Andrew, John the evangelist, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. Their relationship as rabbi and disciples is apparently clearly enough recognized that an invitation to him includes them.

3 they wanted wine.—This would be a major embarrassment to the host, since it would indicate that he had not prepared adequately for his duties of hospitality, one of the most serious responsibilities in the ancient world.

Mary's intervention.—She brings the situation to Jesus' attention. She does not make an explicit request—she may not really know what to ask for. She shares the embarrassment of the host's family, and turns to someone in her own family for help and counsel. "Son, what are we going to do?" If Joseph has passed away, she may have been accustomed to turning to him, her eldest son, for help in difficult times, and her words may simply mark the usual interaction between them.

4, Jesus' Reply.—The Lord's reply has engendered much discussion. It is hardly a positive response to her observation. Yet afterward, he does correct the problem that she has pointed out. It hardly seems in keeping with his character that he protests and later relents. As Anita and I have discussed his passage, it seems to us likely that he already knows of the situation and intends to do something about it, and his words are a gentle reminder to her that he has the matter under control.

Note each of the three expressions with which he responds to her observation.

- He calls her "woman," not "mother." This form of address is unprecedented in Greek or Roman literature, but in John's gospel we find it again in 19:26. This latter use shows that it does not sound rude as it does in English, but it does emphasize that now that he has entered into his ministry, the relation between them has changed (Hendrikson). No longer is she to think of him as her son; he is now her Lord. Borchert: "Although a Jewish mother might normally be able to exercise pressure on her children, it was not to be the case with Jesus."
- "What have I to do with thee?" is literally, "What belongs to me and to you?" We might say, "What do you and I have in common?" *See the NET Bible footnote for a helpful summary of the usage.* If (as we surmise) the Lord is aware of the situation and has his own plans, the expression has the sense, "There is no need for you to worry about this. I have the matter under control."

Many of the Lord's followers were related to him after the flesh (Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, p. 40). It needs to be made clear to all of them that his Messianic authority is not for their particular benefit as his family, but for all the children of Adam. His family may benefit from his work, but not because they are his family. In particular, and in direct contradiction to Roman dogma, even his mother Mary has no special influence on his actions.

- "Mine hour is not yet come." Two understandings are compatible with our reconstruction of the event.
 - Throughout the gospel, the Lord's "hour" is his passion, the end of his earthly ministry, 13:1; 12:22, 27; 17:1. Mary knows her son is the Messiah. She has been warned of the sorrows that will attend his ministry (Luke 2:35 "yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also"), and perhaps they have spoken of the fact that his ministry has an appointed end. In this case, he may be reassuring her, "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere just yet. I can take care of this situation."

John 2a, The Marriage in Cana

- Alternatively, as Matthew Henry suggests, the “hour” in this case may be the time he has appointed for his own action in this case, and he is saying, “I’ll take care of it when I’m ready to.”

Application: Our Lord’s gentle but firm reminder to Mary is an example to us in our need. We come to the Lord in prayer, complaining about some problem or other—and we should indeed “cast all our care on him, for he cares for us,” 1 Pet 5:7. His response is, “There’s no need for you to worry about it. I have the matter under control.” This response marks a clear distinction between two understandings of prayer.

- Prayer is not a means of imposing our will on the Lord.
- It is a means of sharing our concerns with him, and having him reassure us that he is in control.

5, His mother saith ... , Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.—Mary clearly understands his words in this way. She turns from seeking to impose her will on her son, and now recommends that others yield to him.

6, waterpots of stone, ... purifying ... two or three firkins.—Notice the material, the purpose, and the size of these vessels.

They are not of pottery, but of stone. Pottery was liable to defilement if a lizard fell into it (Lev 11:33), a very common occurrence in Israel. A stone vessel incurred no such defilement.

This was important in view of their purpose, which was Jewish ceremonial purification. Mark 7:3,4 indicates that they even immersed (*baptizw*) their “tables,” actually the small couch on which a person leaned to eat, or the bed to which a sick person was confined (Mark 7:30). These ceremonies would require a lot of water.

A firkin is 39.5 liters, or about 10 US gallons, the amount of two of our water jugs. So “two or three firkins” is “20 or 30 gallons,” or “four to six water jugs.” And this is the size of each of them!

The vessels were apparently not full, for the Lord requires the servants to fill them (v.7). Apparently the guests at the feast had been following the purification rituals, and had used up much of the water. There is intriguing symbolism in the Lord’s taking over the mechanisms of ritual purification for his first miracle, as if to say, “Now that I am here, there is no longer any need for these, and we can put them to better use.”

8, governor of the feast.—This would have been, not the host (who was the bridegroom), but the head waiter, or perhaps the master of ceremonies. He acknowledges the quality of the wine that the Lord has produced. What might have been an occasion of severe embarrassment has become a mark of honor for the bridegroom—through no credit of his own, but due to the intervention of the Lord. This is the recurrent pattern of the Lord’s goodness to us, delivering us from our sin and raising us to an honor of which we are, in our own rights, undeserving.

11, beginning of miracles.—Actually, “signs,” *s8meion*. This is another distinctively Johannine word, occurring both absolutely and proportionately more often in John than in the synoptics. It should be distinguished from “miracle,” as in Acts 2:22; 8:13; which there translates *dunamis* “powerful act” (which nowhere appears in John). The point is not the supernatural power that the action manifests, but the meaning that it conveys. The evangelist tells us what the significance of this sign was here: it showed our Lord’s glory—not only in his supernatural ability to turn water

into wine, but also in his independence of his family, marked by his words to his mother. He is no longer “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:45), but the fulfillment of the prophetic roles whom the Jews from Jerusalem were seeking in 1:19.

Connection with Elijah.—In keeping with those levitical queries, we return to the final role about which they asked, that of Elijah. The events of chapter 1 have led our Lord’s disciples to identify him as the Messiah and the promised Mosaic prophet, but what about Elijah (1:21)? Three things about Elijah’s ministry recall our Lord’s.

1. Elijah ministered in the northern Kingdom. Our Lord was a Galilean.
2. Elijah challenged the corrupt Baal worship of the northern court. So our Lord challenged the corrupt temple hierarchy in Jerusalem.
3. Elijah’s ministry was marked with striking miracles, such as withholding rain from sinful Israel (1 Kings 17:1), calling fire down on the sacrifices on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:36-38), destroying the armies sent against him (2 Kings 1), or ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). So our Lord’s ministry was marked with signs of his divine authority.

The history of the marriage in Cana in particular recalls one episode in Elijah’s life, the period when he lived with the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-25). Note in particular:

- Both deal with the multiplication of a food item that has been exhausted.
- There is a subtle linguistic link: John is the only NT writer to use the Greek word *hydria* “waterpot.” He uses it twice here, and elsewhere only in 4:28, of the woman of Samaria. This term occurs only in a few stories in the OT: Rachel watering the camels in Gen 24; Gideon’s men in Judges 7; and the woman of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:12, 14, 16, where it denotes the vessel in which she had her last remnant of flour. (It occurs also in the LXX of 1 Kings 18 describing the sacrifice on Carmel, and once in Eccl 12.) Thus not only do both Elijah and our Lord multiply food, but they both do it using a “waterpot.”
- Our Lord’s words to Mary, “What have I to do with thee,” appear only 4x in the OT, and one of these is 1 Kings 17:18, the widow’s protest to Elijah. Again, both characters define their relation to a woman in the episode.
- The outcome of the episodes is the same; compare John 2:11 with 1 Kings 17:24.

Thus the sign at the wedding of Cana really finishes off ch. 1, showing that Jesus is not only the promised Messiah and the Messianic prophet, but also the counterpart of Elijah.

Who is Elijah?—The Baptist’s denial of being Elijah, and the Evangelist’s placing Christ in that position, may seem troubling in the light of synoptic passages concerning John, such as Luke 1:17 (“he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias”), Matt 11:14 (“if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come”), or Matt 17:12, 13 (“But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. 13 Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist”). After all, who is Elijah—John or Jesus?

In Mal 4:5, God promised that “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” This verse was the basis of the Jewish expectation in v.21. They expected that it would be the very person of Elijah who would return, since he had been taken up

into heaven bodily (2 Kings 2:11). Neither John nor Jesus was the person of Elijah, and this explains the Baptist's denial in 1:21.

The Baptist's relation to Elijah was defined in Luke 1:17, "in the spirit and power of Elias." This relation is not reserved for only one person. It is the same position held by Elisha immediately after Elijah's departure, as reported in 2 Kings 2:9-15, and evidenced by the numerous miracles that Elisha did. So it should not surprise us if our Lord is also described in these terms, as also manifesting the same Spirit that worked through Elias, and in fact the Evangelist will be at pains to emphasize, in concluding a section that compares Jesus with the Baptist, that "God giveth not the Spirit by measure *unto him*" (that is, Jesus) (3:34). The implication is that John had a measure of the Spirit, but not unlimited supply, as did our Lord. No miracles are attributed to the Baptist, and in this sense he falls short of Elijah. The Lord Jesus is the culmination of the Elijah promise, as manifested by the miracles that he did, and the parallels between John 2 and 1 Kings 17 are meant to reinforce that relation.

12, Interlude in Capernaum

This statement is interesting from both a historical and a literary point of view.

Historically, it may reflect a transfer of Jesus' family from Nazareth to Capernaum. Subsequently, Capernaum is called "his city" (Matt 9:1), and the Nazarites recognize only his sisters (who may have married), not his brothers, as still living there (Mark 6:3, located in Nazareth per the parallel with Luke 4:16). Indeed, this becomes the center of his subsequent ministry.

The **literary** connection is more tricky. Why does John insert this notice here? What function does it serve in his narrative? Several connections are possible.

1. At least two of the band of disciples, Simon and Andrew, lived there, according to Mark 1:29. John's gospel describes them as from Bethsaida, a little further east, but there were strong political motives for them to maintain a residence in Capernaum. The two towns were in different territories, and Bethsaida's territory was mostly Gentile, so their Jewish sensibilities would draw them to Capernaum. Perhaps they bring the Lord to Capernaum to introduce him to their family and friends—or he was leading them there to encourage them to do so.

Lesson: Matt 10:32 emphasizes that we must confess Christ before men if we would have him confess us before the Father, and Acts 1:8 shows that this confession should begin at home and work out. By leading his disciples to Capernaum at the start of their ministry, he encourages them to identify with him early, and thus prepares them for broader testimony later.

Geographical note: Before his death in 4 BC, Herod the Great (who slaughtered the innocents in Bethlehem in Matt 2) divided his kingdom among his sons. Bethsaida, which was on the eastern bank of the Jordan where it entered the Sea of Galilee, was grouped with the territory to the east of the sea (the modern Golan Heights), populated mostly by Gentiles, and assigned to Philip. The area west of the Jordan and south to the Valley of Jezreel, together with the east bank of the Jordan between Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, was assigned to Herod Antipas, and included Capernaum, Cana, and Nazareth. Judaea and Samaria were assigned to Archelaus. Thus Capernaum and Bethsaida were

John 2a, The Marriage in Cana

in different administrative districts, as suggested by the presence of a customs house in Capernaum (Matt 9:9).

2. Two subsequent episodes in John concern Capernaum. In 4:46ff he heals the son of a nobleman who lives in Capernaum, and his discourse on the bread of life is delivered in the synagogue at Capernaum, according to 6:59. Perhaps he is preparing the ground for these later interactions. People are seldom responsive to the gospel the first time they hear it, and the Lord is planting seed that he will later water and cultivate.

Lesson: We should not think of our testimony to someone as a one-time effort. New life requires watering as well as planting (1 Cor 3:6,7), sometimes by different people (as in Corinthians), sometimes by repeated efforts on the part of the same person. Even when the messenger is the Lord, it sometimes takes repeated rounds. Why should we think it is any different with us?