

THE WEDDING FEAST AT CANA (Jn 2:1-11)

By Jim Seghers

John's ostensibly simple narrative of the wedding feast at Cana explodes in layers of meaning when it is examined in faith. This reflection proposes to offer some insights that may deepen your understanding and stimulate your discoveries in this rich passage.

It is no accident that John begins his Gospel with the identical words that open the Bible: "In the beginning" (Gen 1:1). In the first chapter of Genesis the emphasis is on the ascending order of creation culminating in formation of Adam and Eve on the sixth day. In the recapitulation in second chapter of Genesis the emphasis shifts to the covenant God established with his favorite creatures to whom God gave dominion over the earth. This covenantal relationship is depicted in the Bible as a *family bond* or a *marriage*.

In the first chapter of John's Gospel the evangelist lays out a literary new creation week. On the first day the Word who is God is depicted as coming to make a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). He is both "life" and the "light of men" paralleling the first day of creation in Genesis when God said: "Let there be light" (Jn 1:4; Gen 1:3). The first three days of John's literary creation week are laid out as follows:

- First Day: Jn 1:1-34
- Second Day: Jn 1:29-34 beginning with the words: "The next day."
- Third Day: Jn 1:35-42 beginning with the words: "The next day."
- Fourth Day: Jn 1:43-51 beginning with the words: "The next day."
- Seventh Day: Jn 2:1-11 wedding at Cana

Chapter two introduces the marriage at Cana with the words: "On the third day" (Jn 2:1). John uses this cryptic technique to highlight that this wedding also takes place on the seventh day. In this way he captures the resurrection motif with the number *three* and the covenantal/marriage motif of the number *seven*.

In the Cana narrative a problem arose at the wedding feast. The wine had run out. This was a serious breach in the marriage etiquette, as it was the bridegroom's obligation to supply the wine. Mary notices the crisis and brings it to Jesus' attention. He gives a mysterious reply: "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4). Translators and exegetes grapple with mixed success to achieve a clear interpretation of this passage. However, some observations can be made here.

Jesus twice addressed his mother with the title "woman." The first time occurs in this passage when Jesus begins his public assault on Satan's kingdom. The second occasion occurs as Jesus defeats Satan on Calvary (Jn 19:26). These identifications connect Mary with the prophecy of Genesis 3:15, when God said to the serpent:

"I will put enmity between you and the *woman*, and between your seed and her seed; he [the seed of the woman] will bruise your head, and you [the serpent] shall bruise his heel."

The only other passage in the Bible where we find the “woman,” her son, and the devil together in the same sentence is in the Book of Revelation:

“And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Rev 2:4-5).

The “hour” (Jn 2:4) is used throughout John’s Gospel as a reference to Jesus’ passion. Therefore Jesus understands that his acquiescence to his mother’s request is an event that will ultimately lead to his passion and death. Can we conclude that in his human nature Jesus was unaware that it was the Father’s will to begin his public mission with this miracle until his mother made her request? That’s a matter of speculation. It is evident; however, in Jesus’ reply that Mary understood Jesus would resolve the crisis of the wine shortage. She said to the servants:

“Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5).

These are the last words spoken by Mary in Sacred Scripture. This is advice that resonates with us at the distance of 2,000 years, because we are also God’s servants. The response of the servants to Jesus’ request to “fill the jars with water” (Jn 2:7) is a model of obedience: “And they filled them to the brim” (Jn 2:7). At this point Jesus changed somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of water into wine!

The superabundance of the miracle is striking. Not only that, it was the “good wine” (Jn 2:10), meaning the best wine. This represents the bountiful graces Jesus will bestow on the human race in the new creation. So what was it about this miracle that made it a “sign” that drew Jesus’ disciples to believe in him? I suggest the answer is found in what the miracle represents. Here we need to begin in the Old Testament.

In Ezekiel God speaks of his relationship with the Hebrew people in marital language:

“When I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold, you were at the age for love; and I spread my skirt over you, and covered your nakedness: yes, I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine” (Ezek 16:8).

However, the people proved to be unfaithful:

“But you trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer by” (Ezek 16:15).

Nevertheless, the heavenly bridegroom promised to establish an everlasting covenant with his unfaithful people:

“Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant” (Ezek 16:60).

After describing the Suffering Servant, the prophet Isaiah was inspired to speak words of mercy and comfort:

“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called” (Is 54:4-5; cf. Ezek 16:7f).

These and other Old Testament passages look to a Bridegroom Messiah. Therefore I suggest that in the changing of water into wine, the disciples saw in this miracle as a sign that pointed to Jesus as the promised Bridegroom Messiah. Subsequently, John the Baptist identified Jesus to his disciples as the bridegroom, highlighting its connection with our text:

“He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full” (Jn 3:29).

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus also identifies himself as the Bridegroom Messiah. When the issue of Jesus’ disciples not fasting was raised, Jesus responded:

“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them” (Mk 2:19)?

This understanding of Jesus as the Bridegroom Messiah leads to another question. In what way is the supernatural marriage, the everlasting covenant, with Christ consummated? I suggest the text gives us two clues. The first is the reference to Jesus’ “hour,” and the second are the words “manifested his glory” (Jn 2:11). Both expressions relate to Jesus’ passion and death because John presents Jesus lifted up in glory on the cross. Therefore within this context we can view the cross as Jesus’ spiritual marriage bed. The Last Supper was the wedding banquet that anticipated it, and the celebration of the Eucharist is the event that commemorates it, that is, makes it present.¹

There is also a connection between the Bridegroom Messiah revealing himself at Cana and the marriage supper of the Lamb depicted in the Book of Revelation (Rev 19;1-10).² “With the final divorce and destruction of the unfaithful wife in A.D. 70 [Jerusalem and the Temple representing Old Testament Israel], the marriage of the Church to her Lord was firmly established; the Eucharistic celebration of the Church was fully revealed in its true nature as ‘the Marriage Supper of the Lamb’ (v. 9).”³

The marital imagery St. John uses to open the Book of Revelation is often missed. The first verse begins with the Greek word *apokalupsis*, “revelation,” or “unveiling,” exposing another layer of meaning in addition to that discussed above. In the ancient Jewish wedding ceremony, which lasted seven days, the *apokalupsis* was the climax of the festivity. The bride and groom, arrayed as a queen and king, would be carried aloft to the wedding chamber where, after the guests respectfully withdrew, the *apokalupsis* or “unveiling” would take place. Thus the two would “become one flesh” (Gen 2:24).

John’s use of this marital imagery in his Gospel and in the Book of Revelation is significant, because God’s revelation is a *Person*, Jesus Christ, who longs to enter into a

¹ For Catholics, the Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans, and some others, the words of Jesus, “This is my body,” are taken literally. Others interpret these words symbolically only. The difference is significant, not only in relationship to the reality that is believed, but also in the understanding of what it means when one receives the Eucharist.

² The insightful Presbyterian scholar David Chilton also shows a connection “in the language between this passage and that in [Rev] 11:15-19, the announcement of the seventh angel’s theme of the completion of ‘the Mystery of God’: the opening of the Kingdom and the heavenly Temple to the whole world in the new Covenant.” *The Days of Vengeance*, p. 468.

³ Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, p. 471.

covenantal/marital relationship with us. Therefore, God's revelation draws us to "know" [experience] Jesus (Gen 4:1, 17, 25) in that unique marital bond by which he forms a supernatural, bridal relationship with us.

Let's conclude this reflection with a quotation from Chilton's commentary on Revelation:

"The greatest privilege of the Church is her weekly participation in the Eucharistic meal, the marriage Supper of the Lamb. It is a tragedy that so many churches in our day neglect the Lord's Supper, observing it only on rare occasions (some so-called churches have even abandoned Communion altogether). What we must realize is that the official worship service of the Church on the Lord's Day is not merely a Bible study or some informal get-together of like-minded souls; to the contrary, it is the formal wedding feast of the Bride with her Bridegroom. *That* is why we meet together on the first day of the week."⁴

⁴ Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, pp. 476-477 (emphasis in the original).