

December 2015

## God's Getting Married: The Wedding at Cana as a Dramatization of Covenantal Fulfillment

Rachael M. McGill  
*Western Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>



Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, and the Christianity Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

McGill, Rachael M. (2015) "God's Getting Married: The Wedding at Cana as a Dramatization of Covenantal Fulfillment," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol8/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).

---

## God's Getting Married: The Wedding at Cana as a Dramatization of Covenantal Fulfillment

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Jim Ware for his patience and excitement that motivated me to submit this, and for my other friends and family members who were gracious enough to read this.

## God's Getting Married: The Wedding at Cana as a Dramatization of Covenantal Fulfillment

By Rachael M. McGill  
Department of Comparative Religion  
rachael.m.mcgill@wmich.edu

John 2:1-11 kicks off the very first sign in that Gospel: the miracle of the changing of water to wine. Often when this passage is brought up, many focus on the fact that Jesus is capable of changing water into wine with the flick of his wrist and gloss over the rest of the details of the passage. However, a closer examination juxtaposing a bird's-eye view of the passage in its literary context will reveal far more about the passage than a first-time reader might catch. By examining the nature of Jesus' signs in John, key Johannine motifs, and John's allusions to the Old Testament, one can find that the wedding passage is actually a depiction of a greater event that is yet to come: God marrying humanity. God illustrates what He is going to do *at a wedding*. This illustration functions in the same way as the rest of Jesus' signs in the Gospel of John: they all depict an aspect of the kingdom of God. Thus, this article will conclude that the miracle at the wedding in Cana is a crucial event in the story of the restoration of Israel because it is a dramatization of the process of God uniting with humanity.

This article seeks to provide a new approach to eisegesis and, more importantly, exegesis—micro- and macro-interpretation of Jn 2:1-11, respectively—by examining the progression of the scene both within and in between the lines of the text. It also suggests that the major significance of the Cana passage with regard to the rest of the biblical story is its literal and symbolic connection to other events in the Old and New Testament, making this passage crucial to the progression of the story of covenantal fulfillment. Since this article suggests a new approach to the passage, this is not intended to provide an exhaustive counterargument to other scholarship. Rather, this article seeks to engage with some major scholarship and to determine how this new approach differs from previous interpretation. Overall, it suggests that the Cana passage is strikingly significant because of how and where it is placed within a progressing storyline.

### Jn 2:1-2: DAY COUNTING, SYNOPTICS, SETTING OF THE PASSAGE

The passage begins as follows: "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding" (*New American Bible*, Jn 2:1-2). Note the timekeeping used by the author of the text; there is a total of eight days between Jn 1:19 and 2:1. The first is John the Baptist's testimony to himself as the final prophet before the arrival of Jesus (Jn 1:19-28). The second is John the Baptist's testimony to Jesus being the Son of God (Jn 1:29-34). The third is the Baptist sending Andrew and another disciple over to Jesus as he passed by them (Jn 1:35-40). The fourth is Andrew bringing his brother Simon to Jesus, who renames him Cephas, or in English translations, Peter (Jn 1:41-42). The fifth day is Jesus calling Philip and Nathaniel (Jn 1:43-51). Then comes "on the third day" in 2:1, bringing the total to eight days. In Jewish tradition eight is a crucial number: it signifies one full week plus the beginning of a new one. The day of the resurrection is also on the eighth day of the week; in accordance with Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is on the seventh day, since God rested from forming creation on the seventh day (Gn 2:2-3). Jesus' resurrection, occurring on the first day of the new week, also seen as the eighth day of the week, has thus been referred to as the first day of a new creation. This is also the final point in the text where the author mentions a specific day save the resurrection,

where the author specifies, “on the first day of the week” (Jn 20:1). The fact that day counting in John all adds up to eight, then, is of no coincidence.

But why use “third day”? This phrase alone has puzzled some scholars. This is an obvious sign pointing forward to an event that is introduced by the other three Gospels in the same language, which makes a crucial point. The use of “third day” does refer back to a continuation of the events from John 1:43-51, which will be addressed later, but there is more beyond that. The concept of a significant event scheduled to happen on a third day is peppered throughout the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The only other significant event on a third day in John is the cleansing of the temple, in which Jesus proclaims he would rebuild it in three days once it is destroyed (Jn 2:19-20). The author of the text emphasizes that Jesus was really referring to his own body (Jn 2:21). The only event in all four Gospels that involves a rising of Jesus’ own body is, of course, the resurrection. Logically, the “third day” that all four of the Gospels refer to, then, *is* the resurrection. The explicit usage of “third day” in Jn 2:1, then, is obvious: Jn 2:1 refers directly to the resurrection. So not only is this event toward which the Cana wedding points occurring on the eighth day of the week—the first day of the new week, a.k.a. the first day of the new creation—but it is also the third day that all four of the Gospel accounts emphasized. It is the third day toward which the Cana wedding directed the reader. Thus, this is a hint that the resurrection must happen in order for a true wedding to take place.

As for the wedding itself, there is a crucial detail in v.1 that isolates John’s first miracle from the other first-miracles in the Synoptics: Mary. This is the only first-sign at which Mary is present. It is also worth noting that Mary in the text is present again only at the crucifixion (Jn 19:25). To explain her presence further, Karl T. Cooper suggests that Mary in the text has some degree of acquaintanceship with the family of the groom, hence her presence before Jesus arrives (Cooper 365). The fact that she is aware of the lack of wine before the headwaiter knows of it implies that she was probably a server at the wedding, which was typical: women usually were in charge of serving at large festivities.

However, whether or not Jesus according to the text would have had some acquaintanceship with the family of the groom is unclear but plausible. The fact that Mary would have had some relationship with the family logically allows for Jesus to also have some relationship with them. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily guaranteed. First-century Palestinian Jewish weddings were a public event. If a person merely recognized a passerby on the road, that passerby would likely have been invited to the wedding as well. According to Craig Keener, this might have been the case with Jesus and his followers; it is likely that someone may have passed by Jesus while he and his followers were already on their way to Cana from Nazareth (Keener 499). Jesus in the text, Keener suggests, may not have been especially close to the groom or his family, but some friend or acquaintance of the family may have recognized him and invited him. It would be heavily implied that Jesus’ disciples would have been invited as well, since weddings were, as mentioned above, such an open event.

#### Jn 2:3: MARY AS HEADWAITER

In the next verse, the plot of the passage commences: “When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine’” (Jn 2:3). Wine was absolutely crucial to weddings. If a bridegroom ran out of wine at his wedding, there would be social and possibly even legal consequences. He could be shamed for years to come and could even be considered a disgrace to the family. Knowing this, Mary approaches Jesus and notifies him of the imminent crisis. Those four words, simple as they may be, have stirred much debate among interpreters. A popular assessment is that Mary, according to the text, requests that Jesus rectify the situation, expecting him to do something phenomenal. Cooper suggests that Mary challenges social authority by going to Jesus, since women at such festivities could not talk to men, let alone male guests, least of all to warn them of such an embarrassing issue (Cooper

364-67). Cooper references Andre Feuillet, who says Mary expresses a need which can only be filled at the time of and after Jesus' death (Cooper 370). These points, while interesting, are all problematic. First, they all suggest that Mary makes a request. The text makes no such indication. Her statement is merely a declarative one, telling Jesus about a deficit, and nothing more. Second, they are inconsistent with an important aspect of the background behind John's Gospel. It is the consensus of the majority of Johannine scholars that John knows the Synoptics, and he assumes his readers know them as well. If that is the case, then John's readers would know that in Luke, the only Gospel account with an adolescent Jesus and thus the only age indicator for the precise moment of the commencement of Jesus' ministry, Mary appears right after his teaching in the synagogue (Lk 2:46-51). Luke is the only other Gospel account that involves Mary sometime around the instance of the first sign, albeit afterward. The outer appearance of this sign was nothing impressive. It does not involve any physical transformation through a miraculous process, as would the Cana miracle. Thus, at the time of this sign Mary had not ever witnessed a physical miracle, so it would be implausible that she would be expecting something that phenomenal. Moreover, it would not be plausible that she could have jumped to such an elaborate theological conclusion as Feuillet suggests. Although it is true that John's Gospel account should be read with an eye for ulterior meaning, in this case the larger theological point to be made within this passage, as stated above, is the role of the crucifixion. Any points toward eschatology would be premature.

Perhaps the manner in which Mary approached Jesus may have followed the same nature of his miracle: discreetly. Perhaps she served him something, and as she set it down in front of him muttered in his ear, "They have no wine," not from any expectation, but more for the reason that she is seeing from the same vantage point as he does. Perhaps it was merely meant as a comment, pointing out something she noticed. Perhaps she did not think too far into it, and simply noted an observation. Regardless of whether or not this is the case, Mary still plays an important symbolic role here by assuming the role of headwaiter with Jesus as the bridegroom. At Jewish weddings in first-century Palestine, a headwaiter would be chosen either by the family or the guests to monitor the festivities (Keener 500). If preparations went awry, the headwaiter would be notified and would be the first to address the situation, only referring to the bridegroom if absolutely necessary. But a lack of wine is more than enough cause to notify the bridegroom. However, what happens instead is the headwaiter at the Cana wedding never being notified and therefore never knowing about the deficit—but Mary does. She then goes to Jesus and informs him of the deficit, directly mimicking the actions of a good headwaiter by going to the bridegroom, Jesus. But it is not known by anyone other than Mary at the time that Jesus is the bridegroom. Unbeknownst to almost everyone present, Jesus will soon reveal himself as the true bridegroom.

#### Jn 2:4: JESUS' STARTLING RESPONSE AND ITS SHOCKING SIGNIFICANCE

In the next verse, Jesus gives his striking response: "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is this for you and for me? My hour has not yet come'" (Jn 2:4). Even more baffling than Mary's declarative statement is Jesus' disjointed reply—or at least, it would certainly seem so at first. As per usual in John's Gospel, this too has a deeper meaning hidden beyond the surface of the response. The mystery is simply a question of why. Why would Jesus respond to Mary so curtly? Why would he mention his "hour" at a wedding?

Augustine of Hippo says the answer to both is that Mary had asked about a temporal, earthly need, and Jesus is rebuking her for asking him about such a trivial need, when he had come to bring redemptive wine, the wine of eternal salvation (*Ancient Christian Commentary* 91). According to Augustine, the reason is that Jesus here conveys the concept to her that he is divine—the same divinity that made her "woman," thereby explaining why he refers to her as "woman" and not "mother." Augustine goes on to say that Jesus also conveys the message to Mary as a reminder that with respect to God there is no mother; she is merely "woman" in

comparison. In this way he hints that he will demonstrate his own personal majesty at his hour, the crucifixion, while remaining human.

Karl T. Cooper says the reason is that Jesus warns her not to expect a public manifestation of his glory just yet, because a public manifestation would throw off the timing of the grand Messianic plan, either by being thrust into worldly kingship, which would completely miss the point of his incarnation, or by premature execution (Cooper 371).

While Augustine and Cooper both make interesting points, neither makes much sense when put in context with the practicality of v. 4, and this is where the new approach to the eisegesis is proposed. This new approach is centered on an important literary element: the flow of dialogue between Jesus and Mary. Properly addressing this would require a bit of storytelling and speculation. Based on what few literary hints the text gives, the flow of conversation may have intentionally included much fewer spoken words and more nonverbal communication. First, Mary tells Jesus about the lack of wine in a discreet manner to prevent other guests—and the headwaiter—from overhearing. Then Jesus would likewise respond to her in a way that would continue to hide the fact that something is wrong, i.e. speaking at a regular volume, “Woman, what concern is this for you and for me?” Next he would add in a volume so low that only she and the disciples would hear, “My hour has not yet come.” This is where Jesus gives nonverbal cues, such as a certain facial expression that only she would understand. She may see it just before she leaves him to tend to other guests. This whole interaction would be very brief, no more than a few seconds or so, and would go unnoticed by all except for Jesus’ own followers. Mary, catching his intended message, knows what to do. The next servant she encounters may or may not be coming to her specifically, but Mary would tell her and other servants involved to do whatever Jesus would instruct. Confused but desperate for help, the servant does so and allows Jesus to proceed with his instructions. Of course, this is all speculation; the text gives few to no hints to any of this, but in theory it would explain the dialogue between Jesus and Mary. It factors in the possibility of tone of voice, which, again, is nowhere in the text itself, but it opens the door to a world of deeper interpretations in between the lines of the text.

But here is why this approach explains the intent better than Augustine’s or Cooper’s suggestions: If wine was so crucial to an occasion such as a Jewish wedding, Jesus would not likely have viewed a need for wine as a trivial necessity. Jesus was probably well aware of social stigmas. Moreover, as it was with the case of Andre Feuillet’s interpretation, it is unlikely that Mary would have jumped to any elaborate theological conclusion, especially if there was no actual wine left at the wedding. Thus, there would be no reason for Jesus to rebuke her. Furthermore, he has not begun his ministry just yet, so Mary would not have any profound conclusion to jump to anyway. She, at this time, would not have had an absolute understanding of the details of Jesus’ mission.

Augustine’s view is more plausible than Cooper’s, but it has another minor problem. Augustine’s view of the first part of Jesus’ statement is true; however, that does not appear to be the focus. It is true that with respect to Jesus being God, he has no mother, and with respect to him being human, Mary is his mother. But here Jesus is about to commence his ministry, which will lead to his eventual crucifixion, and this ministry will consist of Jesus demonstrating his divinity. Up to this point, Jesus has led a life of humanity throughout his childhood, and now he is about to begin his life of divinity. Not that he was never divine as a child, but his divinity was not ready to be revealed yet. Now, it is about to be revealed here.

Cooper would be correct in saying that a premature public display of Jesus’ divine power and glory could throw off the grand Messianic plan by a huge margin, but to say that Mary *expects* a public display of Jesus’ divine power and glory is another example of potentially putting words in her mouth. The text gives no indication that Mary is expecting anything, whether it be phenomenal or perfectly normal, nor does it indicate that Jesus suspects Mary of expecting anything in particular from him.

Given the suggestion of nonverbal communication, it is somewhat likely that the first part of v. 4 could be an invitation to Mary to deepen her faith in her God. She was aware of Jesus' divinity since before the moment of his conception, and now he is telling her that the time to reveal his divinity to the world has arrived. God, in this case Jesus, inaugurated his role as the Messiah by being born through her and is now consummating his role as the Messiah by beginning his ministry of demonstrating his glory and power. The challenge to Mary, then, is to begin seeing him no longer as just her son, but now her Messiah.

The most likely explanation comes from Jean-Bosco Matand Bulembat. He suggests that Mary, having already known that Jesus is the Messiah, also knew that Jesus will one day reveal his true power and glory to the world (Matand Bulembat 64). That said, clearly he would be more than capable of supplying the most crucial ingredient to a successful wedding. Mary knows three facts: there is a crisis at hand, the Messiah is present, and the Messiah will eventually reveal his true glory. These three facts alone are all she needs to know. The only question is whether or not those three will come to pass now or later. So she approaches Jesus.

Although there is no indication of tone, as discussed above, the dialogue gives clues. Mary in the text approaches Jesus and says out loud, "They have no wine," when the *unspoken* understanding could be somewhere along the lines of, "There is a problem. I know you can fix this, though doing so would mean revealing yourself. So could this mean now is the time to reveal yourself?" This then makes Jesus' response sound perfectly natural, "What concern is this for you and for me?" He adds in a whisper, "My hour has not yet come." In other words, Jesus replies, "Not yet."

But regardless of whether or not he whispered this to Mary, if Jesus meant "not yet," he could have simply responded with those two words. Certainly they would have fallen in line with the discreet nature of the entire passage. Instead he draws them out by bluntly stating his hour has not arrived. That must mean that this was a deliberate statement intended to highlight something, both on the part of Jesus and on the part of the evangelist. A broader analysis of what Jesus meant by his "hour" reveals that there is, in fact, more to his reply than simply "not yet." Here I will discuss four key reasons why this particular statement is important.

First, this is the very first mention of Jesus' "hour" in the Gospel of John (Moulton 1025). In fact, there are seven occurrences of "hour" in which the phrasing, "The hour will come when..." indicates something in general happening when that hour occurs. The hour will come when: the Samaritan woman will worship the Father neither on a mountain nor in Jerusalem (Jn 4:21); true worshipers will worship the Father in truth and Spirit (Jn 4:23); the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God (Jn 5:25); all in their tombs will hear His voice (Jn 5:28); those who kill the disciples will think they are offering worship to God (Jn 16:2); Jesus will no longer use figures of speech but will more bluntly speak of the Father (Jn 16:25); the disciples will scatter and abandon Jesus (Jn 16:32). What is different about Jn 2:4 is that this is the first of eight mentions that not only will there be an hour—or time—in which something special occurs, but that there will be an hour that is specifically Jesus' hour. This is explicitly stated in the most crucial passages in John's Gospel: Jn 2:4, 7:30, 8:20, 12:23, 12:27, 13:1, 17:1, and finally 19:27. The final mention of an hour in John occurs just before Jesus' death. It goes without saying, then, that "hour" here refers to the process of crucifixion and resurrection. It is no accident that in the very next two verses after the final mention of Jesus' hour in 19:27 Jesus calls for wine (Jn 19:28-29). This mirrors the very first mention of Jesus' hour in the wedding at Cana which follows with him bringing forth wine. In both cases, Jesus, as God, is providing the wine, specifically the wine of salvation, which is necessary for the upcoming wedding. The evidence is all there: the first instance of "hour" is the tool John uses to allude to the process for salvation, the crucifixion, and resurrection. The text could not make any clearer the idea that Jesus' hour and the wine of redemption are directly correlated to the upcoming eschatological fulfillment, the wedding of God with humanity, the wine of

which will be provided at the crucifixion. Thus, the transformation into wine serves as a literal dramatization of the process of covenantal fulfillment.

The second significant piece about Jesus' statement in v. 4 is that it is a plant in the grand story of the restoration of Israel through Jesus' revelation of his divine glory. Storytellers know that in order to have a good, plausible story, one must incorporate tiny plants toward the beginning of a story that foreshadow the coming climax and yet have the climax remain unexpected. There are two plants here: one is John's use of the word "hour," and the other is the bringing forth of wine—an abundance, no less. Clearly Jesus in the text refers to his crucifixion and resurrection when he declares his coming hour, but that is what makes these plants so striking: nobody at the wedding has any idea to what he refers. The only person who could have any hint would be Mary, but even she would not fully know what Jesus' plan of salvation would entail, much less Jesus' disciples. Thus, Jesus' crucifixion remains hidden in plain sight.

But that only begs the question: why would he mention something so huge in such a discreet fashion? This is the third piece of significance in Jesus' statement in v. 4 which goes hand-in-hand with the second. There is a specific order by which Jesus reveals his glory to the disciples. He needed to reveal that he is the Messiah first before revealing that he would eventually be crucified. If he had revealed his crucifixion and resurrection first and his Messiahship second, no one would have believed him. Since the Jewish expectation of the Messiah was that the Messiah would not die, Jesus' story would immediately be dismissed. Even with the resurrection added to the story, none of the Jews would believe him, and certainly not anyone else. He needed to establish first that he is the Messiah before establishing that he must die.

So, Jesus hinted toward his crucifixion and resurrection gradually in order to reveal to his mother and disciples along the way that he *is* the Messiah, he *did* come to fulfill Scripture, and there *will* be a specific time at which the kingdom of God will be commenced. If he had revealed all of this at once, no one would have believed him. By hinting at this time in small doses, his followers can truly come to believe in and be eyewitnesses to the Son of God in the flesh. In this way, they can more fully come to understand his role once the crucifixion and resurrection had taken place. They can more fully understand that he had to die so that Scripture is not just *mostly* fulfilled, it is *completely* fulfilled.

The fourth piece of significance is an instance of "hour" in John in which Jesus gives an analogy of a woman in labor:

"When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So you also are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you." (Jn 16:21-22)

This passage occurs during the Last Supper, at the Passover meal that initiates the kingdom of God. Jesus describes the current spiritual status for the disciples and how that will very shortly change. What is most striking about this analogy is that Jesus is referring to the crucifixion and the coming resurrection. The disciples and all of Israel are in anguish akin to that of childbirth, but they will soon rejoice as a mother does once her baby is born.

This also echoes Matthew's Gospel: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be famines and earthquakes from place to place. All these are the beginnings of the labor pains" (Mt 24:7-8). Here is the emphasis: contrary to what would seem to be the logical conclusion, the agonizing labor Jesus talks about in John is *not* the crucifixion—the labor is happening currently, before Jesus' hour. The crucifixion is the time of birth. Jesus refers to his own death as birth—the birth of a new creation and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. The other period of labor mentioned by Matthew refers



to eschatology. The fact that Matthew's context of labor pains points to end times and John's context of labor pains refers to the crucifixion highlights the link between the two events. It is without coincidence, then, that John's use of "hour" is deliberate: he must have intended to use "hour" with a mother giving birth as an allegory of what Jesus' hour will truly mean even at the time of his death. Jesus' response at Cana means, in other words, that although his hour will not come to pass until later, nevertheless the time is ripe to begin the ministry that would bring about the goal of his mission.

#### Jn 2:5: MARY'S ROLE

In v. 5 Mary takes action. "His mother said to the servers, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" Now Mary leaves the crisis of the wine deficit in Jesus' hands. What does she think is going to happen? Keener suggests that Mary here recognizes Jesus' authority and wherewithal to change the situation in some way (Keener 502). Just as in her declarative statement in v. 3, there is no way of knowing in v. 5 if she expects anything in particular, although her follow-up action could suggest that she may not have felt she needed to know if Jesus' plan to rectify the situation involved something miraculous or mundane. All she needed to know was *that* Jesus could do it, not necessarily *how* he could do it.

Cooper parallels Mary with John the Baptist in Jn 3:29-30:

"You yourselves can testify that I said I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease."

In this passage John the Baptist likens his role to Jesus as a best man to the bridegroom; the bridegroom must increase while the best man decreases (Jn 3:29). By using the Baptist's analogy, Cooper points out that Mary quickly realizes and then nonverbally acknowledges that she also must decrease while Jesus increases (Jn 3:30). Cooper suggests that Mary does not know precisely what she must do, but she does know of something she can do: shift the authority (Cooper 372). This is not authority in the sense of control but more in the sense of having the wherewithal to tell the servants what to do from where Jesus stands. This is also not to suggest that Mary had any authority over the servants to begin with. Rather, Mary in the text is saying to the servants that neither other servants nor the headwaiter nor the bridegroom can rectify the situation, but Jesus can. It is worth noting that Mary is also not necessarily expecting the unexpected, but that she is not expecting anything in particular, as described above. In this way Mary is doing her part to help Jesus commence his ministry and reveal the glory that she had believed in from the beginning.

#### Jn 2:6-8: POPULAR INTERPRETATION AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

In verses 6-8 the plot of the passage begins: "Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told them, 'Fill the jars with water.' So they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, 'Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter.' So they took it." This is the core of the passage. Here is where the wine miraculously appears. Here is where the author of John's Gospel deliberately points to the richness in the depth of this first sign.

But before diving into the crucial detail of filling the jars with water, one must consider the background of the whole situation. In Jewish tradition drunkenness is forbidden, but wine and drinking in and of itself are not (Keener 499). Typically, the headwaiter has good wine served first while guests are sober. Then, once senses have dulled, he orders that the servants bring out the inferior, cheaper wine. The Pharisees back in that time had strict codes on drinking, even at festivities.

Thus, Keener suggests that the host family of the wedding was probably more lenient on drinking rules, as there is an implication toward the end of the passage that guests at the wedding were already well intoxicated (Keener 500). Keener goes on to say that Jesus brings forth wine from the jars used for ritual purification in order to demonstrate that he values his host's honor and dignity over ritual. This is certainly a tempting view, but it hardly scratches the surface in theological significance, especially when put in context with John's larger narrative. When one factors in all the symbolism in this passage and its implications for the future of Jesus and Israel, the fact that Jesus upheld his host's honor at this wedding is more of a convenience.

Now for the water: A popular interpretation of this passage suggests that the water in the jars is the tradition of the old Judaism and the old revelation. Water is also the word of the prophets of the Old Testament, but wine is Jesus' revelation, the new revelation. Jesus illustrates that he has come to bring fruit; he has come to bring substance to the word of the ancestors. While it is also tempting to interpret the miracle this way, it hardly hits the tip of the iceberg in theological significance. Though to say that Jesus is the "new" coming to replace and fulfill the "old" is not incorrect, there is simply more to it than that. First, keep in mind that John intends to direct the reader forward, not backward, in allusion. Second, wine is too much of a prominent symbol in literature and tradition to be only a vague reference to Jewish history. Rudolf Schnackenburg says wine symbolizes eschatological fulfillment (Schnackenburg 333). D. Moody Smith and many other scholars point toward wine being used by pagans to celebrate Dionysus (Smith 86-7). It can safely be assumed that John and his readers knew about pagan traditions with wine. But even then, wine here would not be pointing to a theological attack on pagan tradition. That too would be a trivial matter in comparison to what the wine here is actually alluding to, apart from the deficit.

Ephrem the Syrian comes closer to a likely theological point than the others. Ephrem parallels the changing of water to wine with the nature of Jesus' birth. He says that just as Jesus transformed water into wine without altering the nature of the stone jars, so too does Jesus transform the nature of his own humanity by being both human and divine without changing the nature of his mother's womb (*Ancient Christian Commentary* 95). While this is a tantalizing thought, it glosses over a crucial detail: Jesus transforms water. Divine intervention through water is an important motif in the Old Testament; the significance of the transformation of water, then, cannot be understated.

In the Old Testament, God demonstrates power over water a number of times: unleashing and retreating the waters of the flood beneath Noah's ark (Gn 7:6-8:5), sending and withholding rain for Job (Job 5:10, 12:15), allowing Moses to stretch out his hand and part the waters of the Sea of Reeds (Ex 14:21, 27), parting the waters before the ark of the covenant (Jsh 3:15-16), etc. Only once in the entire Old Testament is water transformed, and that is when God transforms the waters of the Nile into blood (Ex 7:14-24). He changes water into blood without altering the nature of the ground beneath and around the river.

It is no accident, then, that the water at Cana is transformed into wine. Wine also refers to Jesus' blood, which at the time of the crucifixion is referred to as the wine of salvation. When Jesus is with his disciples at the Last Supper, he takes the cup of wine and says to them that that cup is the new covenant *in his blood* (Mt 26:28, Mk 14:24, Lk 22:20). So, through Moses, God transforms water into blood. At the wedding at Cana, God, through Jesus, transforms water into wine. At the institution of the kingdom of God at the Last Supper, God, through Jesus, transforms wine into blood. Thus, the dramatization of the transformation of water to wine also attains literary significance as well as literal, which has been previously discussed. This means it is also important to note that Jesus, being the true bridegroom and having brought forth wine at Cana, transforms that wine into blood to further dramatize the point that at weddings, especially that of God with humanity, wine is absolutely essential, just as it is in Jewish culture. When Jesus in John transformed the wine into blood, he practically spelled out

his plan for the salvation of Israel. If that wine is blood, then that blood is wine—specifically, wine for the coming wedding. Thus, the true marriage between God and humankind cannot take place without the wine of redemption, that is, the blood of Christ.

#### Jn 2:9-10: HEADWAITER AND BRIDEGROOM

If Jesus' command to the servants is the cause and the means for the transformation, then vs. 9-10 provide the result: "And when the headwaiter had tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from (although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now.'"

Hilary of Poitiers points out a striking detail in v. 9. The servants who dumped water into the jars expected water to be drawn. The servants who drew out from jars saw wine and may have thought that wine was poured into the jars. Hilary notes that there was no account for gain or loss of character (*Ancient Christian Commentary* 97). So that means somewhere in there the water actually turned into wine. The text, however, does not indicate if the content of the jars became wine, or if the water in the jars remained water, and whatever was drawn out turned into wine. All the reader knows is that by the time whatever was in the jar reaches the headwaiter, the content becomes wine.

Hilary makes a great point, but if the existence of wine is crucial, then every detail about the wine must also be equally crucial, as each one would in itself provide symbolism. The only problem is that the text gives no detail whatsoever regarding the precise nature of how and at what point the water becomes wine. The only way it is known that the water changes at all is through the clause in v. 9: "τὸ ὕδωρ οἶνον γεγενημένον" (Jn 2:9)—the water that had become wine. It is plausible that the water turned into wine when water was being drawn out and poured into a cup for the headwaiter to taste while remaining water when it is in the jar. If this is true, it would symbolize an important point that Jesus later makes: he did not come to change or negate Scripture but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17-18). However, as Matand Bulembat suggests, if the transformation itself only has four words attributed to it, then the transformation must not be the focus of the passage. The focus must be on the people and the situation surrounding it (Matand Bulembat 63).

So, turning to focus on the people in the passage, Matand Bulembat points out that the roles of headwaiter and bridegroom appear to be reversed in this passage. Typically at a first-century Palestinian Jewish wedding, a good, responsible headwaiter knows all the arrangements in advance, and if there is a need for anything, he goes to the bridegroom and speaks to him in a respectful manner (Matand Bulembat 63-64). In the passage the headwaiter at the wedding appears to have done neither; he summons the bridegroom and speaks to him casually. Moreover, as he does not appear to have even known about the deficit at all, he appears irresponsible, having never communicated with the bridegroom prior to the festivities. Even though there is also the absence of the role of the bridegroom, he is not without fault either. There is no indication that he accepts the headwaiter's praise nor that he denies it. Neither the bridegroom nor the headwaiter in the text appears to be taking on the responsibility of his respective role. Instead the emphasis is placed on the true headwaiter and bridegroom, Mary and Jesus.

It is Mary, not the wedding's headwaiter, who is immediately notified in some way that there is a deficit of wine. It is Mary, not the wedding's headwaiter, who notifies someone in charge who is more capable of fixing the problem than she. It is Mary, not the wedding's headwaiter, who transfers immediate authority over to higher authority to ensure that the situation is rectified. It is Jesus, not the wedding's bridegroom, who is notified of the situation. It is Jesus, not the wedding's bridegroom, who tells the servants how and where to obtain more wine. One might even say that the headwaiter and bridegroom at the wedding

appeared to be counterfeits in comparison to Mary and Jesus, who truly fulfilled the roles of headwaiter and bridegroom, respectively. Although this is the only time Mary appears as a headwaiter in the text, this is only the first time Jesus fulfills the role of a bridegroom. Nowhere in John 2 is it explicitly stated that Jesus is the bridegroom, but his actions convey that message loud and clear. In fact, we find that Jesus' identity as the true bridegroom is a key theme of John's Gospel, as demonstrated in Jn 3:29-30, which was discussed earlier.

In that passage John the Baptist declares that he is the best man to the bridegroom, who is obviously Jesus. Furthermore, John's readers would have been familiar with the Synoptics, where there is the recurring theme of Jesus being the bridegroom. "Bridegroom," or "ο νυμφίος," is present in Mt 9:15 and 25:1, 5-6, 10; Mk 2:19-20; and Lk 5:34-35, so it does not need to be prevalent in John. Nevertheless, it makes for an interesting coincidence that in all four Gospel accounts there are no less than twelve occurrences of "bridegroom." Twelve, of course, coincides with the twelve apostles of Jesus, who coincide with the twelve tribes of Israel.

### JOHN'S OTHER SIGNS

Another way of seeing Mary and Jesus as the true headwaiter and bridegroom comes directly from taking a larger look at the rest of John's Gospel, particularly at what distinguishes John from the other three Gospels—the signs. By reading John's first sign in context with its placement among the other six Johannine signs, one can clearly see that there is a second purpose as to why Jesus would have made the transformation so subtle.

All seven of the signs are as follows: the healing of the official's son—which is the second sign at Cana (Jn 4:46-54)—and of the man at the pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1-9), the feeding of the five thousand (Jn 6:1-13), the walking on water (Jn 6:16-21), the healing of the man born blind (Jn 9:1-12), the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44), and the resurrection (Jn 20:1-29). Each of these signs reveals something about Jesus' glory, as v. 11 describes. The healing miracles illustrate Jesus' life-giving power, as specified when he says the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and live (Jn 5:25). The signs involving supplies and gifts—changing water to wine and feeding of the five thousand—illustrate messianic and eschatological abundance and fulfillment (Thompson 379). The earlier signs are smaller and simpler, but they start to build in significance, precision, and extravagance. First, the subtle transformation of water to wine, then a couple of healings from disease, then a miraculous abundance of food, then demonstrating dominion over the forces of nature through walking on water and healing a birth defect. Finally, through the resurrection of Lazarus and then of Jesus himself, Jesus demonstrates dominion over the single force that overpowers nature: death.

While the four later signs are obviously significant, one must not overlook the three earlier signs as well. The earlier signs are less precise, but that growing precision is exactly what makes them worth noting. The first sign is completely ambiguous. To change the water into wine, Jesus barely even acknowledges the process, let alone the exact point at which one can say the water transformed. He only instructs the servants to fill the jars with water. The exact point of transformation is skipped entirely, and the narrator only mentions that the water at one point had become wine. In the second sign, the healing of the official's son, the exact point at which the son was healed was when Jesus said, "Your son will live" (Jn 4:50, 53). In the third sign, the healing of the man at Bethesda, the precise miracle point is when Jesus said, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk" (Jn 5:8-9). In the feeding of the five thousand, the multiplication of loaves and fishes occurs during distribution, right after Jesus gives thanks (Jn 6:11).

But why is precision of the turning point in a sign so important? Matthew provides the answer. "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone... Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come... So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of

Man will come” (Mt 24:36, 42, 44). No one knows the day nor the hour at which God will come to be with humanity forever—no one knows at what point the process of eschatological fulfillment will commence. This is foreshadowed by the wedding at Cana: neither the readers nor the servants nor the disciples nor Mary knows at what point the water becomes wine. No one knows at what point the true bridegroom brings about the abundance of the wine of salvation.

### THE FIRST SIGN AS A PARABLE

As can be seen with the Cana wedding, the signs in John are used to convey the power of God over all, since Jesus is, of course, God Incarnate, the Word made flesh. In the Synoptics Jesus uses parables to get his point across regarding the revelation of his glory. In John, however, parables are nowhere to be found. Signs replace them. The result is that each sign in John *is* a parable. One could even utilize the language for the parables to describe the meaning of each sign.

To test this theory, the wedding at Cana could be narrated as follows: “The kingdom of God is like a wedding at which the headwaiter, chosen by the people, for the bridegroom, who was sent by the people, is unaware that the people have run out of their supply of wine. Meanwhile, the headwaiter chosen by God notifies the bridegroom who was sent by God of this crisis. The real bridegroom quietly informs the servants of exactly how and where to obtain all the wine they will need. When they do so, they find that this bridegroom sent by God had actually supplied them with more than enough wine.”

When read as a parable keeping in line with the apparent focus, this passage tells the reader how much more significant it is when one considers the people involved. The transformation becomes a vehicle to drive home the point of the arrival of the true bridegroom who will bring the necessary wine for the coming wedding.

But this also means that by reading the Cana passage as a parable, it is transformed into an allegory. As an allegory it answers an important question: Who is the bridegroom? This is especially important considering the wedding imagery in the Old Testament, which will be discussed further below. But the question of the bridegroom’s identity will be answered later in Jn 3:29-30, as mentioned above. That must mean one of two possibilities: either the author of John’s Gospel wants to emphasize Jesus’ identity as the bridegroom, or there is more to the passage by which reading it as an allegory does not fully address its meaning or significance. If the latter is true, then in order to fully address its significance, the passage must be read as something non-allegorical, which turns it into something literal, live, and real—a dramatization

As a dramatization, and not an allegory, the passage spells out a process: at the “hour” of the bridegroom, wine will be brought forth for everyone for the wedding. This dramatizes the meaning and purpose of the coming crucifixion, in which blood becomes wine. This wine will be necessary for the coming wedding of the bridegroom, Jesus, with his bride, humankind.

### Jn 2:11: WEDDING IMAGERY IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

The final portion of the passage acts as a kind of closure of the sign as well as a commencement of the rest of Jesus’ journey: “Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him” (Jn 2:11).

There is one final, obvious aspect of this passage that has not yet been addressed. Jesus, the true bridegroom, subtly reveals his glory and power *at a wedding*. Wedding imagery is peppered in the words of the prophets of the Old Testament: Hosea warns that God will punish Israel for being unfaithful to Him like an unfaithful wife to her husband (Hos 1, 2:1-19). But then he also proclaims that God will make a covenant with Israel, betrothing Himself to her (Hos 2:20-25). Jeremiah tells of Israel being faithful to God in her youth much like a bride and, almost exactly as Hosea describes, compares her to an unfaithful wife, but her

husband, God, is merciful (Jer 2:32, 3:1-15). Isaiah foretells of God rejoicing in Jerusalem as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride (Is 62:3-5). Isaiah also explicitly states that the Israel is the unfaithful wife who will be reunited with her husband, who is God:

For more numerous are the children of the deserted wife than the children of her who has a husband, says the Lord...For the shame of your youth you shall forget, the reproach of your widowhood no longer remember. For your husband is your Maker; the Lord of hosts is his name, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, called God of all the earth. The Lord calls you back like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, a wife married in youth and then cast off, says your God. (Is 54:1, 4-6)

Much of the wedding imagery in the Bible as a whole, both implied and blatant, is illustrated in Revelation. Rev 19-21 depicts the bride Jerusalem and her groom, the Word:

“Alleluia! The Lord has established his reign, our God, the almighty. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding day of the Lamb has come, his bride has made herself ready. She was allowed to wear a bright, clean linen garment’...Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb...I [John] also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race’...[one of the angels] came and said to me, ‘Come here. I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb’” (Rev 19:6-9; 21:2-3, 9).

Just after Rev 21:9 is a description of the new Jerusalem, which has the names of all twelve tribes of Israel inscribed upon the walls and each of the twelve foundations (Rev 21:12-14). Given the Jewish expectation of the marriage of God with His people, it is surely significant that the symbol-rich Gospel of John would begin immediately with the Word becoming flesh, shortly thereafter naming the twelve disciples, and then a wedding (Jn 1; 2:1-11). In fact, no other sign could fit in that order better than the Cana wedding. With this sign in this particular order at the beginning of the Gospel, John appears to be deliberately illustrating the wedding between God and His people, as expected to happen in the time of fulfillment, as depicted particularly in Revelation. The Cana wedding, then, is no mere allegory, nor is it a bare miracle with no further significance. Rather, when you factor in the social and exegetical aspects, it becomes a *dramatization* of the fulfillment of the Jewish expectation of the reunion between God and humanity by means of a great wedding feast at the end of the age: *a dramatization of covenantal fulfillment*.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the plot of the story of the restoration of Israel, the miracle of the changing of water to wine serves as a tiny plant for the coming climax in the story: the crucifixion, leading to the thrilling conclusion, eschatological fulfillment. Regarding John’s use of symbolism, it serves as a dramatization of Israel’s hopes being fulfilled, of God keeping His promise, and of precisely how God will reunite with Israel. By taking a closer look at the details, particularly of John’s use of “hour,” “day,” and “bridegroom,” one can see how this passage points toward the climactic events of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and especially toward the ultimate climax of eschatological fulfillment. But by taking a broader look at the context of this passage, one can see that it simultaneously points toward the eschatological fulfillment that is yet to come. Jn 2:1-11 thus serves a dual purpose, one in hinting that the kingdom of God will shortly be inaugurated through the blood of Jesus, and the other in that the kingdom of God will later be consummated through the marriage of God with humanity, in which there will be an abundance of wine.

## References

- Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: John 1-10*. Ed. Joel C. Elowsky. Vol. IVa. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007. Print.
- Bauckham, Richard. "Eyewitnesses 'from the Beginning.'" *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006. Print.
- Carmichael, Calum. "The Marriage at Cana of Galilee." *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995. Web.
- Cohen, Harold S. J. "Mary at Cana and on Calvary." *Mary, the Spirit, and the Church*. Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980. Web.
- Cooper, Karl T. "The Best Wine: John 2:1-11." *Westminster Theological Journal*. Vol. 41 no 2. 1979. Web.
- The Greek New Testament*. Ed. B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007. Print.
- Hengel, Martin. "The Interpretation of the Wine Miracle at Cana: John 2:1-11." *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. Web.
- Keener, Craig. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Vol 1. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003. Print.
- Little, Edmund. *Echoes of the Old Testament*. Paris: J. Gabalda, 1998. Print.
- Maronde, Christopher A. "Moses in the Gospel of John." *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. Vol. 77 no 1-2. 2013. Web.
- Matand Bulembat, Jean-Bosco. "Head-Waiter and Bridegroom of the Wedding at Cana: Structure and Meaning of John 2.1-12." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. Vol. 30 no 1. 2007. Web.
- Moulton, W.F. et al. *Concordance to the Greek Testament*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978. Print.
- The New American Bible*. Ed. Stephen J. Hartdegen et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Phillips, Thomas E. "'The Third Fifth Day?' John 2:1 in Context." *The Expository Times*. Vol. 115 no 10. 2004. Web.
- Pitre, Brant. *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*. New York: Doubleday, 2011. Print.
- Richardson, Peter. "What has Cana to do with Capernaum?" *Journal of New Testament Studies*. Vol. 48 no 3. pp. 314-331. 2002. Web.
- Schnackenburg, Rudolf. *The Gospel According to St. John*. Vol. 1. New York: Seabury Press, 1980. Print.
- Sick, David H. "The Architriklinos at Cana." *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Vol. 130 no 3. 2011. Web.
- Smith, D. Moody. *John*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999. Print.
- Thompson, Marianne Meye. "John, Gospel of." *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001. Print.
- Toussaint, Stanley D. "The Significance of the First Sign in John's Gospel." *Bibliotheca Sacra*. Vol. 134 no 533. 1977. Web.
- Williams, Ritva H. "The Mother of Jesus at Cana: A Social-Science Interpretation of John 2:1-12." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Vol 59 no 4. 1997. Web.