



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

The GOSPEL of JOHN

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CHAPTER 1

The Wedding at Cana

(John 2)

John 1 sends us immediately back to “the beginning,” to Genesis, and in returning to the beginning, the Gospel recreates the world. When John’s readers encounter Genesis anew, they will see Jesus in the Word of God by which God creates the world and in the Light that God calls into being. As God in Genesis creates order out of chaos, so Jesus, by his various signs, does the same. The first sign, turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana, where the supply of wine had run out, is not the chaos of the primordial soup; it is not the destruction of war or the disorder of economic collapse. It is the personal chaos of social embarrassment, of a wedding that appears to be starting off on the wrong foot, and of a mother who nudges her reluctant son into action although it is not his time or, as Jesus puts it, his “hour has not yet come” (2:4).

The wedding scene also returns us to the beginning, this time to Genesis 2 and the creation of the figures we call Adam and Eve. These are not their names in Genesis 2, which only mentions, in Hebrew, *ha-adam*, “the earthling” and *ishah*, “woman.” Nothing is said about marriage, and the couple, not yet knowing they are naked, would have no interest in wedding attire. There is no party, no gift table, no band or caterer. Nevertheless, later tradition understood this first couple as married, a point made clear in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke; called Synoptic because they “see together” in telling

more-or-less the same story in the same order; John has a different chronology and different stories about Jesus, including the Cana wedding) where Jesus, in discussing divorce and remarriage, appeals to Genesis 2, “From the beginning (*archē*) of creation, [God] made them male and female. On account of this, a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his woman (the Greek *gynē* can also mean “wife”), and the two shall become one flesh (*sarx*). . . . Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6-9).

John can even be understood as continuing to replay the plot of Genesis. In Genesis 3, the man and the woman eat the forbidden fruit (it only becomes an apple in the early Middle Ages) and seek to hide themselves from God. In John 3:20, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their works may not be exposed.” John evokes Abraham ten times in chapter 8; Jacob in chapter 4; Moses in chapters 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9; the prophet Elijah in 1:21, 25; Isaiah in chapters 1 and 12; and so on.

The Scriptures of Israel are not John’s only source; John also likely had access to the Synoptic Gospels. When I was in graduate school (when Noah was still on the ark), one of my professors insisted that John and the Synoptics were independent. Due in no small part to the work of my student James Barker, who is now a professor at Western Kentucky University, I’ve become increasingly convinced that John knows the Synoptic tradition and provides his own take on it. The idea of one evangelist (the technical term for a Gospel writer) retelling accounts from other evangelists is not new. Most biblical scholars, myself included, see Mark as a source for Matthew and Luke. In Luke 1:1-4, the evangelist notes that lots of people have attempted to write an orderly account of the story of Jesus based on information they received from eyewitnesses (thus Luke tells us that he was not on site), so he to seeks to present an orderly account. In other words, Luke had access to Mark and, probably, to Matthew, and Luke thought that he could do a better job.

My point is not that Mark was wrong. My point is that Matthew and Luke found Mark insufficient: no Nativity story, no Resurrection appearances, no Beatitudes or the “Our Father” prayer, and so on. Thus, Matthew and Luke supplemented Mark. John I think does the same to the Synoptic Gospels. Where there are potential problems, John sorts them. For example, in Luke 10:38-42, Mary and Martha never appear together, never speak to each other, and Martha remains upset with Mary’s lack of support. In John 11–12, the two sisters work as a team. Family squabble in Luke becomes family solidarity in John.

The wedding at Cana seems to me to be another correction to a potential problem. In Matthew 19:12 Jesus praises individuals who “make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven,” an expression that commends those who do not procreate and, by extension, those who do not marry. In Mark 10:28 (followed by Matthew 19:27), Peter announces that he and the other members of Jesus’s inner circle of twelve disciples have “left everything” to follow Jesus: that everything includes wives and children. Luke 18:29-30 depicts Jesus as teaching, “There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers [and sisters] or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this time (*kairos*), and in the eternity to come eternal life.” Even Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:9, expresses preference for the single rather than married life, “but if they [the Corinthians who follow Jesus] do not practice self-control (or cannot restrain themselves), they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn [i.e., with passion].” John may well have felt the need to tell the followers that Jesus *did* approve of marriage, so much so that Jesus not only attended a wedding, he helped cater.

Alas, reception history (not “wedding reception” but how the tradition came to be understood) did not go in this pro-conubial direction. One early church legend casts the bride at the wedding as Mary Magdalene, stranded at the altar when Jesus calls the groom, the Beloved Disciple understood to be John, to be one of his followers. In John 2, we meet neither bride nor groom: we do not know how Jesus,

or his mother, knew them, if they were friends or relatives. For John 2, the bride and groom are not the most important people at the wedding. Nor are their parents. The focus is on Jesus, his mother, and the wine steward. I find this a helpful text when dealing with bridezillas, bachelor parties, controlling mothers and fathers, and everyone else who makes weddings annoying rather than enjoyable.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. (John 2:1)

“On the third day” of what? John does not make this one easy for us. Back in 1:29, John mentions that “tomorrow” (most English translations read “the next day”) John the Baptizer sees Jesus and announces, “Here is the lamb of God, the one who takes away (the Greek is literally “takes up”) the sin of the world.” The first day therefore must refer to the events earlier in the chapter, where the Baptizer testifies that he is not Elijah (in contradiction to the Synoptic tradition), not a prophet (again in contradiction) and finally not the Messiah. He is, quoting Isaiah 40, the forerunner who comes to announce the Messiah.

We can see a decrease in John’s role as we move from the earliest Gospel, Mark, on to Matthew and Luke and finally John. According to Mark, John baptizes Jesus; Mark makes no comment about their relationship. In Matthew’s version, John insists that because Jesus is his superior, it is Jesus who should be doing the baptism. Jesus insists that John perform the ritual, to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15; both “fulfill” and “righteousness” are signature Matthean terms). Matthew thus makes clear John’s subordinate status. Luke increases the subordination by depicting John, while still a fetus, acknowledging, as his mother Elizabeth puts it, his “lord” (Luke 1:43). Finally, for John’s Gospel, the Baptizer is no longer a prophet, or Elijah; he is merely a messenger. This subordination was necessary for the Gospel writers, since other people at the time saw John as a messianic figure. The Mandaeans still do.

John is doing more than counting off the days. When we return to the Scriptures of Israel, it turns out that the third day is the day when miracles occur. It would be great if John here alluded to Genesis 1, but this is not the case, at least directly. The “third day” (Genesis 1:13) is when God gathers the waters to create both seas and the dry land then creates vegetation.

The expression “the third day” occurs first in Genesis 22:4, when Abraham looked up and saw the “mountain of the Lord” (22:14) where he was to sacrifice his son Isaac. This connection, in retrospect, anticipates the sacrifice of Jesus, the beloved Son of God. In Jewish tradition, the location of the near sacrifice of Isaac is Mount Zion, the future location of the Temple (see 2 Chronicles 3:1 which mentions Mount Moriah). Other momentous events on the third day include the manifestation of God on Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah (Exodus 19:11), and Hosea 6:2 where the prophet exhorts the people Israel to return to the Lord (Hebrew: YHWH; Greek: *kyrios*), for “after two days he will revive us (i.e., bring us to life), and on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” For Jesus’s followers, he is a new Isaac, he is a new Moses, and he is the one who is raised, so that those who follow him will be raised as well.

More, it will be on the third day that Jesus, according to the Gospels, will be raised from the tomb (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 46; Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4). Notably, his Passion prediction does not occur in John’s Gospel. John, with knowledge of the Synoptics, and we readers today with that same knowledge, did not need to have Jesus make a Passion prediction. Here the evangelist again clues the readers: the more you know of your Scripture, both the Scriptures of Israel and the other Gospels, the deeper your appreciation of John’s narrative becomes.

In John 2, this third day is not the day of Jesus’s resurrection; it is a wedding. To this point in the Gospel, we have met John the Baptizer and, in John 1, Jesus encounters the first of his disciples. There is no

baptism of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, which is another part of its subordination of the baptizer to Jesus. Why foreground a wedding?

There are multiple answers, aside from the obvious one that we biblical scholars, so intrigued by intertextual allusions, often fail to notice. First, it is possible that Jesus went to a wedding in Cana. He could have easily traveled there from Nazareth, which is about nine miles to the south. Nevertheless, Jesus did lots of things that are not recorded in any Gospel, so again, why a wedding? Here are six more of many possible answers.

Second, as already suggested, John may be controlling the Synoptic narratives that appear to downplay marriage and family in favor of fictive kinships. People in the Synoptic traditions leave their families to follow Jesus, and Jesus in these texts, as well as Paul in 1 Corinthians, promotes celibacy over marriage. By depicting Jesus at a wedding, John affirms marriage.

Third, while the wedding is not that of Jesus himself, the wedding imagery should remind us of the tradition of Jesus as a bridegroom and his followers as “sons of the wedding hall” or, more mundanely, “wedding guests” (see Matthew 9:15; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35). The parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 draws on the same images. That Jesus is a “bridegroom” indicates that to be in his presence is like being at a wedding, with celebration, with food, with the promise of a new family. In John’s Gospel, Jesus does not refer to himself as a bridegroom, but John the Baptizer accords him this role: in John 3:29, the Baptizer explains, “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom, and the friend (Greek: *philos*, as in “Philadelphia”) of the bridegroom, the one who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.” For John’s Gospel, the followers of Jesus are not just disciples, they are “friends” (*philoï*, John 15:14) when they do what Jesus commands them and because he has informed them about everything he has heard from his Father (15:15). He proves

his friendship in his crucifixion, since as he states in 15:13 (KJV), “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*philoì*).

The fourth explanation is related to the third: the image of Jesus as bridegroom draws upon the motif in Israel’s Scriptures of God as the bridegroom and then husband of Israel. The metaphor thus casts Jesus’s followers in the role of the bride. Similar images appear in Paul’s letters, such as 2 Corinthians 11:2, where the apostle, speaking to his Gentile *ekklēsia* (the term, meaning “assembly” and usually translated “church,” is in Greek a feminine noun), states, “I am zealous for you with a zeal of God, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to the Christ.” Similarly, in Revelation 21:2, the seer proclaims, “And the holy city, the new Jerusalem, I saw, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,” who is the Christ.

Fifth, the wedding imagery, with its abundance of wine, is a foretaste of the messianic banquet, when “The Lord of hosts will make for all the peoples on this mountain a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (Isaiah 25:6). The Dead Sea Scrolls, several passages in the New Testament, and Rabbinic literature all display a literary technique in which a cited verse signals that the reader should look at that verse’s immediate context. Isaiah 25:6 is connected to John 2 given the touchstones of wine and of Jesus’s messianic role. The connection is enhanced when we realize that Isaiah 25:8 proclaims that God “will swallow up death forever”; the next chapter proclaims, “Your dead will live, my corpse will rise” (Isaiah 26:19). When we know the context of the allusion to Isaiah, John’s text becomes all the more profound.

Sixth, wedding imagery anticipates other scenes in the Gospel, from the discussion of marriage between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 in which Jesus acts the part of the bridegroom, to the depiction of Mary Magdalene as a lost lover at the tomb in John 20.

And seventh, weddings are the start of new families. According to Genesis 2, as we have seen, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and thus a new family begins. John's Gospel creates new families as well, based on leaving father and mother and becoming a new creation. In the Gospel's next chapter, Jesus explains to Nicodemus that one must be "born anew" or "born from above" (John 3:7).

The last phrase of John 2:1 introduces "the mother of Jesus." We know from the Synoptic Gospels and Acts that her name is Mary. For John, the focus is not on her name—which given both Mary the sister of Martha and Mary from Magdala (or perhaps Mary the Tower), can make for a confusing narrative—but on her role as mother. She is the mother of Jesus, but she will also become, in John 20, the new mother of the similarly unnamed Beloved Disciple. That she has other children, whom we meet at the wedding, shows the importance of this new family: Jesus entrusts his mother not to her other biological children, but to the Beloved Disciple.

John's Gospel gives us no nativity account, nothing about a virginal conception, magi, or shepherds, not even a birth in Bethlehem. In fact, the Prologue seems to erase the need for a mother. Jesus is, according to the Prologue, both God and with God; he is the perfect image of God the Father. Thus, for John's Gospel, when people see Jesus, it is as if they are seeing God. This perfect likeness between a son and a father can indicate that the mother has made no contribution to the appearance or nature of the child. For John, Jesus is this perfect likeness. From such a view easily follows the claim, from the second-century group known as Valentinians, that Jesus passed through Mary like water through a tube. John insists both on the Incarnation, the taking on of flesh, so that Jesus is not a type of friendly spirit (I am reminded of the old cartoon character Casper the Friendly Ghost, who I for a while confused with one of the magi). Thus, Mary is needed to ground Jesus in his humanity. However, because there is no description of the conception and birth, the mother of Jesus is

important in John's Gospel because of what she does, not because of the particulars of her biology.

***Jesus and his disciples were also called to the wedding.
(John 2:2)***

There are verses that demand attention and that remain in memory. Then there's John 2:2. Compared to the wealth of commentary on other passages in the Gospel, John 2:2 gets short shrift. Personally, I like this verse a lot, since it opens space for both imagination and action.

The first verse of the chapter focuses on Jesus's mother, so that the reference to Jesus and the disciples comes as an afterthought: yes, he and his friends were there too. While the disciples get a shout-out, John makes no mention here of Jesus's "brothers and sisters." No reference to Joseph here or anywhere else in John, for whom the only father to Jesus is God.

Nor are we told who called, or invited them: the bride or her family, the groom or his family? Did the mother of Jesus ask for them to be invited, and did she ask that the disciples be included? Such inclusion may sound odd to twenty-first-century ears: If I am invited to a wedding, I would not expect my children to be invited if they did not know the couple, let alone for my graduate students to come along. We do know from later rabbinic sources that a man's (yes, this is a patriarchal culture) disciples were like his sons, so it is possible that the disciples would be seen as part of the family and so included in an invitation. To this point, Jesus only has a few disciples, and only in chapter 6 (vv. 67, 70, 71), at the feeding of the five thousand, does John mention, in an offhand way that suggests readers knew the tradition of the "twelve" from the Synoptics, that Jesus had twelve disciples. John 20:24, the only other reference to the number, mentions that "Thomas, one of the Twelve, who was called 'the twin,'" was not present when Jesus first appeared, after his resurrection, to his followers. A few disciples will not overburden the people paying for

the wedding. Moreover, as far as we can determine from both written and archaeological remains, lower Galilee at the time of Jesus was relatively prosperous. There should have been enough food for the village, and a few more guests.

We have very little information about weddings in Galilee in the early first century CE, so the best we can do is extrapolate from general village customs. Weddings in villages, and Cana is a relatively small village, were often communal affairs where everyone joined in the celebration. Instead of the regular diet of fish from the Sea of Galilee, vegetables, olives, cheese, and wine, it is likely that meat—likely from a sheep or, if the family is very upscale, a “well-fed calf” (see Luke 15:23)—would be part of the menu.

Pastorally, the verse strikes me as helpful for any church wedding. After the “important” parts of the wedding are sorted—the outfits for the wedding party, rings, flowers, caterer, band, and so on—do the people who insist on a church wedding think about inviting Jesus and his disciples? Is the ceremony only for friends, or are all members of the congregation invited? If the church is not part of the lives of the wedding couple or their parents, what is the point of getting married in a church at all? What would it mean for Christians to think about inviting Jesus to the wedding? A house of worship, be it a church, a synagogue, a mosque, and so on, should be more than a destination venue.

All members of a congregation can and do attend baptisms and bar and bat mitzvahs, which are part of the worship services, respectively, in churches and synagogues. All members of a congregation can attend funerals. If a wedding is to be held in a church, why not invite the congregation to the ceremony?

And when the wine was lacking, the mother of Jesus says to him, “They have no wine.” (John 2:3)

The mother does not ask a question or make a demand; she uses a form of speech known as an “indirect request.” We see the same rhetorical move in John 11:3, when Mary and Martha send word

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Once again Amy-Jill Levine charts a lively and informative path through a Gospel about which I thought I already knew what I needed to know. In other words, as I read this "beginner's guide" I realized anew how much meaning is hidden in plain sight. With wit, wisdom, and her signature clarity, Levine takes us on an adventure that highlights the intertextuality of the Bible and the role our senses play in interpreting the Gospel According to John.

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