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THE MIRACLE AT CANA

by F. S. PARNHAM

MR. PARNHAM'S study of the function of the six stone waterpots in the narrative of the miracle at Cana points, in our opinion, to the right solution. Since the Evangelist mentions expressly that these pots were there "for the Jewish rites of purification", their being filled first, before fresh water was drawn from the well and presented (transformed on the way) to the master of ceremonies, suggests that the requirements of the Jewish law had to be fully satisfied before the blessings of the gospel were made available.

"**I**N the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1: 1). Likewise "in the beginning was the Word", eternal and creative, without whom "was not anything made that was made" (John 1: 1, 3). The deity of Christ furnishes a suitable basis for the study of Him in the rare setting of a marriage feast, for there, too, was a beginning—a beginning of His miraculous signs and the public manifestation of His glory (John 2: 11). It is important to notice that the Evangelist stresses this fact, if only to show that Scripture does not countenance the many spurious and fantastic claims of tradition, but establishes the truth that our Lord's anointing at Jordan marked the beginning of His consecrated ministry and the subsequent display of His power. While He was advancing in age and wisdom in the privacy of the home at Nazareth He was subject to His parents (Luke 2: 51-52). More than that we are not told; so let us respect God's silence.

Careful examination of the narrative in John 2: 1-11 will reveal some instructive and, possibly, unexpected features. In this we need grace and wisdom to reject hasty conclusions out of harmony with the verbal statements of Scripture. At Cana the Lord Jesus seems to have left the domestic circle, never to return. Since the day when He emerged from obscurity at His baptism, being consecrated by the Holy Spirit, He regarded the former family relationship in a different light and this is apparent from the strange words addressed to His mother when the supply of wine failed: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come". Not that He shunned all social contacts, as His presence at this wedding testified, but henceforth all was to be subordinate to the one over-riding task of going "about His Father's business". With that same end in view He could and did share a meal with despised tax-gatherers and sinners for their spiritual good. Although the

miracle of turning water into wine met a need and contributed to the happiness of a festive occasion John, in the Gospel record, implies that it served a higher cause, viz., to show forth the glory of the Lord and to promote the faith of His disciples (John 2: 11). The underlying principle is that the spiritual transcends all else and we, in our affairs, do well to remember this.

Mary does not appear to have taken offence at what may seem to us an abrupt or discourteous mode of address. To capture the sense of an ancient idiom or idiomatic phrase is never easy. Moreover, it is difficult to determine what she expected of her Son in this emergency, or to what extent she appreciated the higher calling and work upon which He had now embarked. Memories of former days would doubtless linger and influence her attitude, for she had kept many a dark saying in her heart though failing to understand His pre-occupation with "His Father's business" even when He was but a boy of twelve (Luke 2: 49, 50). That His mother was, in some degree, a distinguished guest at the wedding is more than probable, as is evident from the way she instructed the special servants (they were not slaves) to do her Son's bidding: "Do whatever He tells you". And the servants did not question either Mary's authority or the Lord's subsequent commands. They simply obeyed. Do we respond with alacrity to the word of the Lord?

At this point the inspired writer introduces what, at first glance seems purely incidental by mentioning six stone waterpots and specifying their use. "Fill the pots with water", was our Lord's first command and the servants filled them up to the top. Whence did they obtain the water if not from a spring or well to which the household had access? Now, continued the Lord, "*Draw* (not draw out) and carry to the table-master" (or superintendent of the feast). It is here where so many commentators are led astray by assuming that the servants dipped or ladled out the transformed liquid from the waterpots and the faulty translation of the A.V. lends support to this view. *Draw*, not draw out, is the correct rendering of the Greek word, occurring here and in chapter 4 of the same gospel, and this word signifies the operation of drawing water from a spring or well frequently so deep as to need rope and bucket, or other receptacle, to obtain the precious fluid. Again John states clearly that the waterpots and their contents were used for "purification", i.e. for washing purposes, not for drinking. It is inconceivable that the Lord Jesus would utilize water, more or less stagnant, in order to produce that which "maketh glad the heart of man". No! Fresh, living water from an uncontaminated source

provided the wherewithal for this miracle and if further confirmation were needed we notice that only the servants knew whence it came. The master of the feast did not know and—we venture to suggest—neither did the guests. The waterpots were too conspicuous to escape notice had the Lord used the water out of them.

Furthermore, John supplies another detail by giving the approximate capacity of each pot as two or three measures (firkins) and while it is difficult to calculate the total volume in modern terms it must have been in the region of 100 to 150 gallons. If we add to this the amount of wine already consumed we arrive at a fantastic and altogether improbable figure. Admittedly there was never short measure in any of our Lord's miraculous gifts, yet He was no friend of waste or extravagance (cf. John 6: 12). What the superintendent praised was not the quantity but the quality of the unexpected contribution and there we rest on the plain facts of Scripture.

In conclusion the Old Testament helps to reinforce the teaching of this miracle by a spiritual parallel set forth in Isaiah 12: 3, where the same word for "draw" is used in the Greek text. There is also an impressive consistency throughout the Septuagint translation of all the relevant passages (in Genesis 24: 13 and 20 and Exodus 2: 16 and 19), which describe how water was obtained in ancient times from a well or spring. In every case the word is ἀντλήω (draw) as in John's Gospel. In the face of such evidence it is the more surprising that able expositors like Trench, Farrar, etc., should support the idea that our Lord, in changing water into wine, had recourse to the six waterpots. On the other hand Westcott, though somewhat hesitant, inclines to the opposite view.

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