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Scripture

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THE MARRIAGE FEAST AT CANA (John 2.1-11)

The story of the water changed into wine comes as a surprise after the opening chapter of St. John's gospel. There we have read a prologue (1.1-18) of the greatest theological subtlety, in which John has announced the eternal pre-existence of the Word of God, and of Its becoming flesh among us, and thus enabling us to see Its glory "the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1, 14): "the only begotten God who has made the Father known." This has been followed by the testimony of John the Baptist to Jesus, which has included not only the witness to his superiority, but such solemn declarations as "Behold the lamb of God who takest away the sin of the world" (1.29,36); not only the witness to the descent of the Holy Spirit which remained on him (1.32), but the confession that this is the Son of God (1.34); he has been hailed as Messiah (1.41-45) and the Son of Man who is Jacob's ladder, linking heaven and earth. (1.51)

It comes therefore as a surprise to find that the first action recorded of him to whom such exalted testimony has been given, is seemingly a wonderworking deed of a rather banal sort. He turns water into wine at a wedding feast. The narrative seems typical enough of this kind of story. There is a moment of tension when he seems to refuse to work a wonder; there is the usual silence on how exactly he works it; there is an enormous quantity produced, for the water jars are first filled to the brim and each of the six holds between eighteen and twenty-seven gallons, say 120 gallons in all. One common feature is absent, however, namely the reaction of the onlookers, their surprise and admiration for the wonderworker: the steward is simply impressed by the quality of the wine, which he attributes not to the wonderworker but to the strange quirk of the bridegroom in keeping the best wine back. He does not recognize that it is not just good wine, but water become wine through the intervention of Jesus; nor has the bridegroom anything to say about this astonishing occurrence. The servants who have filled the jars with water, drawn it and taken it to the steward, know what has happened. This is obvious, and one wonders why it needed stressing in what amounts to a clumsy parenthesis (2.9). But strangely enough their reaction goes unrecorded. The guests who benefit by the wonder

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have nothing to say. No onlookers are mentioned. It is true that the story ends with the statement: "And his disciples believed in him"; but this is hardly the usual conclusion to a miracle story, which would rather express the wonder of uncommitted spectators.

Up to a point then this narrative would seem to be a typical story of a wonderworker; but the absence of the usual ending raises doubts. One begins to ask whether this is a typical miracle story, or at least whether John has altered it because he does not want it to be such. One cannot help but feel that it is a strange choice anyway, by a man like John, judging from his epistles and the prologue of his gospel. After all it is not surprising that it has called forth much unfavourable reaction, not to say ribald sarcasm. The providing of such an enormous quantity of wine for wedding guests who have already drunk a considerable amount seems a strange task for Jesus to undertake, and to insist that the text does not mean they were drunk and that wedding feasts were continued for a week with a roster of guests, seems a pathetic endeavour which fails to lessen the embarrassment. Judging by the Synoptics John had many other miracle stories from which to choose. Why then did he pick this one? In the circumstances it seems a pertinent question. The miracle it resembles most closely is the feeding of the multitude by the multiplying of the bread. But even here there are not the same grounds for embarrassment, for it is to satisfy the hunger of those who have followed him to hear his teaching; and it is done without prodigality. It seems strange perhaps that John should also record this multiplication of the loaves when he has passed over so many other miracle stories; but in this case there is no doubt why he does so. In John 6 the story introduces his discourse on the Holy Eucharist, of which the story even as told in the Synoptics reminds us. No discourse follows the story of the water changed into wine; no explanation is forthcoming of why John chose to recount this miracle, and the difficulties persist.

It is therefore not surprising that piety and a realization of Our Lord's true character have come to the rescue by insisting upon his compassion for the bridegroom; his readiness to help those in distress; his generosity even in what seems trivial, when people's happiness is at stake. All this is true as a description of the kind of man Our Lord really is, and it redounds to the credit of the faithful that they can lovingly dwell upon this even when somewhat ruefully they are tempted to contrast their own circumstances with those of the fortunate bridal pair. But why did St. John leave us to make all these inferences for ourselves? There is not a word about the predicament of the bridal couple, nor a word of thanks from them. John gives no hint of Jesus' compassion, nor any pointer towards his loving generosity. True, he can grant his readers

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the simple intelligence needed to make these inferences, but it is difficult to think that he would leave the main, perhaps the only point of his story to inference, since one cannot credit him with the sole intention of telling us that Jesus was a wonderworker. Consequently Christian readers have not been content merely to stress Our Lord's compassion. They have preferred to concentrate on a feature of this story to which we have as yet made no reference: Jesus works this miracle at the request of his mother. It is she who draws his attention to the embarrassing situation: "They do not have wine". In spite of a strange answer she orders the servants to do whatever he says. It would seem that here we have an example of Jesus' love for his mother: of his willingness to do whatever she wants. Here we have an example of the power of Mary's prayers and her influence with Jesus: she does not need even to make any direct request such as "Please supply them with some more wine". Once again, knowing what manner of man Jesus is, and knowing who Mary is, there is no doubt about the truth underlying such an understanding of this narrative. But we can surely still ask whether it was this particular truth that John intended us to gather from reading his story about the wedding at Cana. Was it for this that he recounted it? He gives no sign, no hint that such was his intention. A more direct request would have clarified the point; a reference to Jesus' mother when the miracle had been performed would have underlined it. Admittedly, once more, John can surely presume that we are capable of inferring such a point, and perhaps as we have no right to insist upon his underlining it. But since it is not made explicit we have at least the right to wonder whether in fact it was his point, especially in view of the strangeness of Our Lord's answer to his mother: "What is it to me and to you, Lady?" If the words which follow, namely "My hour has not yet come" are taken to emphasize his unwillingness to accede to his mother's request, then in view of what he immediately proceeds to do, they surprise us by suggesting Our Lady's ignorance of his mission.

There are good reasons, therefore, why we are unwilling to take this story as though it were intended to be merely a miracle story. Perhaps I have laboured this point; but it seems necessary in view of what follows. We will probably find ourselves asking the question "Why understand this narrative as anything but the story of a wonder worked by Jesus: a simple miracle story?" On what grounds can we claim that it has a meaning and symbolises a reality which lie as it were beneath the surface of the narrative, and that this meaning is the one John intended to convey? It is important to be at least doubtful whether we are satisfied to understand the story as a straightforward miracle

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narrative. John does not in fact make his intention plain, and the meaning of this episode is a hidden one.

According to John the meaning of this story lies in its being a revelation of Christ's glory, a sign of that "essential" glory which he possessed with the father from the beginning: "He let his glory be seen" (2, 11). It is intended to be a manifestation of *who* Christ is: a contribution to that definition of Jesus which it is John's aim to give throughout his gospel. It is intended to evoke from his disciples that response of faith in him as the incarnate divine glory. By the very fact that this incident is the first of the signs in John's gospel it is intended to constitute the "epiphany" of Jesus Christ: the initial revelation within the Jewish world where he is commencing his mission from the Father. In this respect, John 2, 1-11 corresponds to the baptism narrative in the Synoptics. Moreover it is in this scene at Cana that he is, in John's presentation, first manifested to the disciples by his own action, since the four disciples had joined him on the testimony of the Baptist, and acknowledged him as Messiah before ever he had done any of his "works".

The wine that Jesus produces is the "good wine" which no-one has tasted before. It is to the Jews that Jesus offers this good wine. Wine is a natural enough symbol of what he had to offer, since the Jews along with most men regarded wine as a particularly good thing, bringing joy to any celebration (cf. Ps. 104.15; Qoh. 10.19; Sir. 31.27ff). Moreover, one of the ways in which the blessing of God was represented was an abundance of wine: "Then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine." (Prov. 3.10). "What is life to a man who is without wine?" It has been created to make men glad." (Sir. 31.27). But the more cogent reason why John represents whatever Christ offers the Jews as wine, is the fact that the tradition preserves sayings in which Jesus himself does this. In Mark 2.18-22 there are sayings which bear upon the contrast between the Baptist and Jesus, or perhaps more accurately between the disciples of the two. There is sufficient evidence in Acts and the gospels to make it quite clear that the relationship between the two groups was a considerable problem. There can be no doubt that the two were closely linked, for John the Baptist is a common element in the good news and all agree that Jesus' ministry begins when he was baptized by John. It would seem highly probable that in historical fact Jesus made his appearance first as a disciple of the Baptist, and certainly his own disciples had previously been followers of John. Superficially it seemed that Jesus' movement was an off-shoot of John's. There is no reason to think that in the early days the distinction was particularly clear or the division sharp.

Now the Baptist and his disciples fasted: they practised this asceticism to a marked degree. Moreover the Baptist seems to have been a Nazirite: "He shall drink no wine or strong drink" (Luke 1.15). We can therefore understand the surprise occasioned by Jesus and his disciples drinking wine and not fasting. In the circumstances it marked an important difference, a significant change which was naturally considered to indicate a different belief and a new teaching. This explains why it is important enough to warrant the space given it in the gospels. It is a question of the "newness" of Jesus, and the difference between past and present teaching within the baptist movement. And the answer as so often, is given in a number of parabolic sayings which are grouped together for convenience rather than as an indication that they were all pronounced on the one occasion. The attendants of the bridal chamber cannot fast whilst the bridegroom is still with them. This is an obvious truth at the level of its imagery; but its underlying truth: its "mystery", is that Jesus is the bridegroom and his disciples are the attendants; whilst they are together it is the time of the wedding celebration, and there is no place for fasting. The second saying, about the patch of unshrunk cloth, is intended to mean that Jesus has started something new: fasting then, belongs to the old way. The third saying about the new wine in new skins has the same sense. Jesus compares his "newness" to new wine. Thus Jesus contrasts himself with the Baptist as the new with the old under two images, the wedding feast and the new wine. Is this the reason why John presents Jesus for the first time in the fourth gospel, as the producer of wine, and the best wine, in abundance, at the wedding, and moreover as the one who produces this wine by changing the "water for the purification of the Jews"?

The changing of water into wine at the wedding is therefore a symbol of the ushering in of the messianic era by Jesus, and possibly also an indication of Jesus' replacing of the Baptist, bringing far more than the latter had been able to bring. Of the messianic days it had been said: "And then shall the whole earth be tilled in righteousness and shall all be planted with trees and be full of blessing. And all desirable trees shall be planted on it, and they shall plant vines on it; and the vine which they plant thereon shall yield wine in abundance, and as for all the seed which is sown thereon, each measure (of it) shall bear a thousand, and each measure of olives shall yield ten presses of oil." (1 Enoch 10, 18-19).

The intervention of the mother Jesus is the most enigmatic detail in the Cana story. That it is mentioned is surprising; but the reply Jesus gives his mother greatly adds to the difficulty. It is no surprise that there

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is any number of different interpretations. I am avoiding retailing these in order briefly to explain what seems the likeliest.

Mary is only very rarely mentioned in the New Testament. The only other place in the fourth gospel is at the crucifixion (19.25-27). She features prominently in Luke's infancy narrative; but apart from this she rarely appears in the Synoptics (Mark 3.31; 6.3; Luke 11.27). She is mentioned among the group of disciples in Jerusalem after the Ascension (Acts 1.14). But the opening of the story of Cana gives the impression that Jesus' mother was at the wedding as a matter of course, whereas the fact that Jesus and his disciples had been invited seems worthy of special mention. Perhaps it is not too outlandish to feel that these opening verses imply an obvious association between Mary and the wedding, whilst Jesus and his disciples are in some way strangers.

There are many plausible reasons one might suggest why it should be Jesus' mother who points out the lack of wine: close friendship with the couple, familiarity with this particular household, observant and sympathetic notice of what was going on. It would indeed be churlish to ask what business it was of hers. But John gives no reason whatsoever. Are we to think it was the most natural thing in the world for Mary to intervene? Or does John imply that it was precisely her function to state: "They do not have wine"?

Her statement draws from Jesus a very strange riposte: "What is it to me and to you, Lady?" This is a not uncommon expression of annoyance or remonstrance, whose vagueness is removed by the particular context. The phrase is a defensive rejection of something that has just been said or implied, or, in other examples where it occurs, of something that has just been done. In this narrative the only event which has preceded this remonstrance is that the mother of Jesus has said: "They do not have wine". This statement is therefore, it would seem, an accusation in some way, implying that Jesus has done them some wrong. And Jesus repudiates such an accusation with the explanation: "My hour has not yet come."

This interpretation seems to be borne out by other examples of this phrase. In Jud 11.12 Jephthah says to the Ammonites: "What is it to me and to you that you have come to me to fight against my land?" He asks them why they have come, with the clear nuance that it was wrong to come. In other words the question is rhetorical, and means: your coming to fight is a wrong against me. Similarly in 2 Sam. 16.10 David's reply to Abishai is an indignant repudiation of what the latter has just said. And in 2 Sam. 19.22 David refuses to agree to Abishai's suggestion, as constituting the act of an adversary. Again in 1 Kings 17.18 the widow of Sarephthah's question to Elijah is an indignant repu-

diation of the wrong the latter has done to her by coming. (The *RSV* translates: "What have you against me?") Here, then, the meaning is: what have you against me, lady, that you should say to me: they do not have wine? In other words: You have no just cause to tell *me* that. This sense is confirmed by the two other examples of this exclamation in the New Testament, on each occasion uttered by demons against Jesus. In Mark 1.24 the question is surely an exclamation of indignation, and this is made clearer by Luke prefixing: Oh! It is as rhetorical as the following one (if a question). Did you come to destroy me? It is an angry repudiation of Jesus' coming. Similarly in Mark 5.7 with the particularly interesting matthean parallel: What to us and to you, son of God? Are you come here to torment us *before the time*?

It would seem then that Jesus' words to his mother are a rhetorical question, an indignant repudiation of what she has just said, since this is taken to imply that it is Jesus' fault they do not have wine. Hence he addresses his mother as Lady. The term is in no way disrespectful; but there is a difference between addressing her as Lady, and as Mother. All that the latter implies is absent, perhaps embarrassingly absent, from the gospels (cf. John 19.26; Luke 2.49; Mark 3.33; Luke 11.27). The use of *gunai* in John 2.4, consistently with these other examples, masks the individual, physical relationship of Jesus with Mary. But to what end? In the other examples it is in favour of accentuating the relationship between Jesus and those who do the will of God: his hearers: his disciples. But in John 2.4 it would seem that there is not simply a lessening of emphasis on the individual relationship between Jesus and his mother; there is a positive division between them: he repudiates what she implies by explaining that "My hour has not yet come," namely that "I have not yet been lifted up" through death and resurrection: I have not yet been glorified.

The lack of wine is not Jesus' fault, because only when his hour has come is he to remedy this deficiency. The "wine" of the blessings to be enjoyed in the days of the messianic wedding feast will only be available at and through his "hour". When elsewhere Jesus said: "If any one thirst let him come to me and drink" John comments: "Now this he said about the spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." (John 7.39). Those who lack the wine, the messianic wine, the spirit of God, are those to whom Jesus has been sent, and those for whom it was intended in God's plan: more particularly and primarily, the Jews, for "salvation is of the Jews." (John 4.22). They have the warer pots of purification, but no wine.

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When St. John wrote this gospel the Jews still lacked the wine; they still had nothing but the water of purification. They refused to believe in Jesus Christ. Why did they refuse to believe that he was the Messiah? Because he was crucified. They expected that the Messiah would suddenly appear, whence they did not know, and at that same hour inaugurate the wedding feast. Jesus had not done this during his time on earth, and he had ended that time by being crucified. They could object to the preachers of the gospel: "If Jesus had been the Messiah, as you claim, then he would have ushered in the time of the banquet. He did not. We are still without wine." The apostles' answer was that God's will dictated he should usher in the messianic era, not as soon as he appeared, but at the hour of his exaltation by way of the cross. Hence John shows us Jesus repudiating the accusation that they do not have wine, with the explanation that his hour has not yet come: the hour of the wine giving is the hour of the crucifixion, and to expect it before then (and consequently to expect no crucifixion) is contrary to God's plan.

Who will be the bearer of the Jews' complaint? The time of Cana is not the time of wilful refusal to believe, but of ignorance and failure to understand God's plan. Who would urge Jesus to supply the wine, even before his hour had come? Would it not be their "mother", in her anxiety for her children? The mother of Jesus, when she complains that "They do not have wine" is the old Israel, the one who is "in slavery with her children" (cf. Gal. 4.25). Jesus, the son of David was born of this woman, born under the law (Gal. 4.4). Mary, whose presence at this Jewish wedding is taken so much for granted, who so naturally voices the deficiency and so naturally commands the servants to do whatever he says, is the symbol of Israel which is without wine. When, on the cross, at the coming of his hour Jesus again addresses his mother as Lady, and says "Behold your son", and to the disciple whom he loves, "Behold your mother" Mary is changed into the symbol of the new Israel: new because she has a new son: the disciple of Jesus, who in turn is changed from the old Israelite to the new, because he has a new mother. It is only when he has brought this about that Jesus hands on the spirit, for his work is completed.

Perhaps this suggestion that in the Cana story Mary the mother of Jesus symbolizes the woman, mother of Israel, daughter Jerusalem, virgin Sion seems fantastic. Yet it is not surprising that some concern about the Jews should appear in this incident. The whole of the first part of the fourth gospel (1-12) is in some respects a confrontation between Jesus and the Jews, and throughout there is a pre-occupation with the question: Why did the Jews fail to believe in Christ? If we

accept the symbolism of the woman here, we have a first example of the failure to understand and therefore to believe: there would be the misunderstanding of the hour and of the crucifixion, and consequently the failure to believe Jesus was the Christ. Moreover it is important to realize that the phenomenon of a single individual representing and being the symbol of a whole people is no new thing to the apostles.

We must never lose sight of the fact that John believes in Jesus Christ as the result of a personal encounter and a personal commitment to him. In his gospel he is attempting to translate *what* he believes Jesus to be, and *why* he has committed himself to Christ, into articulate language. This language is supplied by John's religious background, his religious beliefs and hopes. Now in meeting Jesus Christ he has also met (whether literally or metaphorically does not matter) Jesus' mother, a person naturally closely associated with the person of Jesus, as any mother is with her son. But when he *believes* in Christ and seeks to articulate that belief in terms of his fulfilled hopes, it may well be that Mary must be as it were pressed into service, because of her personal relationship with Jesus. John had longed for the coming of the Messiah; one way in which this longing had been expressed may have been in terms of the weeping of a mother over her son: such as Rachel weeping in Rama for her children (Matt. 2.18; cf. Jer. 31.15). Now when he meets the man Jesus and believes, he says: You are the Christ. But he also meets a woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus. What might he say she was? As Jesus is the Christ, who plays the principal part in the dramatic faith and hope of Israel, could it not seem natural to assign a role in that drama to Mary also? John had been taught that just as formerly Yahweh's acts of salvation had been preceded by times of sorrow and affliction, so it would be in the future, when Yahweh would in the end save his people. The messianic era was to be ushered in by a final trial, more terrible than any before it. It was to be like the pains of childbirth: "Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her time." (Isa. 26.17). The woman, Sion, is the one who personifies the sufferings of Israel at the beginning of the Messianic era, and the joy that will come when that era is established.

The same way of presenting the hopes of Israel is to be found in an apocalyptic work contemporary with the fourth gospel. In IV Esdras the visionary is trying to understand why Israel, the people of God, suffers oppression; and he is attempting to discover when this suffering will be at an end; when will God save his people? (cf. 5.33; 5.50). He is shown a vision of a woman, mourning and weeping the death of her son on his wedding day. (9.38ff). She is rebuked by Ezra for wanting to end her mourning in death: "You most foolish of women; do you not

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see our mourning and what has happened to us? For Sion, the mother of us all is in deep grief and great affliction." (10.6). Ezra eventually consoles her: "For if you acknowledge the decree of God to be just, you will receive your son back in due time, and will be praised among women." (10.16). The sorrows of Sion are described in 10.20ff and then the woman is suddenly changed into a city. The angel interprets the vision: "This woman whom you saw, whom you now behold as an established city, is Sion." (10.40ff). Thus the woman is associated with the messianic transformation for which Ezra longs: she is the symbol of Israel, suffering and then transformed.

*Tu gloria Jerusalem, Tu laetitia Israel,
Tu honorificentia populi nostri.*

T. WORDEN

Upholland