

## “Secret Sign at a Wedding” (Jn. 2:1-11)

### 1. Identified Problem (1-5)

#### a. Immediate Problem

- i. Personal and urgent – recognized by Jesus’ mother.
- ii. Compassion for host.
- iii. Only an immediate remedy could solve the problem.

#### b. Stigmatic & Liability Problem: societal shame. “A wedding celebration could last as long as a week, and the financial responsibility lay with the groom (*cf.* 2:9–10). To run out of supplies would be a dreadful embarrassment in a ‘shame’ culture; there is some evidence it could also lay the groom open to a lawsuit from aggrieved relatives of the bride.”<sup>1</sup>

#### c. No Problem

- i. Mary’s statement is akin to Jesus’ posing the problem of hunger of the crowds to His disciples (Mk. 8:2). After all, I’m sure He proved resourceful in his 30 years as her son.
- ii. Woman, what’s that got to do with us? It seems to me as if Jesus is saying “OK, and what would you have me do?” We can actually detect a bit of humor in this response when it is measured with Jesus’ miracle. Ramsey Michaels explains, “Here the magnitude of the impending miracle stands in almost humorous contrast to the smallness or triviality of the need.”<sup>2</sup>
- iii. Leon Morris: Jesus’ address to her, “Woman,” is not as cold in the Greek as in English. He uses it, for example, in his last moments as he hangs on the cross and tenderly commends her to the beloved disciple (19:26).<sup>22</sup> This vocative was “a term of respect or affection” (LS). Yet we must bear in mind that it is most unusual to find it when a son addresses his mother. There appear to be no examples of this use cited other than those in this Gospel. It is neither a Hebrew nor a Greek practice. That Jesus calls Mary “Woman” and not “Mother” probably indicates that there is a new relationship between them as he enters his public ministry.<sup>23</sup> And if the form of address is tender, the rest of Jesus’ words make it clear that there was something of a barrier between them.<sup>24</sup> Evidently Mary thought of the intimate relations of the home

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 169). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>2</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 149). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>22</sup> Jesus used it also in addressing women for whom he was performing miracles (Matt. 15:28; Luke 13:12), the woman at the well (John 4:21), the adulteress (8:10), and Mary Magdalene at the tomb (20:15). In none of these can we detect any harshness.

LS *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, new edn. H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1940)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hoskyns, “before her request, He first makes it plain that He is no longer able to act under her authority (contrast Luke 2:51) or in response to her wishes. The time of her authority is over: she must lose her son: this is the destiny that has been laid upon her (Luke 2:35).” Derrett says, “The appellation ‘woman’ causes no difficulty: it is universally recognised that it implies no hostility or rudeness, though the correct explanation, namely that a religious devotee or ascetic will speak to a woman, if unavoidable, only in the most formal terms, seems not to have attracted attention” (*Law*, pp. 89–90). The trouble with this is that the Gospels picture Jesus as anything but a “religious devotee or ascetic.” He was described as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners’ ” (Luke 7:34). And he did talk with women (e.g., ch. 4). The position of Hoskyns is preferable.

<sup>24</sup> The expression is found in Judg. 11:12; 1 Kings 17:18; 2 Kings 3:13; 2 Chron. 35:21; Matt. 8:29; Mark 1:24; Luke 8:28. Turner has examined the use of the construction in LXX and concludes, “The remark of Jesus to his mother appears to be a polite request to refrain from interference and to leave the whole matter to him” (*Grammatical Insights*, p. 47). Barclay translates, “Lady, let me handle this in my own way,” and Bruce, “Why trouble me with that, lady?” Vincent Taylor (on

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at Nazareth as persisting. But Jesus in his public ministry was not only or primarily the son of Mary, but “the Son of Man” who was to bring the realities of heaven to people on earth (1:51). A new relationship was established. Mary must not presume.<sup>25</sup>

- iv. If not corrective, Jesus’ response is abrupt and meaningful in that He only does that which the Father’s authority instructs e.g. John 5:30; 8:29.
- v. Jesus’ response was reasoned with the “hour” to come. Craig Keener wrote: Because Jesus’ “hour” in John refers especially to the cross, here Jesus is saying, “Once I begin doing miracles, I begin the road to the cross.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly Mary did not understand Jesus’ words as a sharp rebuke. She doubtless realized that things between them were not the same as they had been hitherto. But she realized also that Jesus was not unmindful of the present difficulty, and that he would take what action was necessary. So she commanded the servants to obey his instructions.<sup>5</sup>
- vi. D. A. Carson: “even family ties, had to be subordinated to his divine mission. She could no longer view him as other mothers viewed their sons; she must no longer be allowed the prerogatives of motherhood. It is a remarkable fact that everywhere Mary appears during the course of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus is at pains to establish distance between them (e.g. Mt. 12:46–50). This is not callousness on Jesus’ part: on the cross he makes provision for her future (Jn 19:25–27). But she, like every other person, must come to him as to the promised Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Neither she nor anyone else dare presume to approach him on an ‘inside track’—a lesson even Peter had to learn (Mk. 8:31–33). For no-one could this lesson have been more difficult than for Jesus’ mother; perhaps that was part of the sword that would pierce her soul (Lk. 2:35). For this we should honour her the more.”<sup>6</sup>
- vii. Furthermore, Jesus had a pattern of refusing a request and then performing it on His own prerogative/authority e.g. Jn. 7:2-10; 11:1-7.
- viii. Mary is not to presume special relationship to him as a mother regarding favors/authority. →

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Mark 1:24) understands the Old Testament expression to mean, “Why dost thou meddle with us?” but this is too strong for the present passage. Godet gives its force as, “This formula signifies, that the community of feeling to which one of the interlocutors appeals is rejected by the other, at least in the particular point which is in question.” Cf. Morton Smith, “Jesus is asking his mother why she intrudes in his affairs, why she bothers him” (*JBL*, LXIV [1945], p. 513). Sometimes Roman Catholic scholars think Mary is asking for a miracle. Thus J. Cortés sees Jesus as meaning, “What has changed between us? Why do you hesitate to ask me for a miracle? The hour of my Passion, in which you will not be able to ask me for miracles nor will I work them, has not come yet. You are as always my mother and I am your son. Therefore I will gladly accept your petition” (*New Testament Abstracts*, III [1958–59], p. 247). The difficulty with this position is that there *was* a change. Jesus had never previously worked a miracle (v. 11), so Mary might well hesitate to ask for one. The beginning of the public ministry altered all Jesus’ relationships, but Mary was apparently slow to grasp this.

<sup>25</sup> There is a valuable note on this passage by Edgar J. Goodspeed (*BT*, 3 [1952], pp. 70–71). He thinks there is no adequate English translation for γύναι and counsels that it be left untranslated. To him Jesus’ words suggest “his independence of action,” and he translates, “Do not try to direct me. It is not yet time for me to act.” See also the note of Harry M. Buck (*BT*, 7 [1956], pp. 149–50). He advocates the rendering, “Madam, why is that our concern?” Perhaps Goodspeed’s position is better.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, L. (1995). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 158–159). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

<sup>4</sup> Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Jn 2:4). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, L. (1995). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 160). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 171). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

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- ix. Mary simply leaves the prerogative to Jesus and ironically or humorously directs her authority to His disciples. Let’s not forget that she had enough sense to mention the problem to the only One who could fix it – if He so chose.
- 2. Instructed Procedure (6-8)
- 3. Ignorant Proclamation (9-10)
- 4. Indicatory Purpose (11)
  - a. A Picture
    - i. Filling ceremonial purification vessels with superior wine. Cf. Heb. 8:13.
    - ii. God was doing a new thing from the old covenant.
  - b. A Parable
    - i. “Jesus remembers that the prophets characterized the messianic age as a time when wine would flow liberally (*e.g.* Je. 31:12; Ho. 14:7; Am. 9:13–14; cf. *2 Baruch* 29:5; *1 Enoch* 10:19).<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he himself adapts the wedding as a symbol for the consummation of the messianic age (*e.g.* Mt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13). Treating the developing circumstances as an acted parable, Jesus is entirely correct to say that the hour of great wine, the hour of his glorification, has not yet come.”<sup>10 7</sup>
    - ii. Scripture begins and ends with a wedding. John underscored Jesus’ own claim to be the bridegroom (3:29 cf. Mk. 2:19-20).
    - iii. Jesus’ providing the wine points to an ultimate feast for which He had to provide a terrible price. Rev. 21:2.
  - c. A Provision
    - i. The humor, or at least the appearance of it, comes in the pitifully narrow scope of the disclosure: “and his disciples believed in him.” The “Israel” of 1:31 turns out to be four, maybe five, people! ...[See **Further Consideration** (below) for the balance of this quote.]...
    - ii. Wright: The Israel of God would indeed witness and/or proclaim that which Jesus had days spoken of before. “The signs are all occasions when Jesus did, you might say, what he’d just promised Nathanael that he would do. They are moments when, to people who watch with at least a little **faith**, the angels of God are going up and coming down at the place where Jesus is. They are moments when **heaven** is opened, when the transforming power of God’s love bursts in to the present world.”<sup>8</sup>
    - iii. Jesus provides our most urgent needs and as He did with the wedding at Cana, He did at Calvary. At Cana, a few disciples witnessed a sign – at Calvary, we can look to the central event of history. At Cana, Jesus’ hour had not yet come – at Calvary, the hour had come to drink the cup of God’s wrath – so that we could enjoy the cup to come at His own great wedding feast!

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<sup>9</sup> For the wealth of such imagery in Judaism, cf. Hengel, *art. cit.*, pp. 100–102.

<sup>10</sup> On the basis of the allusions in this narrative to the messianic banquet, and the use of Esther 1 in rabbinic reflections on the same theme, Roger Aus (*Water into Wine and the Beheading of John the Baptist* [SP, 1988], pp. 1–37) lists as many parallels as possible to argue that John’s account is derivative of Est. 1 (*i.e.* what many would call a midrash on Est. 1). I cannot take up his case here, though I do not find his argument convincing. Even so, his work does have relevance to v. 10, below.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 172). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (p. 21). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

### Further Consideration

No one else is said to have seen Jesus’ glory and believed—not the banquet master or the bridegroom, not Jesus’ mother who seemed to know what was coming, nor even the servants who knew where the wine came from (v. 9)—only a handful of disciples watching from the sidelines.<sup>49</sup> They are outsiders to the miracle, yet the revelation it brings is for them and them alone, not for those who actually participated in the miracle. Similarly we the readers of the Gospel are outsiders even to the *telling* of the miracle, yet the story invites us to see Jesus’ glory through the disciples’ eyes (compare 1:14) and with them believe (see 20:30–31).<sup>9</sup>

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It’s occasionally acknowledged that Scripture begins and ends with a wedding. This itself tells us a lot. Wedding feasts are expensive! They are arduous to plan, prepare, and manage. But they can be the most beautiful and pleasant events to which our memories cling for a lifetime. At the onset of Jesus’ public ministry, we see that although His hour to be glorified had not yet come, He performed a compassionate, secret, and symbolic miracle. It seems only appropriate that His first recorded miracle was at a wedding, was secret, was compassionate, and itself was a sign of His mission and objective.

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<sup>49</sup> This is in keeping with the uses of φανεροῦν elsewhere in the Gospel. Jesus “reveals” God’s name to those “whom you gave me out of the world” (17:6), and after the resurrection “reveals” himself three times “to the disciples” (21:1, 14). Even when his brothers urge him to “reveal yourself to the world,” it is “so that *your disciples* may see the works you are doing” (7:3–4, my italics). Only in 3:21 and 9:3 is the scope of the “revelation” or “disclosure” left undefined. At one point, one disciple is impelled to ask, “Lord, how is it that you are going to reveal [ἐμφανίζειν] yourself to us and not to the world?” (14:19).

<sup>9</sup> Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (pp. 154–155). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.