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The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11): Reading the Text in the Cultural Context of Ephesus

Craig R. Koester

The relationship of John's gospel to the city of Ephesus is often considered as a question about composition. Early church tradition refers to the apostle John composing the gospel in Ephesus, and some interpreters continue to argue for its accuracy.¹ Others question the idea of ascribing authorship to the apostle, but think Ephesus is a plausible location for the gospel's composition or final editing.² Still others find it difficult to connect the writing of the gospel to either the apostle or to Ephesus.³

What I want to do here is to shift the focus from writing to reading. Instead of asking whether the gospel was written or edited in Ephesus, I want to consider what it might mean to read the gospel in an ancient urban context like Ephesus, regardless of where it was composed. Some studies of the Fourth Gospel have taken that approach, and I will develop that line of inquiry here, using the story of the wedding at Cana as the focus.⁴ Because Ephesus had many features that were

¹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 7-8; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: InterVarsity and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 68-87; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 81-139, 142-49.

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed. Francis J. Moloney; New York: Doubleday, 2003), 200-6; Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 11-18, 29. Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 475-76; D. Moody Smith, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 24-27, 39-40; George Beasley-Murray, *John* (2d ed; WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), xvi-lxxxii.

³ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 5-24, 37-38.

⁴ Sjef van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus* (NovTSup 83; Leiden: Brill, 1997); Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), ix.

typical of Greco-Roman cities, this reading strategy might also invite broader reflection on the Fourth Gospel's value for readers in various ancient contexts.

We will proceed in several steps. First, I want to reflect on the reading process itself, and the role that the reading context plays in the creation of meaning. Then I will ask how positing an Ephesian context of reading might shape perspectives on the general setting of the Cana story, the wedding and social relationships in the narrative, and the significance of the wine.

1. Reading as Reception and Creation

Reading is a dynamic process that involves taking in what the text provides. Whether readers see the written page or hear the text read aloud, the words evoke associations from what the readers already know. The text may affirm some associations, while screening others out; it may challenge earlier assumptions, suggest new perspectives, and leave other aspects indeterminate. For example, John 2:1 refers to a γάμος, and readers have to supply a sense of what such an occasion involves. English speakers encounter the word in translation as “wedding,” but the wedding scenes most English-speaking readers might imagine will differ from those pictured by readers shaped by Hellenistic culture. There is inevitably a creative element as readers try to make connections between what is stated and what is implied. No text supplies everything, and in the blank spots in the text the imagination plays the largest role.⁵

Reception history can help to show the dynamics. As we see what people from other periods supply by way of their imagination—which often differs from our own—we become more aware of how readers interact with the text.⁶ To illustrate let me use a visual interpretation of the wedding at Cana, which was done by the sixteenth-century Italian painter Paolo Veronese (1528-1588). The work is now in the Louvre Museum.

The gospel says that there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, so Veronese paints a wedding—in fine Renaissance style—for a monastery in Venice. He gives Cana monumental architecture with Doric and Corinthian columns, and a tower rising up in the background. Jesus,

⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 163-79.

⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Hermeneia: Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 63.

his mother, and disciples are all at the wedding, just as the gospel says. As for other guests, Veronese pictures them in sumptuous clothing, seated at fine European tables, with musicians playing Renaissance stringed instruments in front. Since the gospel says the servants filled jars with water, which became exquisite wine that the steward could taste, Veronese shows a servant pouring from a jar and the steward studying a goblet of wine with a critical eye. Everything stated in the text is included in the painting. The creative elements come from the way the artist pictures those elements and the way he fills in what is *not* said with imaginative details from his own sixteenth-century context in Venice.

Given such imaginative elaboration of the setting, one can see why scholars later embarked on a quest for the historical Jesus, in order to strip away these later embellishments and construct a picture more appropriate for a village in ancient Galilee. Yet that process too involves imagination, as scholars fill in the gaps based on studies of other ancient texts and archaeology. Here I have to wonder whether readers in Ephesus would have imagined the text in the way historically-informed modern interpreters do. How would the Cana narrative, which is set in rural Galilee in the early first century, be construed in a large Greco-Roman city in Asia Minor two generations later?

2. The Setting at Cana and the Setting of Readers in Ephesus

The gospel narrative tells us that there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee (2:1). Information in the literary context might help readers picture Cana as a Jewish town or village. Details that invite that idea are that the wedding is held where there are water jars for Jewish rites of purification (2:6). The guests include Jesus, his mother, and his disciples, all of whom are Jewish (2:1-2). Readers learn that Nathanael—who has a Hebrew name and is called an “Israelite”—was from Cana and was familiar with Jesus’ home town of Nazareth (1:45-51; 21:2). The text also says that Cana was some distance from Capernaum, which was a town beside the Sea of Galilee. A royal official might visit Cana, but did not live there (4:46-47).

Historical investigation enables modern readers to fill in more detail. It seems clear that Galilee was Hellenized by this time. The region had urban centers like Sepphoris and Tiberias, which were within reasonable walking distance of Khirbet Qana, which is the most likely site of

ancient Cana.⁷ Archaeological reports invite us to picture Cana as an unwalled village, located on a hillside with crop fields in front. Prior to 70 CE it was not on a major road system, and people would take pathways to roads leading to larger towns. After 70 a Roman road was built through the Beit Netofa Valley near Cana, providing better connections to other communities. During this period houses were clustered close together, and water came from cisterns. People made their living by grain farming, herding sheep and goats, producing wool and leather, raising doves, and small-scale glass manufacture. There was no commercial plaza.

Ethnically, Cana's population was Jewish. There were *mikvaoth*, and the burials reflect Jewish practices. Current research suggests that "Hellenistic influence was not absent in rural villages," but in comparison to Galilean cities, "the small towns and villages were more conservative religiously and more constrained in expressions of wealth and culture."⁸ None of that is actually stated in the text, but such studies might shape the assumptions that we as historically informed readers might bring to the Cana story.

Now we can ask whether readers in first-century Ephesus would have made those same assumptions if they had never visited Cana or Galilee. In many respects, their physical and social context was quite different from the village pictured above. Ephesus was the largest urban area in Asia Minor and a major city in the Roman Empire.⁹ It had a wall and an impressive harbor. The baths were constructed on Greco-Roman patterns. There were gymnasiums and a theater for Greek plays and musical performances. A major feature of the city was its commercial agora, which had a monumental gate dedicated to Augustus and his heirs. Water was brought in by aqueducts and dispensed through public fountains.

⁷ Peter Richardson, "Khirbet Qana (and Other Villages) as a Context for Jesus," in *Building Jewish in the Roman East* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 55-71; C. Thomas McCollough, "Khirbet Qana," in *The Archaeological Record from Cities, Towns, and Villages*, vol. 2 of *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods* (ed. David A. Fiensy and James Riley Strange; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 127-45.

⁸ Richardson, "Khirbet Qana," 69.

⁹ David Parrish, "Introduction: The Urban Plan and Its Constituent Elements," in *Urbanism in Western Asia Minor* (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2001), 10-41; Peter Scherrer, "The City of Ephesus from the Roman Period to Late Antiquity," in *Ephesos, Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture* (ed. Helmut Koester; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 1-25; Michael L. White, "Urban Development and Social Change in Imperial Ephesus," in *Ephesos* (ibid), 331-71.

Economically, the harbor connected Ephesus to markets around the Mediterranean world. Access to an extensive road system enhanced the city's position as the largest emporium in Asia (Strabo, *Geogr.* 14.1.24). The city was a major center for finance, and there were trade associations for physicians, fishermen, fish merchants, linen weavers, wool dealers, bakers, potters, silversmiths, and carpenters. Ephesus was a hub in the Roman slave trade.¹⁰ In terms of physical space and economic importance, Ephesus might have been more like Veronese's Venice than we might think.

Socially, the population of Ephesus was mixed. There were Greeks and Romans, and people from Rhodes, Egypt, Galatia, Lydia, and Mysia. The dominant religious ethos centered on Artemis, whose massive temple stood outside the city, but other deities venerated there included Hestia, Apollo, Zeus, Demeter, Dionysus, and Asclepius.¹¹ The imperial cult was introduced into Ephesus in the first century B.C.E., and in the later first century C.E. the provincial temple to the Flavian emperors was built. The traditional deities were understood to support imperial rule, and inscriptions and festivals could honor both together.¹² By the mid-first century there had been a Jewish community in Ephesus for generations. While some newcomers arrived from Judea and Galilee, many Jews came from other parts of Asia and other provinces. Jewish identity was

¹⁰ On Ephesus as a banking center see Dio Chrysostom, *Disc.* 31.54-55. On the trade associations see T. R. S. Broughton, *Asia Minor*, v. 4 of *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Paterson, NJ: Pageant, 1959), 889-90; Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 39-40. On the slave trade see Craig R. Koester, "Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18," *CBQ* 70 (2008): 776-85.

¹¹ Richard Oster, "Ephesus as a Religious Center Under the Principate I: Paganism Before Constantine," *ANRW* II.18.3 (1990): 1661-1728; Stephan Witetschek, *Ephesische Enthüllungen I: Frühe Christen in einer antiken Gross-stadt, zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach den Kontexten der Johannesapokalypse* (Tools and Studies 6; Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2006), 66-99.

¹² Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Religions in the Greco-Roman World 116; Leiden Brill, 1993).

maintained through household practices and participation in the synagogue at Ephesus, even as many Jewish families became well-integrated into civic life.¹³

For our work here, I assume that the Ephesian readers of John's gospel were followers of Jesus. I will assume that some were familiar with the Scriptures and with Jewish tradition as it was mediated through the local Jewish communities in Ephesus. But we will not assume that they had firsthand acquaintance with Galilee or that they were well informed about Jewish practice. The way the text explains that the stone jars were to be used for the Jewish rites of purification presupposes that at least some readers would not be able to make that connection on their own (2:6).¹⁴ My interest focuses on how the story set in a place called Cana might have engaged the imaginations of readers in a major urban center with a population comprised of various ethnic groups, economic levels, and religious traditions.

3. The Wedding and Social Relationships

The Cana story is set in a narrative context that explicitly takes up messianic themes from Jewish tradition. In chapter 1, John the Baptist is asked questions about the Messiah, Elijah, and "the prophet" (1:19-28). Those who follow Jesus identify him as the Messiah foretold in the law and the prophetic writings (1:41, 45). Nathanael calls Jesus as the Son of God and King of Israel, titles associated with the Davidic Messiah (1:49), and with that as the context, Jesus performs a miraculous sign at a wedding.

Note that the narrative *suggests* a connection between scriptural fulfillment, messianic expectations, and a wedding, but leaves it to readers to make the connection. For biblically informed readers the context might evoke depictions of God as husband and Israel as bride (Ezek 16:8; Jer 31:32; Isa 54:5). The prophets used wedding imagery for deliverance from grief,

¹³ On the Jewish community at Ephesus see Josephus, *Ant.* 14.227-28; Philo, *Legat.* 315; Acts 18:19; Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 37-51; Witetschek, *Ephesische Enthüllungen*, 141-72.

¹⁴ For a summary of major contributions to the study of Christian communities in Ephesus see Mikael Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective* (WUNT 242; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 1-136.

oppression, and dishonor (Isa 61:10; 62:25), and banquet imagery could connote eschatological salvation and the arrival of God's kingdom (Isa 25:6; cf. 2 Bar. 29:1-8). In Jewish tradition the role of bridegroom was linked to that of the ideal king in Psalm 45 and apparently to other messianic figures in some texts.¹⁵ In Christian circles the imagery was more fully developed to depict the Messiah as bridegroom, whose arrival brings joy.¹⁶ Accordingly, readers familiar with those traditions can connect them to Jesus' miracle and conclude that he is the Messiah, who brings the joy of God's kingdom and assumes the role of messianic bridegroom when he provides abundant wine for the wedding banquet.

The literary flow of the gospel reinforces this perspective by explicitly using wedding imagery for Jesus' as the Messiah. In 3:28-29, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Messiah and indicates that it is quite fitting for Jesus' popularity to be growing while John's own decreases. To underscore the point, he portrays Jesus as the bridegroom, who is rightly the focus of attention; the people who now follow him are like a bride coming to her husband. John himself is like the bridegroom's friend, who rejoices at the relationship that is being formed between the bride and groom, the people and their Messiah.¹⁷

What is striking is that the wedding imagery would also have been meaningful to people who were not well acquainted with Jewish tradition. Wedding practices were broadly familiar to both Jews and Greeks. For both groups, the arrangements for a marriage began with betrothal, when formal agreements were made about the dowry and other matters. It was commonly understood that the wedding was the festive occasion when the bride was taken to live in the

¹⁵ Ruben Zimmermann, "'Bräutigam' als frühjüdisches Messias-Prädikat? Zur Traditionsgeschichte einer urchristlichen Metapher," *BN* 103 (2000): 85-99

¹⁶ The identification of Jesus as bridegroom appears in multiple forms of Christian tradition (John 3:29; cf. Matt 19:15; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35; 2 Cor 11:2; *Gos. Thom.* 104; 2 *Clem.* 14:2).

¹⁷ On Jesus' role as bridegroom in 3:28-29 and the value of that passage for interpreting the Cana miracle see Mirjam and Ruben Zimmermann, "Der Freund des Bräutigams (Joh 3,29): Deflorations- oder Christuszeuge?" *ZNW* 90 (1999): 123-30; Edward W. Klink III, "The Bridegroom at Cana," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (ed. Steven A. Hunt; D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 233-37.

groom's home.¹⁸ When John says Jesus and the disciples were "invited" to the wedding banquet, it fits the common practice of issuing invitations to guests when the time for the banquet arrived (John 2:2). Such invitations might be sent either orally or in writing. Priority would be given to family members, but invitations could be sent to friends and others in the community as well.¹⁹

For both Jews and Greeks the wedding celebration began in the bride's home, where a meal would be served. In the evening, the guests would join in a torchlight procession as the bride was taken to the groom's house. According to Jewish tradition, the feasting could continue there for seven days; in Greek tradition the duration of the meal was apparently not as long.²⁰ But at both Jewish and Greek wedding banquets there was ample consumption of wine. That was a part of the cultural context.²¹ Running out of wine was something that any host would try to avoid, and if it happened, he might try to deal with the sense of embarrassment by blaming someone else for the problem.²² Readers from various ethnic backgrounds would understand that when Jesus' mother says, "They have no wine," she identifies an awkward social situation for the bridegroom and his family (2:3).

Culturally, readers would also sense how awkward it was for Jesus to tell his mother, "What have you to do with me, woman?" (τί μοι καὶ σοί, γύναι, 2:4a). That expression appears in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, and it usually established distance between the person speaking

¹⁸ See Shemuel Safrai and Menachem Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century* (2 vols.; Assen: van Gorcum and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974-76), 2:752-60.

¹⁹ For an oral example see Matt 22:1-10. Examples of written invitations are: "Thermouthis invites you to dine at the marriage of her daughter at her house tomorrow" (P.Oxy. 1579); "Isidoros invites you to dine with him for the marriage of his daughter at the house of Titus the centurion" (P.Fay. 132). On priority being given to the family see Plutarch, *Mor.* 679c. On inviting the wider community see the Asian inscription in *NewDocs* 7:234; Chariton, *Chaer.* 3.2.10; Diodorus Siculus, *Libr.* 16.91.4; 16.92.1.

²⁰ For comparison of wedding practices among Jews and Greeks, and the value of both types of tradition for the interpretation of NT imagery, see Ruben Zimmermann, "Die Hochzeitsritual im Jungfraugleichnis: Sozialgeschichtliche Hintergründe zu Mt 25.1-13," *NTS* 48 (2002): 48-70.

²¹ Aristophanes, *Pax* 1319-24; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 4.128c-130d (noted in Udo Schnelle et al, ed., *Neuer Wettstein: Texte zum Neuen Testament aus Griechenland und Hellenismus* I/2 [Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2001], 89-93).

²² Plutarch, *Mor.* 679e-f (see Schnelle et al, *Neuer Wettstein* I/2: 96).

and the one being addressed.²³ Moreover, referring to one's mother as "woman" would have seemed odd to readers of Jewish or Greek background.²⁴ There were instances where someone might use "woman" as a form of address, but this was not done by a son speaking to his mother.

The peculiarity signals that Jesus' actions do not fit neatly into anyone's sense of social convention. Whatever Jesus chooses to do at this point, his actions cannot simply be seen as the obedient response of a son to his mother. Instead, the narrative directs attention to the coming of Jesus' "hour" (2:4b). The significance of the hour is not explained at this point, but the narrative will eventually disclose that it is the hour of his passion.²⁵ The dialogue intimates that what will govern Jesus' action is not social convention but the commitments that will lead to the surrender of his life. After considering the Cana story further, we will ask how the reference to the coming "hour" functions within the passage as a whole.

After the peculiar interchange with his mother, Jesus' attention shifts to the six stone jars, and the text explains that these were used for purification (καθαρισμός, John 2:6).²⁶ For readers familiar with Scripture and Jewish tradition, the comment could evoke associations of the various types of uncleanness, which were to be purified with water. But since the context is a wedding banquet, the most prominent associations might have come from marriage and dining practices. A Jewish bride would wash herself before the wedding, and those preparing or serving a meal would have washed utensils that were susceptible to uncleanness. Especially significant in this context is the washing of hands before eating (Mark 7:1-5). Handwashing was of special concern to the

²³ For biblical occurrences of such expressions see Judg 11:12; 1 Kgs 17:18; 2 Kgs 3:13; 2 Chron 35:21. In non-Jewish Greek of the period see Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.22.15-16. The sense of abruptness and distance is apparent in Mark 1:24; 5:7. For recent discussions see Mary L. Coloe, "The Mother of Jesus," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (ed. Steven A. Hunt; D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann [WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014], 202-13. Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 67-68.

²⁴ Jesus uses "woman" to address the Samaritan woman in 4:21 and Mary Magdalene in 20:13 (cf. Matt 15:28; Luke 13:12), and there are other instances in ancient literature where "woman" is a form of address (Schnelle et al, ed., *Neuer Wettstein*, I/2: 98-101). Nevertheless, it was not common for sons to speak to their mothers in that way.

²⁵ On the "hour" in connection to Jesus' passion and resurrection see John 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1.

²⁶ The assumption is that stone is less susceptible to uncleanness than other kinds of material (Lev 6:28; 11:32-35; *m. Kelim* 10:1; *m. Parah* 3:2). Nevertheless, in CD XIII, 15-17 stone is susceptible to uncleanness.

Pharisees, but it was practiced by other Jews as well. Water would be needed for guests to wash before and at points during the multiple days of the wedding feast.²⁷ By transforming the water in the jars into wine, Jesus performs an action that suggests both fulfillment and transformation of Jewish practice. What that might involve is not spelled out, and instead of exploring the options here, I want to broaden the question.

I want to ask what resonances the imagery might have had for those who were not well acquainted with Jewish practices. As noted above, the text explains that the stone jars were for Jewish rites of purification, which assumes that at least some readers would not have understood much about Jewish practice. Such readers might have tried to understand the passage based on their understanding of purification more broadly. Greeks too used water for purification in various contexts, including weddings and banquets.²⁸ Prior to a wedding, Greek brides and grooms would undergo a ritual washing called a λουτρὸν νυμφικόν. Water for the ritual was brought in a vessel called a λουτροφόρος. The cleansing was an important part of the tradition.²⁹ Then, during the wedding celebration, participants would wash their hands with water at intervals during the meal. A good host would be expected to provide ample water for the guests to use for hand cleansing throughout the time of feasting. If transforming the water suggests change in the patterns of life defined by Jewish practice, one might assume that the transformative aspect would also extend to those whose patterns were shaped by Greek traditions and would call for a re-centering of life through Christ's action.

The transformative element can also be seen in the social structure reflected in narrative. The gospel assumes that the banquet and wine are to be provided by the bridegroom (νυμφίος) and his family (2:9-10). At the same time, the meal is overseen by the ἀρχιτρίκλινος to whom the other

²⁷ On a Jewish bride washing herself see Safrai and Stern, *Jewish People in the First Century*, 758. On washing hands before eating see E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 228, 262; Joel Marcus, *Mark 1 – 8* (AYB 28; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 440-43.

²⁸ On analogies between Jewish and Greek traditions of cleansing see Marianne Meye Thompson, “Baptism with Water and with Holy Spirit: Purification in the Gospel of John,” which appears in this volume.

²⁹ For Greek wedding customs, including the ritual bath, see *Brill's New Pauly* (Leiden: Brill, 2002-): 15:605-12; M. Grant and R. Kitzinger, *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean* (3 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1988), 2:895-96. On washing during the wedding banquet see Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 4.128e, 129e.

servants report (2:8-9). The narrative gives us the impression of a well-to-do household with servants of different ranks. The reference to an ἀρχιτρίκλινος also gives the scene a Greco-Roman feel. In the strict sense the word indicates a person who oversees a τρίκλινον or banquet at which participants recline on three couches arranged in the shape of a U, which was done among the wealthier members of Greco-Roman society. Although words like τρίκλινον could be extended to various kinds of banquets, extant sources show a connection between the ἀρχιτρίκλινος or chief steward and the homes of the wealthy.³⁰

In a text from the third century C.E., Heliodorus pictures a royal household in which the servants with highest status are the heads of banquets (ἀρχιτρίκλινοι) and chief wine pourers (ἀρχιοινοχόοι).³¹ The Latin equivalent is *trikliniarches*, which also fits aristocratic contexts. A first-century inscription refers to a freedman from the imperial household, who has held the position of *trikliniarches* and pre-tastor of food before it is brought to the table, as well as serving as administrator for games, waters, and finances.³² In Petronius's *Satyricon*, also from the first century, the *trikliniarches* is part of a banquet held in a *triclinium* in a rich man's home (*Sat.* 21-22).

Such a social setting does not readily fit the picture of Cana as a rural village that the archaeological reports suggest was “constrained in expressions of wealth and culture.”³³ Given John's reference to the ἀρχιτρίκλινος, some interpreters might want to ease the incongruity by arguing that Cana must have included at least one household that aspired to the kind of Greco-Roman social patterns that were typical of the wealthy in larger cities. But readers from Ephesus would probably not have sensed the incongruity. The scene would have been comparable to the banquets that were held in the homes of the wealthy in their urban context.³⁴

³⁰ See David H. Sick, “The *Architriklinos* at Cana,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 513-25. The article includes the relevant ancient texts and helpful discussion of them.

³¹ Heliodorus, *Aeth.* 7.27.7-8. All other known references to ἀρχιτρίκλινος in ancient Greek literature are in comments related to John 2.

³² CIL 11.3612. For text and commentary see Sick, “The *Architriklinos*,” 520.

³³ Richardson, “Khirbet Qana,” 69.

³⁴ By 200 C.E. a wealthy resident of Sepphoris had built a residence with a *triclinium* featuring mosaics telling the story of Dionysus. See Sean Freyne, “Dionysus and Herakles in Galilee: The Sepphoris Mosaic in Context,” in

Highlighting the way John 2 depicts human relationships allows us to discern a theme of social transformation with its humorous inversion of roles. In the normal order of things the servants report to the ἀρχιτρίκλινος and he in turn reports to the bridegroom, who is the provider of the feast. But Jesus subverts the pattern by quietly taking on the role of provider and confounding the chief steward's understanding of good order by serving the best wine last. The servants who normally receive orders from others now are the insiders, who know the source of the wine, while those higher up in the social order are clueless.³⁵ If readers are to see that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in Scripture, they also find that he brings a surprising change in conventional patterns, through a gift that redefines people's roles.

4. Abundant Wine as a Sign of Kingship and Divine Presence

This brings us to the central action in the story, which is the gift of wine. The literary context invites reflection on two dimensions of meaning: kingship and divine revelation. First, the narrative suggests that the gift confirms Jesus' identity as the messianic king, who is anticipated by the law and the prophets—though again it is left for readers to make the connection. Those familiar with Jewish law might recall the passage which told of a ruler from the tribe of Judah: “Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes” (Gen 49:10-11). They might also know prophetic writings, which told of an outpouring of divine favor upon Israel, when “the mountains shall drip sweet wine,” and sometimes connected abundant wine to the restoration of Davidic rule (Amos 9:11, 13; cf. Joel 3:18; Isa 25:6). The messianic connotations of the wine were also developed in

Religion and Society in Roman Palestine: Old Questions, New Approaches (ed. Douglas R. Edwards; New York: Routledge, 2004), 56-69. That fits the overall patterns of Hellenization in Galilee, especially in the urban centers. It does not allow us to assume that the same practice was to be found in first-century Cana.

³⁵ On the gospel's use of humor see Craig R. Koester, “Comedy, Humor, and the Gospel of John,” in *Word, Theology and Community in John* (ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Fernando Segovia; St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 123-41. On the humor in the Cana story see Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 159.

later Jewish tradition, and readers familiar with that background would see that Jesus the wine-giver is the fulfillment of messianic hope.³⁶

The second aspect is revelation. The conclusion of the story says that through this “sign” (σημεῖον) Jesus revealed his “glory” or δόξα (John 2:11). Although the term “glory” can refer to the honor that people give to each other and might also grant to a king (5:41, 44; 7:18), the gospel also uses δόξα for the manifestation of divine power and presence (1:14; 11:40; 17:5). Those connotations are apparent in biblical texts, which use δόξα for the numinous presence of God at Mount Sinai and in the tabernacle and temple (Exod 33:18-22; 40:34-35; 1 Kgs 8:11). The δόξα was also made visible through the plagues or “signs” (σημεῖα) that were performed in Egypt prior to the exodus (Num 14:22; Sir 45:3). In John’s gospel, the signs of Jesus reveal the power of God in a manner accessible to the senses. The context at Cana could recall passages that link abundant wine with God’s presence among his people (Isa 25:6; Joel 3:17-18).

At Cana, the context has many Jewish aspects, but it is important to note how the literary flow of the gospel also anticipates the disclosure of Jesus to the wider Greco-Roman world. Before revealing his glory at Cana, Jesus says, “My hour (ᾠρα) has not yet come” (2:4). At the end of his ministry, when the Greeks appear, he announces that “the hour (ᾠρα) has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:20-23). The arrival of the Greeks will signal the arrival of the consummate hour for the disclosure of Jesus’ glory, and that literary connection invites us to consider how the wine miracle at Cana contributes to the idea that Jesus’ glory must be made accessible to Jews and Greeks alike.

Interpreters have debated whether Jesus’ action at Cana should be related to the stories told about the wine god Dionysus. Possible connections have often been noted, and discussion has usually focused on the *origin* of the Cana story, and whether a writer like the Fourth Evangelist would actually have adapted legends from polytheism in his gospel. My interest, however, is the way the story might *communicate* the significance of Jesus.³⁷

³⁶ According to 2 Bar. 29:5, when the Messiah appears, “on one branch will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand clusters, and one cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor (=120 gal.) of wine.” For Jewish messianic interpretation of Gen 49:10 see 4Q252 V, 1-4.

³⁷ Rudolf Bultmann concluded that the Cana story was originally a pagan legend that was applied to Jesus (*The Gospel of John* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 118-119). Variations on the idea were developed by C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 224-25; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel*

The Jewish elements in John 2 would not necessarily have screened out connotations from the wider Greco-Roman environment for readers in Ephesus. After all, wine was highly valued throughout the Mediterranean world. Fine wines were produced near Ephesus and there was a guild of wine tasters in the city.³⁸ Dionysus was honored by statues and inscriptions, and the festival of Dionysus was celebrated at Ephesus and many other places.³⁹ During the festivities the city was decorated with ivy and thyrsus wands. People dressed as Bacchanals, Satyrs, and Pans, and musicians played harps, flutes, and pipes. There were theatrical performances, and the local actors' guild was devoted to Dionysus. Some supporters were initiates into the mysteries of Dionysus.

First consider the implications for the gospel's claims about Jesus' kingship. Traditions about Dionysus emphasized abundance and happiness. These in turn were frequently linked to the benefits that people hoped a good ruler would bring. Those holding public office could demonstrate their beneficence by distributions of food and wine. For example, a first-century inscription from Asia Minor tells of an official who conducted festivals and "distributed sweet wine to everyone in the city." In response to such benefaction, he received public honors.⁴⁰ The pattern is comparable to John 6:14-15, where the distribution of bread evokes associations from the prophetic tradition as well as practices of Roman rulers.⁴¹

This connection of the happiness brought by Dionysus to Roman rule is apparent in the story about Marc Antony, who came to Ephesus during the festival of Dionysus. To celebrate the

According to St. John (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 188-89. Others have vigorously disputed the link to Dionysus traditions (e.g. Rudolf Schackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* [3 vols.; New York: Herder/Seabury/Crossroad, 1968-82], 1:340. For a summary of more recent research on this question see Esther Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and Its Historical and Cultural Context* (Biblical Interpretation Series 109; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 223-27.

³⁸ On the wine tasters at Ephesus see Harland, *Associations*, 39.

³⁹ On Dionysus at Ephesus see van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus*, 95-98. Oster, "Ephesus."

⁴⁰ The inscription appears in *NewDocs* 7:235. See Bill Salier, "Jesus, the Emperor, and the Gospel According to John," *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (ed. John Lierman; WUNT II.219; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 284-301, esp. 291-92.

⁴¹ See Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 56.

hopes of abundance and happiness that were signified by his arrival, the Ephesians called him the personification of Dionysus (Plutarch, *Ant.* 24.3). Ephesian coins from the period underscore the connection. On one side they portray Marc Antony, who wears the ivy wreath typical of Dionysus, along with his wife Octavia, the sister of Augustus. The other side features Dionysus holding a wine cup and thyrsus, which were his trademarks.⁴²



Ephesian coin of 39 B.C.E.
Anthony and Octavia on left; Dionysus on right

The relationship of Dionysus to Roman rule continued in the first century C.E. when cities in Asia Minor asked the emperor Tiberius to grant them the honor of building him a provincial temple. When the delegation from Ephesus proposed that the cult be located in their city, they noted that it would be appropriate, since in former times Dionysus had come to Ephesus (Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.61). The Ephesian proposal was not accepted, but later in the first century they did build a provincial temple to the Flavian emperors.

Roman rulers sometimes associated themselves with Zeus or Apollo, but in the late first and early second centuries, the connections with Dionysus persisted. In the early second century C.E. a wealthy patron built a fountain at Ephesus ca. 102-114 C.E. to honor the emperor Trajan. The fountain was fed by an aqueduct and had a pool and two-story colonnade. In the niches between columns were statues of Trajan and his family, along with Dionysus, a satyr, and

⁴² Image courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group (cngcoins.com).

Aphrodite. In time, a second statue of Dionysus was added. The imagery gave a vivid impression of the emperor as provider of water and the abundance linked to Dionysus.⁴³

In the 130s C.E. Ephesus built a provincial temple to Hadrian, who was said to share the throne with Dionysus (σύνθρονος τῷ Διονύσῳ).⁴⁴ The temple stood outside the city, but near the city center a smaller building was dedicated to him. Its frieze depicted some of the legends about the founding of Ephesus, including Dionysus' victory over the Amazons. Identifying Hadrian as a new Dionysus continues the pattern of associating a ruler's ability to bring happiness to the people with the traditions about Dionysus.⁴⁵

The second dimension of the wine miracle in John 2 is Jesus' revelation of God's power and presence. That theme was also characteristic of legends about Dionysus, whose giving of wine was a means of divine revelation. In one account, Dionysus hands a shepherd a cup in which he expects to find water, but Dionysus has wondrously filled the cup with wine, saying "Here is your water" (Achilles Tatius, *Leuc.* 2.2.3-6). In another account, the god's identity is hidden, and to reveal it he surprisingly provides cups brimming with wine, saying, "Take my gift" (Silvius Italicus, *Punica* 7.186-94).⁴⁶

The revelatory dimensions were reflected in festivals in the regions around Ephesus. At the city of Teos, north of Ephesus, the legend was that Dionysus was born there. As evidence of the divine presence, a fountain of wine would flow from the earth at certain times. At Andros, on the festival called the *theodosia* or "gift of god," a spring would flow with wine; and at Elis, three

⁴³ Maria Aurenhammer, "Sculptures of Gods and Heroes from Ephesus," in Helmut Koester, ed., *Ephesos*, 251-80, esp. 268-69. See also Ursula Quatember, "The Water Management and Delivery System of the Nymphaeum Traiani at Ephesus," in *Cura Aquarum in Ephesus: Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress on the History of Water Management and Hydraulic Engineering in the Mediterranean Region. Ephesus/Selçuk, Turkey, October 2-10, 2004* (ed. Gilbert Wiplinger; 2 vols. Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 1:73-77.

⁴⁴ See David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century After Christ* (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1:617; 2:1477-78. On the significance of calling rulers "New Dionysus" see Arthur Darby Nock, *Essays on Religion in the Ancient World* (ed. Z. Stewart; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 134-52.

⁴⁵ See Carter, *John and Empire*, 222-26.

⁴⁶ See Schnelle et al, ed., *Neuer Wettstein* I/2, 87-88.

empty jars were placed in a sealed room and on the following morning were always found full of wine.⁴⁷

The prologue of John's gospel introduces Jesus as the revealer of Israel's God and the narrative in chapter 1 explicitly identifies him as Messiah and King of Israel. There are no direct references to either Dionysus or to Caesar. Yet the way the Dionysus traditions linked wine to kingship and divine disclosure could have underscored those dimensions for ancient readers.⁴⁸ Such traditions add resonance to the idea that where the abundant wine flows, there God is present and active.

5. Conclusion

The gospel tells readers that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in Scripture and that he reveals divine glory, but what that means is disclosed through an action that is evocative. Turning water into wine at a wedding evokes a range of associations that would vary, depending on what readers bring to the text. Positing Ephesus as a location for reading has illustrated the possibilities. John calls the episode a "sign" (σημεῖον) and a helpful way to consider it draws on Philip Wheelwright's comments about a symbol. He said many symbols have "a brightly focussed center of meaning together with a penumbra of vagueness that is intrinsically ineradicable; which is to say, the vagueness could not be dispelled without distorting the original meaning."⁴⁹

In the Cana story, the "bright focussed center of meaning" is that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in Scripture (1:45, 45, 49) and the revealer of divine glory (1:51; 2:11). His gift of wine at a wedding would prompt readers familiar with Scripture to recall texts about the messianic king, about God as bridegroom, and salvation as a banquet. But the sign is also evocative; it suggests

⁴⁷ On Andros see Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 2.31; 31.16. On Teos see Diodorus Siculus, *Libr.* 3.66.1-4. On Elis see Pausanias, *Descr.* 6.26.1-2; Athanaeus, *Deipn.* 1.61 [34a]. On Haliartus see Plutarch, *Lys.* 28.4. See also Euripides *Bacch.* 704-7.

⁴⁸ Carter raises the prospect that the Cana story contrasts Jesus with Dionysus and imperial rule (*John and Empire*, 224). While the claims of the gospel certainly indicate that the life Jesus brings is superior to that purportedly offered by anyone else, such connotations remain implicit in the Cana narrative. They are not explicitly developed.

⁴⁹ Philip Wheelwright, "The Archetypal Symbol," in *Perspectives in Literary Symbolism* (ed. Joseph Strelka; University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 220.

more than it states, and the connotations of weddings and wine from the wider cultural context contribute to that “penumbra of vagueness,” which stimulates imagination. Wedding practices had much in common across ancient contexts, and wine connoted the abundance and happiness that many associated with beneficent rulers and divine presence.

The sign at Cana evokes this remarkable range of associations, while intimating that they will be redefined as the narrative unfolds. Jesus tells his mother that his “hour” has not yet come (2:4). When the “hour” of his passion does arrive, his mother again appears, creating a link between Cana and the crucifixion (19:25-27). If Jesus’ first action is giving the best wine to others, his final action is drinking the sour wine himself (2:10; 19:28-30). The suggestions of gracious abundance at Cana inform what it means for Jesus to lay down and take up his life.

The reverse is also true: The crucifixion and resurrection disclose what the abundance in the Cana narrative entails. Connecting the texts extends the notion of a king’s abundant gifts to include self-giving through crucifixion. The theme of revelation includes the manifestation of God’s presence in Jesus’ death. The transformation of social roles reflected in the Cana story is to be worked out in light of the cross. The Cana story may evoke associations from Scripture, Jewish tradition, and practices common in Greco-Roman culture, but as the story continues, the crucifixion and resurrection leave none of those associations unchanged.