

JOHN 2-4

John 2

2:1-11

It is not clear why Jesus and His disciples were invited to this wedding, nor why Jesus's mother felt responsibility for the provision of wine. We can be relatively safe in assuming that there was a connection between the family of Jesus and the family of the bride or groom, but nothing definitive can be said about the nature of this connection or the identity of the couple being married.

The interaction between Jesus and His mother (incidentally, she is never called Mary in the Gospel of John, only "the mother of Jesus") is interesting. Some commentators have tried to explain Jesus's address of "Woman," which sounds harsh to our ears, as a mark of respect or deference to His mother; however, there is no evidence that the Greek *gynai* was ever used in this sense. Instead, the reference may be symbolic, connecting Mary with Eve, the mother of all living.

The miracle itself may represent the incarnation, wherein the premortal, divine Jehovah became the mortal Jesus (with the wine standing in for the blood of mortality). This demonstrates a deeper purpose behind the miracles in the Gospel of John. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which use the word *dynamis* (a demonstration of power) for Jesus's miracles, John uses the word *sēmeion*, which could be translated as a "sign" or "indicator." The miracles in the Gospel of John are specifically calculated to signal or indicate something about the nature or identity of Jesus, and the Evangelist has carefully selected the stories that he includes for this purpose.

2:12-25

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which recount only one visit of the adult Jesus to Jerusalem, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus visiting Jerusalem frequently. Given the command that

all male Israelites come to the temple three times a year for pilgrimage festivals,¹ such actions would have been expected for a faithful male Jew. The account of Jesus cleansing the temple occurs at the beginning of His ministry in John but at the end in the Synoptics. It's possible that there were two cleansings that bookended Jesus's ministry or that the authors of the Synoptic Gospels moved the story to the end to present a more streamlined account of Jesus's life.

The story itself can cause some difficulties as it presents an angry, almost violent Jesus, contrasting with the placid, tranquil Jesus so often seen in paintings, videos, and other media. However, we must remember that righteous indignation can be just that—righteous (the phrase “anger of the Lord” appears thirty-two times in the Old Testament and five times in the Book of Mormon). Jesus was perfectly in control of His faculties. We could say that He never lost His temper, but He also never flinched in defending and advocating for the good and righteous. We can feel anger and disappointment at the wickedness of the world so long as we remain the master of our anger and do not become its slave. As Paul says, “Be ye angry, and sin not” (Ephesians 4:26).

The Jewish leaders' request for a sign is ironic, as Jesus had just given His first sign in Cana by turning water into wine (the Greek word used, *sēmeion*, is the same in both cases). Jesus then gave the enigmatic response, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” His listeners misunderstood, reasonably concluding that He was speaking about the physical temple in which they were currently standing. But the Evangelist makes it clear that Jesus had another meaning in mind, even though His disciples would not fully understand its significance until He had risen from the dead. This is a common theme in the Gospel of John—Jesus's words will carry a deeper meaning that is not often grasped by His immediate audience. Only with the benefit of hindsight and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost does the true meaning become apparent to us.

John 3

3:1–13

The theme of misunderstanding makes a reappearance almost immediately. Nicodemus clung to the literal meaning of Jesus's words without grasping their deeper importance. The Greek preposition *anōthen* can mean both “again” and “from above,” indicating that the rebirth through water and spirit occurs on a higher spiritual plane. However, Nicodemus, unable to get past the literal meaning of the words and their impossibility, was baffled.

This passage underscores the importance of being reborn—both internally through a change of heart and symbolically through the ordinance of baptism. Entrance into the kingdom of God is impossible without this. Modern revelation confirms this requirement and clarifies the covenantal process.

3:14–21

Sensing Nicodemus’s confusion, Jesus turned to an illustration from the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. During a bout of Israelite rebellion in the wilderness, God punished the Israelites with a plague of venomous snakes. To offer a cure for the repentant sufferers, God instructed Moses to mold an image of a snake and to place it upon a pole. Those who looked at the image were healed (Numbers 21:4–9). Jesus compared Himself to this image, noting that He, too, must be “lifted up” to provide life for humankind. Alma made a similar connection between this symbol and Christ (Alma 33:18–22).

It is unclear (since ancient texts lack punctuation) if verses 16–21 were spoken by Jesus or by the narrator, but in either case, the words are some of the most well-known and doctrinally rich in all the scriptures. Verse 16 needs little commentary. It is the plan of salvation in miniature. The words remind us that God’s plan is rooted in love and concern for His children.

The commentary on light and darkness is particularly important since Nicodemus had come to Jesus “by night,” suggesting that Nicodemus’s seedling discipleship was not yet rooted in the truth; otherwise, he would have come “to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest.” We should not be too hard on Nicodemus, however. He will reappear later in the Gospel of John to defend Jesus against accusation in 7:51. In chapter 8, Jesus will say, “When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he” (8:28). Nicodemus seems to have been paying attention during his interview with Jesus. When he finally saw Jesus “lifted up” on the cross like Moses’s brazen serpent, he recognized his Messiah and brought a gift worthy of a king to embalm Jesus (19:38–40).

3:22–36

In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is first and foremost a testator for Jesus. His role is to point not to himself but to the one whose path he had come to prepare. We would do well to emulate John the Baptist’s humility. He recognized the extent of his calling, and he was not jealous of Jesus’s growing popularity. Instead, his “joy . . . is fulfilled” by seeing Jesus succeed. We should also find joy in other’s divinely appointed success.

Notice the verb tenses in verse 36: all the verbs are in the present. This is an example of what we call realized eschatology, wherein the effects of God’s final judgment and vindication are realized in the present (the Greek word *eschaton* means “the end,” as in “end times” or the “end of days”). The “wrath of God” is not about to come upon the disbeliever; it is already here and “abideth on him.” Conversely, the one who “believeth on the Son” is not going to inherit “everlasting life” at some future time but rather already has it. Realized eschatology has a place in modern revelation as well (see Doctrine and Covenants 132:29), and we should not doubt the Lord’s ability to provide His help, aid, and grace throughout the process of our mortal struggles.

John 4

4:1–6

John 3 and 4 are artfully placed next to each other for readers to learn from comparison and contrast. Take the time to compare the similarities and note the differences between these two chapters: Who approaches whom? Who does most of the talking? Who is confused? Who learns? What time of day is it? What is the status of each character in terms of economic situation, authority, gender, education, and nationality?

The narrator's comment that Jesus "must needs go through Samaria" is interesting. The route through Samaria was the most direct path from Galilee to Jerusalem, but there was also a well-established route that followed the Jordan Valley and bypassed the Samaritan highlands. This seems to have been the more popular route for pilgrims, and the only "need" for Jesus to pass through Samaria is the necessity of His divine mission. The story of Jacob's well is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but there is a site traditionally associated with that well near Shechem. "Sychar" may be a textually corrupted reading of Shechem; this reading is supported by other details in the narrative suggesting a setting near the base of Mount Gerizim such as Shechem.

There are several points of significance in verse 6. The first item of note is that Jesus, though not truly like other mortals, was subject to physical fatigue just as we are. We should thus stand in greater awe when we consider the superhuman feats that He accomplished on our behalf. In addition, the setting of this scene at the well serves an important literary purpose: it seems to be an important type scene. A type scene is a literary convention that uses familiar themes, settings, characters, and motifs to present narratives in a similar light (for example, a shoot-out at the end of most Western films). In John 4, the reader is invited to draw lessons from the similarities and differences to Old Testament type scenes wherein a man has an encounter with a woman at a well that leads to a betrothal. See, for example, the stories of Abraham's servant and Rebekah (Genesis 24:10–61), Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29:1–20), and Moses and the daughters of Reuel (Exodus 2:15–21) as well as the clever twists on the motif in Ruth and in 1 Samuel 9:11–12 with Samuel and Saul. The encounter in John 4 may also be counted as a variety of the betrothal-at-the-well type scene. Jesus did meet a woman at a well, the topic of marriage was brought up, but in the end, the woman entered a different sort of covenantal relationship with Jesus.

4:7–15

The animosity between Jews and Samaritans is well-documented and well-known. Each group considered the other a corrupted offshoot of the true religion instituted under Moses, and political rivalries only increased the shared animosity. Many Jews saw the Samaritans as ritually and morally impure; thus, the Samaritan woman's incredulity at Jesus's request for a drink is unsurprising. If she were ritually impure, Jesus would have likewise made Himself ritually impure by drinking water she offered him. We also note

that the woman was able to identify Jesus as a Jew without any such self-introduction on His part, indicating that Jesus was dressed in the manner of an observant Jew.

Jesus quickly recognized an opportunity for teaching and pivoted the conversation to the subject of His own “living water.” This phrase (Greek *hydōr zōn*) has a double meaning: it can be the life-giving water that Jesus was speaking of or simply clear, flowing water (as opposed to the stagnant water of the well). Moreover, as is often the case in John, Jesus intended the higher spiritual meaning while His listener grasped only the lower mundane meaning. We should also recall the role that water played in the previous chapter, where it was an instrument of rebirth through baptism. In fact, we should probably read chapters 3 and 4 in contrast with one another—in chapter 3 a man came to Jesus by night, whereas in chapter 4 a woman approached Jesus at midday.

The woman’s question in verse 12 is ironic. The Greek indicates that she expected a negative answer—no, of course this stranger is not greater than Jacob. The twist is that she was talking to perhaps the only living soul who was greater than Jacob. Jesus ignored this question, understanding that it was not sincere, and instead elaborated on His offer of living water.

4:16–30

It’s unclear what motivated Jesus to change the subject as sharply as He did in verse 16, but that change drove the conversation forward. Upon the revelation of her unusual domestic life, the woman was eager to change the topic. Seeing Jesus as a religious authority, albeit a Jewish one, she turned the conversation to a major Jewish-Samaritan disagreement. Judaism regarded Jerusalem’s Temple Mount as the site for divinely prescribed worship, whereas the Samaritans had, at one time, had their sacred temple on Mount Gerizim, where they still worshipped. The woman’s use of the demonstrative “this” indicates that Gerizim was close, probably within sight. In His response, Jesus came down on the Jewish side of the debate, but He indicated that such a question reflected misplaced priorities. It is not the place of worship that matters so much as the spirit in which worship is performed.

Jesus’s statement that “God is a Spirit” has caused difficulty, but this may not be the sense of the Greek. Greek does not have an indefinite article (*a* or *an* in English), so it is unclear if Jesus meant “God is a Spirit” or “God is spirit.” The latter meaning, using “spirit” as an abstract, is consonant with other usage in the New Testament, such as “God is one” (Galatians 3:20), “God is light” (1 John 1:5), and “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16).

The woman seems a bit bewildered by all of this and, perhaps throwing up her arms in futility, uttered a proverbial hope that the Messiah would come to clear up all this confusion. Jesus’s response was brief and powerful. Using the divine name “I AM” announced to Moses (Exodus 3:14), Jesus at once showed Himself to be both the Messiah and Jehovah in the flesh. Shocked by this epiphany, the unnamed woman abandoned her task and ran into the city to spread the word, becoming one of the first Christian missionaries.

4:31–42

As we see throughout the Gospels, the disciples did not quite understand their master. Making the same mistake as the woman, they misunderstood Jesus’s reference to food to be literal, and Jesus had to explain His meaning to them. The more satisfying nourishment is that of missionary work and conversion. The metaphor of harvest became the language of missionary work throughout the scriptures, particularly in the Doctrine and Covenants at the opening of this dispensation.

We can see two stages of testimony among the Samaritans—first, a dependence upon the words of the woman at the well and second, a witness grounded upon individual experience. The remark “Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves” should not be considered a belittling of the woman or her experience but rather a reflection of the need for an individual, personal testimony of the gospel. Each of us is initially dependent upon the words and testimony of others, but this secondary conviction should lead us to seek personal experiences with the Lord so that the witness may become our own.

4:43–54

Commentators have connected this miracle to the healing of the centurion’s son in Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10, but it is unclear if they are, in fact, different accounts of the same story. As is typical in John, the miracle (or, better, “sign”) signals or indicates something about Jesus’s nature and serves as a catalyst for belief. At the end of the story, the man and his entire household believed; but notice also that the man believed Jesus (John 4:50) *before* the miracle takes place. The nobleman thus proved himself to be the exception to Jesus’s statement (the verbs are plural, indicating a generalized audience): “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.”

Notes

- 1 See Exodus 23:17; 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16.

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