

51. The Wedding at Cana

John 2:1-11

There has been little of domestic interest in the earlier Gospels; on the contrary, the earlier Gospels constantly emphasize the need to separate from family and friends. All the more welcome is this first “sign” of Jesus’ career; the first time – at least, as John tells it – when he displays his power.

The mother of Jesus, who has figured in no previous account of his career, is there with him, and this is how it went:

And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: and Jesus also was bidden, and his disciples, to the marriage. And when the wine failed, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. And Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. Now there were six waterpots of stone set there after the Jews' manner of purifying, containing two or three firkins apiece. Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the ruler of the feast. And they bare it. And when the ruler of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and knew not whence it was (but the servants that had drawn the water knew), the ruler of the feast calleth the bridegroom, and saith unto him, Every man setteth on first the good wine; and when [men] have drunk freely, [then] that which is worse; thou hast kept the good wine until now.

This beginning of his signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed on him.



Reflections

John is intimately aware of Mark, but though he sometimes repeats Mark, more often, as here, he goes further and transforms Mark.

Jesus in Mark had rejected his mother and his brothers, and identified instead with his new family: those who “hear the word of God and do it.” This is pretty brusque. Can’t Jesus be a little less brusque? After all, it’s his mother.

The Gospels steadily give more space to feelings in favor of Jesus’ mother. Mark, if anything, is negative. She gets a key role in Matthew’s Birth Narrative, and top billing in Luke’s remake of that story. But even in Luke, the only appearance of Mary *in the story* is to be rejected by Jesus, in the passage still retained from Mark. In John, all this is transformed. There is no rejection of Jesus’ mother. She is present at his Crucifixion.

And she is present at this Cana story. If we look at that story more closely, we see a trace of the Markan Jesus. Mary clearly expects him to do a miracle; Jesus sulks. He complains, My time is not yet come. A typical pushy mother, she goes ahead anyway, telling the wine stewards to do what he tells them. Jesus, socially trapped, obliges with the miracle of making wine out of water. This is an insulated miracle; it produces no result in the wine steward, or the wedding guests, or anybody else. His disciples, who as far as we know already believe in him, or else they wouldn’t be there, seemingly believe a little more. The episode has a perfunctory quality. The only detail with any substance to it is the relation between sulky Jesus and his proud mother.

The sulky Jesus in this story has been thought to be a forerunner of the Brat Jesus in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, who responds to being bumped by killing the child who bumped him, or to being scolded by killing the teacher who scolded him.¹ That is less ridiculous than it may seem. What woman among the Infancy Gospel readership would not be inwardly pleased to see how child Jesus takes nothing from nobody, not his playmates, or even his teacher? What woman reader would not like the way Mary takes charge at Cana?

There do not seem to be any female *writers*, in these early Christian texts, but the importance of their female *audience* can hardly be overestimated.

All told, this Cana story looks like a transformed and female-friendly echo of Jesus’ rejection of his mother in Mark. Nor was the reprocessing of other people’s texts confined to the Gospels. It was more or less the order of the day.

¹For these episodes, see Elliott *Apocryphal* 76-77.