

## **Critical Study of John 2:1-11 and its Implication for African Biblical Exegetes**

**Dr. Jonathan Edward Tetteh Kuwornu-Adjaottor  
Patrick Yankyera  
Dr. Frimpong Wiafe**

### **Abstract**

*The turning of water into wine was the first of 35 recorded miracles Jesus performed. In this miracle, Jesus revealed Himself as the master of quality. He changed water into the “choicest wine” or “best wine” instantaneously to the amazement of people at the ceremony. The study has brought to the fore lessons which African biblical exegetes can emphasize when exposing this text: ministry should be people-centered and not self-centered; the need for people to be sociable, available, and not to focus on miracles but to be devoted to the miracle worker himself – Jesus Christ.*

**Keywords:** religion, New Testament, Cana, wedding, wine, theology.

### **Introduction**

#### **BACKGROUND OF WEDDINGS IN JESUS’ DAY**

The wedding festivities, which lasted for a whole week, were centered in the home where the couple was to live. The bridegroom was allowed to show up at any moment and enter the house; but when he chose to come, he always sent a man ahead crying out, “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him! “This enabled everyone to prepare for his arrival. The bride had ten young ladies (virgins) who were always to be prepared to rush out and meet the bridegroom. In the event that he came at night,

they were to have lamps ready so they could go out to light his path along the streets. This is the picture Christ was painting of His return.<sup>1</sup>

A Jewish wedding ceremony included three events: It started with the marriage feast and ceremony which were held on the same evening and the escort of the couple through the streets to their home and procession which usually took place at night. During such occasions, flaming torches were used and the longest route to the home was taken to attract more attention and to allow the community to share in the joyful event. It was crowned with a happy, festive spirit that swept through the community and surrounded the couple. All week long the couple wore their wedding garments (gown and robe) and entertained guests. The whole community was expected to participate and celebrate with the couple in their new found happiness. Banquets would be prepared for many guests, and the week would be spent celebrating the new life of the married couple. Often the whole town was invited, and everybody would come, it was considered an insult to refuse an invitation to a wedding. Careful planning was needed. To run out of wine was more than embarrassing; it broke the strong unwritten laws of hospitality.<sup>2</sup> The feast followed the groom's taking of his bride to his home or his father's house, before the consummation of the marriage.<sup>3</sup>

Jewish tradition required that virgins be married on a Wednesday, while widows were married on a Thursday.<sup>4</sup> Being the "seventh day" of John's special week, Jesus would be expected to rest, just as God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:1-2). But sin had interrupted God's Sabbath rest, and it was necessary for both the Father and the Son to work (John 5:9). Jesus played three different roles at the wedding: the Guest, the Son and the Host.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leadership Ministries Worldwide, *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible Volume One Matthew-John* (Chattanooga: Zondervan Bible publishers, 2000), 537.

<sup>2</sup>Howard Hendricks, *Life Application Study Bible* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 203

<sup>3</sup> Hendricks, *Life Application Study Bible*, 203.

<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersebe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament volume I* (England: Cook Communication Ministries, 2001), 290.

## EXEGETICAL DISCUSSION OF THE PASSAGE

**Jesus the Guest (vv. 1-2)**

“The third day” in the text means three days after the call of Nathanael (John 1:45-51). Since that was the fourth day of the week recorded in John (John 1:19, 29, 35, 43), the wedding took place on the seventh day of this “new creation week.” Cana, on the other hand, was a small, remote, obscure country village. It is thought to have been in the highlands of Galilee, for a person traveled from Cana down to Capernaum. It was close to Nazareth, and according to the early Church Father Jerome, the city could be seen from Nazareth. Little else is known about the village. Two miracle signs took place in Cana. It was an event of creative power where the water was turned into wine and the royal official’s son was healed (John 4:46-54). Cana is mentioned only one other time in Scripture (John. 21:2), three times altogether, and only by John in his gospel.

Were Jesus and His disciples invited because of Mary, or because of Nathanael (John 21:2)? Our Lord was not yet well known; and He had performed no miracles as yet. It was not likely that He was invited because the people knew who He was. It was probably His relationship with Mary that brought about the invitation. The mother of Jesus was there; since no mention is made of Joseph, we conclude he was dead before this.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to notice that Mary is spoken of as the mother of Jesus. The Saviour was not famous because He was the Son of the Virgin Mary, but she was well-known because she was the mother of our Lord. The Scriptures always give the pre-eminent place to Christ and not Mary.

**Jesus the Son (vv. 3-5).**

Why did Mary approach Jesus about the challenge? Certainly, Mary knew who Jesus was, even though she did not declare this wonderful

---

<sup>5</sup>Matthew Henry, Jamieson Fausset, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary on the New Testament* (Michigan: Bethany House Publishers, 1983), 508.

truth to others. She must have been very close to either the bride or the bridegroom to have a personal concern for the success of the festivities, or even to know the supply of wine was depleted. Perhaps Mary was assisting in the preparation and serving of the meal.

Since Jewish wedding feasts lasted for a week, it was necessary for the groom to have adequate provisions. For one thing, it would be embarrassing to run out of either food or wine; and a family guilty of such *gaucherie* could actually be fined! So, to run out of wine could be costly both financially and socially.<sup>6</sup> It was unthinkable that Mary reported the shortage of wine to Jesus because it was night and wine could not be bought and again Jesus had not performed any miraculous signs yet.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, when the supply of wine was used up, Mary turned to Jesus in hope that He could solve the problem. Because the language of the story implies that Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding because of indirect obligation. Mary was there; Jesus and His disciples were “also” invited to the marriage. The word “also” carries a slight connotation that Jesus and His followers were extra guests, invited because of their connection with His mother. In view of this, Mary felt that the shortage was occasioned by the unexpected arrival of Jesus and His party, in which case she may have felt that He was responsible. Mary’s request to Jesus was at once a testimony to her personal confidence in Jesus’ power and acknowledgment of the social disaster which threatened the young couple. Had the wine actually failed, the occurrence would have been regarded as an insult to those present and would have banished the host and hostess to practical isolation.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently, Jesus planned to solve this embarrassing problem, but gently reminds Mary that the purpose of His coming to earth was not simply to work miracles. The word “woman” applied to His mother may

---

<sup>6</sup> Wiersebe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament volume 1*, 290.

<sup>7</sup> Leadership Ministries Worldwide, *The Preacher’s Outline & Sermon Bible Volume One Matthew-John* (Chattanooga: Zondervan Bible publishers, 2000), 1453.

<sup>8</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, John *The Gospel of Belief, An Analytic Study of the Text* (Cambridge: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 83.

seem strange to a modern reader, but it was a polite and a kind expression. John 19:26 epitomizes this fact. However, the question “Why do you involve me?” was a translation of an idiom, both in classical Greek and Hebrew, meaning “leave me to follow my own course”<sup>9</sup>. Again, the reply, “O woman” is not harsh but “what have you to do with me?” emphasizes the complete independence of Jesus; as in other miracles (e.g. 6:5; 11:6). He acts so as to bring out the fact that family, friends, nor circumstances can dictate to Him.<sup>10</sup>

At this point, John introduced one of the key elements of His record, the idea of “hour.” Jesus’ acts only when the hour comes. “My hour has not yet come” refers primarily to the moment of death and exaltation (John 12:23, 27, 17:1), but also to anticipations of this moment in which the glory of Jesus is manifested (v.11). Yet it came a few minutes later, when the Father, by an inward revelation, had manifested His will to Jesus. Throughout his Gospel, John makes it clear that Jesus was on a divine schedule or timetable marked out for Him by the Father (John 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1) obeying the will of the Father. Mary probably had to learn a painful lesson that Jesus was committed to the Father’s will and the time for His manifestation was in the Father’s hand.

Again, expression in John 2:4 *ti, evmoi. kai. soi,*( *gu,naiÈ* (“What have I to do with you, woman?) does not involve disrespect. The words indicate the division of interest and to suggest a measure of rebuke. Mary may have expected Jesus to use the situation to call attention to himself in a way that would have furthered his Messianic programme.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the formality of Jesus’ reply, his mother is not put off. Far from shrinking into the background, she takes control and demonstrates her

---

<sup>9</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The International Bible Commentary with the NIV* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House 1986), 1236.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Black, H.H. Rowley, *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1962), 848.

<sup>11</sup> The Iverksen-Norman Associates, *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (New York: Library of Congress, 1973), 285.

belief that Jesus can supply the need by ordering the servants to “Do whatever he tells you” (v.5). In terms of Johannine discipleship, this looks like an instance of faith before the sign and thus makes Jesus’ mother’s move from familiar to disciple relationship. This theme will be picked up again in her reappearance at the foot of the cross (John 19:26).

### **Jesus the Host (vv.6-12).**

Our Lord’s first miracle was not a spectacular event that everybody witnessed. Mary, the disciples, and the servants knew what had happened; but nobody else at the feast had any idea that a miracle had taken. His first miracle was quite an event, a wedding in contrast to His last miracle recorded by John (John 11), a public event after a funeral.

Another important thing to take note of is the unlikely vessels that Jesus used to perform His first miracle. In the place, there were six large stone vessels, containing between sixteen and twenty-seven gallons of water apiece. This water was used by the Jewish people for cleansing themselves from defilement. The Lord Jesus gave instructions that the water pots should be filled with water. This the servants did immediately. The Lord Jesus used facilities that were available when He was about to perform a miracle. He allowed men to provide the water pots, and to fill them with water, but then He did what no man could ever do - changed the water into wine! It was the servants and not the disciples who filled the vessels with water. Thus the Lord avoided the possibility of any charge of trickery. The miracle was instantaneous and without ceremonial performances on the part of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Also, the water pots were filled to the brim, so that no one could say that wine had been added to the water.<sup>13</sup> The miracle having taken place, the Lord instructed the servants to draw out some of the wine from the vessels to the governor, or ruler, of the feast. From this, it is clear that the miracle had been instantaneous. The water did not become wine over

---

<sup>12</sup> Roger E. Dickson, *Dickson Teacher’s Bible* (Kansas: Africa International Missions, 2011), 1252.

<sup>13</sup>Roger Stronstad, *Full Life Bible Commentary to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 17.

a period of time but in a second or so. There is certainly more to this miracle than simply meeting a human need and saving a family from social embarrassment. The Gospel of John, unlike the other three Gospels, seeks to share the inner meaning, the spiritual significance of our Lord's work, so that each miracle is "a sermon in action."<sup>14</sup>

The word John used in his book is not *dunamis*, which emphasizes power, but *semeion*, which means a "sign." The event is described as a sign (v.11). This is John's characteristic word for Jesus' miracle. In the Synoptics it occurs principally in passages where Jesus is asked for a sign and refuses to comply with the request. The word has an important Old Testament background (Exo 4:8; Isa 8:18; Eze 4:3), and also occurs in Greek philosophical and religious thought. What is a sign? A sign indicates something that is greater than the miraculous event itself. The sign manifested that there was someone behind the event of the miracle who was manifesting Himself through the miracle. Therefore, the sign signaled to the beholders that God was at work. It was not enough for people to believe in Jesus' work; they had to believe in Him and in the Father who sent Him (John 5:14-24). This explains why Jesus often added a sermon to the miracle and in that sermon to the miracle interpreted the sign. In John 5, the healing of the paralytic on the Sabbath opened the way for a message on His deity, "the Lord of the Sabbath." The feeding of the 5,000 (John 6) led naturally into a sermon on the Bread of Life.

If our Lord had preached a sermon after He turned the water into wine, what might He have said? For one thing, He likely would have told the people that the in world, joy always run out and cannot be regained, but the Joy He gives is ever new and ever satisfying. (In the Scriptures, wine is a symbol of joy according to Judges 9:13 and Psalm 104:15.) The world offers the best at the first, and then, once you are "hooked," things start to get worse. But Jesus continues to offer that which is best until we one day enjoy the finest blessings in the eternal kingdom (Luke 22:18).

---

<sup>14</sup> Stronstad, *Full Life Bible Commentary to the New Testament*, 17.

Our Lord would certainly have a special message here for His people, Israel. In the Old Testament, the nation is pictured as “married” to God and unfaithful to her marriage covenant (Isa 54:5; Jer 31:32; Hos 2:2ff). The wine run out and all Israel had left were six empty waterpots! They held water for external washings, but they could provide mothering for internal cleaning and joy. In this miracle, our Lord brought fullness where there was a disappointment, and something internal for that which was only external (water for ceremonial washings).<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the miracle, His disciples believed in Him. The use of significant Johannine clause or word “sign” for instance, “revealed His glory” (2:11). “Revealed” and “glory” do not appear together in any other place in this Gospel. Glory, in this case, is a term calling attention to the potency of Jesus to accomplish a spiritual transformation, as suggested by the changing of water into wine. “And His disciples put their faith in Him.” In contrast to the ruler of the feast, who was characterized by ignorance and to the servants who had knowledge of the miracle (v.9), the disciples were moved to faith. They alone truly profited by the sign. These elements, “disciples” and “put their faith,” do not occur again in this clear manner until chapter 20, when various people came to the faith in view of the empty tomb and the risen Christ.<sup>16</sup>

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MIRACLE

The significance of the miracle lay in the result that it produced. John 2:11 states: "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory, and his disciples believed on him."

“The beginning of His signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him”. The belief prompted by the sign was not the fullest that Jesus desired. Rather, He sought to teach his disciples to put their faith in Him. Nevertheless, it was an advance step beyond the initial belief that was only theoretical. The people had seen the miracle with their own eyes and were able to draw the

---

<sup>15</sup> Wiersebe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament volume 1*, 291.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Lee, *The Outlined Bible* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain Limited, 1982), 48.



conclusion that a superior being was among them who had substantiated His claims by His deed of mercy and power. “Believe” is the keyword of this Gospel while Jesus Christ is presented as the object of faith (Jn 20:31).<sup>17</sup>

Besides, its significance is seen in how Jesus’ disciples embraced who He is after He performed His first miracle at the wedding in Cana (v.11). They “bought in” to His identity before they bought in to His cause. People buy in to the leader before they accept the vision. Once they believe in the leader, they generally go with the vision. Once the disciples recognized Jesus’ identity, they felt ready to do whatever He called them to do. The leader’s credibility precedes the leader’s plan.<sup>18</sup>

More to the point, the changing of the water into wine was a super-human act with a spiritual meaning. By performing this sign, He manifested His glory. He revealed to men that He was indeed God, manifest in the flesh. His disciples believed in Him. Of course, in one sense they had believed in Him previously, but now their faith was strengthened, and they trusted Him more fully.

Moreover, Jesus’ first miracle was a gracious indication of the joy which He provides by the Spirit. The sign points to Jesus as the mighty Creator. The 120 gallons of fine wine were His gift to the young couple.<sup>19</sup> The first miracle is a transformation, pointing to the kind of transformation ministry Jesus would have. The disciples put their faith in Him. This initial faith would be tested and developed by a progressive revelation of Jesus, the *Logos*. At this point they had not understood His death and resurrection (John 20:8-9) but they did know His power.

---

<sup>17</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, John: *The Gospel of Belief, An Analytic Study of the Text* (Cambridge: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 83.

<sup>18</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The Maxwell Leadership Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 1279.

<sup>19</sup> William MacDonald, *The Gospel of John* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978), 24

Another area that needs to be given consideration is the fact that many of the events related by John have a symbolic significance that places Jesus' ministry in the stream of redemptive history. George E. Ladd says:

“The first miracle – the changing of water at the wedding in Cana – is a sign (2:11). A wedding is a symbol of the Messianic days (Isa 54:4-8; 62:4-5), and both a wedding and a banquet appear in the Synoptics as symbols of the Messianic era (Matt 8:11; 22:1-14). Revelation pictures the Messianic consummation in terms of a wedding (Rev 19:9). In our Gospel, the wedding in Cana symbolizes the presence of the Messianic salvation; wine symbolizes the joy of the Messianic feast (Mark 2:19); the six stone jars used for Jewish rites of purification symbolize the Old Testament era that is now ending; and Mary's statement, “they have no wine,” becomes a pregnant reflection on the barrenness of Jewish purification, much in the vein of Mark 7:1-24.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to note that our Lord chose to perform this significant miracle during a wedding ceremony. The oldest and greatest grand institutions given by God to man is that of marriage. God Himself performed the first wedding in Eden (Gen 2:20-25). The Father would later choose that relationship between a man and wife to illustrate the love of Christ for His church (Eph 5:22-23). Finally, the great event of the ages, yet to come, is a wedding - the marriage of God's Son to His chosen Bride (Rev 19:6-9).<sup>21</sup> In recording it, John doubtlessly had in view the Gnostic false teachers, who regarded matter as evil, and practiced a rigid asceticism, rejecting all bodily pleasures, and abstaining from flesh and wine, and even from marriage. Such teaching was very prevalent in Ephesus, where this Gospel was written (1Tim 4:1-6); and tradition tells us that John vehemently opposed it.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast with a common custom in which the best wine was served first and the lesser quality later, the master of the banquet affirmed that

---

<sup>20</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 267.

<sup>21</sup> H.L. Willmington, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible* (Katonayake: Tyndale House Publishers, 1984), 287.

<sup>22</sup> J. R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 778.

this wine, served last, was the best. The significance of this miracle is that Christianity has advanced over Judaism. God has kept the best gift - His Son - until now.<sup>23</sup>

The structure of John's Gospel is complex, so any brief analysis is bound to be artificial. However, we will follow John's own lead and focus our summary on the "signs." Changing water into wine symbolizes a new order. The first chapter introduces Jesus as God's Word spoken in a new way. Previously, God spoke through prophets, like John the Baptist. But now His Word has "become flesh" (John 1:14). This means a whole new stage in His dealing with the world: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). This "new order" is symbolized by the first sign, the changing of the water into wine.<sup>24</sup>

## WINE IN THE BIBLE

The production of grapes, both for eating and for squeezing into juice, was a very important part of the agriculture of the ancient Mediterranean world. Vineyards, fresh grapes, raisins and wine are frequently mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments.

The subject of wine in the NT raises several questions about the use of wine then and the use of wine today. The list of questions often include the following:

- (1) When the NT mentions "wine" *oivnoj*, was it always alcoholic as in modern times.
- (2) How would the alcoholic content in ancient fermented wine compare with that of various wines today?
- (3) Did Jesus use fermented (i.e. alcoholic) wine?

---

<sup>23</sup> Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 278.

<sup>24</sup> John Stott, *Men with a Message* (Grenville: Evangelical Literature Trust, 1994), 78-79

Certainly, it is incorrect and even unreasonable to claim that wine mentioned in the Bible was never alcoholic since the Bible contains many warnings and restrictions about intoxicating wine (Pro 20:1; 23:1, Eph 5:18; Tit 2:3; 1Pet 4:3). However, it would be just as unreasonable to claim that all wine mentioned in the Bible was alcoholic. Those who are persuaded that all wine was alcoholic argue that since refrigeration was unavailable in the ancient times, there was no way to preserve wine. Therefore, it would naturally ferment in the warm Mediterranean climate if it was consumed immediately. But this view ignores a large amount of evidence provided by ancient writers such as Pliny (*Natural History* 14.11.83) and Columella (*De re rustica/On Agriculture*) 29 who explain in detail the production of non-alcoholic wine known as *aigloukoj* (“always sweet”).

Pliny and Columella describe putting freshly squeezed juice into sealed containers and storing them under cold water until outside temperatures were low enough to keep the substance cool. This method, which could keep the juice sweet and fresh for about a year, would have worked well in the land of Israel (Deut 8:7; 11:11-12; Psa 65:9-13). People in the ancient world often preferred “sweet wines” since there were few choices of things to drink compared with the great variety that we have today.<sup>25</sup> Because fermentation chemically reduces natural sugars in grape juice, alcoholic wines were not as sweet as unfermented juice. For this reason, different processes were used to keep the freshly squeezed sweet, but unfermented.<sup>26</sup>

The most common method of preserving wine in a non-alcoholic state for long periods was to boil the fresh grape juice down to about a third of its original volume, then store it in large clay jars or containers made of sheep or goat skin. Because of large sugar, it restricted spoiling over a long period and did not ferment (Columella, 12.19.1-6 and 20.1-8; Pliny, 14.11.80). Later, water could be added

---

<sup>25</sup> Donald Stamps, J. Wesley Adams, *Fire Bible: Global Study Edition* (Peabody: Life Publishers International, 2009), 1911

<sup>26</sup> Stamps and Adams, *Fire Bible: Global Study Edition*, 1911

in to produce a flowing, like fresh reconstituted juice again. At other times, water was added in order to dilute fermented wine perhaps to reduce the percentage of alcohol or simply to increase the amount available according to the need of occasion.

Among Jewish people in Bible times, social and religious customs often required wine to be mixed or diluted, especially if it fermented. The Talmud (a Jewish work that describes the tradition of Judaism and Jewish religious law from about 200 B.C to A.D. 200) discusses this topic several times. Some Jewish rabbis insisted that unless fermented (i.e. potentially intoxicating wine was mixed with at least three parts water, it could be blessed and would defile, or spiritually corrupt, the one who drank it.

The most common Biblical word for “wine” is the Greek word *oinoj* (Luke 7:33). *Oivnoj* can refer to two distantly different types of wine from grapes. (1) Unfermented juice and fermented, or intoxicating, wine. This is supported by the following data conducted by Donald Stamps.

- (1) The Greek word *oinoj* was often used by secular (i.e., non religious, world) and religious authors in pre-Christian and early church times to refer to fresh grape (non-fermented) wine (Aristotle, Meteorological, 389.b.9-13). (a) Anacreon (c.500 B.C.) writes “Squeeze the grape, let out the wine (oinos)” (Ode 5). (b) Nicander (second century B.C) writes about squeezing grapes and refers to the juice as oinos (Georgica, fragment 86). (c) Althenaeus (A.D.200) about a man gathering grapes who “went about, and took wine *oivnoj* from the field” (Althenaeus, Banquet, 1.4)
- (2) The Jewish scholars who translated the OT into Greek about 200 B.C used *oivnoj* to translate several Hebrew words for wine. That is to say, the NT writers undoubtedly knew that *oivnoj* could be either fermented or unfermented juice from grapes.
- (3) Examination of NT Bible passages also reveals that *oivnoj* can mean either fermented or unfermented wine. In Ephesians 5:18

the command “do not get drunk on wine (oivnoj),” obviously refers to alcoholic wine. But in Revelation 19:15, Christ is pictured in a winepress (a flat, lowered floor where grapes would be crushed by foot to produce). The text: “He treads the winepress of the wine (oivnoj)” the *oivnoj* that comes from the winepress would be fresh grape juice (Isa 16:10; Jer 48:32-33. In Revelation 6:6 *oivnoj* refers to grapes still on the vine. These passages are evidence that people in NT times understood that “wine” (oivnoj) was general word that could be used for two distinctly different grape beverages - sweet, unfermented juice or fermented, potentially intoxicating wine.<sup>27</sup>

### WHAT KIND OF WINE DID JESUS MAKE AT THE WEDDING OF CANA? WAS IT ALCOHOLIC OR UNFERMENTED? WAS IT “NEW WINE” OR AGED WINE”?

The wine miracle was one of Jesus’ seven miraculous “signs” (*semeia*) in John’s Gospel that pointed to Jesus as being Israel’s Messiah and God’s Son, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, 17). This miracle is also part of the “newness” theme that John emphasizes in his opening chapters (“new wine,” 2:1-11; “new temple,” 2:14-22; “new birth,” 3:1-8; “new life,” 4:4-26). In the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, something brand new and unprecedented was emerging in the history of God’s relationship to humankind. However, the old order of Judaism (i.e. religion based on the interpretation of the Pentateuch and Jewish customs) was resisting, opposing and rejecting the “newness” that Jesus was bringing.<sup>28</sup> It is within this context of “newness” that we consider the question about the kind of wine Jesus created. To find answer to the kind of wine Jesus created, we must consider both the biblical context of this passage and the moral position His action would probably represent. Donald Stamps proposes that most likely Jesus created “new wine” (pure and unfermented) rather than “aged wine” (alcoholic) for the following reasons:

---

<sup>27</sup> Stamps and Adams, *Fire Bible: Global Study Edition*, 1912

<sup>28</sup> Stamps and Adams, *Fire Bible: Global Study Edition*, 1912.

- (1) “New wine” fits better in the context of John’s Gospel with its focus on the theme of “newness” as part of the message that Jesus brings (John. 2:1-11; 2:14-22; 3:1-8; 4:4-26; Matt 9:16-17; 2Cor 5:17). In addition, old wineskins and old (aged) wine associated with Judaism, not the Gospel (i.e. “Good News” of Jesus Christ; Luke 5:37-39). The highest goal of redemption (i.e. Christ’ work of spiritual salvation and restoring people’s relationship with God) is to make all things new (Rev 21:5).
- (2) The quality of the wine Jesus made is called “choice” (*kalon*) wine (John 2:10). According to various ancient writers, the “choice” (or “best”) wine was the sweetest wine - one that people could drink freely and in large quantities without harm (i.e. wine that had not reduced its sugar to alcohol through fermentation). The “cheaper” (*elasoo*) wine was usually alcoholic and had been diluted with too much water. In ancient times (unlike today), wine was not thought to improve with age because it could sour into vinegar or form undesirable sediment (the part that would settle to the bottom). The taste of the wine that Jesus produced assured this functionary that it was of superior quality, so much superior that he felt constrained to complement the bridegroom for treating his guests with unusual consideration, giving them good wine at the end of the feast, when many would be so filled as not to be able to discern whether the wine was good or inferior.
- (3) The goals of the wine miracle, as Jesus’ first miraculous sign, were to (1) reveal Jesus as the “creator” (John 2:9) and (2) reveal “his glory” and inspire his disciples to put their faith in Him as God’s Son (2:11; 20:31). It would seem highly unlikely that Christ showed His divinity as the One and only Son of the Father (John 1:14) by creating gallons of intoxicating wine for people who may already have drunk too much (2:10), which suggest that the people had been drinking freely. Such an act could hardly be seen as a credit to His mission as spiritual Saviour (Matt 1:21).
- (4) Since Jesus acknowledged the OT as God’s authoritative revelation, He would have supported the biblical passages condemning drunkenness (Pro 20:10) and the word such as those

of Habakkuk 2:15 “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbours, pouring it...they are drunk” (Lev 10:8-11; Num 6:1-10; Deut 21:20; Pro 31:4-7; Isa 28:7; Amo 2:8, 12; 4:1;6:6; Rom 14:13,21).

In addition, Christ’s perfect obedience to His Father makes it unlikely that He would have done anything that could have compromised the strong warnings in God’s Word about alcoholic wine and its harmful effects (Pro 23:29-35). But turning water into fresh, sweet, unfermented harvest wine certainly could have revealed to His disciples Jesus’ glory as Lord over nature.

### WHAT SHOULD BE THE ATTITUDE OF CHRISTIANS TOWARD WINE TODAY?

The Bible does not appear to teach abstinence, but it does teach temperance.<sup>29</sup> In Psalms 104, wine is included among the blessings from God and described as something that makes people glad. In His first miracle, Jesus made wine from water; wine apparently was taken at the Last Supper; and it appears that Jesus himself drank wine.<sup>30</sup>

Wine is sometimes prescribed for medicinal purposes, and this is entirely in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament (1 Tim 5:23). Regarding its use at the table, Christians ought to act prudently in all situations and in all cultures, seeking before all the glory of the Lord and not the selfish gratification of their own desires. Never rejecting the good gifts of God, the believer should remember the warnings of Scripture specifically against drunkenness (Rom 13:13; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:18; 1Pt 4:3), and against all lack of moderation in general (1Eph 5:18; 1Pet 4:3).

Anyone can become addicted to strong drink. The way to avert this danger is to leave liquor alone. One must always consider the effect of his actions on others. Ordinarily, it would be a bad testimony for a

---

<sup>29</sup> Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, third edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 659

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 104:5; John 2:9; Matthew 11:19; 26:27-29; Luke 7:33-34.



Christian if an unsaved person should see him drinking wine, and for this reason he should abstain. The saints should refrain from any behaviour that would cause someone else to stumble (Rom 14:21; 1Cor 6:12).

Most drinkers use moderation, but some become heavy drinkers, whose dependence on alcohol leads to a variety of problems. It cripples individuals outside of the church as well as those who are inside and it is a major killer, ranking third after heart disease and cancer.<sup>31</sup> From an economic standpoint, the abuse of alcohol costs the economy billions of dollars annually in reduced productivity, absenteeism, property damage, treatment costs, and premature deaths.<sup>32</sup>

Whereas most Christians today would conclude that moderation is good, this paper advocates that total abstinence is better, especially in view of the clear dangers inherent in drinking. Alcohol is a mind-altering drug that, for some, can become psychologically and physically addicting. While its moderate use is not condemned or forbidden by scripture, drinking may fall into the category of an act of any practice or questionable behaviour such as drinking alcoholic beverages that can harm the body, numb sensation, dull the mind, make one more susceptible to immorality and other sin, cause harm to other human beings, or make another believer stumble and fall.<sup>33</sup> When men or women took the Nazarite vow, “setting themselves apart to the Lord in a special way,” they agreed to “give up wine and other alcoholic drinks.” John the Baptist was a special messenger from God who did not drink wine.<sup>34</sup> Today’s Christians should, therefore, choose to practice total abstinence for their own sake and for the sake of others.

## IMPLICATION FOR AFRICAN BIBLICAL EXEGETES

---

<sup>31</sup> Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, third edition, 659.

<sup>32</sup> Harwood, Fountain, et al., “Economic Costs of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, in *The Consequences of Alcoholism*, ed. M. Gelernter (New York: Plenum, 1989), 307-330.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:12; 8:9-13; Romans 14:21

<sup>34</sup> Luke 7:33

Jesus attending a wedding tells us that Jesus was a sociable person. African Biblical exegetes should do studies of biblical texts emphasizing not only the spiritual dimensions of Jesus but also on his sociability. They should emphasize that since Jesus' ministry was focused upon people, ministry in Africa should be people-centered, not self-centered.

Though Jesus was on a mission to save the world, the greatest mission in the history of humankind, yet he accepted invitations to social events, even though His enemies used this practice to accuse Him (Luke 15:1-2). Our Lord entered into the normal experiences of life and sanctified them by His presence. African Biblical exegetes should expose biblical texts in such a way that people will follow Jesus' example.

In addition, Mary submitted to Jesus' way of doing things. She recognized that Jesus was more than her human son - He was the son of God. Like Mary, African biblical exegetes should encourage people to carry their challenges direct to God and allow Him to deal with them as He sees best.

Furthermore, Jesus used water pots to accomplish His first miracle. He desires to do the same today, but now He uses living, earthly vessels. African biblical exegetes should expose the Scriptures to bring out the need for people to make themselves available for God to use.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. It was a wise decision on the part of those who arranged the marriage to invite Christ. African biblical exegetes should encourage people to invite the Lord to their marriages. The marriage, at which there is no place for Christ and His disciples, is not one that can justly be expected to prosper.<sup>36</sup> In order to do this, of course, both bride and groom must be true believers in the Lord Jesus. Then, too, they must give their lives to the Saviour and determine that their home will be a place where He loves to be.

---

<sup>35</sup> Willmington, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*, 287.

<sup>36</sup>J.C.Ryle, *Expository thoughts on John volume 1*(Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 88.

Consequently, when the supply of wine was used up, Mary turned to Jesus in hope that He could solve the problem. Mary understood the meaning of Jesus' words and instructed the servants to do whatever He commanded them. She did not direct men to obey herself or any other man. She pointed them to the Lord Jesus and told them that He was the one who should be obeyed. African biblical exegetes should encourage people to turn to Jesus in the midst of overwhelming and contradictory situations.

Interestingly Moses' first miracle was a plague - turning water into blood (Exo 7:19ff.), which speaks of judgment. Our Lord's first miracle spoke of grace. This miracle also presents a practical lesson in service for God. The water turned into wine because the servants cooperated with Jesus and obeyed His commands. Several of the signs in John's Gospel involve the cooperation of man and God: the feeding of the 5,000 (John. 6), the healing of the man born blind (John. 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John. 11). African biblical exegetes should emphasize the need for people to cooperate with God for Him to work in their lives.

Signs play an important role in the public ministry of Jesus, not least as a pointer to who He is. The validity of belief based on signs is left open almost to the end of the Gospel, when Jesus declares to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). African biblical explain to people that greater faith is that which does not depend on signs but on devotion on the miracle worker himself - Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

The turning of water into wine was the first of 35 recorded miracles Jesus performed. In this miracle, Jesus revealed Himself as the master of quality. He changed water into the "choicest wine" or "best wine" instantaneously to the amazement of people at the ceremony. The study has brought to the fore lessons which African biblical exegetes can emphasize when exposing this text: ministry should be people-centered and not self-centered; the need for people to be sociable, available, and

Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Hankyera, Wiafe

not to focus on miracles but to be devoted to the miracle worker himself  
– Jesus Christ.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruce, F.F. *The International Bible Commentary with the NIV*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986.
- Collins, Gary R. *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, third edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).
- Dickson, Roger E. *Dickson Teacher's Bible*. Kansas: Africa International Missions, 2011,
- Dummelow, J. R. Rev. *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966.
- Harwood, Fountain, et al. "Economic Costs of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, in *the Consequences of Alcoholism*, ed. M. Gelernter. New York: Plenum, 1989.
- Hendricks, Howard. *Life Application Study Bible*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996
- Henry, Matthew and Fausset, Jamieson. *The Bethany Parallel Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 1983.
- Iverksen, The – Associates, Norman. *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. New York: Library of Congress, 1973
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament* revised edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993.
- Lee, Robert. *The Outlined Bible*. Glasgow: Bell and Bain Limited, 1982.
- MacDonald, William. *The Gospel of John*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978.
- Maxwell, C. John. *The Maxwell Leadership Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002.
- Palau, Luis. *High Definition Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2005.
- Rowley, H. H. and Black, Matthew. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. Toronto: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1962.
- Ryle, J.C. *Expository thoughts on John volume 1*. Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.
- Stamps, Donald and Adams, Wesley J. *Fire Bible: Global Study Edition*. Springfield: Life Publishers International, 1988.
- Stott, John. *Men with a Message*. Grenville: Evangelical Literature Trust, 1994.
- Stronstad, Roger. *Full Life Bible Commentary to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999,
- Tenney, Merrill C. *John: The Gospel of Belief, An Analytic Study of the Text*. Cambridge: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.
- Wiersebe, W. Warren. *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament volume 1* England: Cook Communication Ministries, 2001.
- Willmington, H. L. *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*. Katunayake: Tyndale House Publishers, 1984.

Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Hankyera, Wiafe

Worldwide, Ministries Leadership. *The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible Volume One Matthew-John* Chattanooga: Zondervan Bible publishers, 2000.

Zuck, B. Roy. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002.

## **Biodata of authors**

1. Jonathan Edward Tetteh Kuwornu-Adjaottor  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Religious Studies  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology  
Associate Minister, Christ Congregation of the Presbyterian  
Church of Ghana,  
KNUST, Kumasi.
  
2. Patrick Yankyera  
M.Phil,  
Ph.D Student  
Department of Religious Studies  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology  
Associate Pastor, Rhema Assemblies of God Church, Kumasi.
  
3. Frimpong Wiafe  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Religious Studies  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology  
Associate Minister, Grace Society of The Methodist Church  
Ghana, Deduako, Kumasi.