



What They Don't  
Tell You in Church



# Truth Beyond the Facts

Many years ago I taught an adult Sunday school class on Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine. After class, an elderly woman questioned whether such a story might encourage unhealthy drinking. When I pointed out that Jesus Himself had made the wine, she replied, "Yes, but He shouldn't have!" This incident highlights something that occurs when we read Scripture through the lens of our modern perceptions and values: We overlook the intended purpose of the story.

The differences between the Fourth Gospel and the other three, the Synoptic Gospels, can challenge the way we interpret Scripture. Because of these differences, some believe John's Gospel "is profoundly untrue" in its historical reliability. Others view the dissonance differently. Early church father Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 155-220) wrote, "But John, last of all, conscious that the outward facts had been set forth in the Gospels, was urged on by his disciples, and divinely moved by the Spirit, to compose a spiritual Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

Each of these perspectives weighs the relationship between truth and fact (albeit in very different ways). Although facts are necessary to the truth, truth extends far beyond mere historical data. Each Gospel writer gives us the story of Jesus while emphasizing a particular facet of that story. John does so with remarkable artistry. He doesn't present us with a photograph or documentary of Jesus'

life, but with a verbal painting. He uses imagery and associations to communicate Jesus' role as the Messiah. To better understand John's approach, let's consider the first of Jesus' signs: the transformation of water into wine, found in John 2:1-11.

## Beyond the Facts

In the story of the wedding at Cana, John presents Jesus' actions not only as a miracle, but also as a sign that points to who He is. John uses imagery from ancient Jewish traditions to communicate Jesus' messianic role. Throughout Scripture, two images in particular symbolize the extravagant joy of the messianic age: the wedding banquet (Isa 54:5; 61:10; Jer 33:10-11; Rev 19:6-9) and abundance of wine (Jer 31:12-14; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13; Luke 22:18). These images are associated with God's righting of all wrongs and with death being no more—and John applies the them to the work of Jesus.

Set against the backdrop of the apocryphal book of *2 Baruch*, the imagery of abundant wine preserves a part of Jewish tradition that John and his original readers likely knew: "The earth also shall yield its fruit ten thousand times, and on each grapevine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch shall produce a thousand clusters, and each cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and each grape will produce a cor of wine" (29:5). (A cor measured about 120 gallons—close to the same amount Jesus produced at the wedding.) According to the Jewish tradition described in *2 Baruch*, 120 gallons represents the yield of just one grape in the great abundance of the messianic age. By drawing on this symbolism, John reveals that Jesus brings the dawn of the age of deliverance for God's people.

## Meaningful Associations

Biblical writers make associations to communicate ideas, often by repeating words or phrases. By making these connections we can glean insights beyond the events of the story.

John uses this literary device in his account of the miracle at Cana. He begins by telling us that the miracle happens "on the third day" (John 2:1). We might easily interpret this as factual—John is merely telling us how much time has elapsed since the last event in the story. But read within the context of the Old Testament, we discover

something else. A word search reveals that "on the third day" is a traditional phrase referring to deliverance (compare Hos 6:2; Esth 5:1; Matt 12:40). John uses this detail to mark the miracle as a story about deliverance and to point to Jesus as the deliverer.

Another phrase John uses in this passage might seem like a minor detail. Jesus acknowledges His mother by addressing her as "woman" when she tells Him that the host has run out of wine (John 2:4). Jesus addresses Mary this way only one other time in John's Gospel—in John 19:26,

when He is dying on the cross and pouring out His blood, the wine of the new covenant (see Mark 14:23-24). By including Jesus' address to Mary in both of these accounts, John invites us to anticipate the significance of the cross through the changing of water into wine. Jesus' first miracle of deliverance foreshadows the greater act of deliverance that will follow.

#### Finding the Right Depth

The richness of John's verbal artistry has led many interpreters to conclude that his Gospel is shallow enough for a baby to

wade in and deep enough for an elephant to swim in. When I read John after completing an organic chemistry course in college, I was struck by Jesus' ability as Creator to add carbon atoms to H<sub>2</sub>O. But the emphasis of John's Gospel goes far beyond physical or historical facts. When we read the story in light of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition of the first century, it reveals Jesus ushering in the long-awaited messianic age. Jesus' miracle points to the significance of the cross, where the bridegroom pours out the wine that seals the new covenant and delivers God's people from sin and death.



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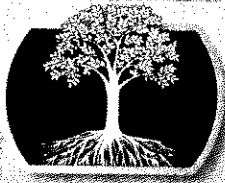
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