

Hearing Different Voices

CONTEXT

When we hear someone expounding Plato, we are actually hearing a medley of voices: Plato, his ancient and modern commentators, and the speaker himself. None of these voices should be discarded without a hearing, but we must be careful not to mistake one for another.

Many of the world's religions have sacred scriptures. Some, like Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* and Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon* were written for communities where silent reading of machine-printed texts was the norm. Others, like the Jewish and Christian Bibles and the Qur'an, were written for communities where, on the other hand, vocal recitation of hand-written texts was the rule. The experience of reading a printed text, with all the apparatus of titles, numbering, cross-references, and footnotes, is very different from the experience of hearing a sacred story recited in a living voice. The living voice provides a *linear* experience, demanding a response to the story-as-it-unfolds. A printed text provides entry into a web, in which the medley of voices may be more easily discerned, inviting a response to the-way-things-connect, in which the story may become atomised, with each fragment valued for how it connects to other things.

On 14 January 2007, the Right Reverend Richard Randerson, Dean of the Anglican Cathedral of Wellington, gave a sermon on the story of the Wedding at Cana.¹ This article reflects on two paragraphs from that sermon.

FROM THE DEAN'S SERMON:

It is in this way that we understand the story from today's Gospel (John 2:1-11) about how Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. The wine at a wedding had run out, and Jesus' mother reports this to Jesus. There were six stone water jars standing by, used for Jewish rites of purification. Jesus instructs the servants to fill them with water and to take them to the wedding steward. The steward draws from the jars and finds wine of the highest quality, in super-abundance with about 150 gallons of supply, and he comments that it is unusual for the best wine to be kept until last.

Now you can have a great debate about how Jesus could turn water into wine, and you might decide it is quite impossible and write the whole story off, and Christian faith with it. Or you might decide Jesus clearly had some magic powers and regard him in consequence as a magician. But a magician falls a long way short of a messiah. Or you might decide that the water-to-wine dimensions of the story are not important in a literal way, but are highly significant for their symbolism. And this, of course, is precisely what John the Gospel-writer wants us to understand. The symbolism of the story is incredibly rich:

Jesus himself is referred to in several places in the Gospels as the Bridegroom come to save his people and here he is incognito at another wedding as the ultimate bridegroom-in-waiting.

The super-abundance of wine symbolises the rich and overflowing nature of God's love.

One might see a reference to the Eucharist, symbolising Jesus' blood which is to be poured out on the Cross, and which will be life-giving in its consequences for all who believe.

We see as a central meaning that the old Jewish rites of purification, and indeed the whole Jewish dispensation, will be superseded by a new dispensation of God revealed and achieved through the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus

The water-to-wine event is described by John not as a miracle but a sign, something that points to a truth beyond itself, namely the saving and transforming power of God in Christ

The consequence of the sign is that Jesus' glory is seen, and his disciples believe in him.

WHOSE SYMBOLISM?

This is familiar fare, and on a sleepy Sunday such a sermon would slide smoothly in one ear and out the other without catching our notice. It is nice soothing religious talk. But when we listen carefully, it sounds odder and odder. Let's start with the interpretations. Are they grounded in the story, or are they imposed on the text?

JESUS AS THE BRIDEGROOM

If you encounter this text as story, so that you don't know what is coming next, Jesus' statement, "What business is it of ours? My time has not come," sounds like "It's not *my* wedding." It does not seem likely that those who heard him at the time would have expected any wider reference. As it wasn't his wedding, neither was it his responsibility to provide the wine. As you hear this story, indeed, as you hear the whole Gospel story to this point, there is nothing to suggest the relevance of the concept "bridegroom" to Jesus. In each of the Synoptics, Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom twice, but John has that image only once, and then on the lips of John the Baptist, not Jesus. This difference in speaker means that the Jesus/bridegroom image is *least* prominent in John. It is an important way to understand Jesus, but it is not a good way to understand John. We are told that "Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding" (John 2:2, NIV). He was not there incognito. Some of his disciples recognised him as Messiah, but as yet, nobody anywhere knew fully what that really meant, so there is no sense in which he was any more "incognito" at Cana than he had been previously at his baptism by John the Baptist.

THE SUPERABUNDANCE OF WINE...SYMBOLISES GOD'S LOVE

Before we can decide what the superabundance of the wine symbolises, should we not first enquire whether the wine was superabundant? We don't know how many people were present, but one would expect a large fraction of the village to be there. Khirbet Cana seems to have been populous for its time. So there could have been a hundred people or more, and the festivities "might go on for a week" (NIV Study Bible). We know that the six jars could hold between 450 and 700 litres, and they were filled. So that's four to seven litres per person. We don't know quite how long the celebration had left to run: maybe two to four days. So we are probably talking about one to three and a half litres of fairly weak wine per person per day, in a hot climate. It's adequate, but to call it "superabundant" is an exaggeration. This is important, because an adequate amount of wine makes a very poor symbol for "overflowing...love." It sounds more like the careful provision of a parent who wants his teenagers to have a good time at their party but not to get stinking drunk: prudent love.

How much water might one need to undertake ritual washing? It's hard to know, but I discovered that I can wash my hands to the wrist with under half a litre of water. Half a litre of wine per meal is hardly superabundant.

REFERENCE TO THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist is the central Christian ritual. It has two essential elements: the bread and the wine. The only verbal or thematic link between this story and the story of the Last Supper is the word "wine." The bread is entirely missing from this story, and the people who receive the wine are mostly not followers of Jesus. It would not be plausible to interpret this story as referring to the Eucharist if that were not a traditional interpretation.

There are two symbols we might call "life-giving" in the early chapters of John. They are bread and water, not wine. John talks a lot about food and drink. Before the 20th century, people were obsessed with where the next meal was coming from in a way that a generation with full supermarkets finds hard to imagine. John divides times by religious feasts. John has a lot of food and drink stories, and this is the first of them. The Last Supper is also a food and drink story, but there's nothing here that points to it particularly.

THE OLD JEWISH RITES...WILL BE SUPERSEDED

Randerson sees supersession as "a central meaning." The idea that Judaism has been superseded ("set aside as useless or obsolete" – OED) by Christianity has a long history in Christian thought. Since the Jews refuse to go away or abandon their practices, the consequences have been appalling. The Catholic Church, as a response to the painful and horrifying lesson of the Holocaust, has explicitly stated that "God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or the calls He issues" (*Nostra Aetate*). Paul spoke of the Gentiles as being grafted into the Jewish "olive tree," not as replacing it. A decent hope that he was right and supersession false doesn't mean that it is false, but it does mean that we need exceptionally strong evidence to support any claim that the Bible teaches it.

The Anglican Church recognises two great sacraments ordained by Jesus. The Eucharist is one. Baptism is the other. Baptism is very closely linked, historically and by symbolism, to Jewish ritual bathing, especially of converts. The chapter of John preceding our story is about John the Baptist engaged in just such a practice. Far from superseding it, Jesus participates in it, according to John. So we are not expecting a supersession story so soon after.

Mark 7:1–14 does appear to say that the washing before meals is obsolete. But John speaks with his own voice, not Mark's. A reader can skip forward to John 13, where the story of the Last Supper has Jesus washing his friends' feet. Again, washing seems to continue. A listener can't do that, but a listener would notice that the water could not have been changed to wine if there had been no water. A miracle that could not have taken place if a ritual had not been followed is a poor sign that the ritual is to be superseded. Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century introduced the *lavabo*, where the priest washes his hands before consecrating the bread and wine. That practice continues to this day in the Catholic Church and in High Church Anglican practice. A Baptist might find it plausible that hand washing was done away with, but should an Anglican find it so?

NOT A MIRACLE BUT A SIGN

John calls the changing of the water into wine a "sign" rather than a miracle. True, but he also calls the healing of the royal official's son, the feeding of the 5,000, the healing of the man born blind, and all the other miracles "signs." *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* glosses *semeion* as "sign, prodigy, portent...of miracles and wonders by which God authenticates the men sent by him, or by which men prove that the cause they are pleading is God's."² In short, John calls the changing of the water into wine by the same word that he uses for all the other things we would call miracles. He is certainly saying that these events are a special kind of indication or token of what/who Jesus is, but he is as certainly not denying that they are miracles. In the ordinary everyday sense, it is simply untrue that "the... event is described by John not as a miracle."

THE CONSEQUENCE...IS THAT JESUS'...DISCIPLES BELIEVE IN HIM

Except for the word "consequence," this is a verbatim quote from the passage in the sermon and it isn't symbolism at all. In summary, "the symbolism of this story is incredibly rich" but, good as it may be, it is Randerson's symbolism, not John's.

NOT HEARING

There are two striking features of the story which Randerson did not mention in this particular sermon. Both of them are interesting because typical Protestant religious experience trains us not to hear them.

The first is the prominence of Jesus' mother. In contrast to the other Gospel writers, John mentions Mary on only two occasions: the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the end. The story as John told it has the following structure: (a) a woman asks Jesus for a miracle on behalf of someone else, (b) Jesus refuses, in terms that seem to us oddly ungracious, (c) the

woman says something subtle, (d) as a result, Jesus performs the miracle. Can we seriously believe that a first-century writer might have meant that structure? Yes: Matthew and Mark both have another story with exactly the same structure. In an Anglican service, the Gospel reading comes shortly before the sermon. After hearing John's delegated voice, there is no time for reflection before hearing the Dean's voice which, in retelling the story, erases Mary's voice and with it this structure. The Catholic veneration of Our Lady knows few bounds. One well-known Catholic sociologist and priest has gone so far as to state in print that "Mary is a goddess," though that was probably the sociologist making an observation rather than the priest teaching doctrine. Protestant revulsion against this has led us to practically write Mary out of the Gospels, which is unfair to her and a serious loss to us.

The second is the joke. There's a special religious way to read the Bible that fails to see any of its jokes. Translation changes the voice from ordinary speech with puns and exaggeration and mild jokes into a special "religious" dialect that makes it hard to hear the tone. What a lot we miss! Some have argued that humour had an important part in early Christianity.³ Whatever else it is, the book of Jonah is splendid satire. The Gospel of John even ends with what might be considered a quip. The 1611 translation, still used in some churches, reads:

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I supposed that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written."

Biblical style often uses puns.

Randerson reached for remote symbolism, but the surface of the story says plainly that Jesus was no wowser and that God has a pleasant sense of humour. What we have here is pretty much the opposite of a practical joke, and it's all the funnier for that.

HOW WAS JOHN SPEAKING?

So far we have seen an approach to drawing lessons from a Bible story which doesn't stay close to the story but seizes on key words and associatively links them to things believed for other reasons. This kind of symbolic reading of the text has ancient and honourable precedent in the Church, but it seems rather odd in the sermon of a 21st-century cleric. But when we read what Randerson wrote, we notice something even odder. He said:

Or you might decide that the water-to-wine dimensions of the story are not important in a literal way, but are highly significant for their symbolism. And this, of course, is precisely what John the Gospel-writer wants us to understand.

The obvious question is, "How can Randerson know what John wants us to understand?" One answer is to ask, "What did people living in the same world and speaking the same language as John think he wanted us to understand?" It doesn't take much acquaintance with the Ante-Nicene and Apostolic Fathers to find out that they took such stories symbolically and literally. It seems highly implausible that John's near contemporaries should have radically misunderstood his intent, so that it takes an American-trained 21st-century Anglican to find out what he really had in mind. Another way is to ask whether "the facts don't matter, only the symbolism" is a concept that John is likely to have accepted. The second-to-last verse of John's

Gospel makes that rather unlikely. This sermon appears to be based on the assumption that we can learn true things from a false story. Others think that if Jesus didn't literally turn water into wine we learn nothing from this story except maybe something about Greek language and style in the 1st century. For example, David Weber has written a series of science fiction stories about one Honor Harrington of the Star Kingdom of Manticore. They are really excellent stories, and if you like military science fiction, nobody does it better. However, do we learn anything about war or naval strategy or honour or politics from these stories? No: at the most we learn David Weber's opinions about war and naval strategy and honour and politics, and only by reading non-fiction statements by David Weber can we reliably tell what are his real opinions and what is adopted for the sake of the story. Another way to know this would be to find explicit statements or clues left by the writer. John's world was not innocent of fiction, even of religious fiction, such as Tobit and *The History of the Rechabites*. Our Bibles contain the Revelation of St John (presumably another John), which is so full of symbolism that most of us don't really know what it means.

The History of the Rechabites is openly and obviously fiction (a palm tree stretching across an ocean indeed!) and the Apocalypse is openly and obviously symbolic. Surely a writer who, intending to provide symbolism, writes in such a way as to be mistakenly read literally by his near contemporaries, is a bad writer. John doesn't *sound* like a bad writer. Here he tells a story in plain language in a realistic, even earthy, setting. He doesn't provide the slightest hint that anything in this story should be taken symbolically at all. He does offer some interpretation: this was a sign, it revealed Jesus' glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. But how could something that didn't happen possibly reveal anyone's glory? If it wasn't the literal events they were present at that impressed the disciples, what was it? Could it possibly have been the symbolism of something that hadn't happened for them to witness and they hadn't read because it wouldn't be written until decades later?

Hardly. We know what symbolic language sounds like. It sounds like the Apocalypse. It sounds like 1 Enoch. It sounds like Ezekiel. It sounds, in John's mouth, like John chapter 1. It doesn't sound like this. So neither the style nor any statements or hints by the author give us any reason to suppose that John meant us to see the literal water-to-wine part as unimportant. There is a fairly obvious symbolic lesson that doesn't move far from the story. There is a 20th-century song, "God and Man at Table are Sat Down." One theme of Second Temple Judaism is the Messianic feast. We may be intended to see the Wedding at Cana as a foretaste of the Messianic feast, and the explicit statement "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41) in the previous chapter may be intended, amongst other things, to set up that link. But this only works if the event really happened. So we could spin more symbolic webs: the Messianic feast, the kindly joke, the meanings of Our Lady. The symbolism might be incredibly rich, but it wouldn't be John's symbolism.

I love the Discworld stories by Terry Pratchett. As many as there are, there are never enough to satisfy me. I have tried, and failed, to write another to supply the want. In the same way, if you love the Bible, there is never enough Bible to satisfy you. It is natural to turn to symbolism as a way of stretching a small amount of Bible into a lot of ideas. Indeed, using our imaginations in this way may well be something we should all do more of. But any ideas we come across

this way should be tested, and we should by no means mistake our symbolic interpretations imposed on a story (even ones that happen to be true) for the author's intentions, any more than we should suppose that the author's intentions exhaust the meanings of the text.

- 1 Available from the cathedral's website at http://cathedral.wellington.net.nz/index.php/Is_the_Dean as last accessed on 20 October 2007.
- 2 J Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).
- 3 See <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/14569.htm> as last accessed on 20 October 2007.

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