

Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel

Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John

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The Servants / Steward at Cana: The "Whispering Wizard's" Wine-Bearers

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"Many of the views embodied in the narrative are expressed through the characters, and more specifically, through their speech and fate."¹

These words of Shimon Bar-Efrat are particularly apt when considering the Gospel of John. This narrative has an explicit ideological point of view,² "that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). All characters, even minor ones, participate in this narrative ideological goal. When considering the minor characters, Bar-Efrat cautions that it is "not always possible to make a clear and unequivocal distinction between a primary and a secondary character"³ since an apparently "minor" character may have a significant function. The servants, and particularly the steward, at Cana exemplify the need for such caution.

The servants fulfill a technical role by complying to a guest's request, even if it appears strange. They fill the available jars with water, and then take some to the steward (2:7-8). When the steward's judgment is given to the bridegroom, these servants, along with Jesus and his Mother, are the only ones who know the origins of this "good wine." The narrator makes no mention of the servants' response to this knowledge. The reader is not told that they came to faith or exhibited wonder, even though they obey Jesus' words as a servant might obey the words of a guest. Their role complete, they disappear into the background.⁴

The steward of the feast, though apparently only a minor character, in fact has great significance when considering the "sign" value of the miracle. By many standards of character analysis he is a "flat" character, or a "type."⁵ But

¹ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 47.

² James L. Resseguie provides a systematic study of the "point of view" in John (idem, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John* [BIS 56; Leiden: Brill, 2001]; see pp. 4-5 for "ideological point of view").

³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 86.

⁴ Cornelis Bennema describes such characters as agents, actants, or walk-ons ("A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature," *BibInt* 17 [2009]: 375-421, here 407).

⁵ Bennema considers the steward to be an agent (idem, "Theory of Character," 407); I prefer the designation "type" because he fulfills a function in the episode consistent with his title.

when this episode is read allowing the narrative to offer an implicit commentary through its symbolizing,⁶ then this character plays a major role. To appreciate the significance of his role the Johannine clues must first be explicated.

Setting

The opening verse contains crucial information for interpreting the significance of the miraculous change of water to wine, and the role of the steward. The reader is told the temporal setting, "the third day," and the social context "there was a marriage." This apparently straight-forward information, when read with an understanding of first century Jewish religious festivals, is part of the implicit ideological perspective, which is often conveyed in the deeper symbolic resonances of the text.

What seems clear and simple on the surface is never so simple for the perceptive reader because of the opacity and complexity of the gospel's sub-surface signals. Various textual features, principally the misunderstandings, irony, and symbolism, constantly lead the reader to view the story from a higher vantage point and share the judgment which the "whispering wizard" conveys.⁷

In the Cana episode, there are a number of indications that situate this marriage within the Jewish Festival of Pentecost.⁸ Francis Moloney and Birger Olsson have argued that the use of the phrase "the third day," the concluding expression that this was the first time Jesus "manifested his glory" and the words of the Mother of Jesus to the servants to "do whatever he tells you" suggest a deliberate allusion to the revelation of God's glory, on the third day at Sinai (Exod 19–24) during which the Israelites affirm, "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7).⁹ At Sinai, Moses is instructed that the people are to be consecrated and prepared "for the third day" (Exod 19:11).¹⁰ The narrative continues, "On the morning of the third

⁶ "The symbols, like the images, metaphors, motifs, and themes to which they are related, often carry the principal burden of the narrative and provide implicit commentary and directional signals for the reader" (R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 181).

⁷ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 151.

⁸ Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 39–43.

⁹ Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2:1–11 and 4:1–42* (ConBNT 6; Lund: Gleerup, 1974), 102–9; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel According to John* (SP 4; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 65–74.

¹⁰ Ruben Zimmermann notes that the expression found in Exod 19:11, "Consecrate them," was understood in later Rabbinic tradition as a formula of betrothal between God and Israel (idem, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* [WUNT 171; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004], 211). While the Rabbinic traditions are later, already in the OT Israel's covenant

day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud upon the mountain" (Exod 19:16). Following the covenant ceremony in chapter 24, Moses ascends the mountain and God's glory settles on the mountain (Exod 24:16, 17).¹¹ The juxtaposition of the revelation of God's *glory* on the *third day* and the people's faith acclamation that they will do "everything that the LORD has spoken" provides an Old Testament background for the revelation of Jesus' glory on the third day.

By New Testament times the Sinai event was linked to the annual pilgrim Festival of Weeks, which is also known as "First Fruits" and in the later Greek books as "Pentecost."¹² In the celebration of Weeks the three days of Exod 19 were prefaced by four days of remote preparation.¹³ The fourth day of this remote preparation is also the first of three days of immediate preparation according to the Exodus account. These preparations culminate therefore on "the third day," or the sixth from the beginning of the sequence. Moloney, correctly in my opinion, concludes that "[t]his time-scheme shapes the order of the events reported in John 1:19–2:12"¹⁴ and explains the introductory phrase, "on the third day."¹⁵

Day 1 (vss. 19–28) John's testimony to the Jerusalem delegation.

Day 2 (vss. 29–34) John's testimony to Jesus' baptism.

Day 3 (vss. 35–42) Two of John's disciples follow Jesus. Andrew brings Peter to Jesus.

Day 4/1 (vss. 43–51) Day 1 of the Exodus 3 days of preparation. Philip and Nathanael.

Day 5/2

Day 6/3 (2:1–12) The revelation of Jesus' glory in Cana.¹⁶

relationship with God was likened to that of a marriage, with God as Israel's bridegroom (Isa 62:5; Jer 2:2; Hos 2:16). At Cana, the social context of a wedding alludes to these covenant traditions.

¹¹ Within the LXX, the term *glory* (*doxa*) is a technical expression reserved to translate the Hebrew word *kabod*, which is associated with weightiness in the sense of a person's honor. In English, this becomes "glory." Within the LXX, the term *doxa* comes to mean the divine revelation of God's essential nature in the created world. See Robert G. Bratcher, "What does 'glory' mean in relation to Jesus? Translating *doxa* and *doxazo* in John," *BT* 42 (1991): 401–408; Ceslas Spicq, "Δόξα, Δοξάζω, Συνδοξάζω," in *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (3 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:362–79; G. von Rad and G. Kittel, "Δόξα," *TDNT* 2:238–46.

¹² Feast of the Harvest (Exod 23:16), Feast of Weeks (Deut 16:10), day of the First Fruits (Num 28:26; Exod 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:17), Pentecost (Tob 2:1; 2 Macc 12:32). See J. C. VanderKam, "Weeks, Festival of," *ABD* 6:895. The name "Feast of the harvest" may have been its original title (J. C. Rylaarsdam, "Weeks, Feast of," *IDB* 4:827).

¹³ Moloney, *John*, 50.

¹⁴ Moloney, *John*, 50.

¹⁵ I am explaining this sequence in some detail, to emphasize the covenantal link with Sinai and to argue against interpretations that suggest a seven-day creation motif in John 1:19–2:12.

¹⁶ This sequencing of days across the celebration of the Festivals is also found in the *Mekhilta* (ca. 250 c. e.) on Exod 19:10–11: "Go to the people and sanctify them today, that is, the 4th day. And tomorrow, that is, the 5th day. And they must be prepared for the third

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The Steward and the Sign of Cana

The actions and words of the steward play a critical role in bringing to the surface the "sign" value of this episode. When the steward discovers the miraculously provided wine, he goes to the bridegroom and comments, "you have kept the good wine until now" (2:10).¹⁷ His statement indicates that it was the role of the bridegroom to provide the wine, thus the steward implicitly reveals Jesus' identity as the bridegroom, since it was Jesus who provided the bountiful supply of good wine.¹⁸ Later in the Gospel, John the Baptizer will explicitly name himself as the bridegroom's friend, and in this way confirm that Jesus is the bridegroom (3:29–30).

At Cana, when the narrator comments that this was the first of his signs, the word "sign" is not simply a synonym for miracle.¹⁹ The sign of Cana points to the deeper identity of Jesus.²⁰ The episode begins by situating this event "on the third day" and concludes with the statement that this was the first time Jesus "manifested his glory." The opening and closing phrases frame the peri-

day, that is the 6th day, when the Torah was given" (see Jakob Winter and August Wünsche, *Mechiltha: Ein tannaitischer Midrasch zu Exodus* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1909], 199). A similar enumeration of days occurs in *Tg. Ps.-J. Exodus 19* leading to the statement, "on the third day, on the sixth of the month ... the Lord was revealed on Mount Sinai." For further details of this see Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God*, 41–45.

¹⁷ Without "hearing" these words, it is difficult to interpret any nuances other than a statement of fact. George R. Beasley-Murray suggests that these words may be ironical or humorous (*John* [WBC 36; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987], 35). Zimmermann considers that the steward is critical of the bridegroom, and thus indirectly criticizing Jesus (*Christologie der Bilder*, 210). Zimmermann also makes a comparison between the steward and the Mother of Jesus, as usually it would be the steward who would give orders to the servants, but in this passage Jesus' Mother gives directions to the servants.

¹⁸ For further detailed analysis of John's role see my "Witness and Friend: Symbolism associated with John the Baptizer," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes and Theology of Figurative Language* (ed. Jörg Frey et al.; WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2006), 319–32; Marie-Émile Boismard, "L'ami de l'Époux (Jo. 3:29)," in *A la rencontre de Dieu: Mémorial Albert Gelin* (ed. A. Barucq et al.; Bibliothèque de la Faculté Catholique de Théologie de Lyon 8; Le Puy: Xavier Mappus, 1961), 289–95.

¹⁹ See Frédéric Manns, "L'emploi du terme, sêmeion pour parler des miracles est un indice permettant de constater que le langage de Jean s'est enrichi d'un symbolisme présent dans tout L'Évangile" (idem, *L'Évangile de Jean à la Lumière du Judaïsme* [SBFA 33; Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1991], 111). On the significance of "signs" as a witness to divine authorization see Marie-Émile Boismard, *Moses or Jesus: An Essay in Johannine Christology* (trans. B. T. Viviano; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 55–59.

²⁰ Many commentators overlook this aspect of the "sign" at Cana and interpret this passage in various ways: the miracle indicates the change of the waters of Judaism to the good wine of Christianity (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To John* [rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995], 155); the comments of the steward proclaim the advent of the messianic era (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* [2 vols.; AB 29–29a; New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970], 1:105). Barnabas Lindars links the "third day" to the resurrection (idem, *The Gospel of John* [NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972], 124).

cope with allusions to Exod 19, as discussed above. The covenanting God of Israel whose glory was once revealed at Sinai is now present in Jesus who comes as the covenant/bridegroom providing abundant wine. The steward is the character in this episode whose words provide the clue to the reader to make this identification. Thus, while apparently a minor character, his role is critical for understanding this first Johannine sign.²¹

²¹ Zimmermann correctly identifies this scene as a "Jesuphanie" corresponding to the theophany at Sinai (*Christologie der Bilder*, 211).

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