

Notes on John 2

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In John 2 the Apostle John continues to piece together a week in the early ministry of Jesus. (See the notes at John 1:45 for *A Week at the Beginning of Jesus' Ministry*). This was the week in which Jesus was identified publicly, a time before his public preaching began. This ministry began in Galilee where Jesus spent most of his time (Isaiah 9:1). In Cana, a town not far from Nazareth, Jesus performed his first miracle. In this same chapter at Passover time, Jesus made his first trip to Jerusalem during his public ministry. (See Appendix 2A below.)

Four main things are presented in John 2:

1. Jesus turned water into wine, manifesting his glory, and his disciples believed in him (2:1-11).
2. Jesus drove the merchants and their merchandise out of the temple area (2:14-17).
3. Jesus predicted his death and resurrection: when fulfilled, this increased the disciples' faith (2:19-22).
4. Though some seeing signs believed in him, their faith was not genuine (2:23-25).

Themes that begin in John 2 but are expanded later in this Gospel:

1. His supernatural works increase. Miracles in chapters 4,5,6,9 & 11.
2. The hostility of the leadership in Jerusalem hardens in time into an official decision to murder him (5:18; 11:53). Jesus revealed that he would die at the hands of others – “destroy this temple” (2:18-22).
3. Some who “believed” did not really believe; they were still children of the devil (8:31-47).

This Gospel emphasizes that Jesus was revealed by the signs, and that opposition would result in his crucifixion. The Apostle John never stops speaking about believing or rejecting Christ. It was his constant burden.

2:1-5 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

2:1-3 This wedding in Cana was about nine miles from Nazareth. Jesus was invited. His mother had more than the usual knowledge of what was going on in serving the guests. Perhaps it was a relative's wedding. When the wine ran out, the guests did not know this, but Mary did. (She is not mentioned by name in this Gospel.) We assume Mary was a widow, since there is never any mention of Joseph after Luke 2:41-52 when Jesus was 12 years old. It is natural that she should turn to Jesus as her eldest son for help. The text does not indicate that she knew what he would do, but she did not know what to do about a very embarrassing situation.

2:4,5 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

2:4 The Lord had already been baptized by John and announced as the Messiah. he had the five disciples with him mentioned in John 1. He was about to begin a public ministry. If he performed a miracle at the request of his mother, that would cause some kind of public response, and confusion on who gives direction to his work. It was his calling to do the will of his Father. God the Father set the agenda of his work, not his mother Mary on earth. In the wedding crisis he could not be viewed as a magic man who simply did what another person (even his mother) asked. The Savior came to do more than fix peoples' temporary problems. It is very clear that Mary wanted the lack of wine solved, but v.11

shows that God had a greater purpose. In fulfilling the request, the miracle revealed the glory of God in human flesh (1:14) here on earth in a wedding in Cana. This was more than Mary expected or sought.

Jesus' response to Mary was something like, "Why are you asking this of me?" That is different from saying, "Yes, of course, I will do whatever you say." It is difficult to give a translation that shows the exact meaning of Jesus' words to his mother. It is not rude, but neither was it a simple acceptance of her request. Jesus did not always fulfill the requests of others. Sometimes he resisted and sometimes gave more opportunity for the one requesting to show faith in him, as in 4:46-50. When he said "woman" to her, we have no recording of his voice. We must not suppose a tone of contempt for a person the fifth commandment commanded him to honor. "Woman" is the same word Jesus used addressing her when he spoke to her from the cross. At that time, in filial devotion he appointed a disciple to take responsibility for his mother (19:26).

2:4 My Hour This is the first mention of his "hour". In every other place (7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1) "my hour" refers to his obedient death. With the rest of this Gospel serving as the context, we ought to accept that the same meaning is intended here. If we read it this way, we also find in good Jewish structure that in his Gospel, John speaks of that hour seven times. A little later in Jerusalem, chapter 2 speaks again of his coming death (vv.18-22). So beginning with the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world in chapter 1, the death of our Lord appears two more times in chapter 2. While in Jerusalem, meeting with Nicodemus, this theme appears yet again (3:14). John shows us that the death of Christ was central to his mission, identical to the agenda of God the Father.

2:5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

2:5 Mary and her friends faced much difficulty. She left the matter with Jesus and instructed the servants to do whatever he said. (Many devotionals have been given from that sentence!) Her orders to the servants reveal her role in the workings of the wedding feast. In that society weddings could go for a seven days!

2:6-10 Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. 9 When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."

2:6-10 The Miracle God has the power to make wine from shoelaces, but the Lord made it from water. All wine comes originally from water. In this miracle, the Lord did a supernatural work in a natural context. He speeded up the process of wine making as he bypassed the slow journey of rain in the soil entering grapes on a vine. His miracle was not weird. Turning water into wine was supernatural but not anti-natural. (I found this helpful observation in the book "Miracles" by C. S. Lewis.)

Some unusual detail is given here. It does not just say that Jesus turned water into wine, as in 4:46. John gives the number of jars, what they were made of, how much they held and what they were used for. This might be provided to emphasize the amount of wine made. Probably there was a need for wine for a few more days. Then the report is about how good the wine was. But there is a surprise here.

The stone jars were used for *Jewish rites of purification*. Jesus said to fill those jars. It appears that he told the servants to *draw* water out of those jars, but the text does not say that. The word *draw* does not mean *pour*. This word, as in 4:7,15, is used to draw water from a well with a bucket. Thus it is likely that the servants drew water from a well in order to fill the jars, but then they did not use *that* water, though obviously available. The servants then *drew* more water from a well (not poured from the jars) and took that water to the master of the feast. This then was the water that was turned to wine in a new creation. The other water remained just water for old covenant ritual.

If this interpretation is correct, it fits why John would include that the jars were used for ceremonial cleansing. It is significant that Jesus bypassed the water in those jars. Jesus would teach that worship will not be centered at the mountain in Jerusalem where the Jews worship (4:21). He will baptize with the Holy Spirit, not with water (1:33). The law and its ceremonies were given through Moses, but something beyond the character of law (namely grace and truth) came through Jesus Christ (1:17). The ceremonies and the blood of so many animals were passing away, but the reality of salvation was appearing. Skirting rituals of cleansing, the superior wine signified a new day brought in by Christ, something better than the old covenant (Hebrews 8:6). The better wine points to a better covenant. The water for purification was part of a covenant that was becoming obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

This miracle was not nearly as public as feeding the five thousand. The servants knew where the wine had come from but the master of the banquet did not. All he knew was that it was better than what had been served before, so he complained about the order in which it was served. John wanted his readers to know that what Jesus made was better, and this is typical of all that Jesus would do.

Was the Wine Jesus Made fermented? Yes it was. The Greek word for wine is the same as Paul used in Ephesians 5:18. In 2:10 the wedding master referred to wedding wine as a kind that could intoxicate. The Greek word in v.10 relates to drunkenness. The wedding master was not praising grape juice.

Some other factors are often overlooked. The Jews knew what too much wine would do, so in that day they often diluted it with water to avoid drunkenness. In our time wine often has its alcohol content increased above what natural fermentation can produce. This was not done in Bible times because the Arabs discovered distillation only after New Testament times. Thus the "strong drink" the Bible warns about is probably undiluted wine. It certainly has no reference to strong spirits like vodka and whisky, because such drinks did not exist then. Alcohol was not forbidden (Deuteronomy 14:25,26); it was regulated and the Scripture gives a number of warnings about it. Passover was in the spring; grapes left to dry would become raisins, and grape juice sitting around all through the winter would become either wine or vinegar.

Jesus did not make anyone drunk. God has created all of nature with all its potential, including the making of strong drink, but, except where a cup refers to divine wrath, God has never made anyone drunk. The Bible points to the sad moments such as the drunkenness of Noah and Lot, and warns that a man given to drink is not qualified for office in the church (1 Timothy 3:3).

2:11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

2:11 This was the first of Jesus' miracles. This fact shows that he performed none as a child. It was done in a little village far from the headquarters of the Jewish religion. God is the God of the unexpected, and he is the Lord of what is fresh and new. Later the Lord will refer to his renovation of all things by saying he *makes all things new* (Revelation 21:5). The disciples received a glimpse of the glory of Christ, and what they saw prompted them to believe. They would see much more and believe much more, but faith must begin somewhere. Maybe many at that wedding never knew what happened there, or if they

did, they learned only later. Jesus' disciples did know. Though his people as a whole would not receive him, some individuals did (1:11,12). The Apostle John constantly keeps that issue before his readers.

We often speak of Jesus' *miracles*. The Apostle John prefers to call them *signs*. A *sign* always points away from itself to a greater reality. A wedding ring *signifies* something greater, namely, the marriage covenant. Jesus' miracle signs pointed to such truth as him being the Bread of Life. So the bread he multiplied was an indication of who he is and the life he gives. Many could see only the signs and missed the realities they signified. (Note other terms used for miracles in Acts 2:22 and Hebrews 2:4.)

2:12 After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

2:12 Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, but as an adult he moved to Capernaum (Matthew 4:13). Note "after this." (See also 3:22; 7:1; & 21:1.) John uses: a) feasts (See Appendix 2A), b) the words "*after this*" or c) a new location (4:3) to show a new chapter in his Gospel. The days are not specific; a timeline is no longer being traced as in chapter 1.

2:13-16 The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. 15 And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. 16 And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

2:13-16 Driving Merchants from the Temple Jesus went *up* to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem was higher in elevation. For a Gentile not familiar with Jewish culture, calling this feast the "Passover of the Jews" made this Gospel easier to understand. Jews would simply call this "Passover" or the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Those selling in the temple were outside the main temple building but still within its outer courtyard. The leaders had permitted this to happen, and later in the Synoptics we see that it was a practice that continued. In John 2 the Lord did not explicitly condemn this on the grounds of making a profit, and it was not reported as work on the Sabbath. In John 2 the issue is not framed as dishonesty. The later temple cleansing in Mark 11:15-18 was a different occasion; there Jesus calls them robbers. In John 2 the single reason given for Jesus' reaction was that this trade was going on within the temple. The temple was his Father's house. What was permitted in other places and other times was not appropriate in the temple. (I wish Christians would take this same approach to worship services, by leaving out entertainment, and limiting what is allowed in a worship service.)

It was actually a convenience to have animals available locally for sacrifice. To bring animals a great distance would be a hardship. But to have this business activity *within the temple area* was a great distraction from approaching the Lord. The temple was not supposed to be Walmart. The sounds of animals and the chatter at the money-changing tables should have been heard elsewhere. Jesus drove all the merchants and the animals and birds out of the temple. He even overturned the tables of the money-changers. Probably coins were rolling in all directions. The temple was to be a place for prayer (Matthew 21:13). Those who owned the animals could find and sell them outside. Some had pigeons and doves. It does not say Jesus released them from cages so they could fly away. Perhaps this shows that Jesus did not

intend that they should lose their property. He wanted them to do their business elsewhere. He wanted the temple to be a place of worship.

Jesus did not seek permission from the temple authorities before he acted. When he told the merchants what to do, he spoke like someone who owned the place, ordering them to get their stuff out. He had the authority to act and speak this way. The matter of authority will come up in v.18.

Did the Old Testament Predict this Action by Christ?

The Book of Malachi ends with a prophecy of John the Baptist; Zechariah ends with a prediction of pure worship: *“There shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day”* (Zechariah 14:20,21). Jesus’ actions fit this prediction. Zechariah spoke of the final restoration that can only come with the Second Coming. What Jesus did in his first coming showed that he as Lord was moving closer to that day. Malachi 3:1-4 supports this. First John the Baptist would appear: *“Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me”* (Malachi 3:1). Then, *“the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple”* (Malachi 3:1). Malachi 3:2-4 predicts cleansing so that the worship of the Lord would again be pleasing to him. Even though what Jesus did in the temple was not a miracle, it had such significance that some scholars consider it one of the signs John gave in testimony that Jesus is the Christ. Certainly taking over the temple as his own pointed to him as the Christ, the Son of God (20:31), because it was his Father’s house that he was cleansing.

2:17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

2:17 The disciples related Psalm 69:9 to what Jesus did. This understanding probably came to them after the death and resurrection of Christ. The Psalm says, *“Zeal for God’s house has consumed me.”* They looked on it as consistent with Jesus’ commitment to God’s house and read it as a prediction, *“Zeal for your house will consume me.”* That verse may mean more than that Jesus was consumed with holy passion to cleanse the temple. To save God’s house, and make his people to be his house (Hebrews 3:6), he needed to die for them. In the place of his people, Jesus was consumed under the wrath of God. He could take that wrath; we cannot. Without his sacrifice, we could never be his treasured possession, his spiritual house, his temple (1 Peter 2:4-10; Ephesians 2:19-22). Very early in Jesus’ ministry he cleansed the material temple; later, by being consumed for us on the cross, he brought cleansing to his people so we could become living stones in his holy temple.

2:18 So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

2:18,19 The Issue of Authority Jesus acted to restore the proper use of the temple. The abuse of God’s house was not the issue it should have been in the leaders’ minds. Their question was not, “Is it proper that we have been allowing this commerce to happen here?” but, “Who authorized you to do this?” (We tend to avoid questions related to our conduct, but raise questions about what others do.)

It was reasonable for the leaders to ask by what authority Jesus put an end to trading in the temple courts. However, they did not ask if he was the Christ according to the many predictions of the Scriptures. They knew what was written in Zechariah 14:20,21 (quoted above). They must have wondered, because they expected that any prophet from God would perform miracles. They could point to Moses and Elijah as examples. But they could not point to miracles in the ministry of many prophets such as Jeremiah,

Ezekiel, Joel, or Habakkuk. Years later Paul would say, "The Jews demand signs" (1 Corinthians 1:22). When people asked Jesus for a sign, he scolded them (Matthew 12:38,39). Often those asking for a sign had seen one previously, as in John 6.

In John 2 the sign Jesus pointed to was the ultimate sign – his resurrection. (See Matthew 12.) By the resurrection God declared Christ to be his Son (Romans 1:4). It verified all the public claims Jesus had made. His prediction of rising from the dead on the third day was well publicized. He made this prediction of his resurrection at least two years before his crucifixion. His enemies remembered his words about the third day (Matthew 27:63,64).

2:19-21 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

2:19-21 The "forty-six years" refers to the time the temple was under construction. It was not finished till 63AD just seven years before the Romans destroyed it. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple," he was referring to his body. A temple is a place where God dwells, such as the church (Ephesians 2:21,22; 1 Corinthians 3:16,17) or the body of a Christian (1 Corinthians 6:19). When Jesus who was God in human flesh spoke of his body as a temple, it was a truthful claim. When Jesus spoke, he in his human flesh was the only thing on earth which was the visible manifestation of God. The leaders back then guarded the temple built with stones but were eager for the Romans to drive nails through the temple that was Jesus' body. Jesus knew they would do that. He said to them, "Destroy" – a reference to *their* activity – and he would "raise it up" – a reference to *his* activity. (See notes of John 10:17,18.) Later when he was accused of saying he would destroy the Jerusalem temple in Matthew 26:59-63, it was a false charge. They twisted his words. He had really spoken of *them* as the ones who would destroy. The Apostle John gives a number of examples where Jesus' words are misunderstood (among them 3:4; 6:52 and 11:13).

Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Jesus' resurrection was only a resurrection of his spirit, not his body. The Gospels make clear that Christ rose bodily and was not a ghost. Ghosts do not have flesh and bones, and they do not eat fish (Luke 24:37-43). Here Jesus spoke clearly of raising up *his physical body!*

2:22 When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

2:22 The disciples came to understand later. Faith is based on facts, and understanding is essential to faith, but faith does not come all at once. In 2:11 the disciples believed, but they believed more after the resurrection (2:22). Faith grows as more truth is received. I urge in teaching children that the facts should be taught to them, even though they will not understand all they hear; this is true for adults as well. Having the words and then grasping the meaning later is what happened with Jesus' disciples. This is the common experience of all believers. In the disciples' case there had been many occasions when the Lord spoke of his death. After he was crucified and risen, they put the words and events together. The other factor was that their foolish hearts were slow to accept what they had trouble believing (Luke 24:25). God is greatly glorified when by faith we receive his words as truth (4:50), and believe before we see (John 20:29; 1 Peter 1:6-9).

The Lord often emphasized that the disciples' faith should have been based on the Scriptures they already had. He took them through the Old Testament (Luke 24:27), and later this became *the chief way* that the apostles and evangelists proclaimed Christ in the Book of Acts. (See Acts 2,3,4,7,8,10,13, and more.) Surely it was how Saul argued in Acts 9:22. In the first century, Christians witnessed by the testimony of Scripture. It is still the way we should serve today.

2:23-25 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. 24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

2:23-25 A Shallow Faith and the Heart of Man This Gospel does not report what miracles Jesus did on that visit to Jerusalem; instead, it gives results. Those signs were in some way convincing, because “many believed.” To believe *in his Name* is another way to say that they believed *in him*. Often “the Name” is a way the Lord refers to himself, as in Deuteronomy 12:10-18. (See 3 John 7 where the apostle calls the Lord “the Name.”) What they believed about Christ is not stated except that it was the result of seeing signs. We are not saved by believing a piece of truth. True faith does not resist that Jesus is the Christ who must be accepted/confessed as the Lord he is. People could be vague and say that he must be someone *who comes from God* (like Nicodemus in 3:2), and still be persons who are not born from above. Many “believe” in God (James 2:19) who do not worship him as God. Truth observed in a miracle, accepted in the mind but resisted in what it implies about Christ as Lord, is not saving faith. Saving faith is not merely cognitive. (See especially John 12:42,43.)

Jesus did not commit himself to these “believers” the way he did to Nicodemus in John 3, to the Samaritan woman in John 4, and to the man blind from birth in John 9. Why did he not do this? He knew without being informed by others what was really in a man. God knows whenever a profession of faith is sincere. The heart is deceitful and wicked (Jeremiah 17:9,10). We may fool ourselves but not God. The human heart may receive the word with joy, without that word taking root (Matthew 13:20,21). Imposters deceive themselves (Hebrews 3:13). They are not those who have *firmly believed* (2 Timothy 3:12-14; James 1:22). Such men never deceived Jesus. He knew the way sin affected the human heart. *He knew what was in man!* Later in this Gospel Jesus will warn that man cannot come (6:44) and cannot hear (8:43), even though no one can be saved without hearing (5:24) and coming (6:35). In John’s Gospel the problem of the heart receives much attention, so we can understand the difficulty and depth of salvation. Some will not receive; some will (1:11,12). We believe only if we are born of God (1:13). The Apostle John follows these sober words of what was in man with a major section on the new birth in John 3. It is a shame that often these words at the end of chapter 2 are not read as the background for the visit of Nicodemus in chapter 3.

Appendix 2A

How Long Was the Public Ministry of Christ?

Only the Gospel of John records Jesus attending a series of Jewish feasts as part of his public ministry. All four Gospels mention that Jesus' crucifixion was during the Passover. Similarly, Christmas is once a year, so any story revealing what someone did for a number of different Christmases, indicates that the narrative stretches over those years. John *explicitly* mentions three Passovers during Jesus' ministry. Passover came each spring, the first feast in their year. The uncertainty about the length of Jesus' ministry is that the feast in 5:1 is not specifically identified. That is tantalizing. These are the feasts John mentions:

1. **Passover**, 2:13 in the spring
2. An unnamed feast, 5:1
3. **Passover**, 6:4 in the spring
4. Tabernacles or Booths, 7:2 in the fall
5. Dedication, 10:22 in the winter
6. **Passover**, 11:55 in the spring

From the first Passover to the second is one year, and then there would be one more year to the last one mentioned. This means that the ministry of Jesus was at least two years plus whatever time preceded that first Passover. That period involved everything prior to 2:13. Jesus also remained among his disciples for forty days after his resurrection and ascended to heaven ten days before the next feast, the Feast of Pentecost in Acts 2.

Where the record is unclear: If the feast in 5:1 is also a Passover, then there is another full year in the ministry of Christ, making it three years and a fraction. This is the traditional view, but I do not know if it is correct. Some think the feast in 5:1 is a Passover because in 4:35 Jesus indicated that the next harvest would be four months away in the next spring. If so, Jesus' words in Samaria were spoken in the late fall, and that would mean that the feast in 5:1 could be a Passover (!) in the spring of the next year. It means there would have to be another year in his ministry, because the Passover of 6:4 cannot be in the same year as any feast in 5:1. (*Passover is the first feast in any year, so any preceding feast had to be in the previous year.*) The Passover of 6:4 *was* in a later year than chapter 5. If all of this is proper reasoning, especially about what time it was in 4:35, it means that the ministry of Christ on earth was three years plus a little. For sure it was at least two years. To make it simpler – if 5:1 was a Passover, the traditional view of a three year public ministry of Jesus is solid. What matters most is that he was here and did the will of his Father. As one born under the law, he obeyed the injunction that every able-bodied male was to go up to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16). The Gospel of John gives the most evidence of this. These time factors come up because the other Gospels tell far more about Jesus' ministry in Galilee, where he spent most of his time. John has chosen to give much attention to various visits by Jesus to Jerusalem, all of which are tied to a feast in the Jewish calendar.