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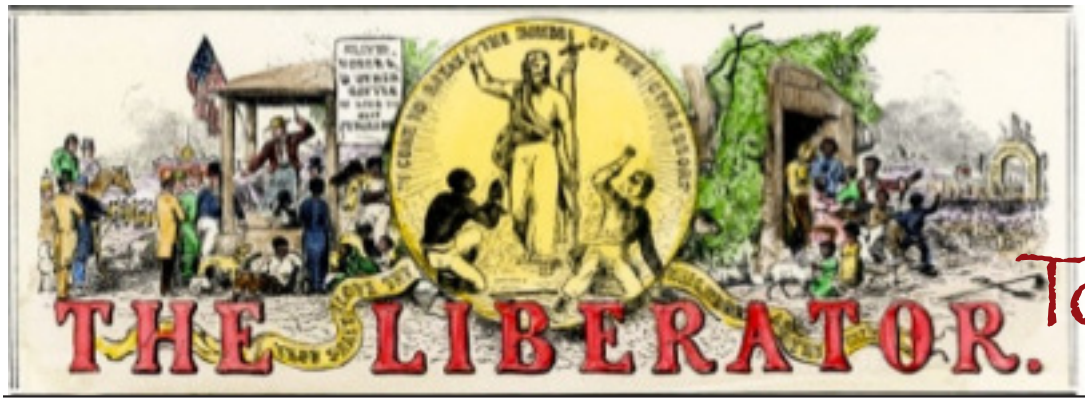

Today

GARY W. LLOYD, Editor "Our country is the world – our countrymen are mankind." L.D. BLISS, Printer

Jesus and his Miraculous Disregard

First Person: "Did you hear about Jesus's second miracle at Cana?"
Second Person: "What?! No."
First Person: "Yes, the first miracle was that Jesus turned the water into wine. The second miracle is that American Christians have turned the wine into grape juice.

Every reading of John 2:1-12 is an occasion for one of my favorite jokes, but this particular joke serves a purpose in my own reading of Scripture: it confronts the attempts that we often make to deny the richness of Jesus's story. Just how glorious is the Son of Man? Just how compassionate is he? Consider what if the six stone jars full of water had been turned into grape juice. Yes, it would have been a miraculous transformation of substance, but just barely. The same thing could have happened--at least technically--with a surreptitious packet of grape Kool Aid. Jesus, however, provoked fermentation--he breached Time itself. He evoked a particular beverage's historic role in the festive celebrations of civilization. He invoked quality, excellence, and beauty. The master of the banquet was puzzled, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

Preserving the richness of Christ's story certainly means honoring what is pointedly in the text, but there are other occasions where the same purpose is served by noticing what is pointedly *not* in the text. What did John, our inspired narrator, leave out in the story of the Miracle at Cana? What did he leave out that a modern narrator--you or me--would surely have included? And then, what difference does the omission make?

One thing that seems to be missing in John 1:1-12 is any detailed statement of the problem that Jesus has been asked to solve. All we have is the sentence: "When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine'" v. 3). It is stated so matter-of-factly--"when the wine was gone." It doesn't warrant an adverb like "suddenly the wine was gone;" nor an exclamation like "horror-of-horrors! the wine was gone." It almost seems natural: weddings serve wine, drink it and it's gone. John later claims, "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (v. 11), so there's a lot at stake here with this water and wine, being the first miracle and all, and yet there is no howling wind or crashing wave waiting to be stilled, no congenital blindness waiting to be healed, no body rendered putrid in the grave to be resurrected. Even if we moderns were storytellers, we would clamor for a few more expository details--"set the scene, John!"--but ours is not a storytelling age; we are report writers. We want a problem analysis. We want a prospectus. We want to be able to evaluate whether this is a worthy debut of the incarnate Almighty. Even if we don't know for sure, a suitable prospectus would at least speculate under the sub-heading "Probable Causes." Why might the wine have run out?

1. An unavoidable accident: The vintner's cart may have broken a wheel and toppled in the road, the wine containers crushed under the weight of the cart, the wine pouring out into the dust.

2. Poor planning by hosts: The master of the banquet may have miscalculated the number of adult guests, the liter of wine consumed per capita, or the efficiency of the supply chain from the vineyard.

3. Irresponsibility of the guests: A significant portion of the guests may have failed to RSVP. Another group may have been uninvited party crashers.

4. Stinginess on the part of the hosts: The host family may

have budgeted only the bare minimum on food and drink.

5. Overindulgence and drunkenness of the guests: Surely this is what the master of the banquet meant by "when the guests have had too much to drink. . . !" These guests may have been a particularly sodden and sloshed bunch.

Notice how much of our problem analysis has to do with assigning blame. The master of the banquet is a loser. The guests are irresponsible. The hosts are stingy. Everyone is drunk. We know that a story of Jesus will likely involve grace. (John warned us as much in Chapter 1.) Jesus solves problems that he didn't create and responds to messes for which he was not responsible. Nonetheless, a thorough report, one would think, should at least assign blame first. In our analysis of modern problems of racism, poverty, militarism, or ecological destruction we like to assign blame: is it a breach of personal responsibility or a transgression of social justice? (See The Liberator Today 2/1/15 and 2/9/15.) Yet in John's narration of the Miracle at Cana we get nothing.

Why did John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, make this omission? To ask that question, of course, is also to speculate, but this is speculation of a different variety. In the first case-- "what happened to the wine?"-- we are trying to dredge up an unknown fact and make it known, but now we are trying to come to grips with the implications of a known fact, namely we *know* that John did not tell us what happened to the wine. Why? What does this omission mean? What might the Holy Spirit be trying to teach us by this? We are seeking wisdom.

Mary says to her son, "They have no more wine." Jesus replies, "Woman, why do you involve me?" (vs. 3,4). If we had sufficiently established blame and responsibility, then it would be [too] easy to read Jesus's response in a particular way, as a critical response with which we are very familiar. *Poor planning?* That's his problem not mine. *Irresponsibility?* Yeah, people are jerks. *Stinginess?* How will they ever learn if we rescue them from natural consequences? *Drunkenness?* They've made their vomit; let them lie in it. Of course, we read on, and see that Jesus does respond to a situation for which he was not responsible. He gives them more wine. Nonetheless, this doesn't read like an anecdote about God's grace in and through Jesus Christ, because after all, we don't know whether any failure, irresponsibility, stinginess, or drunkenness were even involved. And Jesus doesn't respond to Mary with the words "Why should I get involved [with a mess like this]?" His question to Mary is worded "Why do you involve me?" (Put the emphasis on the word "me," not on the interrogative "why.") He follows up with the comment "My hour has not yet come." This is not the story of Jesus turning water into wine. This is not a story of Jesus solving a problem. This is a story about Jesus, period. A story about Jesus, the Great *A Priori*. The richness in the stories about Jesus, are not in the stories, but in Jesus himself. Jesus does not require a beginning, a middle, and an end; an exposition, a crisis, a denouement; a plot line. He supplies the richness in his own person, or what John will later call "glory" (v. 11.)

This requires some explanation, I know.

What if no problems existed in the universe? Would Jesus still be "the solution?" Was he the Answer before any questions were asked? We know according to Romans 5:20 that "where sin increased, grace increased all the more," but does this automatically mean that if sin was reduced to zero, that grace too would cease to exist, or have no reason to exist? Yahweh revealed his glory to Moses when he passed by, proclaiming his name: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). Is God eternally and *a priori* "Lord," or can a person only be Lord if are there also subjects? (In other words, is God's eternal Lordship dependent on our existence or obedience?) Is God compassionate in the absence of human need about which to be compassionate? Does he require sinfulness in order to lay claim to being gracious? Can "slowness to anger" be rightfully one of his attributes, or does he have to be defined by our provocation? God is ineffable, unfathomable. We finite creatures--whether modern report reporters or ancient storytellers--naturally rebel against such a set-up. Some of us insist on defining the ineffable in our likeness, and so the Greeks, for example, offered us a fallible, irresponsible, stingy, and drunk pantheon. Others insist on defining the undefinable by contrast, patiently explaining to us that "a diamond shines more brilliantly when laid against a background of black velvet." We fail to understand that the velvet does not act on the diamond a wit, and certainly does nothing to add to its essence. Diamonds are brilliant because diamonds are brilliant.

When John summarizes what transpired at the wedding, he writes, "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." John doesn't call the turning of water into wine a "miracle," and he certainly doesn't call it a "solution to a problem." He calls it a "sign." To purposefully use the passive tense that this plot line deserves: What happened at the wedding? Jesus was pointed at, nothing more than that, and CERTAINLY NOTHING LESS THAN THAT! Occasionally when I am exhorted to "give glory to God" through my thanksgiving, or "ascribe glory to God" through my singing and worship, I fall into an unfortunate imagery in my mind. I am tempted to think of God's glory as a balloon with a slow leak and that my worship is the tire pump which regularly--at least once a week--re-inflates it. Instead: "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen." He is Alpha and Omega, which means all his stories begin "Once before there was a time. . ."

-A.O.B.