

CFM7 John 2-4, “Ye Must be Born Again” (Or, an exercise in Johannine Irony)
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These three chapters present some classic Johannine irony through the use of contrasting characters and situations. In each case, John carefully explores the subject to delve into the spiritual implications of the events. A lot of Biblical commentators focus on this section of chapters 2-12 as “the signs” and divide it up into “Seven Signs” by picking out the seven miracles they consider to be most consequential. But, this really misses John’s theological intent in the text. John isn’t presenting miracles to convince people Jesus is the Christ, he is presenting situations with weighty gospel themes so the believers can get a better understating of who Jesus was and what he was trying to accomplish.

John 2

This chapter has two contrasting events at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, both of which have strong messianic overtones. These two sections serve to foreshadow Jesus’ ministry.

- v. 1-12 Water to wine at the Wedding
- v. 13-25 Cleaning out the Temple at Passover

In the first section (v. 1-12), Jesus miraculously provides an abundance of wine at a wedding feast. Jesus is relaxed and accommodating and everything turns out favorably, even if most people at the wedding are ignorant of the miracle.

This contrasts with the second section (v. 13-25), which presents an exceptionally angry and confrontational Jesus who on Passover quite literally beats down the people polluting his Father’s (His own) Temple.

The two sections use water symbols in opposite ways. In the first section, the water symbolism is clear, as Jesus miraculously turns it to wine, which has Messianic overtones.

Amos 9:13-14

13 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. 14 And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them.

Hosea 14:7

4 I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. 5 I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as

Lebanon. 6 His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. 7 They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon.

Isaiah 25:6

6 And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.

Isaiah 55:1-3

1 Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. 3 Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.

Jeremiah 31:12

12 Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all.

In these various OT passages the abundance of wine is a symbol of covenant blessings (cf. Lev. 26:4-5, Deut. 28:11). When the people repent and return to the Lord, He blesses them. In Isa. 55:3 the messianic connection is made explicit.

The water symbolism in the second section of text is a little more obscure. First, the setting is the ingathering to the Passover feast at the Temple at Jerusalem. The clear water symbolism of the Passover is the parting of the Red Sea and the subsequent destruction of the rebellious Egyptians by drowning (cf. Exod. 14). In addition to this, in v. 17, John explicitly references Ps. 69:9, drawing on the water/flood symbolism.

Psalm 69

1 Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. 2 I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. 3 I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God. 4 They that hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of mine head: they that would destroy me, being mine enemies

wrongfully, are mighty: then I restored that which I took not away.

9 For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.

14 Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink: let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters. 15 Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. 16 Hear me, O LORD; for thy lovingkindness is good: turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies. 17 And hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble: hear me speedily. 18 Draw nigh unto my soul, and redeem it: deliver me because of mine enemies.

John is invoking imagery of drowning, devastating floods, hostility and anger.

Both of these presentations play on the symbolism of water and what it can represent. Water can either be turned into wine for those who repent and come to the marriage supper of the Messiah, or the water is a raging torrent of the Lord's anger and justice against His enemies.

John uses this imagery at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to foreshadow it's impact on Israel. Those who accept Jesus will drink the Messianic wine and the Lord's wedding feast. Those who reject Jesus will be whipped and kicked out of the Lord's presence.

We can see the contrasts within the text as follows:

| | <u>Wedding</u> | <u>Passover Temple</u> |
|--------|--|---|
| Jesus | Relaxed, generous | Angry, hostile |
| People | Disciples see miracle, Guests nonplussed but happy | Visitors and disciples spared, Sellers and religious leaders questioning, argumentative, unrepentant, implied enemies |
| Symbol | Water to wine at wedding, | Flooding and destruction on enemies at Temple |

Johannine Irony: The corrupt Temple guards and Levites question Jesus' authority. At Passover, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, which was entirely justified, presents him as making enemies of the corrupt Jewish leaders, which will result in his death in 3 years. The symbolism of the Passover is the Lord delivering Israel from the Egyptians. But, here, Jesus is sealing his own fate at the hands of his own people, during Passover, because he reprimands their corruption.

“Woman, what have I to do with thee?”

Verse 4 has a somewhat obscure Semitism that is poorly translated in most English versions of the Bible. The most literal translation would be something like “Woman, what to me

and to you?” Most English translations render it something that reads like Jesus is being rude to his mother. But, that is not what is happening with this Semitism. The phrase is used in different contexts, sometimes hostile (cf. Judges 11:12, 2 Chron. 35:21, 1 Kings 17:18), sometimes noncommittal or detached (cf. 2 Kings 3:13, Hosea 14:8), and sometimes solicitous (cf. Joshua 15:18, 2 Sam. 14:5, 1 Kings 1:16, Esther 5:3). Thus, the meaning on the phrase is always context dependent.

In this appearance, there is nothing in the context to suggest Jesus is being hostile or detached to his mother. Rather, he is asking her what she wants him to do because he is presently idle. Compare Mark 5:7 for another appearance of this Hebraism in the NT in a hostile context. Smith’s rendering in the IV/JST on this verse captures the meaning of the Semitism in context, it’s a correct paraphrase as opposed to an obtuse literal translation.

John 3

This chapter presents three characters revolving around a single theme of light. Two of the characters are compared and contrasted with the third, namely Jesus Christ in the center. The characters of Nicodemus and John Baptist are presented as opposites.

- v. 1-10 Nicodemus, who is in the dark
- v. 11-22 Jesus, the Light, discusses the light and darkness
- v. 23-36 John Baptist, who is in the light

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and confesses they know Jesus is man of God, given his miracles. Note Nicodemus comes by night, to avoid being seen, confesses “they know” not “I know” to remain personally non-committal, and calls him “rabbi” not “messiah”. Nicodemus is likely coming to Jesus as a representative of the Sanhedrin, wanting something from him. We don’t know exactly what they want, but it is clear they are trying to stir up trouble by the time they send people to question John in v. 25-26.

Jesus rejects his compliments and encourages him to be spiritual and not physical. Nicodemus either doesn’t get it, or is playing dumb. Jesus continues to teach him, explaining that the Messiah is there for the expiation of sins, so God may grant the believers eternal life. Jesus is explicitly rejecting the idea of a physical messiah. Jesus then tells Nicodemus those who accept him are in the light, but those who do not are in the darkness because they love sin.

The text then transitions to a confrontation between the Jews and John Baptist, where John rejects their attempts to cause jealousy and bears down in pure public testimony that Jesus is the Messiah.

Note John's deliberate contrasts between the two characters:

Nicodemus

John Baptist

Ruler among Jews (v. 1)

Nazarite cast into prison (v. 24)

| | |
|---|--|
| At night, in private (v. 2) | During day in public (v. 23) |
| Not committing to Christ, gospel, or the doctrine (v. 2-10) | Committed to Christ, the gospel, and the doctrine (v. 28-36) |
| Asks questions (v. 4, 9) | Answers questions (v. 26) |
| Physical, worldly | Spiritual, heavenly |

Johannine Irony: John Baptist is the one who is right, Nicodemus is the one who is wrong.

“born again”

The idea of being spiritually born again is not a NT novelty, the idea is present in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Deut. 10:16, Deut. 30:6, Isa. 44:3, Isa. 53:8-10, Isa. 66:7, Jer. 4:4, Jer. 24:7, Ezek. 18:31. While the passages cited above call for a new heart as opposed to a new birth, the passage in Isa. 53 clearly presents a “born again” theme where the suffering Messiah brings about restored Israel by suffering for their sins and then sees a new generation and new seed. Nicodemus is certainly familiar with the text of Isa. 53, but he is either not understanding the spiritual implications of the passage or is being deliberately evasive. It is difficult to discern which, but I tend to favor the latter, given his clear credentials.

John 4

This chapter gives us the woman at the well contrasted with the prominent Jewish royal official. The woman at the well is lonely and an outcast, shamed because of her status. Yet, she is teachable and believes Jesus, who is willing to spend time with her. The Jewish royal official is primarily interested in seeing a sign, even with his own son ailing. Jesus reprimands his motivation and denies him seeing the miracle and refuses his company. But, when the man corrects himself, Jesus mercifully heals the son.

The conversation with the woman shows how easily the Samaritan’s believe in Jesus and how they lack the cultural baggage the Jews had with respect to the Messiah. This chapter also foreshadows the later ministry to the Gentiles, as the Samaritans weren’t really pure Israelites.

The final section of text (v. 46-54) contrasts the Jews with the Samaritans and Jesus’ willingness to interact with them. Where Jesus spends time with the Samaritan woman and people in the village, he rejects the Jewish royal official’s approach, sending him on his way.

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| <u>v. 1-43</u> | <u>v. 46-54</u> |
| Woman | Man |
| Outcast, poor | Nobility, wealthy |

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Samaritan | Jewish |
| Sassy, genuinely humble | Puts own interests above son, has to be humbled |
| Asks for water | Asks for miraculous healing |
| Convinced by words | Convinced by sign |
| Jesus verbose | Jesus terse |
| Jesus spends two days | Jesus rejects invitation, dismisses |

Interestingly, both parties end up believing, despite Jesus handling them much differently. The text suggests Jesus knows what people need to believe and tailors his response to what they need to get a favorable outcome. In neither case does Jesus give them what they ask for (e.g., the woman sarcastically asks for flowing water so she doesn't have to haul water anymore, the man asks for Jesus to come to his house so his son to be healed) not giving them what they ask for, but what they need.

Johannine Irony: Samaritans much more accepting of Jesus than the Jews.