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Why does Jesus turn water into wine? Is he announcing the fading of the Law? No, rather he is announcing the new Exodus and his identity as Moses' successor.

BY DR. JIM SIBLEY

When I was a new resident of Israel trying to learn Hebrew, my language teacher, a secular Jewish woman, asked one day, "I have a question about Jesus. You would think his first miracle would be full of significance. If it really happened, turning water to wine would definitely be a miracle, but I don't understand what the significance is." That's a good question! John does specifically emphasize the fact that this was Jesus' first miracle (John 2:11). What is its significance?

Many explain the meaning of this miracle in terms of Christian superiority. Since the water from stone pots was used in the purification rites (Lev 11:32), they claim the water pots stand for the Mosaic Law that was being replaced by Jesus. Likewise, others see the pots as symbolic of Judaism that is being replaced with Christianity. For example, George Beasley-Murray says, "Most writers acknowledge that in the Johannine narrative there is an implicit contrast between water used for Jewish purificatory rites and the wine given by Jesus; the former is characteristic of the old order, the latter of the new." [1]

While it is certainly true that Jesus offers a salvation the Law could not offer, this sign miracle is begging for a better explanation. Two points are particularly important. In the first place, the signs in the Gospel of John were for the purpose of identifying Jesus as the Messiah. John 20:31 says that these signs were included "that you may believe that



cmj-usa.org
info@cmj-usa.org

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PO Box 443
Ambridge, PA 15003

540-722-2564



that Jesus is the Christ [Messiah], the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name.” The signs are not given to describe the relationship between Judaism and Christianity or between the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant; they are given to establish Jesus’ identity as the promised Deliverer.

The second point is that the Mosaic Law was not fading away. Was the Mosaic Covenant set aside prior to the inauguration of the New Covenant? If so, how did Jesus fulfill its demands? In Galatians 4:4-5, Paul tells us that Jesus had to be born under the Law and live under the Law so that he could fulfill the demands of the Law in order to provide redemption for those who trust in him. The obligations of the Mosaic Law would be replaced with the New Covenant at the Crucifixion, but not before. [2] Since the signs were to point to Jesus’ identity and since the Law was still in effect, this interpretation, while ancient and common, cannot be correct. Instead, with the wedding, the water, and the wine, Jesus is introducing himself as the Prophet-like-Moses.

Whereas Moses’ first public miracle was turning the water of Egypt to blood, symbolizing judgment and death, Jesus’ first public miracle was turning water to wine, symbolizing joy and redemption. Some say the water of Egypt merely turned red with algae. But the color was not the point; it was the nature of the miracle. Scripture presents the plagues as mighty acts of God, and it was blood that signified judgment. It is worth noting that Exodus 7:19 specifies that it was not only the water in the Nile River or the water in streams and pools that were turned to blood, but also the water “both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.”[3] The extent of this plague to include water in pots also rules out naturalistic explanations regarding the red color of the Nile, for it was not just the Nile, but even water contained in vessels of wood and stone that was turned to blood.

With his first miracle, Jesus shows himself to be the One of whom Moses spoke. This is seen as further signaling the time for the new Exodus—a new Exodus of salvation.[4] In turning the water to wine, Jesus is introducing himself by presenting his credentials, his business card, as the Prophet-like-Moses. The Messiah has arrived!

Jim Sibley is the North America Coordinator for the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism and Research Professor for Israel College of the Bible. He has been involved in Jewish ministry for many years and served on the board of CMJ USA until November 2022. He and his wife, Kathy, have two married daughters and six grandchildren.

Footnotes

1. George R. Beasley-Murray, John, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 36.
2. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8:13; 7:11-16. But see also Rom 7:12 and 2 Tim 3:16.
3. Emphasis added.
4. See T. Francis Glasson, Moses in the Fourth Gospel, Studies in Biblical Theology (London: SCM Press, 1963; reprinted, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009).