

*Finding Wine in the Water Jar:
A History of Interpretation of John 2:1-11*

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Abstract: Throughout much of the church's history, interpreters have understood the *sensus literalis* of a biblical text to contain or lead to further spiritual senses. This understanding is particularly illustrated in how the church has historically interacted with the Gospel of John. Therefore, in this article I will use John 2:1-11 as a test case for how many throughout history have understood the *sensus literalis*. In doing so, I contend that the fullest readings neither diminished authorial intent nor a multiplicity of meaning. Rather, they recognized the *sensus literalis* of the biblical text to lead to further spiritual meanings. As a result of this study, many of the spiritual interpretations advocated throughout the history of the church will be found consistent with the literary and theological intent of John's Gospel.

A survey of the history of interpretation shows that the church has wrestled with the proper tension between the literal and spiritual meanings of the biblical text. In our contemporary setting, the church continues to grapple with this hermeneutical question. On the one hand, many modern interpreters are hesitant to employ spiritual

readings that were more prevalent during previous eras.¹ It is said that to do so necessarily leaves interpreters “drifting on the sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”² Therefore, in fidelity to the grammatical–historical method of interpretation, the spiritual senses of the biblical text are sacrificed in the name of obtaining the author’s single meaning. On the other hand, some postmodern interpreters diminish authorial intent in order to allow for a multiplicity of meaning.³ David Steinmetz forcefully asserts, “The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its doubtful defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false.”⁴

Are readers of the biblical text then forced to pit authorial intent against a multiplicity of meaning? Not necessarily. Throughout much of the church’s history interpreters have understood the literal sense (*sensus literalis*)⁵ of the biblical text to contain or lead to further

¹Particularly with John’s Gospel this hesitancy is illustrated among commentators such as, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978); D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

²Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 158.

³See David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (1980): 32; Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 33–40.

⁴Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 27.

⁵The phrase *sensus literalis* is being used to articulate the literal sense of the biblical text as, “reading for its literary sense, the sense of its communicative act. This entails, first doing justice to the propositional, poetic, and purposive aspects of each text as a communicative act and, second, relating these to the Bible considered as a unified divine communicative act: the word of God” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There*

spiritual senses. This understanding is particularly illustrated in how the church has historically interacted with the Gospel of John. For instance, Eusebius recounts how Clement of Alexandria classified it as a “spiritual Gospel.”⁶ Therefore, it may be advantageous for contemporary interpreters to explore how the church has historically employed spiritual readings of John’s Gospel in relation to reading a literal level.

To this end, I wish to present John 2:1–11 as a test case for how many throughout history have understood the *sensus literalis*, recognizing how this passage yields a range of meanings that are inherent to the literary intent of John’s Gospel. In doing so, I contend that the fullest readings neither diminished authorial intent nor a multiplicity of meaning. Rather, they recognized the *sensus literalis* of the biblical text to lead to further spiritual meanings.

With the above thesis in mind, this article is divided into two main sections. The first provides a brief history of interpretation from the patristic era until the present, highlighting key representatives of each period and their interpretive emphases. The second approaches John 2:1–11 by following the lead of those interpreters who viewed the *sensus literalis* to encompass multiple levels of meaning. As a result of this study, many of the spiritual interpretations advocated throughout the history of the church will be found consistent with the literary and theological intent of John’s Gospel.

a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, The Reader, and The Morality of Literary Knowledge [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 312.).

⁶Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 6.14.7.

A History of Interpretation of John 2:1–11

The Patristic Era

From the perspective of many modern interpreters, the patristic era is characterized as time dominated by fanciful interpretations that were not grounded in the text of Scripture. Though it is true that the patristic era emphasized spiritual readings of the text, it would be too simplistic to assume that their approach was devoid of exegesis. Rather, as Reno and O’Keefe affirm, methods of exegesis were essential to “reading the details of scripture so that they fit together into an interlocking whole.”⁷ With this goal in mind, the early church employed an intensive reading of Scripture looking for “hints and signs amid the tiniest details of the text.”⁸ By finding verbal associations that provided contact between one passage and another, the fathers prepared a way for a comprehensive reading of Scripture.

Such an intensive reading is visible in the early church’s treatment of John 2:1–11. Primarily, the passage is interpreted Christologically. For instance, significance is found in that the wedding occurs on the third day (v. 1). Cyril of Alexandria says this statement represents “the last days,” and that it also looks forward to the defeat of the curse at the resurrection.⁹ At a macro-level the entire wedding and miracle were universally interpreted in light of the Christ event. Probably the most elaborate interpretation was that of Augustine.

⁷John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 45.

⁸O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 46.

⁹Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. David R. Maxwell, vol. 1, *Ancient Christian Texts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 91.

Viewing Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, he interpreted the water to represent the Old Testament read apart from Christ. Therefore, without Christ the Old Testament is tasteless.¹⁰ In light of Christ fulfilling the Old Testament, Augustine then reads the rest of the passage through the lens of this reality. For example, the six water jars represent the six ages leading up to the last days of Christ. Each age prophesied of the Christ, but as Augustine states, “so long as these things of which I speak were not preached among the peoples, the prophecy was water, it was not yet changed into wine.”¹¹ Other emphases by patristic interpreters include, understanding the location of the wedding being in Galilee as a sign that the gospel had gone out to the Gentiles. Both Cyril of Alexandria and Eusebius understand this as a fulfillment of Isaiah 9, where in the “latter times [God] has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”¹² Additionally, others see the wedding as representing Christ’s incarnation, whereby he humbles himself to serve.¹³

Though patristic interpreters were quick to read the text at a spiritual level, it does not follow that the text was not at all engaged at

¹⁰Augustine of Hippo, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John,” in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 64.

¹¹Augustine of Hippo, “On the Letter and the Spirit,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 66–67.

¹²Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 1-10*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 88; W. J. Ferrar, *The Proof of the Gospel Being the Demonstratio of Eusebius of Caesarea* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 170.

¹³Elowsky, *John 1-10*, 88, 90, 96.

the literal level. For instance, most interpreters recognized that on the surface the miracle showed Christ to be the creator.¹⁴ One in particular who devoted time to interact at a textual level was Theodore of Mopsuestia. In doing so, Theodore emphasized the importance of the human author, giving attention to the grammatical and linguistic questions of the text.¹⁵ For example, though the miracle itself is a spiritual event, it merely highlights Jesus's creative power.¹⁶ Again, Theodore interprets the "third day" as a chronological marker, indicating that the event took place three days after Jesus's baptism.¹⁷ Furthermore, he viewed John's detail about the "six water jars" as providing historical context to the situation, thus giving credibility to the miracle.¹⁸

Patristic interpreters also interpret the account at a moral or tropological level. In this way several elements of the Wedding at Cana are seen as prescriptive for Christian living. First, the text serves as an affirmation of marriage, and a refutation to heretics who reject marriage.¹⁹ Second, since Jesus honors his mother's request to address the wedding crisis, he serves as an example to honor one's parents. However, as Chrysostom notes, Jesus's respectful rebuke to his mother

¹⁴Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.*, 3.11.5.

¹⁵Bruce A. McDonald, "Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428)," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 968.

¹⁶Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. Marco Conti, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 27.

¹⁷Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 26.

¹⁸Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 27.

¹⁹Elowsky, *John 1–10*, 89.

also teaches Christians that when parents “require anything unseasonably, and cause hindrance in any spiritual matter, it is unsafe to obey.”²⁰ Finally, the disciples aid as examples for us to believe in Christ as the Son of God.²¹

From this brief survey of patristic interpretations, it is evident that the spiritual sense dominates. Though there are differences among the interpreters, nearly all see Christ’s miracle to signify the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Also, most draw similar moral readings from the text. Cyril of Alexandria seems to be conscience of both the literal and spiritual senses of the text. By examining the plain sense, Cyril explains that the miracle shows Christ’s creative power and his glory.²² Nevertheless, at a deeper level the text also speaks to Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Testament, and how this salvation historical event impacts the church. Though Cyril, and others do not delineate their method, this absence should not be seen as a lack of concern for the plain sense of the text. Rather, it is best to view their limited interaction with the literal sense in light of their aretegenic goal for writing.

The Medieval Era

During the Medieval period there is great continuity with patristic interpretations. Specifically, Augustine’s impact is perceived among many Medieval interpreters. For instance, Bede the Venerable (673–

²⁰John Chrysostom, *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. G. T. Stupart, vol. 14, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 74.

²¹Elowsky, *John 1-10*, 97.

²²Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:90–91.

735) follows Augustine’s interpretation concerning the water turned to wine, stating “[Christ] soon turned those mandates which seemed fleshly to spiritual teaching, and he changed the whole exterior appearance of the letter of the law to the gospel of virtue of heavenly grace – which is the meaning of his having made wine from water.”²³ Again, along with Augustine, Bede interpreted the six water jars to correspond with the six ages leading up to the preaching of Christ, and that the measurements of the jars are also a reference to the Trinity.²⁴ From another angle, Bede also understood the whole wedding to function as an allegory of Christ’s incarnation. He says, “His nuptial chamber was the womb of his incorrupt mother, where God was conjoined with human nature and from there he came forth like a bridegroom to join the church to himself.”²⁵

Two other interpreters of the Augustinian tradition, include Bonaventure (AD 1217–1274) and Aquinas (AD 1225–74) Like Augustine, they both interpreted the “third day” as the age of grace and the time of Christ.²⁶ In the same way, the miracle itself testifies to how the shadow of the Law has been transformed into the joyful wine of reality (Heb 10:1).²⁷ Aquinas, referencing Bede, viewed the wedding to be an allegory, picturing Christ’s incarnation.²⁸ Furthermore, similar to

²³Bede the Venerable, “Homily 1.14,” in *Homilies on the Gospels*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 136.

²⁴Bede the Venerable, “Homily 1.14,” 138.

²⁵Bede the Venerable, “Homily 1.14,” 135.

²⁶Saint Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Robert J. Karris, vol. 11, Works of St. Bonaventure (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2007), 145; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher and James A. Weisheipl (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 133.

²⁷Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 11:145–46.

Augustine, Bonaventure and Aquinas saw the text anagogically representing the marriage of Christ and the church.²⁹

Though spiritual readings were still prevalent at this time, interpreters began to ask questions regarding how the spiritual or allegorical sense should be attained. Giving greater attention to such questions, Christopher Ocker notes that a shift in thinking occurred where the literal sense was understood to be “the meaning first intended by the author; therefore ‘every passage of holy Scripture has a literally meaning, which is not always what is first signified by the literal words, but is often what is designated through the thing that is signified by the literal words.’”³⁰ Simply stated, the literal sense of Scripture was understood to contain or lead to the other spiritual senses. This change is well illustrated by the format of both Bonaventure’s and Aquinas’s commentaries. Both designate their literal, allegorical, and tropological interpretations, commenting on the text from three different perspectives.

Bonaventure’s commentary begins with a structural outline of the text dividing John 2:1–11 into five parts: (1) the occasion; (2) the petition; (3) the transformation; (4) the acknowledgement; (5) the manifestation.³¹ It is this literary structure that provides the foundation or starting point for all other readings. Although Aquinas does not parse his commentary out into separate divisions, he too

²⁸Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 133–34.

²⁹Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 11:145; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 133.

³⁰Christopher Ocker, “Biblical Interpretation in the Middle Ages,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 19.

³¹Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 11:139.

bases his readings on the literary structure of the passage.³² As a result, the wedding occurs on the third day, a chronological marker. However, the third day has more than a literal meaning, as shown above. In the same way, both Bonaventure and Aquinas give a historical description of the six water jars and how the Jews used them for ceremonial cleansing. Nevertheless, there still remains a deeper spiritual meaning to the six water jars.

An emphasis on the literal interpretation is highlighted among the writings of Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1349). For Lyra the spiritual meaning of the text is contained in the literal. To illustrate this relationship, Lyra likened the literal sense to the foundation of a structure, which supports and upholds the spiritual meaning.³³ Therefore, the theological themes of John's Gospel are to be identified in the structure of the text. For example, Lyra relates the Wedding at Cana with John's prologue, where the revelation of Christ's divinity is described. Because Christ's divinity is integral to John's purpose, it should appear throughout the Gospel, including the Wedding at Cana.³⁴ As a result, the spiritual senses of the text are regulated by John's larger narrative structure.

The Reformation

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, greater attention was given to the literal sense of the Scripture. With the impact of the

³²Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 132–33.

³³Mark Hazard, *The Literal Sense and the Gospel of John in Late-Medieval Commentary and Literature*, ed. Francis G. Gentry, *Studies in Medieval History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.

³⁴Hazard, *The Literal Sense and the Gospel of John*, 31.

Renaissance, a renewed interest developed in the original languages and the historical meaning of the text. As a result, some began to resist allegorical and tropological interpretations. However, as Richard Muller states, this resistance did not result in “a bare literal understanding of the text but rather an understanding that took into consideration the larger theological context and specifically the meaning of the divine author as presented in the Bible as a whole.”³⁵ In other words, since the Scripture was divinely inspired, interpreters “supplemented a close grammatical reading of the text with figural or typological interpretation.”³⁶

Though interpreters at this time read the Scriptures theologically, many emphasized a historical and literal interpretation. This emphasis is illustrated by John Calvin (1509–1564) who in his commentary only devoted himself to a surface level reading of John 2:1–11. For example, Calvin provides geographical details as to the location of Cana of Galilee.³⁷ Mary serves merely an illustration of compassion, and Christ’s correction of her is to show that she crossed her bounds. And when examining the six water jars, they merely serve to set the historical context, and reinforce the validity of Christ’s miracle.³⁸ Considering the passage a whole, Calvin surprisingly makes no mention about the fulfillment of the Law and the New Covenant.

³⁵Richard Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2007), 22.

³⁶Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (London: Yale University Press, 1974), 19–20.

³⁷John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 82.

³⁸Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 87.

Instead, the miracle is merely seen as an instrument to display Christ's glory.

Even with a shift to a more literal reading of the text, not everyone had an aversion to spiritual readings. Martin Luther (1483–1546) would be such an example. Though Luther is most notably recognized for his role in the Protestant Reformation, methodologically he was a Medieval interpreter. In his *Postils*, Luther examined the text spiritually to cultivate faith in Christ. Therefore, the wedding speaks to married people, to understand that “Christ shows that he wants to supply what is lacking in marriage by giving wine when it ran out, and making it out of water.”³⁹ For Luther this means that Christ will turn the afflictions the married couple endures into “joy and delight.”⁴⁰ Beyond this moral reading of the text, Luther also stands in continuity with earlier interpreters. First of all, the wedding represents Christ and the church.⁴¹ Secondly, the miracle speaks to the reality that Christ has come to fulfill the Law.⁴² Specifically, the six water jars represent the Old Testament, which is merely water. And the changing of water into wine is the word of the Gospel that brings a right understanding of the Law.⁴³ Finally, Luther also interprets the servants, as preachers of the New Testament, and the chief waiter represents the priesthood.⁴⁴

³⁹Martin Luther, “Gospel for the Second Sunday After Epiphany: John 2:1–11,” in *Church Postil*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels, vol. 76, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 239.

⁴⁰Luther, “John 2:1–11,” 240.

⁴¹Luther, “John 2:1–11,” 245.

⁴²Luther, “John 2:1–11,” 246.

⁴³Luther, “John 2:1–11,” 247.

⁴⁴Luther, “John 2:1–11,” 248.

Reflecting on this time period, one notices that John 2:1–11 is interpreted rather thinly. Except for a minority (e.g. Luther), many interpreters abandoned a spiritual reading of the text. Certainly, theological truth could be extracted, but nothing beyond Christ’s divine power being put on display. Beyond this theological truth, the text could be used to affirm marriage, appreciate the example of Mary’s compassion, and provide grounds for believing in Jesus as the Christ. Nevertheless, Luther seems stand in between the extremes of the patristic tendencies of over–spiritualization and the overly literal interpretations during his day.

The Modern Era

With the rise of the Enlightenment a premium was placed on empiricism, naturalism, and a scientific view of history. As a result, a critical shift from the Renaissance occurred where language was viewed less as a depiction of reality, and more representational of the knowledge of the world.⁴⁵ With this change in thinking, biblical interpreters began to view the Scriptures as a representation of ancient history, which contained God’s revelation.⁴⁶ Therefore, the biblical text was no longer the source of truth. Instead truth is contained in the distant past, which now must be uncovered.⁴⁷ This search for the “true” history behind the Bible is illustrated in Gabler’s biblical theology program. The literal sense of Scripture became

⁴⁵G. T. Sheppard and A. C. Thieselton, “Biblical Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2007), 47.

⁴⁶Sheppard and Thieselton, “Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” 48.

⁴⁷Sheppard and Thieselton, “Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” 60.

synonymous with “the intent, purpose and scope of human testimony within a biblical book.”⁴⁸ This redefinition of the literal sense of Scripture produced a scientific approach to the Bible over against a spiritual one.

This shift in biblical study is seen in the interpretations of John 2:1–11 by men such as John Bengel (1687–1752),⁴⁹ Brooke Westcott (1825–1901),⁵⁰ and to some degree also Matthew Henry (1662–1714)⁵¹ and J. C. Ryle (1816–1900).⁵² For instance, all of these men merely interpret the third day (v. 1) as a chronological marker in the text. Neither do these interpreters see any significance in the location of wedding being in Cana of Galilee. At this point Westcott devotes his comments to geographic points seeking to discern the most likely location.⁵³

An emphasis upon the original languages is illustrated in both Westcott’s and Lange’s commentary discussing Jesus’s words to his mother, *τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί* (v. 4).⁵⁴ Each examines how the phrase was used

⁴⁸Sheppard and Thieselton, “Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” 65.

⁴⁹John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, 7th ed., vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004).

⁵⁰Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

⁵¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

⁵²J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John*, vol. 1 (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1867).

⁵³Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 36.

⁵⁴Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 36–37; John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scripture: John*, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. 41 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 105.

in the Old Testament to argue that Jesus's response was friendly. Along these same lines, Lange devotes an entire section of his commentary to the exegetical and critical questions of the text.⁵⁵

As attention is given to the miracle itself (vv. 6–10) most interpreters devoted space to historical and archeological findings to describe the purpose of the water jars in Jewish culture. Similar empirical questions are raised concerning the size of the water jars, as well as explanations for why they would be made of stone.⁵⁶ By concerning themselves with the plain meaning, the theological truth of the text is clear, the transformation of water into wine displays Jesus's divine power.

Although great attention was given to historical, archeological, and philological issues, there were some interpreters who incorporated the spiritual sense into their commentaries. These include Matthew Henry, Brooke Westcott, and John Lange. Nevertheless, one interpreter who distinguishes himself from the rest is Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon's sermon interprets the passage both allegorically and tropologically.

Specifically, the Wedding at Cana is spiritualized to show Christ's work of the kingdom. Under this rubric, the wine is "a type of his grace, and the abundance of it as a type of the abundance of his grace which he doth do liberally bestow."⁵⁷ Therefore, Spurgeon draws out several moral principles that are "hidden" in the text regarding how

⁵⁵Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scripture: John*, 41:102–08.

⁵⁶Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 37; Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John*, 1:97; Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1925; Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, 1:565–66.

⁵⁷Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Waterpots at Cana," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 26 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1972), 494.

Christ works to bestow the grace of the kingdom.⁵⁸ For example, regarding Jesus's command to fill up the water jars (v. 7), Spurgeon says, "when Christ is about to bestow a blessing he gives a command."⁵⁹ Spurgeon concludes that just as Jesus gives a command before he performs a miracle, so he gives the command to believe the Gospel before conversion. Again, Christ's command is to be done with zeal. Therefore, the instruction to fill the water jars up to the brim speaks of giving people the full gospel, rather than a half gospel.⁶⁰ Furthermore, filling the water jars also speaks to filling our minds and hearts with Scripture so that he may change our preaching from water into wine.⁶¹

Having briefly examined representatives during the modern era, it is apparent that the literal sense is highly prized. The prominence of a more scientific approach to the Scriptures reflects the influence of the Enlightenment, which valued empiricism as the standard for rationality.⁶² However, some interpreters still interpreted the text at both a literal and spiritual level.

Recent History

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries reflect both continuity with and progression beyond modern scientific approaches to Scripture. Until the mid-twentieth century biblical studies were dominated by historical-critical methods of interpretation represented by the

⁵⁸Spurgeon, "The Waterpots at Cana," 495.

⁵⁹Spurgeon, "The Waterpots at Cana," 495.

⁶⁰Spurgeon, "The Waterpots at Cana," 498.

⁶¹Spurgeon, "The Waterpots at Cana," 502.

⁶²Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

Tübingen school of theology.⁶³ However, by the late 1900s and the aftermath of WWII, there was a shift away from the objective idealism which characterized the modern era. This shift resulted in a new emphasis upon the theology of the Bible and the application of literary analysis.⁶⁴ Even with a return to study the biblical text as a theological document, most interpreters were still far removed from the spiritual approach that characterized the patristic and Medieval eras.

When discussing recent interpreters, it is best to begin with one of the most influential scholars in the last century, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). With Bultmann’s demythologizing program, “Historical stories and legends are narratives, the main intent of which is religious rather than historical.”⁶⁵ In other words, Bultmann argued that Jesus’s message was a presupposition of New Testament theology rather than a part of it.⁶⁶ Therefore, his approach to the Gospel of John aimed to interpret its theological message.

Applying this approach to John 2:1–11, Bultmann first examines the text according to its narrative structure in order to unpack what he calls the “*παράδοξον* of the miracle.”⁶⁷ By following the flow of the narrative it becomes apparent that the story symbolizes the

⁶³T. H. Olbricht, “Biblical Interpretation in North America in the Twentieth Century,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 88–92.

⁶⁴Olbricht, “North America in the Twentieth Century,” 93–98.

⁶⁵D. Fergusson, “Rudolf Bultmann,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 267.

⁶⁶Charles H. H. Scobie, “History of Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 16.

⁶⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, ed. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 115.

“revelation of the $\delta\omicron\zeta\alpha$ of Jesus.”⁶⁸ Specifically, it shows “the divinity of Jesus as the Revealer, and it becomes visible for faith in the reception of $\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma$ and $\alpha\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$.”⁶⁹ Once this basic understanding is drawn from the text, the other details must be interpreted in light of it. Therefore, the water “stands for everything that is a substitute for the revelation, everything by which man thinks he can live and which yet fails him when put to the test.”⁷⁰ The ignorance of the chief steward in verse 9, “represents the blindness of men confronted by the Revealer.”⁷¹ And finally, it may be that verse 10 should “be interpreted in this sense, namely that the divine action runs contrary to all human rules.”⁷²

Another significant interpreter is Leon Morris (1914–2006). In his commentary he begins by placing the Wedding at Cana within its theological context within the gospel of John. Commenting on the significance of the signs, Morris states, “They point beyond themselves. This particular miracle signifies that there is transforming power associated with Jesus. He changes the water of Judaism into the wine of Christianity, the water of Christlessness into the wine of the richness and the fullness of eternal life in Christ, the water of the law into the wine of the gospel.”⁷³ From this comment Morris places himself within the consistent stream of the history of interpretation that sees the miracle to point beyond the plain sense, to speak of a new spiritual

⁶⁸Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 119.

⁶⁹Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 119.

⁷⁰Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 120.

⁷¹Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 121.

⁷²Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 121.

⁷³Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 155.

reality. Nevertheless, the rest of Morris's commentary does not reflect this theological significance.

Instead, he resorts to a more scientific approach merely examining historical, cultural, and grammatical elements of the text. Commenting on the actual miracle, Morris again gives a fairly shallow reading. Regarding the six water pots, he is open to the possibility that they symbolize the imperfection of Judaism, but then offers a strong objection, that "the narrative contains nothing that would symbolize completeness, which would surely be required to correspond to the incomplete. Jesus does not create or produce a seventh pot."⁷⁴ Instead of the details of the event having symbolic significance, Morris sees these elements functioning apologetically to give creditability to the miracle.

The final interpreter to be examined is N. T. Wright (b. 1948). Wright stands out from many in recent history because he reads the text according to its spiritual sense for the edification of believers. Nevertheless, Wright's spiritual reading is rooted in the literary cues given in the narrative. In other words, he allows John's narrative to set the tone for how the Wedding at Cana should be read. Essential to understanding this passage is to see that this miracle is a "sign" (v. 11). Wright states "the signs are all occasions when Jesus did . . . what he'd just promised Nathanael that he would do. They are moments when, to people who watch with a least a little faith, the angels of God are going up and coming down at the place where Jesus is."⁷⁵ In other words, "They are the moments when heaven and earth intersect with each

⁷⁴Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 161.

⁷⁵N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Chapters 1-10* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 21.

other.”⁷⁶ Therefore, this miracle illustrates what John states in his prologue, that the word became flesh (1:14). Literally heaven came to earth in the person of Jesus. From this account then, we see that when Jesus is present and people do what he tells them to do, transformation occurs (v. 9).⁷⁷

The Sensus Literalis of John 2:1–11

What becomes unmistakable from a history of interpretation of John 2:1–11 is that the fullest readings recognize the multifaceted nature of John’s Gospel. Understanding the *sensus literalis* in this way acknowledges the interconnectedness of the literal and spiritual levels of meaning that are inherit to John’s literary structure. Consequently, the literal or plain sense serves to lead the reader to dig for the deeper spiritual truths beyond surface of the text.

The Prologue and The Plain Sense

Essential to an intensive reading of John is an awareness of the theological themes. By following the lead of Nicholas of Lyra in particular, the prologue of John establishes these themes that reappear throughout later narrations. Therefore, as one approaches John 2:1–11 the literary structure leads to spirituals truths that parallel those found in the prologue and are expounded upon elsewhere throughout the Gospel. These themes from the prologue include: Jesus as creator (1:1–3, 10); Jesus’s incarnation (vv. 9, 14); Jesus’s rejection (v. 11); belief and acceptance of Jesus (v. 12); the new birth (vv. 12–13); the glory of Jesus (v. 14); the superiority of Jesus over the Law (v. 17); and the

⁷⁶Wright, *John for Everyone*, 21.

⁷⁷Wright, *John for Everyone*, 22.

revelation of the Father in Jesus (v. 18).

From a plain reading of John 2:1–11, John wants his readers to understand that this “sign” of transforming water into wine “manifested [Jesus’s] glory” (v. 11a). Furthermore, this sign was to elicit the response of faith in Jesus exemplified by the disciples (v. 11b). Verse 11 then serves as an explanatory statement, giving a surface level meaning to the text. Therefore, to grasp this meaning is to obtain John’s intent. However, reading at a surface level does not exhaust the text’s meaning. Rather, it serves as a foundation for further meaning. In fact, verse 11 explicitly states that the literal events at the Wedding at Cana represent spiritual realities. In other words, John is teaching us how to read his Gospel. It is therefore, the reader’s responsibility to listen closely to John’s cues to uncover these spiritual meanings.

This understanding of how verse 11 functions, is the conclusion that Bultmann arrived at. However, Bultmann admitted that he did not know how much of the spiritual meaning is to be read back into the narrative.⁷⁸ In this regard, we may be helped by Lyra’s observation that the prologue to John’s Gospel provides the limitations for what spiritual meanings are to be found. Along these lines it is significant to note that both the manifestation of Jesus’s glory and the example for belief are two themes found in the prologue. If Lyra is on the right track, then other spiritual readings of this passage should also correspond with the theological themes given in the prologue.

Reading Beyond the Surface Level

Already the surface meaning of the text has been identified. The story of the Wedding at Cana is a manifestation of Jesus’s glory, soliciting

⁷⁸Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 120.

belief in him (v. 11). The narrative in which this meaning is located can be structured as follows: the setting (vv. 1–2); the miracle (vv. 3–10); and the significance (v. 11). However, as argued throughout this paper, we must not be satisfied with such a basic understanding of the text. Rather, John intends us to read more deeply, discerning the greater spiritual realities that lie therein. In order to unearth these fuller meanings, readers must listen closely to the text grasping its multifaceted character.

The Setting (vv. 1–2). Approaching this narrative, John first establishes the setting in which this “sign” will occur. It is said that the wedding was on the “third day” (v. 1). At a literal level, John very well may have intended to communicate that the wedding took place three days after Jesus’ exchange with Nathanael.⁷⁹ On the surface, this is likely correct. However, the entire story anagogically reflects heavenly realities. As John’s prologue has already taught, heaven has come down to earth (1:14). And as Wright aptly notes, this manifestation is most clearly seen in the passion of Christ (chap. 19–20).⁸⁰ It is no coincidence then that Jesus shows his glory at the resurrection, three days later (20:1). What then is the significance of the “third day” in 2:1? It’s a sign of the new creation, and the age of the Spirit. Or as Cyril of Alexandria recognized, it represents the “last days” and the defeat of the curse.⁸¹

In the same way, further significance should be found in that the sign occurs at a wedding (v. 1). Again, at a surface level Jesus and his disciples were at a real Jewish wedding. However, this should also

⁷⁹Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 167.

⁸⁰Wright, *John for Everyone*, 22.

⁸¹Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:91.

recall in the readers mind the uniting of Christ and his church. This theme is established in the prologue where John says that Jesus “came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (1:11–12). Therefore, when people receive Jesus they become part of his family. In 2:2 it must be noticed that Jesus was “invited” to the wedding. In other words, Jesus was “received” and as a result, a miracle of transformation occurs (vv. 3–10; cf. 1:12). Read this way, it is not a stretch to see the wedding as a picture of Christ’s incarnation and coming into the world, and as a marriage between him and his church.⁸²

Closely related to this spiritual reality is the detail concerning the location of the wedding “at Cana in Galilee” (v. 1). Many modern interpreters strive to identify this historic location.⁸³ Again, certainly this was a real historical place. However, Lyra is correct that historical realities have a double meaning.⁸⁴ In the patristic period, this geographical detail represented Jesus’s coming to the Gentiles.⁸⁵ Linking this interpretation with the prologue, John has already told us that Jesus’s people did not receive him (i.e. the Jews, 1:11). However, in 4:25 John tells us that Jesus went out to Galilee and he was “welcomed.” It is important to understand that Galilee was on the outskirts of Judea. Later in 7:1, John says Jesus went about in Galilee, because in Judea

⁸²Bede the Venerable, “Homily 1.14,” 135; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 133.

⁸³Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 190.

⁸⁴“The intimate relationship of literal and spiritual senses implied a double understanding of history: history means both earthly experience and the revelation that framed and informed it” (Hazard, *The Literal Sense and the Gospel of John*, 11.).

⁸⁵Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:88.

“the Jews were seeking to kill him.” Furthermore, Cyril of Alexandria sees a fulfillment of Isaiah 9, which speaks of God’s glory being made known in “the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations” (Isa 9:1).⁸⁶

The Miracle (vv. 3–10). Just as the setting contains multiple levels of meaning, so does the recounting of Jesus’s miracle. Examining the water being transformed to wine, one could simply see this as a manifestation of Christ’s creative power.⁸⁷ However, much more is going on. The six stone jars are mentioned with the comment by John that they were “there for the Jewish rites of purification” (v. 6). This is important, because already in the prologue John has told us that Jesus’s coming marks the fulfillment of the Law, and the full manifestation of God’s “truth and grace” (1:17). Therefore, Jesus’s transformation of the water contained in the purification jars, represents the fulfillment of the Old Covenant.

At this point, even more meanings arise from the miracle. First, the six jars likely recall the six days of creation leading up to the seventh day of rest. Again, the creation theme is given precedent in the opening verses of the Gospel (1:1–4). Jesus has now come to bring about God’s rest in the new creation. Second, the new creation motif is not only mentioned in 1:12, but is again spoken of in John 3, where Jesus commands Nicodemus to be born again (vv. 3, 5–6; cf. Ezek 36:26–38). Reading this theme into the miracle at Cana, recalls the miracle of regeneration, whereby hearts are transformed. Third, there may also be merit in interpreting the stone jars as the stone hearts of men. Already the themes of regeneration from Ezekiel have been evoked.

⁸⁶Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:88.

⁸⁷Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 85.

Interestingly, the imagery of “stone” along with “water” is used in both passages (vv. 6–7; Ezek 36:26, 33).

Once a reader begins to dig deeper into the spiritual realities of the text, it is not difficult to see how previous interpreters found multiple levels of meaning. One more example of this type of reading may prove helpful. Charles Spurgeon likened the miracle at Cana to the task of preaching the gospel. Just as Jesus told the servants to full the jars to the brim (v. 7), so we are to give people the full gospel.⁸⁸ One may object saying that John never mentions preaching the gospel in this text. And certainly on the surface he does not explicitly say such a thing. However, John has already told us his intent in verse 11. Part of the purpose of this “sign” is to solicit belief. Reading this purpose back into the details of the text is illuminating. Belief is illustrated in the servants, who are to “Do whatever [Jesus] tells [them]” (v. 5). The servants then take the transformed water and serve it to the guests. If the transformation of the water into wine represents the spiritual reality of regeneration, then it also speaks to what happens when the gospel is preached. Therefore, the belief that John calls for in this text looks like obeying Jesus (v. 5) and serving people with the good news (vv. 8–10).

Conclusion

From the outset, I have sought to address whether students of the Scriptures must choose between authorial intent and a multiplicity of meaning. In order to help answer this question I presented John 2:1–11 as a test case for how many throughout history have understood the *sensus literalis*, recognizing how this passage yields a range of meanings

⁸⁸Spurgeon, “The Waterpots at Cana,” 498.

that are inherent to the literary intent of John's Gospel. In doing so, I argued that the fullest readings neither diminished authorial intent nor a multiplicity of meaning. Rather, they recognized the *sensus literalis* of the biblical text to lead to further spiritual meanings.

Therefore, at least as it concerns reading John's Gospel, it seems that interpreters should not polarize authorial intent and a multiplicity of meaning. Instead, the latter should be a natural extension of the former. Nevertheless, as hermeneutical discussions continue, it would be advantageous for further study to see how the church has interpreted other portions of Scripture, especially the New Testament epistles. Perhaps such a study would give greater insight into how Holy Spirit has guided the church to read the Scriptures, revealing the endless glories of our Lord Jesus Christ.