ALTERNATIVE PATRONAGE IN JOHN 2:1–11?

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1. Introduction

Within John, the importance of John 2:1–11 is hard to overestimate,¹ as the pericope constitutes the beginning of the famous signs that Jesus performs as recorded in the Fourth Gospel as part of its process of christological identification,² culminating in Jesus' death and resurrection, the final fulfillment of Jesus' statement in John 1:50–51.³ The road towards this finale is the road of Jesus' earthly revelation as the Christ, i.e. that of his heavenly δόξα through and in the earthly σάρξ.⁴

¹ Writing this essay in honor of Martin de Boer also gave me opportunity to reflect on his academic leadership, which, no doubt due to a Christian inspiration and a reticent personality, did and does indeed reflect qualities that I think are there in John's portrayal of Jesus as patron as well.—I am grateful to Mr. Philip Whittaker, Haarlem, for proofreading this study.

² So, here: Raymond F. Collins, "Cana (Jn 2:1–12)—the First of His Signs or the Key to his Signs," in: idem: These Things Have Been Written (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 2; Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 158–82, 182; see also Christian Welck, Erzählte Zeichen (WUNT 2/69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 134, noting that ἀρχή means both origin and beginning, and using the word "prototype" to describe the function of the miracle in Cana. See also Birger Olsson, Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel (ConBNT 6; Lund: Gleerup, 1976), 67–68.


⁴ So e.g. Schnackenburg, Johannesevangelium, 340. It is, however, with Jörg Frey, Die johanneische Eschatologie 3 (WUNT 117; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 230, in a sense still a sarkic, mediated, vision, as may be suggested by John 17:24, probably differentiating between the earthly mediated glory of Jesus and the heavenly, unmediated beata visio, as it occurs in John 1:18 as well, see also 1 John 3:2.
However, despite its widely acknowledged importance, the kind of point that John 2:1–11, the wedding in Cana, seeks to make remains a debated issue. This essay argues that a plausible interpretation of the entire pericope can be found when it is interpreted with the background of (divine) patronage in the Greco-Roman world, taking into account the miraculous provision of wine, the large quantity of it, and its quality. Jesus appears in this way as a superior patron, superior to human ones as well as a true representative of the patron of all. In doing so, this study specifically seeks to further the interpretation offered by Collins and is in line with approaches to the Gospel of John in the tradition of social-scientific exegesis, such as Neyrey’s recent commentary that pays ample attention to questions of honor and patronage. In arguing this point, the essay also seeks to show that an interpretation of John 2:1–11 in terms of (a potentially anti-Jewish) statement on the relationship between “Christianity” and “Judaism” is highly implausible.

In order to do all this, first the interpretation of John 2:1–11 along the lines of the relationship between “Christianity” and “Judaism” is considered, which paves the way for a consideration of an interpretation of the events in John 2:1–10 on the basis of John 2:11, subsequently, questions of patronage and the provision of wine are considered, and finally an interpretation of John 2:1–11 on this basis is offered.

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5 Given the prevailing uncertainty regarding the place of composition and intended readership of Gospel of John, which, often, is located in Asia Minor, though with a background in Palestine and Syria, this essay will not focus on the wedding in Cana as placed in a purely early Jewish setting, but rather in one that is characterized by aspects of the social dynamics of the Greco-Roman world at large, despite the disadvantages that are inherent to such a generalization.


8 At the same time, given the focus of this study, the intertextuality of John 2:1–11 with various OT/LXX texts and traditions will not be explored in any depth in this study, given that it seeks to tease out some aspects of the intertextuality of this pericope with its cultural setting. See e.g. for an exegesis that does much more justice to this aspect of John 2:1–11: Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 150–63, as well and especially: Edmund Little, *Echoes of the Old Testament in The Wine of Cana in Galilee (John 2:1–11) and The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish (John 6:1–15). Towards an Appreciation* (CRB 41; Paris: Gabalda, 1998). It also seems implausible that John 2:1–11 must be regarded as the “Bildhälfte eines Gleichnisses,” as Folker Siegert, *Das Evangelium des Johannes in seiner ursprünglichen Gestalt: Wiederherstellung und Kommentar* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 247, states. See for his further tradition-historical considerations: 247–51. Siegert gives a helpful overview of echoes of the “Old Testament” on 253–55.