

stories. Rather, I will endeavor to study and analyze the narratives on their own terms, hoping thereby to make their iconic quality more apparent. In the course of his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth took his readers on an elaborate and detailed tour of the dense jungle of the biblical world; I will attempt something similar, on a much smaller scale but, I hope, in the same spirit.

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The Gatherer

The English word *sin* is derived from the German term *Sünde*, which carries the connotation of sundering or dividing. The Greek word *diabalos*, from which various terms for the evil one derive—*diablo*, *di-able*, *devil*, *Teufel*—means basically “scatterer.” In the book of Genesis, the original sin—incited by the serpent—amounts to a sundering of the human relationship to God (expulsion from the Garden) and a radical division and scapegoating among creatures. When Adam is challenged by God, he responds, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate,” and when the woman is confronted, she passes the buck to nature: “The serpent tricked me, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12–13). Over-and-againstness, separation, suspicion, mutual hatred, blaming—all are signs that the scattering power of sin is let loose.

In the course of the Old Testament, the twelve tribes of Israel—gathered together as one people through the power of God’s covenant—are periodically separated, divided, carried into exile because of their infidelity to that covenant. The hope for a united Israel, for a return of the exiled tribes, is expressed in the Prophets and in Psalms: “Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. To it the tribes go up” (Ps. 122:3–4), “the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King” (Ps. 48:2). A large part of the mystique of King David was that he had united the disparate people of Israel and had governed them from the central capital city, Jerusalem. And despite his numerous failings, David’s son Solomon enjoyed great renown, first because he had built the temple

in Jerusalem, which had become a physical and spiritual focal point for the nation, and second because his reputation had drawn to the capital potentates from around the world, most famously the Queen of the South. In this he had embodied Israel's mission to be a light to the nations, the true pole of the earth, the gathering point of the world.

When a Jewish prophet of the first century announced that the reign of God is at hand, N. T. Wright has argued, he would be taken to mean something very specific: that the scattering of the tribes of Israel (in both a literal and a spiritual sense) was over and that Yahweh was coming to reign in Jerusalem, this reconfiguration inaugurating the illumination and salvation of the entire world.¹ In other words, he would be interpreted as saying that the dream of Israel—realized only fitfully and inadequately throughout its history—was now coming definitively true. So when Jesus of Nazareth said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15), he was not calling attention to general, timeless spiritual truths, nor was he urging people to make a decision for God; he was telling his hearers that Yahweh was actively gathering the people of Israel and, indirectly, all people into a new salvific order, and he was insisting that his hearers conform themselves to this new state of affairs. In this gathering, he was implying, the forgiveness of sins—the overcoming of sundering and division—would be realized. In a word, the proclamation of the kingdom was tantamount to an announcement that the Gatherer of Israel had arrived and had commenced his work. What is most remarkable about Jesus, according to Wright, is that he not only indicated this fact but embodied it and acted it out, taking, in his words and gestures, the very role of the Gatherer. Origen said substantially the same thing when he described Jesus as *autobasileia*, the kingdom in person.

The Wedding at Cana

The first narrative that I will consider under the rubric of the Gathering is the Johannine account of the wedding feast at Cana. Throughout the Old Testament, the motif of the wedding is used to symbolize the marriage of God and his people as well as the good cheer that obtains when human beings come together in love. It is accordingly a particularly apt expression of the overcoming of the sundering of sin. Thus it is no accident that in the context of John's Gospel, Jesus's first public "sign" takes place at a wedding feast, for he himself is the marriage of divinity and humanity.

1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), esp. 172–90.

The narrative begins with an elegant Johannine code: "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee . . ." (John 2:1). Throughout the Gospel, *te hemera te trite* (on the third day) is the expression for the day of Jesus's resurrection from the dead. More to the point, this marriage feast takes place in Cana of Galilee, and Galilee, in the symbolic system of John, is the country of resurrection, that place where Jesus would meet his friends after Easter. Therefore, this story must be read through the lens of the resurrection, which is to say, the act by which God in an unprecedented and unsurpassable way gathered humanity to himself and inaugurated the process of the universal gathering ("Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died," 1 Cor. 15:20). The wedding feast of Cana and the wedding feast of the resurrection will stand in one another's hermeneutical light.

We hear that the disciples of Jesus—presumably at this point Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and the disciple whom Jesus loved—were invited to the wedding along with the Lord himself and his mother. The presence of both the *mathetai* and the mother are key. In calling disciples to himself, Jesus had already inaugurated the gathering of his people (eventually the Twelve will be seen as evocative of the twelve tribes of Israel), and so their presence signals the novelty and future purpose of Jesus's ministry. Mary is a rich and multivalent symbolic figure in all of the Gospels. In Luke's infancy narrative, she emerges as the spokesperson for ancient Israel, speaking, in her Magnificat, in the words and cadences of Hannah; and as the recipient of an angelic announcement of a miraculous birth, she calls to mind not only Hannah but also Sarah and the mother of Samson as well. In Matthew's Christmas account, she is compelled to go into exile in Egypt and is then called back to her home, recapitulating thereby the journey of Israel from slavery to freedom. She is thus the symbolic embodiment of faithful and patient Israel, longing for deliverance. In John's Gospel, she is, above all, mother—the physical mother of Jesus and, through him, the mother of all who would come to new life in him. As mother of the Lord, she is, once again, Israel, that entire series of events and system of ideas from which Jesus emerged and in terms of which he alone becomes intelligible. Hans Urs von Balthasar comments in the same vein that Mary effectively awakened the messianic consciousness of Jesus through her recounting of the story of Israel to her son. So in the Cana narrative, Mary will speak the pain and the hope of the chosen people, scattered and longing for union.

We hear that in the course of the wedding celebration "the wine gave out" (John 2:3). In an era when such parties lasted upward of several days, this was not a minor difficulty. With the wine depleted, the spirit of conviviality would dissipate, the celebration would wind down quickly, and the hosts, as well as the bride and groom, would be profoundly em-

barrassed. Noticing the difficulty, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine" (John 2:3).

Let us press ahead with a symbolic reading of this iconic episode. Wine—that which changes, uplifts, and enlivens the consciousness, that which produces good feeling and good fellowship—evokes the Spirit of God, the divine life. When we are linked to that infinite source, when we partake freely of it, we are brought to personal joy and a deep sense of community connection. It is the elixir that makes of human life a communal celebration; it is the condition for the possibility of the gathering. To be in sin is nothing other than to be sundered from that source and hence to fall into a depression of the spirit, a listlessness and loneliness. When Mary quietly suggests to Jesus that the wedding party has run out of wine, she is ancient Israel speaking to its God, reminding him that the people have run out of joy, purpose, and connection to one another, that they have become dry bones with no life. She is taking up the lament of so many of the Hebrew prophets and sages: "How long, O Lord?"

What follows is the most puzzling part of the story, Jesus's seemingly cold distancing of himself from this reasonable request of his mother: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). First, his addressing her as "woman" should not be construed as a mark of disrespect; rather, it should be interpreted as a densely textured symbolic act. Eve, in the Old Testament context, is the woman par excellence; Mary is presented here as the new Eve, the new representative of the human race, with whom God is seeking union. As is fitting in this Cana setting, the theme of human bride and divine bridegroom is being hinted at. But if she is the Woman with whom God seeks union, why the aloof and off-putting words? The best explanation, in my judgment, is that this is a narrative device that serves to highlight the importance of Jesus's "hour" and shows the relation between what he does at Cana and what will transpire in that hour. Like "the third day," "hour" is code for the Paschal Mystery, Jesus's passage through death to life. In that event, God will effect the perfect marriage between himself and the human race, for he will enter into the most intimate union with us, embracing even death itself and leading us into the bridal chamber of the divine life. Thus, the exchange with Mary brings to our attention the ultimate purpose and correct symbolic setting for the action that Jesus will perform for the humble bride and groom of Cana.

Unfazed by her son's response, Mary says to the *diakonoi* (the table servers), "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Once again, this is Israel who is speaking. The rupture between God and humanity is irreparable from the human side and through human effort. The dysfunction into which men and women have fallen is like an addiction or an obsession: any attempt on their part to overcome the difficulty will only sink them

deeper into it. Therefore the proper attitude in the presence of the saving God is obedience and acquiescence, imitating his moves, responding to his commands, doing whatever he tells us.

We come to the heart of the matter as Jesus commences his work of transformation. "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons" (John 2:6). These huge containers, used in connection with the religious life of the people, are empty, and this calls to mind the tiredness and uselessness of a religiosity unconnected to the divine Spirit. In this regard, these jars play the same symbolic role as the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. But they are, we might say, eloquently empty, for they represent the potential for life in relation to God, human religiosity, indeed human being, is a passive receptacle, something waiting to be filled.

Jesus now does two things—one visible and one invisible—and we must attend carefully to both. He first tells the servants to fill the jars with water and John pointedly tells us that "they filled them up to the brim" (John 2:7). The divine giver is now responding to the request of long-suffering Israel. The first thing he gives is the opportunity for them to contribute to the process of their vivification. Mind you, this is not in conflict with what I just specified concerning the attitude of total acquiescence, since he himself is giving, through his command, their very capacity to cooperate. So the filling of the jars to the limit is symbolic of all that human agency—through the divine prompting and power—can bring to the task of cultivating human flourishing: art, music, science, technology, politics, spirituality. All of this is obviously good, but it remains provisional and inadequate, for remember that the problem is that they are out of wine, not water. What they (Israel, the human race) require is not just the ordinary nourishment that water provides but rather intoxication, elevation, something greater.

Jesus tells them, "Draw some out, and take it to the chief steward" (John 2:8). When the steward tastes the water (now transformed into wine), he remarks on its extraordinary quality and undoubtedly passes on to the bride and groom the good news that they have wine in superabundance—180 gallons! Jesus has changed the water into wine, taking something relatively insipid and making it tasty and intoxicating. He has received what they gave him and has not negated it, but rather raised it to a new pitch of intensity. Augustine's comment that Jesus simply accelerates and concentrates a natural process that occurs all the time—rainwater gives rise to grapes, which give rise to wine—is pertinent here. The water isn't cleared out in order for the divine contribution to be made; instead, the divine contribution is precisely the "perfecting" of the water. This quality of God's giving is congruent, of course, with the Christology of Chalcedon, the noncompetitive coming together of the divine and human

natures: when God and a creature meet, the creature is confirmed and made more authentically itself. What is being hinted at in the Cana miracle is the elevation and expansion of human culture under the influence of the divine life. Filled with God's Spirit, architecture, art, science, politics, etc., become more completely themselves and realize their own deepest purposes. God gives our very capacity to give, and then he gives further by transfiguring our gift to our greater benefit. This miracle is hence a particularly apt iconic representation of divine-human coinherence.

Now we mustn't forget that the purpose of this water made wine is to increase and prolong the celebration of a wedding. Because of Jesus's miracle, a large group of celebrants will continue to be gathered around a couple who have chosen to form, themselves, an intimate community for the rest of their lives. Read symbolically, this wine is the divine Spirit which alone grounds authentic human coinherence. When human solidarity is based upon something other than God's love—mutual self-interest, political considerations, shared convictions, etc.—it will inevitably shake apart and dissolve. Aristotle knew that a friendship endures only in the measure that both friends have commonly given themselves to a good that transcends them individually, and Augustine knew that people love each other most appropriately when they do so for the sake of God. What both appreciated was that without a transcendent ground or point of reference, the other orientation of the partners would quickly devolve into self-preoccupation. When God and humanity are married, the connections between human beings intensify and deepen, vertical coinherence giving rise to horizontal coinherence. This fully developed one-in-the-otherness is on iconic display in the story of the wedding at Cana. It is a picture of the divine gatherer at work.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

One of the greatest showings of the Gathering is Jesus's parable of the prodigal son, or better, of the father and his two sons. In considering this narrative, we are, hermeneutically, on interesting ground, for we are dealing with an icon of the Father told by the one who is himself the Icon of the Father. Thus we have Jesus indirectly crafting a subtle self-portrait. The gathering technique of the father in the story mirrors that of the heavenly Father, which in turn is iconically represented in that of Jesus. In the course of this narrative, we will see who the father/God/Jesus is and how he brings to himself an Israel that had, in a double sense, wandered into exile.

A man, Jesus tells us, had two sons, and "the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me'"

(Luke 15:11). As many have commented, this demand is presumptuous and highly insulting, for normally a son would not receive his inheritance until after his father has died. Thus, in claiming his money, the younger son is none too subtly suggesting that he wishes his father would hurry up and die. Especially in Jesus's time and culture, a stinging remark could scarce be imagined. The parable opens, then, with the declaration of a clear break in the communion and coinherence one would expect to hold between a father and his son. And if we attend closely to the language of the parable, we will sense further dimensions of this rupture. The boy doesn't ask his father, he tells him: "Give me share of the property that will come to me." By definition, a gift can be demanded; it can only be received graciously and as a sort of surprise. In making his demand, therefore, the younger son is precluding the possibility of a gifted relationship between himself and his father; he is cutting off the flow of grace.

Second, in asking for property that is coming to him, he emphatically confirms the gracelessness of the exchange. Property is what is "proper" to a person, what is uniquely his, what he can claim in at least a quasi-legal sense. In common usage, the word indicates what is to be held to and defended against counter-claimants: we might hear someone say, "Get off my property," or set up a sign that defiantly declares "Private property." Jean-Luc Marion has helpfully drawn attention to the Greek term that undergirds "property" in this story, *ousia*.² This is the only time in the New Testament that this famously controversial and theologically charged term is employed. In this context it obviously doesn't have its fully developed metaphysical sense that it has, for instance, in Aristotle, but it does have at least an overtone of the philosophical usage. The more ordinary meaning of *ousia* (displayed here) is money, property, or wealth, is "presently disposable," ready to hand for use. Thus there is a link to that metaphysical "substance," which could be construed as that which a thing possesses as its own, that which it has ready to hand—as opposed to more fleetingly possessed accidents. In demanding this *ousia*, then, the younger son is asking emphatically for something to have and hold as his own, free of any merely accidental link to either the source or the possible destination of his possession. He expects the gift (in a substantive sense) apart from giving, and this is precisely what he receives when his father "divided his property between them" (Luke 15:12).

Here is a portrait in miniature of God in relation to sin. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sought to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, taking God's place and seizing his prerogatives. At the prompting of the tempter, they wanted to take for themselves a life that can only be

2. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), 96.