

## A Re-Reading of John 2:1-12 in Yoruba Context

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### ABSTRACT

It is no doubt that one of the cardinal parts of the Gospels are the miraculous events; this does not exclude John's Gospel. It is discovered that part of the uniqueness of John is in the area of his usage of σημεῖον – signs instead of miracles like the Synoptics. This understanding has prompted the quest for a critical engagement of signs in the Gospel of John in modern Johannine scholarship. The wedding which took place at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-12) according to John marks the beginning of Jesus' miraculous activities. Therefore, this biblical text forms the theological framework for this study. Marriage one of the important activities upheld and reflects across diverse cultures of the world; this does not exclude the Jews, and even Africans. In fact, an average African mind patiently awaits this stage, when he/she will have his own 'family' often considered as the unit of the society. Although, Jesus' miraculous act in the marriage ceremony (turning of water to wine) is a motion to strike; the study grasp another dimension by undertaking a contextual analysis of the occasion – γάμος (wedding ceremony) as a vital model through which the African cultural context is understood. Due to the variety and numerous cultures in Africa; the study limits this contextual discourse to the Yoruba context. Therefore, this discourse reveals John's account in 2:1-12 as that which socio-theologically relevant to contemporary Africa believers.

**Keywords:** Gospel, John, Jesus Christ, Marriage, Yoruba.

### INTRODUCTION

John's often-quoted verses (3:16, 11:35) mark it as one of the most beloved works of Christian literature. Although the its vocabulary of John's gospel is simple and somewhat redundant at times, it contains one of the most artistically complex and sophisticated combinations of theological themes and ideas found anywhere in the Bible.[1] John records only eight out of several miracles of Jesus in the Gospels. Six out of these eight are unique to John's Gospel. Many scholars have supported the stance that John's gospel arose out of the first century conflict between a community of Christian believers, some of whom are Jewish and their opponents (Jews).[2] Both claimed to be true recipients of divine revelation (Brown, 1984). From within, the Johannine community was engaging a movement which upheld the divinity of Jesus at the expense of his humanity. The Christology of this secessionist results in a deviant ethics.

Also, John's Gospel can be seen as a polemic homily to be read in the congregation of the Johannine community to combat the Christology

and ethics of secessionists from within. [3] The miracles which John as an eye witness chose to record in his Gospel were carefully selected (20:31). Water posits that each miracle had something special to reveal. [4] The fourth evangelist has a peculiar way of presenting the highly-elevated theological language 'λόγος-Jesus' and his mission to his readers. In fact, John is the only one among the Evangelists who presented the wedding at Cana as the first sign performed by Jesus. Kulandaisami explained that the biblical literature and several amount of exegetical works carried out by numerous biblical scholars on the gospel of John reveals that it is not as simple as it seems. [5] Therefore, this study is significance in the sense that it analyzes John 2:1-12 with the aim of a contextual view of marriage ceremony in Yoruba cultural framework in other to articulate its relevance to contemporary African believers. Just like the Jews, the Yorubas hold the issue of marriage in high esteem with the sense of making everyone who attends a partaker of the success. It is discovered that wedding is beyond the couples alone, it is between two families who have decided to become one; this reveals

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why the presence of Mary, Jesus and his disciples were present. What makes the wedding in John 2 distinct is the appearance of Jesus which in turn averts the havoc which should have wrecked the wedding.

### THE CONCEPT OF ΣΗΜΕΙΟΝ IN JOHN

John's use of σημεῖον - "sign" (miraculous sign – NIV) is also found in 4:54; 6:14; 9:16; 11:47. In John, signs do not concentrate on the wonder of the extraordinary event but emphasize its significance. The two fold purpose of these "signs" is stated in 1:11; the arrival of Jesus as the Son of God and as the Son of Man was one stupendous sign of God's glory.[4]

The σημεῖων (signs) were chronologically arranged in its effect; they were important to understand Christ superiority over the issues of life humans cannot handle.[6] Signs reveals the Jesus' deity, help understand the purpose of eternal life and help believe in God through Jesus the Son that they may have life in his name (John17:3).

σημεῖοις not for Jesus' personal gain but for God's glory (Jn 1:14). Signs bring Christian to the absolute assurance of salvation. The same subject happens in other miracles where Jesus requires praise been given to God (Jn 11:4). John illuminate the demonstration of God's power via miracles to make known those who witnessed them would realize that the kingdom had arrived with the coming of Jesus. [7] The miracles explained and clarified some factual facts as it concerns different aspect of Jesus' event. [8] σημεῖον declare the meaning of the God's kingdom for the world with its future significance.

### ANALYSIS OF JOHN 2:1-12

The usage of και τη ημερα τη τριτη – 'third day' is in line with John's usage of ημερα (day) in 1: 29, 35, and 43). Thus, the third day here means Jesus reached Cana on the third day after the call of Philip and Nathanael (1:43). This journey probably took few days (1:28), and no incident is recorded of the last day of travel.

At the beginning of this story, γαμος a singular nominative masculine noun translated as a wedding, marriage festival, a wedding banquet, a wedding feast or matrimony is the occasion which brings Jesus - υιου, his mother - μητηρ του υιου and his disciples - και οι μαθηται αυτου play. [9] γαμος also appears in the

accusative form in second verse, signifying an emphasis on the event which took place. The first subject to be introduced is the mother of Jesus, who had apparently some special interest in the wedding (2:3, 5).

According to Bernard, in a Sahidic apocryphal fragment edited by Forbes Robinson, Mary Jesus' mother is said to be the sister of the bridegroom's parents.[10] It is plausible that Jesus' mother had come over to Cana from the neighboring village, Nazareth, or Capernaum (2:12). Although not stated in the text, it is logical to assert that it is wedding of a relative or family-friend; this would account for Mary's vehement role at the occasion and Jesus' invitation.

οι μαθηται αυτου is used in distinguishing Jesus' followers from the disciples of other Rabbis. Since Jesus had not yet declared Himself for what He was, and as the disciples had been attracted only during the previous week, it is not likely that they were invited to the wedding in their capacity as His disciples. They were probably present as friends either bride or bridegroom. Nothing in the narrative seems to support the suggestion of some commentators that they were unexpected guests, and that the failure of the wine was due to this sudden addition to the wedding party. ἐκλήθη (passive aorist) translated as 'invited' is perhaps to be rendered "to be called" or "saluted by name" as if it were a pluperfect. Another possibility is that Nathaniel, who was from Cana, was authorized to extend invitations. Some are of the opinion that he was a relative of the bridegroom, though not stated. [11] The main point is that Jesus accepted the invitation for the entire group. He was not an ascetic; He came eating and drinking (Matt. 11:19).

As the wedding proceeds, the wine – οινου began to run short. Since a Jewish wedding often lasted a week, the study posits that the deficiency in the wine-supply might be occasioned by the unexpected arrival of new guests. The fact that wine was considered a staple article of food is clear in Jewish setting (Gen. 14:18; Num. 6:20; Deut. 14:26; Neh. 5:18; Matt. 11:19). Because of its intoxicating character its use was definitely restricted; in connection with the execution of certain functions it was forbidden. Thus, excessive indulgence was always definitely condemned (Lev. 10:9; Prov. 31:4, 5; Eccl. 10:17; Isa. 28:7; I Tim. 3:8).

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The failure of the wine is an embarrassing circumstance, this prompted Jesus mother's attempt to rescue with the remark to Jesus, "They have no wine." Did she show a degree of impatience because he did not at once do something about the present embarrassing situation? She merely mentioned the need, but the hint was clear enough; the fact that she expected a miracle seems certain. Of all those present no one knew better than Mary who Jesus actually was and what task had been assigned to him (Lk 1:26-38), not even the disciples.

Jesus and Mary were introduced in the setting (1-2), and again mentioned in verse 12, the concluding verse of the event. Meanwhile, John 2 is a marriage context but nowhere in the text does the bride appear. However, many people within the purview of a symbolic meaning argue that Jesus is the bridegroom and the Mother, Mary is the bride. While some other explained that the sign Jesus performed symbolizes the newly established covenant between God and His people.[5] Following John's narrative, what brought about the gathering of many individuals (Jesus' mother, Jesus, his disciples, the servants, the chief of the feast, the bridegroom, the Jews and Jesus' brothers) in the society is simply the marriage ceremony. It was a well-known and normal event inherent in the Jewish setting. The cultural context from which John writes is placed vis-a-vis the sign Jesus performed. Therefore, this standpoint forms the basis on which a contextual view on marriage ceremony is explored in the next section of the work.

#### JOHN 2:1-12 IN YORUBA CULTURAL CONTEXT

The contextual engagement of John 2:1-12 is within the Yoruba cultural framework. The crux of the matter here has to do with marriage and its ceremonial nature. Marriage is an integral part of man's social life and a covenant and commitment between a man and woman.[12] The analysis of the text reveals several cardinal elements enshrined in the nature of the Jewish marriage ceremony and the Yoruba cultural context. It is important to note that this contextual discourse does not capture all activities in the Yoruba marriage ceremony. The observed activities as explicated in John 2:1-12 is explicitly analyzed.

Marriage is a sacrament of the society.[13] It is a sacred, life-long, religious and socio-cultural contract; [14] thus, marriage ceremony is always a glamorous affair. The presence of Mary, the invitation given to Jesus as well as their positive

responses (2:1-2) shows a kind of affiliation with the family in question. Also, this suggests that marriage is not an occasion anyone might want to miss having been invitation. It is a thing of joy; in fact, unserious people in terms of being maritally responsible are being queried by people in the community.[12]

According to Omobola, marriage is an essential cultural institution of the Yorubas. Marriage for the Yoruba man or woman is a necessity. It is a social union or legal contract between individuals that creates kinship in Yoruba culture.[15] It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged in a variety of ways. In the institutional families, marriage is a functional partnership rather than a romantic relationship. For a man or a woman who is matured enough to get married and still remain single is against the norms of the Yoruba.[16]

Marriage is a matter between families as much as between the bride and groom; many families arrange the marriages of their members.[17] In the Yoruba context, a family meeting precedes this event; this is where the families come together to trash many issues like the date of the event among others. Akinsipe and Babarinde explained thus:

The Yoruba family is an extended family system made up of all relatives called *Ebi* (household). The *Ebi* includes grandparents and great grandparent, uncles, aunts, and cousins many generations removed as far as one can trace. In the true traditional setting, the family lives in a household *Agbo'* headed by the oldest male who is called *Baale*. He is respected by all members of the *Ebi* including their wives and children.[18]

The meeting of *Ebi* is always in two folds; inter (which entails the bride and grooms family) which is commonly called introduction "*Idana*" and intra (which involves each families solely). At the success outcome of such meetings (*ipade molebi*), decisions are taken then people in the society are informed about the event. In fact, the jurisdiction of invitation has no bound.

The glamorous nature of marriage ceremony in the Yoruba context is reflective of the fact that although marriage oath and blessing takes place on one day; the fact remains that the wedding ceremony envelops the presence of many relatives and family members who will have been on ground some days before the event; receiving guests, meeting for family discussions,

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rejoicing, dining and planning in view of the ceremony.

A marriage ceremony takes place over a certain period of time. Marriage in Yoruba context just like the Jew isn't simply saying a few words. It is a step by step process taken on by the entire community.[17] The attendance and appearance of people in marriage ceremony have several connotations. This is suggestive of the fact that people deem it fit to honor the families in question and especially the parents of the couple. This clearly pulls supportive strings in the heart of the occasion hosts.

According to Barber, this ceremony is usually preceded by the "Bride's Eve (*Àisùn Ìyàwó*)" or "Bride's Enjoyment" (*Fàájì Ìyàwó*) as Joseph puts it.[19] In fact, this is where the performance of the nuptial poetry (*Ewì Ajemóyáwó*) takes place. [20] The bride will be chanting the nuptial chant known as *ekun iyawo* to receive blessings from her parents. Barber also confirmed that on the day before the girl moves into her husband's house, she makes a ceremonial tour around the town, starting with her own compound, saying farewell to her kin and announcing her impending change of state.[19]

The wedding day is called '*Ijo igbayawo*'. Wedding feasts are organized at the homes of both the bride and the bride-groom. Moshood (2011) explained that foods and palm wine are always in surplus, music and fun fair will fill the atmosphere both in the young man's house and the ladies' house. Wedding feasts are very expensive; this understanding is congruent with the occasions of the Jew, clearly seen in Mary's statement in verse 6; "...whatever He says to you, do it". It is because she knew the importance of the wine in the wedding feast. The foods and wine shouldn't be out of stock in the ceremony, because this is what makes every other activity successful. Some parents in Yoruba land end up with loans because of this understanding; to meet up with what is obtainable in the society.

In the Yoruba context, the feasting and dancing usually start on the eve of the wedding and continue intermittently until long after midnight on the day of the wedding. Dance bands are engaged to supply popular music, and dancing involved in wedding celebration knows no limits. Sometimes, more than one band is invited by each family. After this admonition

and prayers from the family, the wives from the bride's husband's family, wives from the bride's family and some of her friends will take her to her new house with singing and dancing. [21]

## THE RELEVANCE OF JOHN 2:1-12 FOR THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Marriage is a familiar concept which connotes covenant. Aside from the fact that Jesus' intervention in the event as explained in the body of the work helped the cultural situation at that time, which can be understood in the Yoruba context; it reveals the significant place of Jesus' mission on earth. In other words, the role Jesus played is not only relevant to the cultural context but a prototype of the mission to save mankind. Jesus rescued the situation without the knowledge of the owner of the ceremony themselves. Although Jesus' role is cardinal, his acknowledgement and recognition by the organizer's family is obscure. Therefore, while many Christians already believe Jesus, they should reach out to others because although a great miracle was done during the wedding; people noticed (even the Chief Steward of the wedding) the sign but could not in any way depict the source of the sign. No matter the writing on the wall about the Christian faith, evangelism is still a cardinal process for the Christian community (especially in this contemporary time); Christians must ensure the effective platform of evangelism order to point and draw men towards Christ.

Why Jesus intervened in the disarray situation is the fact that He does want the wedding ceremony to be uttered. The truth that Mary spotted out this need cannot be denied, but the fact remains that Jesus rescued the situation out of his own power and volition. Mary believed in Him; "...whatever He says to you, do it". But Mary's faith isn't enough to avert the impending doom. This is then suggestive of the fact that Jesus is not in the dissolving any covenant. In fact, Jesus' action and reaction to the situation reveal his interest in marriage held today. In view of this, it is important for Christians to understand the place of faith and God's will. The two are interwoven but distinct and must be strategically positioned in Christian life.

Also, the way of things and the nature of marriage in the Jewish and Yoruba context reveals the merriment involved in marriage ceremony. Several expenses are incurred for the purpose of ensuring that all and sundries are well taken care of. The families and even those

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who are not related to the family felicitate with the family and crave for their own day of joy too that others will come and celebrate with them. While all these are important, the one significant person who makes the marriage wonderful, not the ceremony now, but the marriage itself (the lifetime contract signed by the couple) work out is Jesus Christ. The integral place of Christ in every Christian marriage cannot be overemphasized. Someone said that the key to a successful marriage in the world is simply for the couple to be Christ-like. The determinant factor of this has to do with the focus of the investments made. While the preparation for the ceremony aspect of marriage covenant is organized, the lifetime structure should be well constructed making a great investment in that regard. The success of any Christian marriage is not dependent on how sophisticated the wedding ceremony is; rather, it depends on how firm the family is in Christ.

### CONCLUSION

Marriage is an essential part of the Jewish and Yoruba culture. Much importance is attached to the celebration that none of the family wants any form of misnomer. This event projects the cultural heritage of the people. The aesthetics of the traditional marriage is mainly in the performance because it is from there that attention is drawn to the elements of songs, food and dance. The fact that John made use of an important medium of σημεῖον – ‘sign’ to reveal the true identity of Christ cannot be overemphasized. Although the ministry of Jesus is the focal point, John 2:1-12 is embedded with the cultural event; marriage in the Jewish context. A clear view of the study’s observation unveils the importance of the crux of the event in the Yoruba context.

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