

The Gospel of John
Session Three – Jesus’ Epiphany and Encounters
(John 1:19 – 3:21)



Where is Cana?
The Mother of Jesus: introduction to the Book of Signs
Nicodemus

Where is Cana?

The Gospel of John mentions a town named Cana. John specifically tells us Cana is in Galilee, which is a region in Northern Israel. The location of the biblical town is widely debated today; however, the name Cana may derive from the Hebrew word for “reeds”, which suggests the town was located near marsh or grasslands.

In the Bible, Cana is best known as the place where Jesus performed his first public miracle. Told in chapter two of the Gospel of John, “a wedding took place at **Cana** in Galilee.” (John 2:1) “What Jesus did here in **Cana** of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:11) Jesus was attending a wedding in Cana with his mother and disciples. During the celebration, the host ran out of wine and Mary asked her son to do something about the situation. Jesus instructed the servants to fill six stone jars with water, however, when the master of the banquet tasted the liquid, it had become wine. Although this is believed to be Jesus’ first miracle, it is not recorded in the synoptic Gospels.

The Gospel of John mentioned Cana a further two times. “Once more he visited **Cana** in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum.” (John 4:46) When the man heard Jesus was in Cana, he begged Jesus to heal his son. Jesus declined to go with the man to his house; however, Jesus promised his son would live. As

Jesus was saying this, the fever left the young boy, and Cana became the location of a second miracle.

The final time Cana is mentioned in the Gospel of John is in relation to one of Jesus' disciples. "Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from **Cana** in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together." (John 21:1-2) Nathanael from Cana is more commonly known as Bartholomew the Apostle who was born in Cana during the 1st century AD. He was first mentioned in John 1 when Philip introduced him to Jesus. When Jesus met Nathanael, he said, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." (John 1:47) Jesus promised Nathanael that he would "see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:51)

In some versions of the Bible, Simon the Zealot, as he is known in the NIV, is known as Simon from Cana or Simon the Cananite. (Matthew 10:4, Mark 3:18) Simon was another of Jesus' apostles who, like Nathanael, may have been born in Cana. Some scholars, however, contest his place of birth, pointing out the Hebrew for "zealous" and "Cana" both derive from the same word, *qanai*, therefore, "Simeon from Cana" could be a mistranslation.

The location of Cana has baffled historians for centuries and many theories have been developed. There have been some suggestions that Cana may not have been a real place, however, the name of the town has also featured in *The Life of Josephus* written between 94-99 AD. To date, five places have been proposed as the true location of the town. They are Qana, Lebanon; Kafr Kanna, Israel; Khirbet Qana, Israel; Karm er-Rasm, Israel; and Ain Qana, South Lebanon.

The early Christian historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, selected Qana in Lebanon as the location of Cana during the 4th century. It is a village situated approximately 18 miles from the city of Tyre. It is said that Jesus' first miracle took place in one of the natural caves in the village, which contain ancient inscriptions on the rock.

In the 17th century, a papal emissary to Palestine reported two possible locations of Cana: Khirbet Qana and Kafr Kanna. The latter, located 4.3 miles from Nazareth, was considered to be the location of Cana long before the emissary's visit, however, there is no tangible evidence for this. Although Arabs predominantly inhabit the town, there are a few Catholic churches, including the Roman Catholic Chapel of the Apostle Bartholomew and the Franciscan Wedding Church.

Khirbet Qana, on the other hand, means "ruins of Cana", giving it more standing as the true location of the city. The village is 8 miles from Nazareth and contains the remains of a settlement from the Early Arab Period. Maps produced by the Crusaders cite Khirbet Qana as the biblical Cana, however, since the village lies

in ruins, there is little other evidence.

Meanwhile, Yardenna Alexandre, an Israeli archaeologist, is convinced the ruined site of Karm er-Rasm is the true location of Cana. Excavations have revealed it was once inhabited by a Jewish population and eventually abandoned in the Byzantine period. Unfortunately, no one else agrees with her theory.

Finally, Ain Qana, which means “the spring of Cana”, is an agricultural town that has been considered as a better candidate for the biblical Cana. Situated only a mile from Nazareth, early Christian pilgrims reported the town contained a spring from which the jars at the wedding may have been filled. The spring is no longer there, and excavations have not yet taken place. Once again, there is not enough evidence to determine if this is the true location.

For now, Cana remains missing!

– Rev. Martin Wheadon (Gants Hill UR)

The Mother of Jesus: Introduction to the Book of Signs

Not only is the mother of the Lord present at this wedding, but also Jesus’ disciples are said to be in attendance. The mother of the Lord is however, cast in a central role. The symbols are obvious. This transformation of water into wine will occur “on the third day” (John 2:1). There are six stone jars present that are meant to be used for the Jewish rites of purification. The mother of Jesus stands at the nexus between the shortcomings of the ritual activity of the Jews and the celebration of the new life that Jesus came to bring – new life that is symbolized by the marriage ceremony. The “old wine” has been spent. There is no more for the celebration. The mother of Jesus pushes her son to act in this crisis. He rebukes her, calling her “woman” and saying to her, in what seems like a harsh manner, that his “hour” has not yet come, and no one can force it. The word “hour” is used many times in the Fourth Gospel to refer to Jesus’ crucifixion and thus to the time of the ultimate revelation of who he is. When the Book of Signs is complete, Jesus finally announces that “the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified” (John 12:23), and the drama of the cross begins to unfold. Jesus in this earlier narrative must decline to have his mother determine the hour of his death, which for the Fourth Gospel will also be the hour of his glorification.

In this Cana of Galilee story his mother now retreats, but before doing so she is made to instruct the servants to “do whatever he says” (John 2:5). That is the moment when the water pots of Jewish purification are filled with water which is then transformed into wine. The wine steward tastes the new wine in the Jewish water pots, pronouncing it better than that first served at the wedding feast, and the glasses of the guests are refilled. The people wonder at the source of this wine, for if we

literalize the measurements given, there would be more than 150 gallons of new wine, meaning that this symbol of new life was present in overwhelming abundance. This dramatic act, says John, creates in the disciples faith, and “they believed in him” (John 2:11). The first of John’s signs is now complete, so Jesus, his mother and his disciples go down to Capernaum and remain for a few days. This is the final mention of the mother of the Lord until the scene of the crucifixion.

What is going on here? It is the first of all not a miracle story. It is a “sign” pointing to something quite different from a supernatural event. Clearly in this story Jesus is the bridegroom, an image that we will see appear again shortly. He is calling Israel into a new status. The wine of the spirit has replaced the waters of purification. Who then is “the mother of the Lord?” I submit that, as she is developed in the Fourth Gospel, she is a mythological figure who stands for Israel, the faith tradition that gave birth to Christianity and thus is its mother. This transition from Israel to Christianity is one of John’s interpretive keys. It must come, however, only when all else is ready. It is shrouded in secrecy in this narrative, for we are told that no one knows the source of this transformation. At the proper time all will know, but the ultimate revelation will come only when he – that is, Jesus – is lifted up on the cross. The seed of the idea, so central to John, that it will be in the death of Jesus that his glory will be revealed, is thus planted. That is a different note from any we have heard in the earlier gospels. John’s unique message, his transforming understanding, begins to come into view. We will watch it emerge slowly and steadily as his story unfolds. For now recognize that the mother of Jesus in this gospel is not a person; she is a symbol. When she appears again at the foot of the cross, the meaning of that symbol will become abundantly clear.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

Nicodemus

We are told that Nicodemus comes “by night.” This is not an accidental piece of information. The Fourth Gospel uses much light/dark imagery with light being good and dark being bad. The conversation starts out fine. Nicodemus, representing his group (“we know”), indicates that the signs that Jesus does are sourced from God. Remember that “signs” (*semeia*) is special Johannine language. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus does “deeds of power” (*dynameis*, which we often translate “miracles”), not signs. John never uses the word *dynameis*. What do signs do? They point to something. That is, the meaning of the act is not simply, “Wow – check that out!” Rather, it is something deeper about who God is and who Jesus is. In fact, this Gospel is rather impatient with “sign faith.” It might be OK as a baby step, but a mature Christian knows that a faith based on miracles is a shallow (and shaky) faith indeed.

Notice how Jesus does not stick out his chest and say, “Glad you noticed my powerful deed.” Instead, he ignores Nicodemus’s statement and tries to move to a deeper conversation by issuing the first of three double-amen sayings that appear in chapter 3. The signs point to the kingdom of God and how we participate in it. Whatever it entails, we must be born *ἄνωθεν*. The word has two meanings in Greek, “from above” and “again.” Jesus means the former; Nicodemus interprets it as the latter and so is immediately confused and starts talking about being physically reborn. Jesus plows ahead, issuing another double-amen saying. Being born *ἄνωθεν* means: (1) being born from above, (2) being born of water and the Spirit, and (3) seeing/entering the kingdom of God.

Jesus is speaking in metaphor while Nicodemus is stuck on the literal. Notice that one Greek word lies behind the English words “Spirit” and “wind” (and, for that matter, “breath”): *pneuma*. The author is doing wordplay here in verse 8, as he invites Nicodemus into the exciting, if unpredictable and surprising, life of the Spirit. If Nicodemus was lost before, he is even more lost now; so he questions Jesus, probably with a furrowed brow and some frustration or exasperation about Jesus’ pedagogical skills!! “How can these things be?” Nicodemus cannot seem to let go of the ordinary to make room for the extraordinary. He clings to what he already knows and wants everyone and everything to “stay in their lane.” To fit it all into his preconceived categories. I can relate to that.

If Nicodemus is frustrated with Jesus, Jesus appears to return the favor as he chastises him. Nicodemus respectfully calls Jesus rabbi in verse 2, but Jesus’ use of the term “teacher” with respect to Nicodemus conveys critique: “You are a ‘teacher’ but you don’t understand?” He then proceeds to make what appear to be more enigmatic statements. Nicodemus never speaks with Jesus after verse 9.

By the end of chapter 3, it’s hard to know how to react to Nicodemus and whether to sympathize with him or scoff at him.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

Primary Sources:

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