

CANA IN RETROSPECT: READING JOHN 2:1-12
IN LIGHT OF THE CROSS

I.

In 1978, Norman Petersen heralded a paradigm shift in gospel studies, a movement away from viewing the texts as windows opening onto the life of the historical Jesus, the experience of the early church, or the theology of the evangelists, and toward viewing them as mirrors whose meanings are contained within themselves as literary works. (Petersen, 1978: 24) New Testament interpreters have relied upon a variety of literary theorists to provide the narratological questions and categories appropriate to this paradigm shift. Reader-response criticism, an approach focusing upon the role of the reader in the production of the meaning of a text, has been demonstrated to be an especially valuable hermeneutical approach to the gospels.

The importance of the reader has not always been recognized in either literary or biblical studies. Historical critical interpreters sought the author's identity, background, sources, and purposes. Readers were relegated to the passive role of the author's "recipient" or "audience." The importance of the author so dominated concerns that C. K. Barrett could say that the Fourth Evangelist, "though doubtless aware of the necessity of strengthening Christians and converting the heathen, wrote primarily to satisfy himself." Barrett goes on: "His gospel must be written: it was no concern of his whether it was also read." (Barrett, 1978: 135) The approach of New Criticism in literary studies, ignoring both author and reader, attended to the text as a closed world to be interpreted from within itself. Reader-response theorists, however, have moved the focus of attention a step further, past authorial intentionality and the absolute text to the "virtual dimension" of the text produced in interaction with the reader.

Wolfgang Iser, a seminal figure in the analysis of the role of the reader, labels his approach to literary texts "phenomenological." (Iser, 1974: 274) He seeks to describe the interactive process occurring between reader and text that results in the production of the "aesthetic response" (*Wirkung*). (Iser, 1978: ix) Iser's phenomenological approach to reading offers valuable heuristic categories for understanding how readers bring their imaginative and perceptive faculties into play in assembling the meaning of biblical texts. Following an overview of Iser's description of the reading process, I will illustrate the potential contribution of this approach to Johannine studies by accompanying the reader from Cana to Golgotha, noting the demands the text places upon the reader and the reader's role in configuring the meaning of the gospel narrative.

II.

Since Iser views literary texts as acts of communication, he feels justified in approaching literature from a functionalist standpoint. (Iser, 1978: 54). Because the reader and the text are "partners in a process of communication," one's prime concern will not be with the "meaning" of the text, but with its "effect." (Iser, 1978: 54). That effect depends on two criteria for its success: (1) the strategies the author employs and (2) the real reader's willingness to assume the role of the "implied reader" offered by the text's "network of response-inviting structures." (Iser, 1978: 34) For Iser, the primary value of literary criticism is that it "helps to make conscious those aspects of the text which would otherwise remain concealed in the subconscious; it satisfies (or helps to satisfy) our desire to talk about what we have read." (Iser, 1974: 290)

The text and the reader represent two poles connected in the dynamic process of reading, resulting in the production of a "response." According to Iser, "effects and responses are the properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process." (Iser, 1978: ix) In this process the reader moves through the

text in a strictly temporal manner. Unlike other aesthetic objects, such as a sculpture or painting, the literary text cannot be grasped all at once. The text can be appropriated only by "consecutive phases of reading," resulting in a means of understanding unique to literature. Iser conceives the relation between text and reader to be "quite different from that between object and observer: instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along inside that which it has to apprehend." (Iser, 1978: 109)

While moving through the text with this "wandering viewpoint," the reader forms expectations, or "protensions," that are subsequently confirmed, frustrated, or modified in the reading process. (Iser, 1978: 109-11) In literary, as opposed to expository, texts the protensions more often are frustrated or modified instead of fulfilled. The reader is often required to recall material previously encountered and to view it from a new perspective, against a new background. Iser says, "The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory; conversely these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations." (Iser, 1974: 278) Iser terms this reevaluation "retrospection." (Iser, 1974: 278)

Iser emphasizes that the connections formed between elements of the text and the reevaluation of past events, the "interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories," are not components of the text as such. Rather these connections lie within "the province of the reader himself." (Iser, 1978: 111). Consequently, for Iser, "every moment of reading is a dialectic of protension and retension, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoint carves its passage through both at the same time and leaves them to merge together in its wake." (Iser, 1978: 112). The aesthetic response obtains as the reader enters into this dynamic process of recreation: "We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept,

we reject." (Iser, 1974: 288)

In addition to the attempt at resolving the tensions between present and future, past and present, the reader searches, consciously or unconsciously, for a consistent pattern or "gestalt" in the text. (Iser, 1974: 283) According to Iser, "by grouping together the written parts of the text, we enable them to interact, we observe the direction in which they are leading us, and we project onto them the consistency which we, as readers require. This 'gestalt' must inevitably be colored by our own characteristic selection process. For it is not given by the text itself; it arises from the meeting between the written text and the individual mind of the reader. . . . The 'gestalt' is not the true meaning of the text; at best it is a configurative meaning." (Iser, 1974: 284) This process is also dialectical, for in the text one inevitably encounters "alien associations," those "impulses" that cannot be integrated and that speak of richer "semantic possibilities" of the text. (Iser, 1974: 285) The alien associations prevent the reader from being completely absorbed in the gestalt or "illusion" that he/she has formed and cause the reader to oscillate between involvement in and observation of that illusion. (Iser, 1974: 286) As a result, the reader is "bound to conduct his own balancing operation, and it is this that forms the esthetic experience offered by the literary text." (Iser, 1974: 286)

One other Iserian concept requires explanation: the distinction between the "written" text and the "unwritten" text, or "indeterminacies." These "indeterminacies" are left to the reader to formulate. As Iser explains, ". . . two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable." (Iser, 1974: 282) To be sure, the author has a variety of narrative techniques with which to influence the reader's imagination, but to provide the whole picture is to fail to activate that imagination. (Iser, 1974: 282) In the dynamics of reading the filling in of these indeterminacies or "gaps" interacts with the process of anticipation and retrospection, and affects the formation of the

gestalt of the text. As a result, "one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decisions as to how the gap is to be filled." (Iser, 1974: 280)

The potential for many readings of a single text does not, however, invalidate Iser's critical approach. The literary critic identifies those "intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning production" in the text with which every reader must interact in the process of formulating a response. (Iser, 1978: 25) The task of his theory of aesthetic response is "to facilitate intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations." (Iser, 1978: x) Iser calls for an abandonment of the categories of "objectivity/subjectivity" in favor of his "intersubjective" frame of reference. (Iser, 1978: 25)

Ultimately Iser's theory concerns the production of meaning that results from the dynamic encounter between reader and text. As the reader attempts deciphering in the unfamiliar situations provided by the text, an unconscious element of his/her being manifests itself. As Iser says, "The production of meaning in literary texts . . . does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness." (Iser, 1974: 294)

III.

Of all the New Testament narrative texts, the Fourth Gospel offers the most potential for demonstrating the value of Iser's approach, for his categories are almost explicitly applicable to that text. In John, the reader's expectations are aroused and modified from the first sentence. Retrospection is clearly required of the reader (4:46, 54; 21:20), is practiced by Jesus' disciples (2:17, 22; 12:16), and is facilitated by the Paraclete (14:26). In addition, the reader is expected to respond to the text by finding life through believing that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God"

(20:24-25). A survey of the Fourth Gospel from the first manifestation of Jesus' glory at Cana to his hour of glory at Golgotha, taken within the perspective of Iser's "implied reader," will demonstrate how strategies employed in the text lead the reader to a completely transformed understanding of the significance of the first sign.

The reader comes to the account of the first sign (2:1-12) after having been introduced to Jesus as the eternal Word become flesh and as the bearer of "glory" befitting the unique Son of God (1:1-18). Characters in the first chapter have heaped multiple titles upon Jesus (1:29, 34, 36, 38, 41, 49) and have made astounding statements about him (1:29, 30, 32, 45). Jesus himself has demonstrated a mysterious kind of authority in summoning his disciples (1:38, 39, 42, 43, 47, 48, 50) and has aroused equally mysterious expectations about himself (1:51). Nothing in the first chapter, however, indicates that he will perform miracles. Although protensions of some sort of conflict have been raised (1:5, 10-11, 26, 29), nothing has been explicitly said of Jesus' death.

The setting of John 2:1-12, a wedding feast, is part of the "repertoire" employed by the Fourth Evangelist to challenge the reader's norms (Iser, 1978: 82). The wedding feast and the abundance of wine are images associated with the messianic age in both Jewish and Christian tradition (Isa. 54:4-8; 57:4-5; Matt. 8:11; 22:1-14; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 22:16-18; Rev. 19:9; Amos 9:13-14; Hos. 14:7; Jer. 31:12; 1 Enoch 10:19; 2 Bar. 29:5; Mark 2:22). Since Jesus has already received the title Messiah (1:41, 49), such norms are clearly being evoked. It will be for the reader to observe how the familiar elements of the repertoire are "coherently deformed" and "recodified" to bring about a transformed understanding of eschatology. According to Iser, ". . . literary communication differs from other forms of communication in that those elements of the sender's repertoire which are familiar to the reader, through their application in real life situations, lose their validity when transplanted into the literary text. And it is precisely this loss of validity which leads to the communication of something new." (Iser, 1978: 83)

As the reader moves through the account of Jesus' first sign, many expectations are aroused. Jesus' mother appears on the scene prior to him and plays a significant, albeit puzzling role in the story. Given her presence and role in the first sign, should the reader expect her to play a major role in the narrative that follows? Jesus' initial response to his mother includes a reference to his "hour" that is yet to come. This hour's identity, significance, and actualization remain ambiguous. In addition, the narrator informs the reader in 2:11 that this is only the "beginning" of Jesus' signs, clearly raising expectations of more to follow. After the sign, Jesus and his disciples accompany his mother and brothers back to Capernaum (2:12). Consequently, the reader naturally expects Jesus' family to play a further role in the narrative.

The gaps in this story are as plentiful as the wine. Why is the mother of Jesus not called by name? His father had been designated in 1:45. Why does she tell Jesus about the lack of wine? What does she expect him to do? Are his words to her a rebuke? Why does she seem to gather from his words that he might still act? Why does the narrator supply so many details about the sign? Why do the servants obey Jesus and his mother? Who, apart from Jesus and the servants, actually know of the transformation of the water to wine? What exactly is the "glory" that has been manifested in this sign? The indeterminacies of the account place demands upon the reader's imagination throughout.

At this early stage in the narrative the reader can only understand this event in rather traditional messianic and eschatological categories. As in the first chapter, Jesus has spoken with a mysterious authority. The Messiah has miraculously provided an abundance of choice wine at a wedding feast to inaugurate his ministry. Surrounded by his family and his believing disciples, he has manifested his glory. His "hour" is yet to come, as are additional signs. Like the water in the stone pots, however, all this is to be transformed into something far richer.

The incident immediately following the Cana miracle contains one of the early alien associations in the Fourth Gospel (2:13-25). After Jesus' authoritative act in the Temple, the

narrator speaks of Jesus' death and resurrection (2:22), as well as of those in Jerusalem who saw Jesus' signs and believed, but whom Jesus did not trust (2:24-25). The death of the Messiah is not a part of the reader's expectations and seems to conflict with the glory of the previous episode.

In an account containing a surprising number of parallels to the first sign (4:1-42), the reader is required for the first time to view the Cana story retrospectively. In this episode Jesus encounters a unnamed Samaritan woman (4:7; cf. 2:1). Although he speaks to her of his thirst (4:7), she desires the "living water" Jesus offers (4:15; cf. 2:3). She does not know where Jesus gets this "living water" (4:11), and his disciples do not know the source of his "food" (4:31-34; cf. 2:9). Jesus addresses her as "Woman" and speaks to her of a coming "hour" (4:21; cf. 2:4) in which distinctions between Jew and Samaritan will lose their significance, an hour that in some sense has already arrived. The woman, having found "living water," leaves her waterpot (4:28; cf. 2:6-7). As a result of this encounter, the Samaritans "believe" in Jesus (4:39-42; cf. 2:11).

The reader's original understanding of Cana must now be revised. Although the Cana miracle clearly evoked the norm of Jewish messianic expectations, these norms are now revealed to be far too narrow. Although "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (4:9), Jesus has acted to quench the thirst of both. As he provided the choice wine for the Jews at Cana from an unknown source, so he now provides living water for Samaritans at Sychar. His coming "hour" will be a time when neither Jerusalem nor Gerizim will be the focus of attention, for worship will be in spirit and truth (4:21). In fact, Jesus' presence in Samaria attests to the proleptic arrival of that hour (4:23). Samaritan waterpots are to be abandoned even as Jewish ones are filled to the brim (4:28; cf. 2:7), for "salvation is of the Jews" (4:22). But Samaritans, too, may believe, since Jesus is "Savior of the world" (4:42).

The reader is explicitly reminded of the Cana episode in 4:46 and 54, when the narrator

frames the account of the second sign with references to the first. The healing of the official's son stands as a rebuke to those who must "see signs and wonders" in order to believe. Yet, like the incidents at Cana and Sychar, this episode closes with people "believing" (4:53). This second designated "sign," encourages the reader to see in it another manifestation of Jesus' "glory." At this point the reader's expectations have been broadened to include both Jews and Samaritans as the recipients of the messianic blessings, but no real transformation of the understanding of those blessings has occurred.

Jesus' words in chapter five expand the reader's expectations even further. In a heated exchange with "the Jews" following his healing of the lame man, Jesus speaks again of a coming "hour" (5:25, 28-29). The eschatological dimension of this hour is evident, for it will be a time when "the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live." Just as Jesus' manifestation of his glory at Cana marked the proleptic arrival of his hour, so in 5:25 he speaks of an hour that is both future and present (cf. 4:23; 11:25-26, 43-44). In this same context the reader once more hears of the possibility of Jesus' own demise (5:18).

The first major transformation of the reader's norms occurs in chapter six. In this episode the people lack food rather than wine or water (6:5-9), and Jesus supplies it in abundance (6:10-13). At the Capernaum synagogue, in the discourse that follows, Jesus describes believing on him as an elimination of both hunger and thirst (6:35; cf. 2:3, 10; 4:13-14). Like the Samaritan woman, these Jews ask Jesus for the bread of life (6:34), but they do not understand its source (6:41; cf. 2:9; 4:11). Jesus offers life to those who "eat his flesh" and "drink his blood," (6:53-56; cf. 2:9-10; 4:10, 13-14, 31-34). Although Jesus mentions nothing about his hour, he speaks again of his raising the dead "on the last day" (6:40, 44, 54). In contrast to the episodes in Cana and Sychar, this results in some turning away (6:60-71) rather than believing (2:11; 4:39-40). The reader's memory of Cana is also evoked by a passing reference to Jesus' mother (6:42), the first since chapter two.

The reader's concept of the messianic blessings must now undergo a drastic change. Jesus does offer the "world" (6:51) a bread that will satisfy its hunger and a drink that will quench its thirst (6:35), but these are his own flesh and blood (6:53-56). Jesus' death is clearly foreshadowed, and the reader must decide whether to take offense like some in the story (6:66) or to continue like the twelve (6:67-68). The abundance of wine at Cana assumes new meaning for the reader, and the "living water" offered to Samaritans is transformed into "wine" of a different sort. Hereafter the reader expects the Messiah's death, but must seek ways of formulating a gestalt that includes his coming "hour" and his "glory."

Beginning with chapter seven, references to Jesus' death abound. In 7:1-8, Jesus' death and his appointed hour are brought into proximity for the first time, in a conversation with his brothers, who have not appeared in the narrative since the Cana miracle (2:12). As in the Cana story, Jesus' family members attempt to persuade him to do something he initially refuses to do because his "time" has not arrived. The association of Jesus' death and his hour occurs frequently in the remainder of the Gospel (7:30; 8:20, [cf. 7:44; 8:59; 10:31, 39]; 12:23-28; 13:1-3; 17:1). Another of the reader's expectations formed in the original encounter with the Cana episode has been transformed from expectations of glory to expectations of death.

The final element to undergo radical revision is the concept of glory itself. In the first sign Jesus is said to have manifested his glory, resulting in his disciple's belief (2:11). Later, he spoke to Nicodemus of his being "lifted up" (3:14-17), with no hint of anything other than glorification. In 7:38-39, however, the reader's understanding of glorification is called into question. For there, in words reminiscent of Cana, Sychar, and Capernaum, Jesus offers an abundance of "living water" to those that thirst. The narrator adds that Jesus spoke of the Spirit, but that "the Spirit was not yet given, for Jesus was not yet glorified." The "not yet" reminds the reader of Jesus' hour, which has already taken on new meaning. Perhaps Jesus' glory also is of a nature different than the reader first anticipated. This modified expectation is

confirmed when Jesus clearly identifies his "hour" as the time of his "glorification" (12:23) and speaks of his death as his being "lifted up" (12:32-33). From this point on, Jesus' hour, his glory, and his death are incorporated into the gestalt configured by the reader (13:1-3, 31-32; 17:1, 5). The reader's initial encounter with the Cana story has been completely deconstructed.

The final retrospective view of Cana is found in the narration of the crucifixion (19:16-37). Here the reader encounters several now familiar elements that recall Jesus' first sign. The mother of Jesus is present again, for only the second time in the Gospel (19:25). Jesus again addresses her as "woman" (19:26) and commits her to the custody of the Beloved Disciple, not to his brothers. The narrator notes that from "that hour" that disciple took her to his own home (19:27). On this occasion Jesus cries out in thirst (19:28), and soldiers offer him sour wine (19:29). A soldier pierces Jesus' side, producing a flow of "blood and water" (19:34; cf. 2:10; 4:13-14; 6:35, 53-56; 7:37-39).

Cana bears a new significance in light of Golgotha. The reader now sees past the glory, the joy, the celebration, and the abundance of wine. The scene has taken on a much more somber tone. The hour that is to come is the hour of Jesus' death. The choice wine is his own blood. Even as Jesus' hunger is satisfied only by doing the Father's will (4:34), so his thirst is quenched only by "the cup the Father has given" him (18:11). The glory he manifests is a foreshadowing of his being lifted up on the cross.

But Cana has also prepared the reader to view the death of Jesus with a unique perspective. It is the hour of Jesus' glory, the time of his exaltation. It is the means by which resurrection and eternal life are offered to the world. Jerusalem and Gerizim have lost their significance in the light of Golgotha. Jesus' death is the provision of the messianic blessings, the choicest of wine, the living water, the bread of life. Rather than an hour of sorrow, it is an hour of glory and joy. The reader finds this new perspective on death expanded by the narratives of the empty tomb (20:1-10) and of the appearances of the risen Jesus (20:11-21:23).

IV.

Reading the Fourth Gospel requires one to formulate an understanding of one's own existence that incorporates suffering and glory, sorrow and joy, mourning and celebration. The gestalt configured by the reader of the Fourth Gospel must be capable of finding wholeness to both Cana and Golgotha. In the forming of that harmony, one is enabled to offer the response to the text desired by the narrator: "these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

WORKS CITED

Barrett, C. K. The Gospel According to St. John, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978

Iser, Wolfgang. The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Petersen, Norman R. Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978.