

Writing my last post on Papias made me think of something that is rather humorous even if it is only very tangentially related. If you recall, Papias claimed that Jesus taught the following about the future utopian kingdom on earth:

The days are coming when vines will come forth, each with ten thousand boughs; and on a single bough will be ten thousand branches. And indeed, on a single branch will be ten thousand shoots and on every shoot ten thousand clusters; and in every cluster will be ten thousand grapes, and every grape, when pressed, will yield twenty-five measures of wine.

When I was writing up that post, I was reminded of the story in the Gospel of John in which Jesus turns the water into wine. Jesus appears to have enjoyed wine in great abundance.

The story in John is particularly interesting, and what is humorous to me is how I've heard it interpreted by well-meaning conservative Christians who were certain that Jesus would not ever encourage people to partake of alcoholic beverages.

In John 2 Jesus and his disciples are invited to a wedding. (Contrary to what you sometimes hear by creative interpreters, this could not be Jesus' own wedding! He gets invited to it by someone else.) These wedding ceremonies could last for days. After a while, the wine runs out. That's very bad indeed. Jesus' mother asks him to do something. He rebukes her, but then does what she asks. There are six large jars there, each large enough to hold over 20 gallons. Jesus tells the slaves to fill them up to the brim. He then tells the master of ceremonies to taste what is in them. The master of ceremonies does so and to his amazement the water has turned into wine. And not just any ole wine, but fantastic wine. He goes to the bridegroom and praises him, saying that most people at long weddings serve the good wine first, and then when everyone has had a lot to drink, bring out the second-rate stuff (since no one much cares any more at that point). But you, he says, have saved the best wine for last.

When I was a youth pastor of a conservative Christian church in Oak Lawn Illinois, back in the mid 1970s, a sincere and rather severe mother of one of my kids told me that this story in John could not really be about Jesus turning water into wine. (Since good Christians would not drink wine.) No, she told me, the Greek word for "wine" in the passage means "new wine." And new wine is wine that has not yet fermented, so that it has no alcoholic content.

I've always found this interpretation highly amusing, and it has always struck me as a perfect example of how people will try to get around what a text says in order to make it mean what they want it to mean.

For one thing - something I didn't know at the time - the word used for "wine" in this passage is not a special word meaning "new wine." It is simply the word wine. That is, the stuff with alcohol in it.

For another thing, something that I *did* think at the time, but didn't feel like I should tell this sincere woman who would have taken offense, the story simply makes no sense if the point was the Jesus turned the water into new wine. Just imagine the scene. People have been having a good time, hanging out, drinking good wine, enjoying themselves. The supplies run low. Jesus intervenes and performs a miracle. And the master of ceremonies can't believe it. He goes up to the bridegroom and praises him. Most people serve the best wine first and then bring out the second-rate stuff. But you have outdone yourself! At first we were drinking wine, but now you have given us GRAPE JUICE!!

As miraculous as this famous deed of Jesus is (recorded only in John 2), it pales in comparison with what will happen in the utopian kingdom according to Papias, who claims he is simply citing a saying of Jesus. According to that saying, each and every grapevine in the kingdom will have ten thousand boughs; each of those ten thousand boughs will have ten thousand branches; each of those branches will have ten thousand shoots; each of those shoots will have ten thousand clusters of grapes; each of those clusters will have ten thousand grapes; and each grape will produce 25 gallons of wine.

Now that's a lot of wine! Probably someone on the blog can do the math, and tell us how many gallons this one vine - presumably there are millions of them - will produce. And it should be stressed: this won't be the cheap stuff you buy at the supermarket. This will be Chateauneuf du Pape. And since this is the coming kingdom will have no suffering, there will be no downside of drinking it in abundance. Now **that's** a utopia!



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