

Episode 4: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Stan:

You are listening to Conversations in the Gospel of John episode 4. this episode was recorded in the spring of 2023 at Friends University in Wichita Kansas welcome to conversations in the Gospel of John where we want to bridge the gap between current academic research and contemporary proclamation of this wonderful text my name is Stan Harstine my co-host is Douglas Estes

Douglas:

hi I'm Douglas and I currently teach at Friends University before becoming an academic I was a pastor for 15 or 16 years and I hold a PhD in theology from the University of Nottingham

Stan:

I've been involved with teaching and preaching in Baptist congregations for the past 30 years I currently teach at Friends University in Wichita Kansas and hold a PhD in biblical studies from Baylor University we're so thankful that you are choosing to listen to our conversation today we're talking with Sherri Brown who is an associate professor at Creighton University up in Nebraska and so Sherri what would you like to introduce yourself to our audience

Sherri:

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hi thanks uh Doug and Stan for having me as part of this conversation I'm really happy to be here I as you said am associate professor of New Testament at Creighton University in Omaha Nebraska I've been here for about nine years I uh grew up in the East and West Virginia and had my PhD in biblical studies from the Catholic University of America

Stan:

well that's wonderful we're so glad to have you just up the road as they might say from Wichita to Omaha lots of things going on between those towns so let's start the conversation Sherri by telling us what caused you to be interested in the Gospel of John way back when you were studying at some point in your career

Sherri:

yeah with it's hard to say because I sort of I've always responded to that question with well the gospel John was my first love I'm not sure sort of when that love began but even you know as a as a teenager uh an undergrad the Gospel of John always spoke to me in ways that maybe the other gospels didn't and as I was pursuing my master's program I always wanted to do a seminar on John and one was never available and then I spent some time in the Peace Corps and International

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Development finally went back for my doctoral program and heard that Frank Maloney was at the Catholic University of America at the time and uh so that's where I started my program for folks who don't know Frank Maloney is a a master scholar on the Gospel of John so I ended up doing all my studying with him yeah and he became a a great mentor to me and we continue to work together

Douglas:

so Sherri as someone who loves the gospel but is also a fully qualified scholar of the Gospel what is the method that you use when reading the gospel or what's your favorite approach s

Sherri:

So as a uh proper uh student of Frank Maloney I was trained um in what we call a literary approach or specifically A Narrative Approach um to the gospel which certainly uh takes into account the historical context and the time and place and setting of the ancient world and the writing of this uh Gospel of John it takes also very seriously the Evangelist as author as uh one who had these traditions and of course in the gospel claims to have been an eyewitness but shaped the material in such a way for an intended audience as we say the audience that he was looking to maybe his community and shaping the story and telling what he felt they

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needed to hear in order to affirm their faith strengthen the the community unity and John of course is our one gospel well like the gospel Luke John actually tells us that in at toward the end in John 20:30-31 he says and I'm paraphrasing I'm not reading it now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God and that you may have life in his name so he says that he's picked and chosen and shaped his narrative in this way and so I go back you know to the beginning what we call the prologue John 1:1 to 18 as a first page as an introduction and follow the shape of the narrative and using all of the things that the tools that we think about when we think about narrative character plot setting story arcs all of that good stuff

Stan:

so we've been talking a little bit about ahead of time about women in the gospel and sometimes that's a tremendous approach there are quite a few to talk about in John's gospel as opposed to the other three but let's talk about that one who doesn't have a name she's just simply the mother of Jesus so tell us about John 2 and the wedding and the mother of Jesus and um what what have you been thinking about her lately as a just an

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overall uh big picture item you love the story tell us why you love the story

Sherri:

this approach feminist in the sense of a concern for the role of women and sort of a collaborative approach and oftentimes people don't think about John as being particularly feminist or one who focuses on the role of women but if we take seriously this this narrative and the way that he writes we have longer deeper more far-reaching encounters between Jesus and women that really sort of shape the narrative or shape the direction of Jesus's uh Ministry and what God is doing through Jesus in John than any of our other gospels and all of this begins at John 2. so again only the second uh chapter obviously and Jesus has just begun his ministry he's gathered disciples over the course of the first couple days of the narrative the end of chapter one and then we're told that on the third day there was a wedding at Cana and Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there and as you say she's always referred to by the narrator by the author as the mother of Jesus she's never given a name you know we have to believe we don't often want to make assumptions or presumptions about what our authors know or don't know but her name was given uh prominently in other gospels toward the end of The

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Narrative we're told that our author narrator and the mother of Jesus were given to each other by Jesus I'll come back to that so he must have known her name I think we can say so what is he doing there by always referring to her as the mother of Jesus Stan:

yeah I'm gonna let you finish up but here's a thought that I had because we were recording this shortly after Easter and we were reading through Luke and there's way too many Mary's in some of those synoptics to keep track of who the heck they're talking about so I think that you know you know just a random thought is he didn't want to get her confused with any other Mary that might be in the story so what do you think about the reference to mother of Jesus

Sherri:

So again you know it's sort of if we take this Narrative Approach this is the first this would be the first Mary right and this is our sort of opening encounter if anything you want you might suspect he would highlight her as the Mary and maybe unnamed the others right uh later in the gospel or something like that so I think that um by always referring to her as the mother of Jesus he's actually highlighting her role as mother and notice um at the same time Jesus always refers to her as woman he addresses her as woman here in John 2 and he does it again on the cross

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at John 19. so in terms of character shaping character building it highlights her role as woman and mother and as woman and mother she inaugurates Jesus's public Ministry sort of facilitates the beginning of his activity in public at John 2 at this wedding in Cana so I think sort of that is is um in terms of what John is doing by shaping it this way I think he's starting off the story by highlighting the role of a woman and mother and by leaving her unnamed highlighting the role of all women and mothers you know in in this way

Douglas:

so one of the questions let's let me dig a little deeper in this one of the questions that you get if you're in the local church and you're reading this passages why in the world does Jesus refer to his mom as mother that seems so cold or unusual or weird and I know you you and I both know there's lots of theories but from a narrative perspective how do you answer that question in a couple of sentences with a layperson

Stan:

why does he refer to as woman yeah exactly woman yeah

Sherri:

yeah and so I think it's it's whenever you're you're sort of reading this passage you know with folks they're like how rude you know um

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and then it almost seems like he uh uh rebukes her but I think we need to be careful with how we read uh what the Evangelist says and exactly what he says and I think sometimes our our English translations don't serve us too well in that um but I just want to say that I just want to um bring up that Jesus does refer to her as woman but he also refers to her as woman again at John 19 when we next see her there's no way that you could that one could interpret that as that encounter as rude or or oppositional and he actually refers to other women as women so however unusual it is I think from a character building standpoint from a narrative standpoint it's allowing both uh John as evangelist and Jesus as minister to highlight the fact that he's encountering these women and these women are helping to shape his ministry in this encounter you know she comes to him and says they have no wine oftentimes this is restated by folks that she requests the miracle she requests a miracle from him well that's not what she does she actually all she actually does is sort of make known or reveal you know the lack in the wedding and we can do lots of uh historical contextualization about ancient weddings and this sort of um honor uh uh involved in providing abundant uh food and wine for the guests which would suggest that the hosts are in a potentially shameful situation by running out of wine we can also talk

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about and that maybe she's trying to help allay that potentiality we can also talk about if we go back to the Jewish the Jewish scriptures how the prophets would speak of you know the the coming of the Messiah the sort of revelation of the Messiah as um a banquet with abundant food and wine so there's that symbolism there too and then Jesus's response to her is this you know age-old very complicated question given the larger sort of symbolism here of a Messianic banquet and what John 1 has set us up for with sort of uh the potential revelation of the glory of God I suggest what Jesus is doing is challenging her I mean it's it's definitely a strong saying he's not rebuking her and saying I'm not doing this he's saying what is between you and I are you ready to sort of um be a part of what God is doing through me and she responds interestingly enough not by talking to him but by turning to servants and saying do whatever he tells you

Douglas:

well I you know I I think that that opening statement by Jesus the statement is really the wrong word you know I've always read that as kind of a fatic statement which means it's a a euphemism like uh almost in English we would say yo what's up you know so it's in fact as you said Sherri it's not designed at all to be confrontational it's designed to be

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in my opinion relational let me dig in with what you're saying a little bit because I think a lot of times pastors if they're teaching this or if you have a Bible study or something like that you can go the historical route but then people's eyes glaze over when we start talking about you know the the weddings and the ancient world and then people don't care uh and then we can talk about the symbolic but then it's easy to to turn that into a free-for-all narrative though the beauty of narratives is focus on story so when you think about this this story this is the first sign why does John put this or make this the first sign that he narrates I mean what is what is the importance here like if you're trying to explain to a layperson and you only had a couple of sentences what would be the the gist that John wants to get here and does

Stan:

does Mary's role yeah have a significant um part in this is it an inaugurated sign yeah and the woman role

Sherri:

this inaugural sort of present who Jesus is going to be in this gospel Jesus in this gospel is challenging is provocative he's welcoming but he's going to push you further than you thought you could go it I think it's a very strong opening and it incorporates women uh as with men in Jesus's

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disciple his close Community she acts then the servant act and then we only come back to the ones that arrive with him at the end and find out that uh they've been they've been so far they've been Watchers right they're not doers yet but Jesus begins to reveal his glory they begin to believe in him and then the whole crowd leave the wedding and move on men women the whole sort of group together

Stan:

I want to pick up on one thing you said is that Jesus is I'll use the word provoking those who would follow him perhaps believe in him to move Beyond perhaps and the fun part about narrative is sometimes we have to try and read a back story of what may have happened to get to that point that perhaps Mary as the mother of Jesus has already had some encounters where he has challenged her to believe differently about this coming Messiah and that she is starting to act out or act away from a cultural prescribed Behavior to a kingdom-prescribed behavior of caring for those who who might be in need who might be facing shaming public shaming because of their lack of wine any thoughts on how the mother of Jesus came to be such a provocateur herself in Crossing those boundaries and bringing the need forward

Sherri:

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I mean very I I really like that idea of she's really just she's really uh caring for others by uh by bringing this situation uh to Jesus by making the need uh playing for him it allows Jesus with her leadership you would say to maintain the community and to keep people you know sort of in community so it's a model for for helping and it's a model for sort of stepping up when you see people in need I I agree um very much and I think we see that in encounters with Jesus all across the gospel he's going to keep pushing you to be better but he wants you on board now right you don't have to be perfect before you begin he wants folks really try in their imperfection in their flaws continuing to act continuing to grow we think of Nicodemus you know he's a fan favorite and we're all going to continue having our good days in bad right having our solid days and our and our and our fragile days and I think in this gospel Jesus he still wants you right he wants you in relationship now

Stan:

it's easy for us to always focus on Jesus and that's the challenge of narratology is to look at the other characters and the role that they play and to ask those questions

Douglas:

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let me ask a practical question Sherri uh let's say that um you had a student who was teaching a Bible study and they came to you and said I I get the whole wedding thing I need two or three solid um points or takeaways for John 2 what would be the things that you would say you've got to include when you cover this passage

Sherri:

say that you as this won't be a surprise given in the last 20 minutes or so that you've got to emphasize the potentiality of of women right alongside the men as key Disciples of Jesus I mean she becomes a model disciple when she's challenged by Jesus she responds in the affirmative and gets the action going she probably still has lots of processing to do about that encounter and lots of processing to do about their relationships yes Jesus to be and who she understands herself to be in that relationship but she gets going anyway right and it's in the process in the journey that we learn and become uh who we are whether or not we have it all figured out um at the beginning or not I also would suggest again that sometimes we yourself in the Ancients where there's um a lack a need maybe we uh have a lack or a need and we might feel um or we find ourselves as she does in a situation where others are in need or um and need are caring and we might be wondering why God is God

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acting well God can act in us and through us and so um we see that Jesus begins to reveal his glory through the actions of these uh of these other people his mother and the disciples nobody actually knows that a miracle has occurred all the people saying oh my God this wine is great um this wedding is fantastic they have no idea that God Jesus has acted in their mid only sort of this Inner Circle that is and the relationship that's formed there we may never know how um profoundly God Jesus may be acting in us as we step forward um to try to care um for others or respond to a need I know we still got to do it

Sherri:

I noticed that you didn't prioritize the six jars and their significance in the temple purification ceremonies but which is great that you didn't we don't want that to happen but as we begin to move towards the closing on this oftentimes this passage gets preached and and we hear them and you've given us two really good points for um things to cover but what do you think one or two things are that usually get missed um when we when you hear this talked about in a homily or a sermon or even a someone talking about John 2 even in a commentary sometimes that they they just they miss the point because they're not looking at it

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from a narrativological perspective perhaps they're too historical or too rhetorical in their approach

Sherri:

well I think think yeah I think they can miss the point of the dialogue you know as between Jesus and his mother um focusing on the wrong things and I like what Doug said that it's that it it's sort of um a greeting it's just um and a relational encounter I think it's okay to call something a challenge without calling it negative right that um we all need to be challenged and I think he does challenge her I don't think it's remotely negative you know uh in the way that he interacts with her but that she is in fact woman and mother also highlights the role that we can all take and so I think that they that that she inaugurates this public Ministry and becomes this model disciple that we then um can encounter these if we even at his very next encounter you know in the temple area with the Jewish leadership and how they respond to her if we've got her as a model then we're like okay they they don't get it at all you know and and so um if we can use her as a model for you know these future encounters too

Stan:

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yep she is she is an opening closing model for sure well Sherri we want to thank you for taking time on this fine day to talk with us about the mother of Jesus even though we oftentimes refer to her as Mary when the text doesn't um and we just bring in our other knowledge and we look forward to the writings that you're working on and those coming out to further illuminate us and be available thank you for joining us on episode four as we discuss the mother of Jesus in John chapter 2. our next episode will feature a conversation with Christopher Skinner from Loyola University in Chicago we will be talking about John chapter 20. we hope you'll join us bye now