

ROD OF JESSE

JOHN ERSKINE on *The Human Life of Jesus*

Are place-names traditionally more reliable than the wonders told of in those places? At Cana Jesus turned water into wine, at Nain raised a corpse from its bier, at Gadara cast demons into swine, at Bethsaida cured one blind man by spitting and at Jericho cured another by a spoken word. There is a peculiar convincingness about the naming of places: there they are. On the strength of a place-name, we are tempted to posit an original fact.

John Erskine's essay on *The Human Life of Jesus*¹ shows that a Catholic humanist may reason along these lines. First, a wonder occurs and a tradition arises which remembers the place of it. Sometimes one of Jesus' own disciples – John, for instance, as the supposed author of the Fourth Gospel – makes a miracle out of a significant memory. It was at a Wedding in Cana in Galilee that *the mother of Jesus* told him, 'They have no wine,' and he replied, 'Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.' A strange reply, these words in Jesus' mouth, and it has often been wondered at. *Woman*, he calls his mother, as if she were a woman of a lower caste. Nevertheless, she turns to the servants saying, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Six stone jars are standing nearby, and Jesus tells the servants, 'Fill the jars with water,' and then, 'Now draw some out and take it to the steward of the feast.' A wine of rare quality has been obtained. No word of command has been spoken, no audible prayer.

What can have happened to give rise to such a tale as this if it rests on a fact? Did the original thing done by Jesus and remembered in connection with a wedding at Cana resemble the miracle described? Or did Jesus have them serve fresh water on purpose to guests well drunken? Such was the inspiration of Robert Graves, who made bold to see a 'hit' on Jesus' part for daring a novel idea: tasting fresh water they liked it! Or else it might have been only a ladleful drawn for the steward that Jesus miraculously transformed instead of all those brimming stone pots which would have furnished the wedding guests wine by the gallon. This odd solution is the compromise of Father Raymond Brown who accepts the miracle but shudders to think of the inordinate quantity transformed.

What does John Erskine say? His book is an act of faith: he will

1. NY William Morrow & Co. 1945