

The Samaritan Woman at the Well



Christ and the Woman of Samaria | Pierre Mignard, 1681 | The North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh | PD

The gospel account of the Samaritan Woman at the well is a long passage (John 4:5-42) with lots of details because St. John has just packed so much into the telling of the encounter. I'd suggest that while the story stands on its own, it is best read with an eye toward the story that precedes it: Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. It then stands as bookends framing the whole of Jesus' ministry even as it is positioned at the beginning of the Johannine telling of the story of Jesus. So, before moving ahead let us review the encounter with Nicodemus so that we understand the deep contrasts between these two protagonists.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee (3:1) and a “teacher of Israel” (3:10) a moniker from which we can infer a number of things: he was Jew by birth, married, and the head of rabbinic school. He was not “the man on the street.” He was someone who was particularly familiar with Scripture and the traditions of Judaism. While within the official ranks of Judaism there was likely already great concern about Jesus because of the incident of the cleansing of the Temple (John 2). Was he another would-be-claimant to the title Messiah whose campaign would only bring the harsh response of the Romans? One suspects their judgment was negative, but it seems Nicodemus was curious - but cautious, and so he approaches Jesus under the cover of darkness (3:2). In John’s gospel, a weak, wavering or incomplete faith emerges from the night or darkness. Nicodemus has been attracted by Jesus’ signs, an attraction not to be despised, yet he remains at a distance from true faith.

A dialogue ensues, animated by ambiguity and the potential for misunderstanding; a particular feature of Johannine stories. Jesus tells Nicodemus: ““*Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *ánothen*.*” (3:3). I deliberately left the Greek *ánothen* in place because the word has dual meanings: “again/anew” or “from above.” In American Christianity which so often opts for “from above,” they lose the nuance of the exchange and the inherent choice being offered to Nicodemus.

The expression “born again” has a context and meaning in Judaism of Nicodemus’ day. One is born again when one converts to Judaism, comes of age, is married, crowned a king, ordained a rabbi or becomes the head of a rabbinic school. Nicodemus has done all these things (that pertain to him) and hence the question: “*How can a person once grown old be born again?*” There is no achievement or milestone left for him and hence the follow-on: “*Surely he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?*” (3:4). Nicodemus apparently does not consider that he is being offered the choice to be born from above. He cannot understand who it is before him and what he offers: two choices, earthly (again) or heavenly (from above), Nicodemus seems to only understand the earthly choice; he does not understand that “*without being born of water and Spirit*” he will not have eternal life in the kingdom. Nicodemus is being asked to let go of all he knows/believes to be true in order to be “reborn” but from above.

The expression “born again” is a slogan, a rallying cry, and a test – “Have you been born again.” It is a short-hand to reduce the contemporary Christian experience to a sound bite. While the phrase has its merits, it is also taken out of the context of a much more nuanced dialogue. It flattens the word *anóthen* to only be connected to an individual’s private moment of conversion. As Gail O’Day notes, it privileges anthropology over Christology. It is the mistake that Nicodemus makes in not grasping the decisive Christological meaning of *anóthen* – the source of the change: the cross. And in doing so lose the emphasis of the newness of life possible for which there are no precedents. To approach the text of the Nicodemus story already assured that one knows the meaning/translation, is to repeat the experience of Nicodemus.

To approach the text of the Samaritan women already assured that one knows the meaning is to miss an encounter with Jesus that leads her to the newness of life. But then she is a Samaritan. She is a woman. What could she possibly understand that would elude Nicodemus, the *teacher of Israel*? The answer lies in the telling of the story.

Who are the Samaritans?

In John 4:4-42, Jesus’ ministry enters a new stage. He leaves the confines of traditional Judaism and turns to those whom his Jewish contemporaries reckoned as outsiders and enemies: the Samaritans. The breach between Jews and Samaritans can be traced to 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel withdrawing from the throne of David in Jerusalem upon the death of King Solomon. They formed a competing confederation building a new capital city and a new temple (Mt. Gerizim), claiming that this was the true place of worship of God. To the people of the south (Judah) they were traitors and heretics.

When the Assyrian Empire conquered the north some 200 years after the division (721 BCE; see 2 Kings 17), there was likely little sympathy in the south. But it was 500 years later that the rivalry intensified when the armies of Judah marched north and destroyed the Temple at Gerizim. It did little but to deepen and inflame the divisions as witnessed in John 4:9: “*For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.*”

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he meets someone who stands in marked contrast to all that has come before in this gospel. When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus (3:1-21), he spoke with a named male of the Jewish religious establishment, a “teacher of Israel.” When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, he speaks with an unnamed female of an enemy people.

This long passage of the encounter at the well consists of two main blocks of conversation (vv.7-26, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and vv.31-38, Jesus and his disciples) surrounded by their narrative frames. The structure of the text can be outlined as follows:

- 4:4-6 Introduction: Jesus’ arrival at the well
- 4:7-26 Conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman

- 4:27-30 Transition: Arrival of the disciples and departure of the woman
- 4:31-38 Conversation between Jesus and his disciples
- 4:39-42 Conclusion: Jesus and the Samaritan townspeople

Jesus' arrival at the well

When Jesus spoke with Nicodemus (3:1-21), he spoke with a named male of the Jewish religious establishment, a “teacher of Israel.” When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, he speaks with an unnamed female of an enemy people.

⁵ *So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon.*

As O’Day [565] notes, the introduction provides the setting for the narrative. Verse 4 links the Samaritan text to vv.1-3; to get from Judea to Galilee (4:3), Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” Scholars are divided on whether the necessity of this Samaritan journey is strictly geographical or has theological overtones. The geographical necessity of the trip is supported by Josephus who notes that the most expedient route from Judea to Galilee during the first century was through Samaria; however, there is ample support to indicate crossing the Jordan so as to not enter Samaria was also routine. The word translated as “had to” (*edei*), however, usually is associated in the Fourth Gospel with God’s plan (e.g., 3:14, 30; 9:4). It seems best, therefore, to read the necessity of the journey through Samaria as both geographical and theological. Jesus’ itinerary may have been governed by geographical expediency, but his stay in Samaria was governed by the theological necessity of offering himself to those whom social convention deemed unacceptable.

Verses 5-6 provide a detailed description of the location of Jesus’ conversation with the woman. This description is important because of the OT imagery in which the geography is couched. The references to Jacob and his well introduce the patriarchal traditions that will figure prominently in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (vv.11-14). The description of Jesus’ arrival at the well (v.6b) also establishes the conditions of his request for water in v.7. Jesus was tired from his journey, and he arrived at the well in the heat of the day (“about noon;” lit. “about the sixth hour”).

Eisegesis is the process of (mis)interpreting a text in such a way that it introduces one's own ideas into and on top of the text. It is difficult to know what to make of the literal expression “the sixth hour.” In John’s narrative, when he points to a specific hour it is an indication that he wants the reader to pay close attention. What is not clear is why this encounter between Jesus and the woman happens midday. The women of the developing world typically see the timing of the meeting as a sign that the woman is an outcast in her own village. Water is usually drawn from the well at sunrise and sunset, outside the heat of the day. It is the place/time when women gather to meet, chat and have community. Someone who comes at noon to draw water is either avoiding the others, is unwelcomed to the community of women, has been formerly shunned, or just happens to need water at that time of day. Eisegesis is to insist on one of the first three choices. And that may well be the correct reading, but exegesis (following where the text leads) is always preferable.

The Conversation: Part 1

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman consists of thirteen exchanges, one of the longest dialogues in the Gospel. It is divided into two sections, each section introduced by a request/command by Jesus: (1) vv.7-15 (“Give me a drink”); (2) vv.16-26 (“Go, call your husband”).

Verse 7 is filled with OT images that figure prominently in the rest of the narrative: “*A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”*” First, Jesus’ request for water recalls the story of Elijah and the widow of Sidon (1 Kgs 17:10-11). In both stories a man interrupts a

woman engaged in household work to request a gesture of hospitality. The parallels between Elijah and Jesus suggest the image of Jesus as prophet, a theme that will occupy a pivotal place in Jesus' conversation with the woman (4:19).

Second, the scene of a man and a woman at a well recalls the betrothal stories of Isaac (Gen 24:10-61), Jacob (Gen 29:1-20), and Moses (Ex 2:15b 21). John 4:4-42 evokes these betrothal stories in order to rework their imagery, however. The story of the wedding feast (2:1-11) and John the Baptist's parable (3:29) have already introduced wedding imagery into the Fourth Gospel as images of eschatological joy and fulfillment. It is in that context that the messianic/bridal symbolism has credence. Unlike the OT well scenes, Jesus does not come to the well looking for a woman to be his bride, but for a witness who will recognize the Messiah and bring the marginalized and despised people to faith in Him. In the fact that a Samaritan woman becomes that witness (vv.28-30, 39-42).

The Samaritan woman responds to Jesus' request with amazement because it violates two societal conventions. First, a Jewish man did not initiate conversation with an unknown woman. Moreover, a Jewish teacher did not engage in public conversation with a woman ("Hence the sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the law and at the last will inherit Gehenna." p. *'Abot 1:5*) Second, Jews did not invite contact with Samaritans. The Fourth Evangelist's aside in v.9 underscores the seriousness of the breach between Jews and Samaritans. A fear of ritual contamination developed into a prohibition of all social interaction.

Instead of answering the woman's question directly, Jesus invites her to answer her question herself ("If you knew..."). If the woman could recognize the identity of the person with whom she speaks, a dramatic role reversal will take place. The woman would be the one who requests water. "Living water" (*hydor zon*). As with *anōthen* from the encounter with Nicodemus, *hydor zon* has two possible meanings. It can mean fresh, running water (spring water as opposed to water from a cistern), or it can mean living/life-giving water. Once again, Jesus intentionally uses a word with a double meaning..

The Samaritan woman hears only the meaning "running water" in Jesus' words and so responds to his offer of living water with protests of logical and material impossibility (cf. Nicodemus, 3:4). It is not credible to her that a man who has just asked her for water because he was unable to acquire any for himself should now offer her fresh running water (v.11 a). Her protest leads to a question, "Where then can you get that *hydor zon*?" (v.11b). This question, like other questions about the origins of Jesus' gifts (1:29; 2:9; 3:8; 6:5), is ironically charged. The question operates on two levels simultaneously—it makes sense to ask a man with no bucket where he will get water, but the question can also be asked of Jesus' gift of living water. The irony arises because the reader knows the appropriateness of the question on both levels, but the woman is wary – still clinging to the practical (*bucket/deep*), but perhaps possessing a sense of the greater things in play (*living water*).

The woman's question in v.12 (*Are you greater than our father Jacob*) is a universally recognized instance of Johannine irony. The immediate source of its irony is clear: for the Fourth Evangelist and most of his readers, Jesus is greater than Jacob, while the woman seems to assume the opposite. (The question is introduced by the interrogative *mē* in the Greek text, a construction that anticipates a negative reply: "You are not greater than Jacob, are you?" (cf. 8:53)). Since Jesus has no visible means with which to draw water, the woman's question seems to imply that only a miracle similar to the one tradition attributed to Jacob at Haran could produce the water. The woman's response to Jesus is a challenge to match the gift of one of the great forebears of the faith.

Jesus responds to the woman's challenge by focusing on the permanent effect of the two waters on thirst. Jacob's gift may have been miraculous and its abundance legendary, but it could not assuage thirst permanently (v.13). Jesus' gift of living water will, however, do just that (v.14): *but whoever*

drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The contrast between the two waters recalls Isa 55:1-2 (“everyone who thirsts,/ come to the waters”). Jesus’ description of his gift of water in v.14 clarifies the meaning of the expression “living water”: Jesus offers water that gives life. Those who drink from Jesus’ water “will never thirst” (lit., “will not be thirsty forever”), because his water will become “in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (v.14). In John 7:37-39 Jesus’ gift of living water is associated with the gift of the Spirit, and it is possible to see that connection in v.14 as well.

The Samaritan woman responds enthusiastically to Jesus’ words (v.15a), but her enthusiasm misses the point. The motivation for her request—that she would no longer have to come back to the well (v.15b)—shows that she has not yet grasped the radical nature of Jesus’ gifts. She continues to see Jesus through her categories of physical thirst and miraculous springs, and so she does not understand the meaning of his “living water.” Her request is ironic to the reader, because it is the right request for the wrong reasons (cf. 6:34).

On the one hand, then, v.15 sounds a note of failure. Although by her request for water the Samaritan woman is seemingly doing what Jesus had earlier said she should do (v.10) – yet she does not know for what she is asking or of whom she is asking it. She thinks that Jesus is a miracle worker who can provide her with extraordinary water. Her misperception is the source of the irony of her response for the reader, because the conversation has led the reader to see that something more is at stake in these verses.

On the other hand, v.15 sounds a note of hope, however embryonic: *The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”* The woman has gained considerable ground in this conversation. She has moved from seeing Jesus as a thirsty Jew who knowingly violates social convention to seeing him as someone whose gifts she needs. At the beginning of the conversation, Jesus’ words about living water seemed preposterous to her, empty boasts by a man without a bucket (v.11), but in v.15, she believes that Jesus can give water that will assuage her thirst. The woman’s openness to Jesus and her willingness to engage him in conversation stand in marked contrast to Nicodemus, who only greeted Jesus with amazement and resistance (3:4, 9). The Samaritan woman recognizes neither Jesus’ true identity nor the fullness of his gifts, but in v.15, she is willing to receive what she thinks he is offering and hence to acknowledge her need for him.

The Conversation: Part 2

Now we will continue to dive into the details in order to unpack this amazing narrative.

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered and said to him, “I do not have a husband.” Jesus answered her, “You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’¹⁸ For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet.²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.²² You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews.²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him.²⁴ God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.”²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when he comes, he will tell us everything.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking with you.”

Go call your husband. Jesus introduces a new topic in v.16 possibly to provide a fresh angle on his identity: *Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.”* Prior to this, Jesus’ invitation to the woman was couched in the metaphor of living water. Now Jesus’ invitation will be grounded in the woman’s own life.

What one makes of vv.16-19 will determine how one understands what follows as well as what one thinks about the transition of the conversation in v.20. The most popular understanding – meaning what readers assume about the text – is that this woman is a sinner. Jesus does not judge her; any moral judgments are imported into the text by interpreters. There are many possible reasons for her marital history other than her moral laxity. Perhaps the woman, like Tamar in Genesis 38, is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10; see also Luke 20:27-33), and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her. Significantly, the reasons for the woman’s marital history intrigue commentators but do not concern Jesus.

The woman does not respond with an accusation that Jesus has been snooping into her background, sharing gossip or some other natural reaction. She responds that she believes that Jesus is a prophet – perhaps that great-prophet-like-Moses - *The woman said to him, “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet”*. One should wonder what just transpired in between.

- At a literal level, the conversation is a moment of revelation for the woman. Jesus’ insight into her words and life leads her to declare him to be a prophet. Her response recalls the response of Nathanael in 1:47-49. With both Nathanael and the Samaritan woman, a demonstration of perception and insight on Jesus’ part leads to a christological confession.
- There are perhaps OT echoes with the answer response. 2 Kings 17:24 indicates that after the fall of the Northern Kingdom: *“The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities.”* People from five nations were resettled in Samaria. In ancient Hebrew the word for husband was *ba’al* - *“On that day, says the Lord, she (Israel - 10 northern tribes) shall call me, ‘My Husband’ and never again ‘My Ba’al’*” (Hos 2:18). In Genesis, Hagar, the slave wife of Abraham refers to him as *ba’al*; Sarah, the free wife, speaks of him as *adon* - both indicating a marital relationship. The term *ba’al* means “husband”, “lord”, or “master”, and thus became a word for “gods”. A little later in 2 Kings 17:29, we are told *“every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the people of Samaria had made, every nation in the cities they lived”*. Could the five husbands symbolize the five nations and their gods? [Note that 2 Kings 17:30-31 lists seven gods worshiped by the five nations.]

Is this perhaps another Johannine scene when the words are playing at two different levels? At one level he refers to the woman’s past husbands and current relationship. On another level he speaks to the false *ba’alims* of the Samaritan history and that the god they currently worship is not the husband spoken of in Hosea. Hence, *“I can see that you are a Prophet.”*

Unlike Nicodemus she is moving beyond her natural limits of understanding. Think about her response to all this: *Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.* This shift in topic is dramatic. We have moved from the opening questions (*Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.”*) to a response about true worship. The woman understands that she is talking more than just a traveler at the well and so she asks which temple, Jerusalem or Gerizim, is righteous in the eyes of God (*Jn 4:20*).

In the light of her recognition of Jesus as a prophet, the woman puts before him the most dividing problem that stands between Jews and Samaritans: What is the right worship site, this mountain

(Gerizim) or Jerusalem (v.20)? The introduction of this topic is not, as commentators frequently argue, a psychological ploy, a classical evasion to turn the subject away from the embarrassing truth about her morals. Nor is this theological topic and Jesus' response too difficult for the woman to understand. By asking Jesus about the proper place of worship, the woman is not disengaging from Jesus. Rather, her inquiry about worship is an act of deepening engagement with Jesus, because she anticipates that the prophet Jesus will be able to speak an authoritative word on the subject.

The woman's question evoked a lengthy response from Jesus. The woman's comment reflects the present reality of Samaritan/Jewish relations, but in v.21, Jesus directs her attention away from the present to the future. "*But the hour is coming*" refers to the time of eschatological fulfillment (cf. 5:25, 28). In the eschatological age, the woman's categories will be obsolete, because neither the Samaritan ("this mountain") nor the Jewish site ("Jerusalem") will be the place of worship---both will be replaced in the age to come. Jesus' words in v.21 also remind the woman of the object of worship: "the Father." The Samaritan/Jewish conflict so dominates the woman's perspective that her words to Jesus (v.20) contain no reference to who is being worshiped.

In v.22, Jesus identifies himself with the Jews. The "you" of v.22a is second-person plural, and the "you"/"we" contrast in that verse refers to Samaritans and Jews. The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch as Scripture, and so from the Jewish perspective they had an incomplete picture of God ("You worship what you do not know").

In v.22b, "*salvation is from the Jews*," Jesus affirms the positive role of the Jews in salvation history. The noun "Jew" is used positively here because it refers to the Jewish people as a whole (cf. 11:19, 45), not the Jewish religious authorities. Jesus reminds the woman of Israel's place as God's chosen people in order to caution her that by rejecting the Jews, she risks rejecting God's offer of salvation. This positive appraisal of the Jews has an ironic undertone when read in the context of the whole Gospel, because it points to one of the Gospel's central paradoxes. Salvation does originate from God's own people, the Jews, but some Jews do not receive that offer of salvation in Jesus. For example, the offer of salvation made by Jesus (a Jew) has been rejected by the Jew Nicodemus but will be accepted by the Samaritans (4:42).

The "*But the hour is coming*" marks a decisive turning point in Jesus' speech. The hour when conventional understandings of worship would change is coming; in v.23 (*But the hour is coming, and is now here*), that hour is no longer merely anticipated but has arrived. The ordinary present has been transformed into the eschatological present. In the eschatological present, true worship is no longer defined by place, but as worship "*in spirit and truth*" (vv.23-24). Worship of God in spirit and truth does not point to an internal, spiritualized worship but to a form of worship that reflects and is shaped by the character of God. That is, the historical problem of Jewish vs. Samaritan worship is transformed into the encounter with the presence of God. "*God is spirit*" (v.24), not bound to any place or people, and those who worship God share in the spirit. Jesus' presence in the world initiates this transformation of worship, because Jesus' presence changes the moment of anticipation ("*the hour is coming*") into the moment of in-breaking ("*and is now here*").

The woman's response indicates that she has heard the eschatological promise of Jesus' words, but not the fulfillment. Jesus has spoken of the coming hour; the woman responds by speaking of the coming One. The Samaritans, like the Jews, expected a Messiah. The Samaritans called their Messiah *Ta'heb* ("the one who returns"). The Samaritans thought of the *Ta'heb* as a teacher, which may explain the statement "*he will explain all things to us*" (v.25). The critical difference between Jesus' words and the woman's response, however, is that she does not grasp the eschatological immediacy of what Jesus says. To Jesus' vision of the in-breaking of the eschatological age, the Samaritan woman responds with traditional eschatological expectations of the future Messiah.

Jesus' response to the Samaritan woman's traditional eschatological affirmations is simple and bold: "*I am he, the one who is speaking to you*" (see notes below.). The NAB translation plays down the boldness of Jesus' remarks by supplying a predicate ("he" that is not present in the Greek) for the "I am" saying. When the predicate is supplied, the meaning of Jesus' words becomes, "I am the Messiah you expect." The "I am" of v.26, however, is not simply Jesus' messianic self-identification. When Jesus speaks the "I am" in v.26, these words make explicit connections with the divine name of Exod 3:14. Jesus thus speaks an absolute "I am" here, with no predicate (6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:6), in order to identify himself as the one in whom God is known (1:18). The absolute "I am" confirms the words of the Prologue, "*the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (1:1). Jesus thus fulfills the Samaritan woman's messianic expectations at the same time as he transcends them.

The return of the disciples

This passage provides a bridge between Jesus' conversations with the woman and with his disciples (vv.31-38). The disciples' reaction to Jesus is similar to the woman's initial response to him (v.9): shock that Jesus would violate social conventions. Unlike the woman, However, the disciples keep their questions to themselves.

The woman makes no response to Jesus' bold self-revelation, perhaps because of the disciples' return. She departs from the well, leaving her water jar behind. Like much narrative detail in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., 1:37-39), the detail about the jar works on two levels simultaneously. On the level of the plot line, the abandoned water jar provides a link between the two conversations at the well. The woman's jar will stand before Jesus and his disciples as they speak. Yet the detail also has meaning on a more theological level. The abandoned jar suggests that the woman's concern of v.15, the desire for miraculous water, has been superseded by the revelation of Jesus' identity.

In response to her conversation with Jesus, the woman goes into town and bears witness to what she has heard. Her witness is threefold. First, she invites her fellow townspeople to "*come and see*." This invitation is crucial in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 1:37-39, 46). It is an invitation to participate in the life of faith, to experience Jesus for oneself. Second, the woman offers her own experience as the basis of her witness, which here may build on the Samaritan expectation of a teaching Messiah (cf. v.25). Third, she broaches the question of whether Jesus might be the Messiah. The translation accurately captures the tentativeness of the woman's words. (The question begins with the negative particle (*meti*) in the Greek, a construction that anticipates a negative or contradicting response.) She cannot quite believe that Jesus is the Messiah, since he challenges her conventional messianic expectations (vv.23-25), but her lack of certitude does not stand in the way of her witness. The woman's behavior stands in marked contrast to many characters in the Fourth Gospel who will insist on their own certitudes (e.g., Nicodemus, 3:9; the crowds, 6:25-34; the Pharisees, 9:24-34) and hence close themselves to what Jesus offers. The woman's witness brings the townspeople to Jesus (v.30). Their movement toward him provides the backdrop for Jesus' conversation with his disciples.

Conversation between Jesus and his disciples

Jesus' conversation with his disciples follows a similar pattern to his conversation with the woman, albeit abbreviated. It opens with a dialogue that revolves around a misunderstanding about the meaning of "food" (*brōsis*, vv.31-33; cf. the misunderstanding about "living water" in vv.10-15). This dialogue is followed by a longer speech by Jesus (vv.34-38; cf. vv.21-24) in which he offers a new way of thinking to his conversation partners. Both of these final speeches by Jesus have an eschatological orientation.

The disciples ask Jesus to eat the food that they have brought from town (v.31; cf. v.8), but Jesus does not accede to their request (v.32). The disciples are confused by Jesus' words and assume that he must be referring to food that someone else had brought him (v.33; cf. vv.11-12). In v.34, Jesus makes clear that the food that sustains him is his vocation: to do the will of the one who sent him and complete

God's work. God is frequently described in the Fourth Gospel as the one who sent Jesus (e.g., 5:23-24, 30) and Jesus' mission is often characterized as doing the will and the work of God (5:30, 36; 6:38; 10:37-38). Jesus' description of his food is deeply connected to Johannine christology; food is the metaphor for Jesus' divine commission and the enactment of the relationship between Jesus and God. Verse 34 underscores that any discussion of Jesus' identity is meaningless apart from a discussion of his vocation. The necessity of Jesus' journey into Samaritan territory and his conversation with the woman can be understood as examples of Jesus' "food," of doing the will and work of God; true food which sustains him.

The focus of Jesus' words now shifts slightly. Jesus has just spoken of his role in completing the work of the one who sent him; he then turns to a traditional biblical image of completion—the harvest (e.g., Isa 27:12; Joel 3:13). Harvest imagery is structured around two agricultural proverbs.

In v.35, Jesus draws his disciples' attention to a common agricultural saying ("*Do you not say, 'In four months the harvest will be here'? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest*"). This proverb has not been attested outside the Fourth Gospel, but it reflects agricultural life in ancient Palestine; there is a waiting period between seedtime and harvest. At the end of v.35, Jesus informs his disciples that the waiting is over. Jesus exhorts his disciples to look around them: "*look up and see the fields*." Jesus asks his disciples to attend carefully to the situation in which they find themselves, to read the data of their own experience instead of trusting in conventional wisdom (this motif will appear again in 9:28-33, where the blind man's trust in his own experience is superior to conventional teachings). In their immediate context, Jesus' words draw the disciples' attention to the Samaritans who are coming to him. The "crop" of Samaritan believers is proof that the harvest is ready.

Jesus' words echo what he said earlier to the Samaritan woman: "*The hour is coming, and is now here*" (v.23). The conventional understanding is that one must wait for the Messiah/harvest (vv.25, 35a). In reality, both are here now - again echoing the earlier conversation with the woman.

Verse 36 continues the imagery of the immediacy of the harvest. The reaper is already at work, receiving wages, gathering fruit. Sower and reaper now share in the joy of the harvest echoing Psalm 126 and Isaiah 9:3). It is tempting to suggest God as the sower and Jesus the reaper - and perhaps rightly so. But rather than looking outside the Johannine text. John the Baptist told the parable of the bridegroom and his friend to illustrate joy (3:29); Jesus now tells the parable of the sower and the reaper to illustrate the arrival of the eschatological present and its attending joy.

The second agricultural proverb occurs in v.37: *One sows and another reaps*. The reality of the saying is playing out in real time: *I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work*. Point being that the woman has done the sowing and they will reap the harvest of her efforts. This seems to point to the disciples' future, when they will be "sent" (*apostellō*) by Jesus to continue his work (e.g., 17:18; 20:21). The latter part of this account is a foreshadowing of the mission of the early church (Acts 8:4-24).

Jesus and the Samaritan townspeople.

John brings the Samaria narrative to a close by focusing on the success of the Samaritan mission. Verse 39 notes the faith in Jesus of many Samaritans and explicitly attributes the people's faith to the woman's "testimony" (*martyria*). She, like John the Baptist, is a witness who brings people to faith in Jesus. Also like John the Baptist (3:30), the woman's witness diminishes in importance when the Samaritans have their own experience of Jesus (vv.40-42). The Samaritans invite Jesus to stay with them, and he stays for two days (*if. 40*). The use of the verb for "stay" (*menō*) recalls 1:38 and Jesus' meeting with his first disciples. To stay with Jesus is to enter into a relationship with him (cf. 15:4, 7). Many more persons come to faith in Jesus as a result of this stay (v.41), and in v.42 those who believe acknowledge that their own encounter with Jesus supplants the woman's word. This is the model of

witness and faith in the Fourth Gospel: The witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one's own experience of Jesus.

The Samaritans' acclamation of Jesus as the savior of the world (v.42) is the most sweeping christological confession yet encountered in the Gospel. Salvation may be from the Jews (v.22b), but it is not limited to the Jews. Ethnic and religious distinctions that figured prominently in this text (vv.9, 20-22) are dissolved in this recognition of the universality of salvation available in Jesus (cf. 3:17). The Samaritans' confession evidences the truth of Jesus' words in vv.21-24; the hour has indeed come when neither this mountain nor Jerusalem will define the worship of God.¹²

A Final Reflection

Jesus' words overflow with metaphor: living water, the hour, food, harvest. Each of these metaphors attempts to open reality in fresh ways for his conversation partners. Jesus wants to open the eyes of the Samaritan woman and his disciples so that they can see what is being offered to them in the present instead of continuing to view everything through the lens of old realities. Jesus wants the Samaritan woman to see who is speaking with her at *this* moment and the gifts that he offers (4:10). He wants her to see that the present moment is the time of eschatological fulfillment (4:23-24). Jesus wants his disciples to see that the harvest is ready *now*, contrary to popular understandings (4:35). In both conversations (4:7.26, 31-38), Jesus takes familiar images and fills them with new meaning in order to open up for his listeners the possibilities of a life defined by God's gifts. The metaphors of these verses keep the terms of the conversations always fresh, always suggestive, always open to new meanings in changing circumstances.

Everything is to be newly defined by the arrival of the hour, by the impingement of the eschatological future on the present. God's salvation is available now, to all who will receive it (cf. 2 Cor 6:2). Salvation will be offered on God's own terms, however, not necessarily in the form that those who wait on it have determined in advance. The Samaritans' acclamation of Jesus as savior of the world reminds the reader of that. The savior in whom they put their faith does not conform to their prior expectations. The reality of God's presence in Jesus redefines their previous categories.

The woman, the disciples, and the Samaritan villagers all received more from Jesus than their conventions and assumptions had led them to expect. One could say that once again Jesus transformed ordinary water into wine. An incredulous Samaritan woman becomes a witness to the gospel, Jesus' questioning disciples become co-workers in the harvest, the despised Samaritans spend two days with the "savior of the world." John 4:4-42 is a text of promise, of expectations overturned and surpassed. This text suggests that the life of faith and discipleship will be refreshed and reanimated by attending to Jesus' vision of transformed reality and, most important, to Jesus himself. Jesus' metaphors of living water and worship in spirit and truth invite the church to a new relationship to its God and to one another through his incarnate presence.

The closing words of the Samaritan villagers hold the key to understanding the narrative techniques of this text. The Samaritans no longer need the secondary witness of the woman's word because "*we have heard for ourselves*" (v.42). Effective witness does not replace the immediate experience of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel; it leads to that experience. John 4:4-42 is narrated so that the readers, too, can sense that they have heard Jesus for themselves. As a result of reading this text, one may come to recognize oneself as a "Samaritan"—one to whom the good news has come in unexpected places at unexpected times.

It is a living parable of the sower and the seed – as well as a tale for those who would think that sowing the living word of God is a task limited to the insiders or professionals church people.

Notes

John 4:5 Samaria: “Samaria” (Assyrian *Samerina*) has as its natural borders defined by the valleys of Jezreel and Aijalon on the N and S respectively, by the coast to the W, and by the Jordan river valley on the E. In pre-Assyrian times this region and its population had been referred to after the old Israelite territorial/tribal name Ephraim (in Hosea 36 times and Isaiah 12 times; cf. Jer 31:5–6). As a generalization it refers to the tribal homes of the 10 northern tribes of Israel. In many instances “Israel” refers to the same region. Sometimes the name Ephraim was reserved only for the hill country of southern Samaria, while the hill country of northern Samaria was called Manasseh. Later, however, the area was repopulated by heterogeneous populations from throughout the Assyrian empire, whom the Judeans of Jerusalem generally regarded with contempt.

John 4: 5-6 Sychar...well: The text in John connects the well with the city of Sychar, but modern opinions on the identification of this town are divided between those who see in the place-name the modern town of Askar located to the north of this well and others who associate Sychar with Shechem. The identification with Shechem has been shaken by recent archaeological evidence indicating that Shechem ceased to exist by the 1st century B.C. Askar has its own well but its water is not as good as the one of the well in question. Yet in spite of the difficulties connected with the identification of the city of Sychar, the well has been confidently identified with *Bir Ya'aqub* in the proximity of Tell Balatah. This well is located at the entrance to the ravine which separates Mt. Ebal from Mt. Gerizim inside a Greek Orthodox church. This location is plausible since it agrees with the evidence from the narrative, namely that the well is found at the foot of Mt. Gerizim (John 4:20) and about 1 mile SE of Nablus. It is near the fork of a road which comes from Jerusalem and branches to Samaria and Tirzah respectively. The authenticity of this well is not only based on the details from the story, which agree with its identification, but also upon the fact that all traditions—Jewish, Samaritan, Christian, and Muslim—support it. [AYBD 3:608-9]

John 4:5 the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph: The reference reflects the customary inference from Gen. 48:21–22 and Josh. 24:32 that Jacob gave his son Joseph the land at Shechem that he had bought from the sons of Hamor (Gen. 33:18–19) and which later served as Joseph’s burial place (cf. Exod. 13:19; Josh. 24:32). Gen 48:22 reads “*I now give to you one portion more than to your brothers*” (NSRV; a more literal translation than the NAB). The word for “portion” in Hebrew is *šekem*. This may well have led to the later reading of “Schekem” as the city location.

John 4:6 It was about noon: lit. “it was about the sixth hour.” There is no clear agreement about the meaning. There is no clear agreement about the meaning of *hóra én hōs hektē*. Culpepper argues that using the Roman reckoning the scene at the well occurred at 6 pm. However, the expression is used seven places in Scripture for the time of the day. In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard workers are enlisted at equal intervals between the first and the last hours, including the middle of the workday (Matt 20:5), but the workers all receive the same pay. In Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; and Luke 23:44 darkness falls at the sixth hour; according to Mark this took place from the midpoint of the time during which Jesus hung upon the cross until his death. According to John 19:14 Pilate undertook a last attempt to save Jesus at the sixth hour. It seems “it was about noon” is the best translation.

John 4:6 sat down there at the well: *ekethezeto houtōs epi tē pēgē* expresses a sense of duration and truly settling down for a rest indicating that Jesus was indeed tired from the journey.

John 4:7 Give me a drink: Many hear an echo of OT well scenes, e.g., Isaac’s servant and Rebecca (Gen 24:10-19), Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29:1-14), Moses and Zipporah (Ex 2:15-21).

John 4:9 use...in common: *synchrōntai* is generally translated as “to have dealings with.”

John 4:10 living water: *hydōr zōn* – the expression is open to two meanings. On the one hand it can mean “flowing water” from a stream or a spring, as opposed to the still water of a cistern, well or pond. But the expression has a long history in biblical and other religious traditions that point beyond the physical realities of water, hence “living water.” It should be noted that in the Samaritans’ own liturgy it is said regarding the *Ta’heb* (the Samaritan equivalent to the Messiah) that “water shall flow from his buckets” (cf. Num. 24:7).

John 4:14 will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life: The phrase is reminiscent of Isaiah’s vision of people joyfully “drawing … water from the wells of salvation” in the last days (Isa. 12:3). In the future age envisioned by the prophet, people “will neither hunger nor thirst” (Isa. 49:10; cf. 44:3), and Yahweh will make “an everlasting covenant” with all those—Jews as well as believing representatives of “the nations who do not know you” (Isa. 55:4–5)—who follow his invitation, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters … that your soul may live” (Isa. 55:1–3a; cf. Sir. 24:21). **welling:** *hallomenou* is a word normally describing a human being leaping.

John 4:19 I can see: *theōreō* is a verb used to indicate the arrival at an intellectual perception based on the accumulated experience of a person.

John 4:20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain: The “ancestors” include Abraham (Gen. 12:7) and Jacob (Gen. 33:20), who built altars in this region.

John 4:20,21 this mountain: Mount Gerizim (also referred to as Ebal by Jews) was the OT setting for the Deuteronomic blessings (Deut. 11:29; 27:12) and the mountain on which Moses commanded an altar to be built (Deut. 27:4–6). The Samaritans had built a temple on Mount Gerizim about 400 BC, which was destroyed about 128 BC by the Jews, who claimed that proper worship must be rendered in Jerusalem. Archeological evidence shows that Gerizim/Ebal was used as a worship site in the periods well before the temple’s construction and likely dates to the sacrificial altar of Joshua (Josh 8:30–35) built upon entering the promised land.

John 4:25 Messiah...when he comes, he will tell us everything: The Samaritan messianic figure, *Ta’heb*, was expected to tell secrets yet unknown. They did not expect a messianic king of the house of David but a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15).

John 4:26 I am he: the Greek is simply *egō eimi* which lit. translates as “I am.” While the use of the Greek expression by itself is not necessarily the “divine I am,” given that it follows the Samaritan woman’s reference to the Messiah/Anointed it is best understood as revelatory of the divine.

John 4:39 believe in him because of the word of the woman: The woman is presented as a missionary, described in virtually the same words as the disciples are in Jesus’ prayer (John 17:20).

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