

BECAUSE OF THE WOMAN'S TESTIMONY: A RE-READING OF THE SAMARITAN
WOMAN AT THE WELL IN JOHN 4

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The Samaritan woman in John 4, often known as the woman at the well, is a well known story in Scripture. In this narrative, Jesus stops at a well near the town of Sychar in Jerusalem while on his way to Galilee. While his disciples are getting food, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman drawing water and asks her to give him a drink. By the end of the conversation, the woman brings her entire town of Samaritans to know Jesus as the Messiah. However, as O'Day claims, "Commentators on this text have more readily accepted the offer of the gospel to the Samaritans, a despised group, than they have accepted the offer of the gospel to women, a despised sex."¹ This is the case because of the portrait that is often painted of this woman. Most preachers and commentators label her as an adulteress and sexually immoral. One who is viewed as an outcast in her society. The method has been to shame the Samaritan woman, and bring her down as far as possible, in order to elevate Jesus. Is this truly what a close reading of the text communicates, or are there other ways to read the woman at the well? In this paper, I will argue that the two main facets of this story used to shame the Samaritan woman are not necessary. I will then show the ways in which this story breaks significant boundaries, and end by suggesting that the most faithful reading of this text is one that views this woman as a true disciple of Jesus in contrast to Nicodemus.

The Traditional Reading of the Text

As previously stated, the woman at the well is most often preached as a sexually promiscuous sinner who receives pity and compassion from Jesus. Dr. Marian Ronan points out that this interpretation comes from two main components in the story. First, the time at which the

¹ Newsom, Carol A., Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. 3rd edition, revised and updated. Westminster John Knox, 2012. 521.

woman comes to the well. This tradition claims that since she went there in the middle of the day, she must have been too ashamed to encounter other women who apparently only go in the morning and evening hours. Second, the exchange through which Jesus reveals that she has had five husbands, and currently lives with a man who is not her husband, is believed to show that this woman is immoral.² These interpretive traditions have led to many negative comments on behalf of this woman. Gangel remarks, “here was a woman who lived outside the boundaries of any religious or cultural standards of her day. A string of five husbands followed by a lover is certainly not unknown in the twenty-first century, but it is hardly common even in our permissive society with its twisted tolerance for evil. In first-century Samaria, such a domestic arrangement was unthinkable.”³ Likewise are the reference Theodor Zahn makes about the woman's "immoral life, which has exhibited profligacy and unbridled passions for a long time", and Paul Duke's description of her as "a five-time loser ... currently committed to an illicit affair"?⁴ Moore points out the result of this traditional reading stating, “Recent feminist readers of John 4:1 - 42 have been countering a traditional tendency on the part of male commentators to victimize the Samaritan woman—to reduce her to a sexual stereotype, to patronize her for her intellectual "inferiority"—thereby providing yet another biblical warrant for the unequal treatment of contemporary women in the church, the academy, and society at large.”⁵ The

² Ronan, Marian. 2009. “Woman at the Well.” *The Living Pulpit (Online)* 18 (2). 11.

³ Gangel, Kenneth O., and Max E. Anders. *John*. Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2000. 76.

⁴ Moore, Stephen D. 1993. “Are There Impurities in the Living Water That the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism, and the Samaritan Woman.” *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (2): 207–27. 211.

⁵ *Ibid.* 213.

commonness of this reading does not equal correctness, and the damage that has come from this reading cannot be justified. It is time to re-read the Samaritan woman in John 4.

Historical Context

Who are the Samaritans? Before one can begin to fully understand this story, they must understand the significance of the Samaritans. Okure sheds light on this by explaining that the Samaritans were a people group subjected to social prejudice because of their origin. In addition, this woman would have also faced prejudice simply for being a woman. The author of John adds into the story that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” (4:9). This enmity dates back, in Hebrew Scripture, to 2 Kings 17 in which five nations settle in Samaria after many leading Israelites were deported by the Assyrian King. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans increased during the postexilic period after Zerubabel refused to allow Samaritans to help rebuild the Temple. This caused the Samaritans to build their own shrine on Mount Gerizim as a rival to the Jerusalem Temple. A Jew destroyed the shrine around 128 BCE, and, in turn, the Samaritans desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem. The Rabbis saw Samaritan women as experiencing menstruation from birth, meaning, permanently unclean and a constant source of uncleanness for their community. The Jewish leaders in John’s Gospel perceive Samaritans as demon-possessed, and even see Jesus as one of them (8:48).⁶ It is also important to understand that men, especially Rabbis, did not interact with women in public. It is interesting to note that, even considering the hatred between Jews and Samaritans, the disciples are more shocked that Jesus is speaking to a woman than they are that he is speaking to a Samaritan (4:27). All of this underlines the text.

⁶ Okure, Teresa. “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:1-42) in Africa.” *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (June 2009): 401–18. 407.

Time of Day

At the beginning of the story, John writes that Jesus, “left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”⁷ The detail that this woman was at the well at noon has been one main source of the conclusion that this woman has an immoral status. Since women did not usually fetch water during the hottest part of the day, it is assumed that this Samaritan woman is trying to avoid the others. Why is she avoiding them? The answer given is that she must be an outcast. However, there are many alternative ways to interpret this detail.

First, the comment of time is made in relation to the journey Jesus is on. It is possible that the mention of time has nothing to do with the Samaritan woman and is simply a device for the setting. Pointing out that it was noon (the heat of the day) gives Jesus a reason to stop at the well. It is also likely that preachers and commentators are making too much of the notion that women only went to the well at certain times. Davidson writes that “well use was not restricted to the evening hours, except by the rural shepherds.”⁸ In agreement, Ronan adds that the belief that this woman would avoid other women at noon is unfounded. She writes, “This reading makes no sense at all; why would she not have met other women in the middle of the day? The woman was

⁷ John 4:3-7 NRSV

⁸ Davidson, Jo Ann. 2005. “John 4: Another Look at the Samaritan Woman.” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43 (1): 159–68. 164.

at the well because she had to haul a great deal of water – not just for drinking and cooking but also for washing, for livestock, and for crafts work.”⁹

Two further viable interpretations exist as well. First, Neyrey argues that, in this story, the public and private spheres are on display. He argues, “the ancients construed the world as gender divided: males in the 'public' and females in the 'private' world.”¹⁰ However, this story breaks all of these barriers. In order to do this, the timing is vitally important. The middle of the day, in a public location, would have been off limits for this woman. Neyrey goes on to point out, “she and Jesus meet at a public place in male time. But the rhetorical pattern suggests that a transformation is taking place, not just of the status of the woman who becomes an insider in Jesus' circle, but of the nature of the space that they occupy.”¹¹ In this reading, the timing has nothing to do with the woman’s status, or sinfulness, but is used to show that she is welcome to take part in a complete destruction of social barriers. Second, the timing coincides with the story of Nicodemus in the previous chapter of John. Mary Rose D’Angelo writes, “The time is given at noon, but not, as is sometimes suggested, because the woman was shunned as immoral by other women and could not come at the normal hours (morning and evening). Rather the purposes of this comment are dramatic. It contrasts the woman with Nicodemus: whereas he came by night and left in the dark, she comes at the point of fullest possible light.”¹² Overall, the timing as noon does not require the Samaritan Woman to carry the title outcast.

⁹ Ronan. *Woman at the Well*. 11.

¹⁰ Neyrey, Jerome H. *A Feminist Companion to John*. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003. 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 114.

¹² Kraemer, Ross Shepard and Mary Rose D’Angelo, eds. *Women and Christian Origins*.

Five Husbands and One Who is Not

After Jesus points out that the Samaritan woman has had five husbands, and the man she is living with now is not her husband, interpreters assume this must mean the woman is sexually immoral. In contrast, O'Day writes that "When interpreters speak of the woman as a five time loser, or a tramp (as has been the case in scholarship about this story) they are reflecting their own prejudices against women, not the views of the text."¹³ There are several readings of this detail that do not equate to promiscuity.

One reading claims that Jesus is speaking symbolically. Moore describes this reading as Jesus making, "a statement about the religious infidelity of Samaria itself, represented here by the woman, which had worshipped the gods of five foreign tribes (cf. 2 Kings 17:13-34) and whose current Yahwism was also "adulterated" ("the one you have now is not your husband")?"¹⁴ Another reading suggests that this detail of the woman's life is significant merely to show that Jesus knows all things. Davidson acknowledges that "a favorite Johannine literary device of transition in a dialogue is often a recognition of Jesus' supernatural knowledge (e.g., 1:42, 48; 2:4-3:2). Jesus' request that the woman bring her husband functions as a preparation for his revelation that he knows all things. Her reaction in v. 19 shows that his request has the desired effect: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."¹⁵ When viewed this way, the dialogue about the woman's married life is not meant to shame her, but rather to begin leading her to the realization of who Jesus is.

Oxford University Press, 1999. 133.

¹³ O'Day. *Women's Bible Commentary*. 521

¹⁴ Moore. *Impurities*. 211.

¹⁵ Davidson. *John 4*. 162.

An additional way to view the Samaritan woman's many husbands is through the lens of death and/or divorce. Although the reader is told that the woman has been married five times, the reasons for these marriages ending are never disclosed. It is possible that one or more of these marriages ended in death. If this is so, Mark 12 appears to confirm that levirate marriage (a woman marrying a series of her dead husband's brothers in order to preserve the family line) was practiced during the time of Jesus. If her marriages resulted in divorce, the woman cannot be blamed. As Davidson reminds us, "it is generally acknowledged that divorce in that era was the sole prerogative of the male: "In OT law, the initiative in instituting divorce proceedings lay entirely with the husband (Dt. 24: 1-4). There is no hint of a divorce being initiated by a wife. This is in keeping with the double standard which characterized Israel as well as most of its contemporaries in the Mediterranean region."¹⁶ Regardless of whether it is death, divorce, or a mixture of both, Jesus focuses more on her living with a man who is not her husband. In this situation, it is equally important to ask why the man will not marry this Samaritan woman. Perhaps she was a concubine. If the man she was currently living with refused to marry her, this Samaritan woman would have little choice. Ronan explains, "We also know that women without men to support them were impoverished, because Jesus refers to the poverty of a widow later in Mark 12. There were, in fact, few wage-bearing jobs for women in the first century Israel, so women whose husbands died or abused them made arrangements with other men in order to survive."¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid. 165.

¹⁷ Ronan. *Woman at the Well*. 11.

The most enlightening evidence to contradict the claim that this woman is sexually immoral comes from what the text does not say. In John 8, Jesus interacts with a woman caught in adultery. At the end of the interaction Jesus explicitly says to her, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”¹⁸ However, no similar command is given to this Samaritan woman. Also, after meeting Jesus, the woman goes back to her town and invites the men and women to come and see Jesus. At her invitation, they follow to witness what she spoke of. It is very unlikely that if this woman was a sexually immoral outcast who could not even fetch water near other women of the town, that the men and women of Samaria would openly follow her to meet Jesus. A re-reading of this story is needed.

A Better Reading

So far, it has been demonstrated that the traditional readings of the woman at the well, which cast her as a shameful, promiscuous, castaway, are unnecessary. How then does the text view this woman? To answer this question, the reader must look at John chapter 4 in comparison with John chapter 3. At the beginning of John 3, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He is described as a leader of the Jews. John adds the detail that he came to Jesus at night. In John chapter 4 Jesus goes to a well, an often used literary device in the Hebrew Bible. One would expect a story of Jesus going to a well to result in finding a woman to marry. However, John states that the woman he meets is a Samaritan. This would have been radical, as when Jesus reveals in his parable that the Samaritan was the one who was actually a neighbor. The contrasts between the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus begin as this woman is not ashamed. Instead of

¹⁸ John 8:11 NRSV

meeting Jesus under the disguise of nightfall, she meets Jesus at noon, when the sun is the brightest.

Next, Nicodemus admits that the signs Jesus has performed show that he is “a teacher who has come from God.” Jesus then begins to explain how one must be born again, of water and spirit, but Nicodemus does not understand. Similarly, the woman at the well recognizes that Jesus is a prophet after he “told me everything I have ever done.” As Jesus begins talking to her about living water she also does not understand. Jesus tells Nicodemus that whoever believes in him will “not perish but may have eternal life” (3:16). He tells the Samaritan woman that the water he gives “will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (4:14). At this point the stories begin to contrast. Nicodemus, an educated Pharisee, is unable to grasp what Jesus is saying. He is a leader of the people of God, yet does not respond to Jesus. Jesus criticizes him saying, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (3:10). However, the Samaritan woman does begin to understand what Jesus is talking about and, though she is not religious leader, enters into the longest theological discussion recorded in the gospels.¹⁹ Davidson describes this shift stating, “She begins to call him "sir," and then wonders if he might be a prophet. Her questions and comments consistently reveal her profound understanding of both Samaritan and Jewish theology. The conversation in the narrative clearly reveals that she is not "unschooled" in contemporary political or theological matters... The narrative implies that he did so with the assurance that her mind could grasp theological verities. Jesus did not regularly speak this directly regarding himself in Israel or even to his disciples.”²⁰

¹⁹ Stinton, Diane B. 2013. “Encountering Jesus at the Well: Further Reflections on African Women’s Christologies.” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (3): 267–93. 279.

²⁰ Davidson. *John 4*. 166.

The Nicodemus narrative continues with Jesus stating “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (3:18). Nicodemus is clearly the one who did not believe, while the Samaritan woman did. Therefore, Jesus elevates her as one who is not condemned. This is hardly the narrative that has been given. Finally, Jesus ends his encounter with Nicodemus by stating, “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (3: 20-21). Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the darkness, and does not embrace Jesus for who he is. Therefore, Nicodemus is condemned as one who is evil and hates the light. In distinction, the Samaritan woman not only approaches Jesus in literal light, but her deeds come into the light as well. As Jesus tells her everything she has done, she answers truthfully (4:17) and Jesus commends her twice for speaking the truth (4:17, 18).

By the end of the John 3 pericope, Nicodemus has disappeared from the narrative. However, the Samaritan woman returns to Jesus, bringing her entire town. Her town comes to know Jesus as the Messiah. The Pharisees demand a sign, yet this woman and her village do not demand one in order to embrace Jesus. This text does not paint the Samaritan woman as shameful, sexually immoral, or as an outcast who requires pity. Instead, the text elevates her even above a well respected male religious leader.

Conclusion

Overall, a re-reading of the Samaritan woman in John 4 reveals that this is a boundary breaking story that elevates this woman to the status of disciple. The story breaks boundaries in its well imagery as Jesus brings the marriage of Samaritans into the kingdom. The story breaks

the boundaries of public and private as, not only does Jesus converse with a woman in public space during male time, but then sends her to go speak with the men in her village in the public sphere. The story breaks boundaries of exploitation and oppression as this woman leaves her water jug behind. The story breaks ritual boundaries as Jesus asks to share a drinking container with a Samaritan woman. The story even provides a role reversal as the male asking for a drink from the female, becomes the one serving water to her.²¹ All of these boundary breaking components are lost when this woman is confined to the boundary of sexual stereotype. When a re-reading of this Samaritan woman takes place, a new picture is presented. This woman is not ignorant, nor a prostitute. Instead, she is well-informed, engages in theological discussion, and the town listens when she speaks. In this way, she becomes a model of the ones who truly worship in Spirit and truth, an example to be followed. She becomes a representative disciple of Jesus, a witness through her invitation and her words. “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39).

²¹ Neyrey. *John*. 116.

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