

A Samaritan Woman Meets Her Messiah-Revealer

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John wrote his gospel after the other three had been written and had been in circulation for some time. I think one of the reasons his gospel includes things not found in the others is that he wanted to include things which had made a lasting impression on him and which had *not* already been covered by the other gospel writers. I imagine his kind of cosmic and poetic style is partly because he knew the Greek believers among whom he lived warmed to metaphors like wind, water, and light, which

Jesus had used and which John had latched onto (and I imagine he latched on to them because he himself had a poetic bent and they appealed to him as well). As Michael Card has pointed out, one of the things found only in John's gospel is the inclusion of extended conversations with individuals. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in chapter 4 is one of these.

Jesus and his disciples have left Judea, and are headed north towards Galilee, passing through Samaria, which is the shortest way to get to Galilee. On the whole, the Galilean Jews—while strict by our standards--were less strict than the Jews of Judea. The Judean Jews would travel far out of their way to avoid passing through Samaria, but Galileans generally did travel through it. Jesus and the disciples are near the village of Sychar, and Jesus sits at a well while the disciples go on into the town to buy food.

One interesting thing about this encounter is a detail which I'm thankful John included. The well where Jesus will talk to this woman is not just any well; it is Jacob's well. And this reminds us of Jacob's story, and his story reminds us of Isaac's. There have been two very significant previous encounters between a man and a woman at a well similar to this one. It is at such a well (though in Haran) where Abraham's servant, given the job of finding the right wife for Isaac, met Rebekah. He had prayed that if he met a young woman at the well and she was the right one for Isaac, that God would work things out in such a way that if he asked for a drink that she in reply would offer not only to give him a drink but offer to water his camels as well. That would be the sign that she was the one. Sure enough, a young lady (who is, we learn, beautiful) does come to the well and does offer to give both him and his camels water to drink. She is Rebekah, and this meeting at the well will lead to her becoming the wife of Isaac and a matriarch of Israel.

One generation later, Jacob has fled his home in fear of Esau and, having been on a hard, long journey, arrives at a well in Haran (perhaps the same well). At the well he encounters a lovely girl, learns that she is his cousin, and weeps in gratitude at having found his relatives and

knowing that he will no longer feel so alone. He also falls in love with Rachel so deeply that the 7 years of work required in order to marry her seem to him like just a few days. These are both encounters which connect a man with a woman whom he will be marry and love. And in this highly significant setting--a well, and, what's more Jacob's well--Jesus and the Samaritan woman encounter each other. Regardless of what this woman looks like or what her age is, I think that, in a way, she represents us. Like her, we are at times broken, messed up, and isolated. And humankind is the object of Jesus's love as surely as Rachel was the object of Jacob's.

As is often pointed out in sermons, this woman has come to the well at noon, and that is not the time of day when women customarily come to fetch water. As we learn, this woman has been married 5 times and is currently living with a man who hasn't married her. Her place is probably quite low on the totem pole of her community. It's also interesting that she's been married five times. Even the Jews who were lenient had a limit to the number of times a woman could be married—and that limit was three times. Perhaps the Samaritan's had a rule that five was the limit. Or perhaps man #6 just doesn't love this woman enough to marry her. Not being married to him puts her in very precarious position indeed. If this man drops her (which he can do at any moment), there would be no place left for her but perhaps the streets. This low position of hers probably makes her prefer coming at the noon hour by herself to draw water rather than early in the day with the other village women. She probably doesn't feel comfortable in their company, and the feelings may be mutual.

Why has she been married that many times? Some of her husbands may have died, but it seems likely that several of them (and perhaps all of them) divorced her. Why did they? Since there is no child mentioned, I wonder whether perhaps she was not able to bear children. That would certainly make many a man divorce her; most men wanted a posterity. If she couldn't bear children, however, why did so many men (one after another) marry her? My guess is that she was—like Rebekah and Rachel—beautiful. That might make a man willing to take his chances and marry her and hope she would become able to conceive a child after all. If she was beautiful, her beauty could have also easily made the village women dislike her out of jealousy. And if she was barren, that could've given the village women a way to feel superior (which they'd likely grasp and cling to if they were jealous of her beauty). Whatever the details were, the dynamics in this woman's life and in her community would've been very human.

When the disciples later return and find Jesus talking to this woman, their surprise is not that he is talking to a *Samaritan* but that he is talking to a *woman* in public. Most Jewish men, especially rabbis, did not talk to women in public, not even to their own wives. Their attitude is further evidenced in the sayings of rabbis of that time period: one such saying was, "Better that the law be burned than delivered to a woman." Yikes. But the disciples, though surprised and curious, stop short of asking him why he's talking to a woman.

But that's getting ahead of myself. Let's look back to the moment when she arrives at the well and Jesus asks her for a drink of water.

The woman is surprised. But unlike the disciples, she is not surprised that in speaking to her, Jesus is talking to a woman (maybe Samaritan men were kinder in that respect) but is very surprised that he is talking to a Samaritan. It's the first thing topic she lands on. As they talk, her answers to him at first seem defensive in tone, even a bit hostile. But as Jesus continues to pursue her, making statements that are unexpected (talking about supernatural living water), her curiosity takes over and then an openness. By the time she discovers that Jesus knows things about her (her 5 husbands and current relationship) which he couldn't know apart from the miraculous, her defensiveness has departed. She realizes she is encountering something inexplicable apart from God's power.

As soon as the woman realizes this, she doesn't ask for a miraculous bag of gold to appear or any other material blessing. She asks Jesus to explain things to her. She must've been something of a thinker. Perhaps her time alone has fostered this part of her personality. She wants the long-standing argument (an argument she's heard rehashed all her life) about whether Jerusalem or the mountain here near Sychar is the right place to worship (the Samaritans actually did have some reasons for believing the right place was their Mt. Gerizim). This time it's not defensiveness or irritation with the Jews speaking. She'd just like to know the answer. She just wants to know the truth about something important.

And, like we often do, she wants to know whether the correct answer is A or B (those are the only two answers she's ever heard of). Jesus answers, *Neither one. The answer is C. The place to worship God is not where but how—true worshippers will worship God in spirit and in truth.* When we give the Lord either/or questions, he fairly often tells us "neither one" and then goes on to tell us something that wasn't even on our radar screen.

The Samaritans—not just the Judean and Galilean Jews--believed in a messiah, but they saw him not so much as a political or military messiah-deliverer but as a messiah-revealer. So it makes sense that when the woman realizes Jesus is no ordinary man, she wastes no time—she asks him to answer (to *reveal* the truth about) a spiritual question. When she runs to town to tell the men there to come see this uncanny man she just met and says she thinks he may well be the messiah, the evidence she presents is that he seems to supernaturally know everything, including unknowable details of her own life. He is The Knower, she seems to argue, so he is probably also The Revealer. (And he'd also just given her a great answer to her burning spiritual question, but she is content to let the men ask Jesus their own questions themselves.)

It is interesting, by the way, that this woman of Sychar, when she runs to blurt out her news, tells the men of the town (rather than the women). Is this simply because they are the town rulers/elders and that's to whom one brings an important message? Or is it because she actually feels more comfortable talking to the men than the women? Or both? Or something else? It is also interesting that they listen to her and act on her words. They even seek her out later to tell her that at first they believed on Jesus because of her testimony but that now they believe on Him because of their own encounter with Him. They didn't have to converse with her about this. They didn't have to tell her that. But they did. Perhaps the deep joy of meeting Truth

Himself was so great that all barriers and divisions were quite forgotten. Whatever their reason, I'm glad they told her this, and I'm glad John included that part of the story.

And I also appreciate that even as the excited woman is on her way back to town to share her news, Jesus is letting the disciples see his own joy. Being a worker in the harvest is giving him a satisfaction greater than a good meal of normal earthly food. I'm sure he eventually ate something (and eventually got his drink of water), but for the moment he doesn't need the food—he has gladness and fulfillment of a higher sort to refresh him.

With thanks to Michael Card (*John: The Gospel of Wisdom; The Nazarene*) and others