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The Well Women Revisited

Jo Ann Davidson
Andrews University, jad@andrews.edu

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THE WELL WOMEN REVISITED

The role of women in Scripture deserves another critical, unbiased look.

Many modern feminist writers argue that Old Testament patriarchy is the major influence behind all subsequent repression of women. Rightly drawing attention to the pain and inequities women are still forced to bear, they are correct in noting that these grievous matters need to be addressed and resolved. In their view, however, nothing will change as long as patriarchal religions such as Judaism and Christianity exist, for it is just such systems that force women into subservience. The language in feminist literature against patriarchy is often bitter and uncompromising.

Offenses against women are horrifying. Feminist complaints are compelling. Though the abominable

record of the mistreatment of women continues to this day, however, the charge that Old Testament patriarchy is its primary cause should be scrutinized. Textual indicators within Scripture depict matriarchy far more positively than feminism acknowledges.

HAGAR

Hagar is not a matriarch in the Covenant line. She is, however, one of the “well women” of Genesis. Poignant details are recorded in Genesis 21, when she and her son are excluded from Abraham’s family.

**Jo Ann Davidson, Ph.D., teaches systematic theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan.*

God does not abandon Hagar or her son Ishmael in their devastating situation. When they are at the point of death in the wilderness of Beersheba, God directs them to a well. He also promises to make Ishmael a great nation.

Indeed, it is arresting how similar is His promise to Hagar and her son to the one they have been hearing in Abraham's household regarding the son of promise.

After surveying the Genesis narratives, Trevor Dennis asserts that this Egyptian slave woman is “more highly honored in some respects than almost any other figure in the Bible.”¹ For example, the angel of the Lord appears, for the first time in biblical history, to this rejected woman (vs. 17). Indeed, he even calls her by name! Sarah and Abraham have not granted her this dignity but typically call her “slave girl” (16:2, NRSV).

God does not abandon Hagar or her son Ishmael in their devastating situation. When they are at the point of death in the wilderness of Beersheba, God directs them to a well (21:19). He also promises to make Ishmael a great nation. Indeed, it is arresting how similar is His promise to Hagar and her son to the one they have been hearing in Abraham's household regarding the son of promise: “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multi-

tude” (16:10, NKJV).

This occasion is also the solitary time that a covenantal-type promise is announced to a woman. “How very surprising is the honor which is bestowed upon Hagar (and upon Ishmael too) in Genesis 16. For a start, annunciations are a rare commodity in the Bible . . . In only three cases, those of Hagar, Manoah's wife, and Mary in Luke, is the promise of a son made to the one who will be the mother of the child (although Sarah overhears in Genesis 18, the words are addressed to her husband). In only four cases does God make the announcement himself. . . . only two women in the entire Bible receive annunciations from God himself, Hagar and the unnamed wife of Manoah.”²

It is also noteworthy that Hagar is the only woman in the Old Testament, indeed the only person in all of Scripture, to give Deity a name (16:13). The name *El-Roi* is found only here in the Old Testament, and

only Hagar expressed it.

“Let no one underestimate how extraordinary this naming is. . . . After wrestling with God all night at the river Jabbok, Jacob names the spot, Peniel, or ‘The face of God’ (Gen. 32:30). After coming so close to sacrificing Isaac . . . Abraham names the place, “The Lord Sees” (22:14). Abraham’s name is very close to the one Hagar gives God. Yet, like Jacob, Abraham names the place of encounter. . . . Elsewhere Abraham calls upon the name of God (12:8; 13:4; 21:33), but that is a very different exercise. Moreover, Hagar does not name her God as an aside, or declare his identity to herself after he has left the stage. She names him to his face: ‘You are the God who Sees Me.’”³

This occasion is also one of the three times in Genesis when a woman dialogues with God.

REBEKAH

Rebekah, a prominent matriarch in Genesis, is notable. “Rather than minimizing Rebekah’s contribution to the Israelite people, the [Genesis] narratives that introduce and develop the portrait of the second of the matriarchs are striking in the way she is depicted. Although she is described as being a beautiful wife for Isaac, she is not appreciated solely for her appearance. Like Abraham, her independence and trust are demonstrated by her willingness to leave her family

and travel to a strange land.”⁴

Narrative details such as dialogue, narrative pace, genealogical notation, and other literary features suggest the prominence of Rebekah in Israel’s history. She appears in the text as a young woman who takes a great risk leaving her home and venturing into uncertainty. The Genesis narratives follow her journey as she then marries and becomes a mother. Both Rebekah’s character and her journey are extensively recorded in contrast to her husband Isaac, the patriarch, of whom little is written.

Rebekah’s many positive qualities and strength of character are displayed in her life as a matriarch. Her “actions attest to a certain degree of female autonomy in the biblical world.”⁵

Rebekah’s genealogical designation alone is striking. In Genesis 22:20–24, the genealogy lists the children born to Abraham’s brother Nahor and his sister-in-law Milcah. Their eight sons are named, but the offspring of these eight sons (the next generation) are included in two cases. Only the children of Kemuel and Bethuel are given, and we are informed that “Bethuel begat Rebekah” (vs. 23, KJV). This is arresting, for she is the only named offspring of her father, yet later the narrative includes her brother Laban.

If the narratives following the

death and burial of Sarah are considered “patriarchal” by feminists, they should deal with the life of the patriarch Isaac. Instead, the reader’s attention is focused on Rebekah. Apart from the incident in which Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, we know nothing of the boyhood or youth of Isaac. By contrast, Rebekah is depicted more fully. “The power of her personality is already evident when as a young girl she takes command of her destiny and leaves for Canaan.”⁶

When Abraham directs his servant to find a wife for Isaac, one remark in his instructions is also indicative of a woman’s status during the patriarchal era. Abraham declares that “if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be released from this oath” (24:8, NKJV). The patriarch is assuming that the woman will have the final say. And indeed, ultimately it is Rebekah herself who chooses to go. In fact, in the lengthy narrative of Genesis 24, her determination to travel with Abraham’s servant is spoken directly by her (vs. 58). In contrast to what might be expected in an oppressive patriarchy, her father determines nothing.

Upon the servant’s arrival at the local well, he meets Rebekah and asks for a place in her “father’s house” (vs. 23, KJV). Rebekah arranges for his hospitality herself with her “mother’s house” (vs. 28,

KJV). Her father says hardly a word throughout this entire narrative.

Most impressive is the noticeable correspondence of key terms between Rebekah’s narratives and Abraham’s.

“The references to haste that punctuate the narrative: ‘She made haste and lowered her pitcher . . . she made haste and lowered her pitcher into the trough . . . she ran again to the well’ . . . bears more than the obvious complimentary implications for character and judgment. It echoes nothing less than Abraham’s model hospitality, ‘He ran to meet them . . . Abraham made haste into the tent . . . Abraham ran to the tent. . . he made haste to prepare it’ (18:2–7) . . . the elevating analogy stamps her as worthy of the patriarch himself.”⁷

According to the text, both Abraham and Rebekah leave behind “their country,” “their kindred,” and their “father’s house.” Both will be “blessed” and “become great.” It has been suggested that “with this blessing the narrator quietly moves Rebecca into the cycle of God’s promises to the patriarchs.”⁸

After Rebecca marries Isaac and becomes pregnant, she apparently experiences great difficulty. In agony she inquires of the Lord. She does this herself (25:22). The phrase “to inquire” is significant in the Old Testament. Prominent prophets like Moses and Elisha and leading kings

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of Israel inquire of the Lord. So does Rebekah, and she receives a personal oracle from Yahweh that her older son is destined to serve the younger.

A concentric chiasmic structure in this scene serves to underscore the importance of Rebekah’s divine oracle:

A. Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah (vs. 20)

B. Rebekah was barren; prayer for children answered (vss. 20, 21)

C. his wife Rebekah conceived (vs. 21)

the children struggled together within her (vs. 22)

D. Rebekah asks for—an ORACLE (vs. 22)

D. Yahweh grants her—an ORACLE (vs. 23)

C. her days to be delivered were fulfilled (vs. 24)

and behold, there were twins in her womb (vs. 24)

B. birth and appearance of Jacob and Esau (vss. 25, 26)

A. Isaac was 60 years old when

she bore them (vs. 26)⁹

Highly significant also is the formula used to announce Rebekah’s delivery: “Her days were fulfilled for her to give birth” (25:24, NKJV). This formula is used of only three biblical women: Elizabeth and Mary in the New Testament and Rebekah in the Old Testament.¹⁰

Later, when Esau her son marries two Hittite women, the text informs us that this is “a grief of mind to Isaac *and Rebekah*” (26:35, NKJV, *italics* supplied). This inclusion of Rebekah’s distress regarding Esau’s marriage to pagan women reveals that Rebekah is just as concerned about the covenant line as is Isaac.

It bears repeating that the Genesis narrator exhibits far more interest in Rebekah than in her husband Isaac, the patriarch. “Characterization of Rebekah yields a deeper understanding of her significance. . . . All of these actions are given without a polemical context, and the narrator does nothing to indicate

Feminists have been right to focus attention on the abuse of women inside and outside the church. But they have been wrong in their assumption that Old Testament patriarchy is a prime cause of this long-standing oppression of women. The patriarchal system is a pivotal issue in their understanding of female repression. Old Testament matriarchy, however, exhibited in Genesis suggests a different perspective from that implied by feminist literature.

that these were unusual activities for a woman to take. . . . The presentation of Rebekah shows that women in Israel were viewed as persons who could make crucial decisions about their futures, whose prayers were acknowledged.”¹¹

RACHEL

During the next generation of patriarchy, Jacob tells his wives Leah and Rachel (whom he met at a well) of God’s command to “return to the land of your fathers” (Gen. 31:3, NKJV). In the process, he recounts the poor treatment he has received at the hands of their father to persuade them of the reasonableness of leaving.

“Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, ‘Is there still any portion or inheritance for us in our father’s house? Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money. For all these riches which

God has taken from our father are really ours and our children’s; now then, whatever God has said to you, do it” (vss. 14-16, NKJV).

They add to Jacob’s description the hurts they themselves have suffered from their father and urge Jacob to hearken to the Lord’s word. They are not afraid to oppose their father. Nor is Jacob a male figure who issues commands to his wives, as might be expected from feminist depictions of patriarchy.

We again find a repeated Genesis formula regarding the Covenant: the sundering of human family ties for a divine purpose. Abraham is called to abandon his home for the place God will show him. Rebecca, too, abandons family and land, traveling from Haran to far-off Canaan. The same breaking of family ties is assented to by Rachel and Leah.

“The capacity to leave is a measure of the clear awareness of the exigencies of their chosen status. . . .

Davidson: The Well Women Revisited

In the story of Genesis, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah know, with neither melancholy nor capriciousness, how to give up their moorings in order to enter further into the covenant, how to keep themselves available to the summonings of a God who chose them. . . . This certainly argues for their extreme consciousness of the demands pertaining to the Promise, but also, and jointly, for the necessity of a common receptiveness on the part of man and woman to the urgent solicitations of the holy Word.”¹²

Not Old Testament Doormats

The Genesis “well women” are not “wall flowers”! It would be unfair to the narrative portraits of these women to argue that women bow in submission to all men. Rather, though respectful of their husbands, these women are intelligent and willful. “Far from conforming to a traditional servitude, these women grace the pages of Genesis with their laughter, their sorrows, *their strength, and their power.*”¹³

Feminists have been right to focus attention on the abuse of women inside and outside the church. But they have been wrong in their assumption that Old Testament patriarchy is a prime cause of this long-standing oppression of women. The patriarchal system is a pivotal issue in their understanding

of female repression. Old Testament matriarchy, however, as exhibited in Genesis suggests a different perspective from that implied by feminist literature.

Feminists are correct in demanding redress of the long-accumulating record of the subjugation of women. But they need to rethink the cause of this repression. The Genesis matriarchs are not suppressed or oppressed women. Biblical patriarchy must be defined by the biblical narratives.

Carol Meyers proposes that many of the details recorded in the Old Testament seem to indicate a rather equitable situation between male and female up to the time of the Israelite monarchy.¹⁴ The result of establishing the throne in Israel, she argues, brought great changes to the Israelite patriarchal society, with the former position of the female diminishing from that time on: “Feminists who condemn or bemoan the apparent patriarchy of ancient or other societies may be deflecting their energies from what should be the real focus of their concern: the transformation of functional gender balance to situations of real imbalance.”¹⁵

The suggestion that the suppression of women in Scripture begins with the emergence of the Israelite monarchy is borne out textually in the narratives. God warns Samuel of the results to Israel should they insist

on having a king (1 Samuel 8). When the monarchy is instated, one notices a sudden shift in textual emphasis from women and men in basic equivalence to kings, court intrigue, war, with women almost disappearing. This then becomes characteristic of the subsequent Old Testament historical documents. The narrator thus subtly substantiates the fulfillment of God's prediction with this dramatic textual transition. The monarchy signals the end of vigorous matriarchy.

A New Testament Well Woman

Though the narrative of John 4 is found in the New Testament and was written in Greek, the writer was a Jew. Thus it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that it may exhibit the same Old Testament narrative properties.

Ongoing discussion of John 4 points to a need for re-evaluating the numerous narrative details of this passage as they cast light on the status of women. All the verbal and literary subtleties that are part of this narrative need to be accorded their proper attention to accurately inform interpretation.

Regarding the sequencing of Hebrew narratives, the theology of John's Gospel is expressed not only by choice of vocabulary, but also by the author's careful linking and balancing of one narrative scene with another. This becomes obvious in

the conversation of Jesus and Nicodemus, a learned Israelite rabbi (John 3), immediately preceding Christ's conversation with a Samaritan divorcee (John 4). The differences between Nicodemus and the well woman in grasping the words of Christ are thus highlighted.

The number of verses in the well scene of John 4 signal its importance. Even more striking is the length of the first conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus. Dialogue is widely acknowledged as one of the notable features of the fourth Gospel, as it is in all biblical narratives where it appears. The initial conversation in John 4 is one of the longest found in all four Gospels, taking up more than half of this particular narrative. On this basis alone, John 4 is a significant passage. In chapter four of the fourth Gospel "we have . . . one of the most momentous utterances of our Lord."¹⁶

Within the first dialogue, the logic of Jesus' seemingly abrupt turn from the subject of water to His request, "Go, call your husband, and come here" (John 4:16, NKJV), attracts much attention. Some commentators imply that this disrupts the flow of the conversation. A favorite Johannine literary transition device in a dialogue, however, regularly alerts the reader of Jesus' supernatural knowledge (1:42, 48; 2:4-3:2). Jesus' request for her to

Jesus has already shown that He is free from Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans. Now He seeks to instruct this Samaritan woman regarding the Jews. He declares that the great truths of redemption have been committed to them, and that from them the Messiah is to come. The historical problem of Jewish versus Samaritan worship is thus transformed into a declaration of the true encounter with God, ultimately climaxing in Christ's dramatic "I AM."

bring her husband functions as preparation for His revealing to the woman that He knows all things. Her reaction shows that it has that effect: "Sir, . . . I can see that you are a prophet" (4:19, NIV).

But in reality there is no real digression in the conversation. Jesus has heard the woman's desire to thirst no more. Thus, He is gently leading her to recognize her need of a Savior.

The ensuing remarks of Christ (John 4:21-24), His longest speech in the first dialogue, are widely recognized as foundational statements for mission theology, doctrine of the church, and the theology of worship. Cahill even suggests a chiasmic structure of this narrative with the apex highlighting true worship:

A. Meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (vss. 5-9)

B. Dialogue on living water (vss. 10-15)

C. Dialogue on true worship (vss. 16-26)

B Dialogue on true food (vss. 27-38)

A Meeting of Samaritans and Jesus (vss. 39-42)¹⁷

Jesus has already shown that He is free from Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans. Now He seeks to instruct this Samaritan woman regarding the Jews. He declares that the great truths of redemption have been committed to them, and that from them the Messiah is to come. The historical problem of Jewish versus Samaritan worship is thus transformed into a declaration of the true encounter with God, ultimately climaxing in Christ's dramatic "I AM" (vs. 26, NLT). The well woman is granted a direct, definitive revelation of the Messiah rarely given to anyone.

Another matter needs to be addressed: the characterization of

This well woman is consistently portrayed by commentators as a disreputable character incapable of grasping intelligent theological discourse. The details within the narrative, however, do not yield that picture. Even her questions of Christ suggest differently. Her profound grasp of the theological thinking of her day is reflected in her intelligent questions about worship.

the Samaritan woman. Because the first dialogue in John 4 contains a single reference to her unlawful marital status (vss. 16-18), most interpreters have restricted their understanding of this woman to this one single clue. As a result, she has been evaluated in a less-than-positive light. Some examples:

1. The time reference of the “sixth hour” (John 4:6, KJV), when Jesus is said to have arrived at the well, is interpreted by some to mean that the woman comes to the well in the middle of the day to avoid meeting anyone in her great embarrassment.

Well use, however, was not restricted to the evening hours, except by shepherds. Other noon-time encounters at local wells are not unheard of in Scripture. Jacob meets with Rachel at the well near Haran during midday (Gen. 29:7). It is also important to remember that no one at that time had run-

ning water in the home. Furthermore, the comment of time in the narrative is grammatically connected with Christ’s journey and His weariness.

2. Major commentators, in the usual negative characterization of this woman, wonder, when she at first misinterprets Christ’s reference to “living water,” whether a Samaritan woman would typically have been able to comprehend even the most elementary concepts of such a discussion.

Nicodemus, however, in just the previous chapter, also initially misinterprets Christ’s comments literally. However, this is characterized as merely a misunderstanding.

3. Other damaging indications regarding the well woman include her being referred to as a “five-time loser” and a “tramp.”¹⁸ This kind of characterization is common among commentators.

Whatever adjectives are attached

to this woman regarding her reputation and her marriages, the consistent implication is that she is a low-class person, and any fault in the marriage failures are hers. Even her witness concerning the Messiah to the “men” of Samaria is interpreted negatively.

This well woman is consistently portrayed by commentators as a disreputable character incapable of grasping intelligent theological discourse. The details within the narrative, however, do not yield that picture. Even her questions of Christ suggest differently. Her profound grasp of the theological thinking of her day is reflected in her intelligent questions about worship.

The negative characterizations of the Samaritan woman have also not been informed by this woman’s political savvy revealed in the narrative. She is not culturally naive. Her conversation with Christ opens with evidence that she is well aware of the political situation between the Samaritans and the Jews (vs. 9) and seems to teasingly wonder about the “ignorance” of these matters on the part of the Jewish gentleman at the well when she responds to Jesus’ request for a drink of water: “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” (vs. 9, NKJV).

Furthermore, as the conversation progresses, contrary to the evaluation of her in the commentaries, the

Samaritan woman’s understanding of the Stranger deepens. She begins to call Him “sir” and then wonders if He may be a prophet. Her questions and comments consistently reveal her grasp of both Samaritan and Jewish theology. The conversation in the narrative clearly reveals that she is not unschooled in contemporary political or theological matters.

As far as her having no influence—after the conviction that Christ is the Messiah penetrates her heart, she overlooks the reason she came to the well, which strikingly fulfills Christ’s earlier promise regarding thirst. She leaves her water pot and hurries to the town. She goes to where she knows the people, including men, are gathered, resting in the heat of noontide. And at her invitation they come to see for themselves the one of whom she testifies.

Textual evidence does not support the idea of her having no influence. Nor does it allow her to be the town harlot. It is hardly possible that if she were truly a low-class prostitute, the men of Samaria would openly follow her to meet an individual described as being able to reveal everything a person has ever done, which is the well woman’s testimony to them about Christ.

What the narrative details seem to portray is an intelligent city woman with a keen mind who has pondered the theological and polit-

ical realities of her day and culture. The progression in the dialogue reveals Jesus' desire to bring this woman to faith, knowing that her mind and heart can grasp theological verities. With this one solitary divorcee, Jesus discusses the fundamental issues of Christian theology and worship, making His most profound theological statement on true worship to this supposedly "ignorant" woman, even though He Himself has warned about casting "pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6, KJV).

Like modern commentators, His own disciples seem not to see any potential in this well woman, for when they return, they wonder why Jesus is speaking to her (John 4:27). Nor have they seen Samaria as a potential area for mission, but solely as a place to purchase food. The woman, however, is of a different mind and goes immediately to invite the people of her town to come meet Jesus. And Jesus waxes eloquent to the disciples about the ready harvest of Samaria: "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (vs. 35, NKJV).

The woman's witness to the men of Samaria is an occasion for Jesus to become excited about the harvest of His ministry. And in a place as unlikely as Samaria, this harvest is

ready. The well woman "proved herself a more effective missionary than [Christ's] own disciples. The disciples saw nothing in Samaria to indicate that it was an encouraging field. Their thoughts were focused upon a great work to be done in the future. They did not see that right around them was a harvest ready to be gathered. But through the woman whom they despised, a whole cityful were brought to hear the Saviour."¹⁹

Some scholars suggest that the well woman is only half-hearted in her acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. The clues in the narrative suggest instead that she is rather immediate in accepting His divine claim when she grasps who He is. The learned Nicodemus, by contrast, has been unable to make such connections from similar concepts spoken by Jesus in the previous chapter. Unlike Nicodemus, who quietly disappears from the scene as Jesus' partner in conversation, the Samaritan woman invites the men and women of Samaria to meet Jesus. In contrast to Christ's disciples, who go into the city only to buy bread, she hurries there to share the "Bread of Life."

The Pharisees of Israel have despised Jesus, demanding a sign that He is the Son of God. But the Samaritans demand nothing, and Jesus performs no miracles among them, except to reveal to the well woman that He knows her marital

The matriarchs are not suppressed women. Rather, they are willful and directive within a basic position of gender equality with the patriarchs. The consistent picture in Genesis finds both men and women cooking and doing other household chores. Both genders take care of sheep. It isn't until the later institution of the monarchy that this is drastically affected. Feminists are free to deplore patriarchy, but they cannot use the Genesis matriarchs as evidence to support that position.

status. And many in Samaria receive Him. In their new joy they say to the woman, “Now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world,”²⁰ giving demonstrable confirmation of the influence of this woman’s testimony. Moreover, the Samaritan acknowledgment of the Messiah is proclaimed in the distinctive designation, “Savior of the world” (vs. 42, NKJV).

Conclusion

Feminists deserve to be chided for their castigation that biblical patriarchy subjugates women. Old Testament narratives paint a different picture. The matriarchs are not suppressed women. Rather, they are willful and directive within a basic position of gender equality with the patriarchs. The consistent picture in

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In the New Testament, the gentle chiding is for the commentators on the Gospel of John who seem to miss numerous important narrative details in John 4, and as a result underestimate this well woman. Rather than a low-class prostitute, she is pictured as a well-informed city woman to whom people listen when she speaks. A whole town full of people believe her testimony regarding the Jewish man at the well and go with her to find Him.

Yes, she has been divorced five

times, but the text never informs the reader who has been at fault in those divorces. Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that divorce in that era seems to be the sole prerogative of the male. Within the John 4 narrative, it is important to notice that Jesus is not criticizing the well woman's previous marriages, but rather noting her present situation of living with a man without being married. In fact, He twice commends her honesty in describing her present marital status.

And Christ unfolds to her the most profound and sublime theology. Christ, throughout all four Gospels, is portrayed as One who knows all things and all people. In the John 4 narrative, He surely knows not only that the well woman's mind is capable of understanding theological discourse, but even more importantly, that her heart is receptive. In fact, careful narrative work throughout the fourth Gospel reveals that it is women who are the privileged recipients of Jesus' most important self-revelations (e.g., Mary, Martha, and the Samaritan woman).

The well woman of John 4 deserves our respect and a fresh evaluation of her character. Sensitive narrative analysis can help point us in the right direction. Interpretation of biblical narratives used to shape theology demands careful attention to every detail. □

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