

## JOHN 4: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

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### *Biblical Narrative Genre*

For more than a century, biblical narratives have been assaulted by a major frontal attack from the formidable arsenal of the historical-critical method.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the twentieth century, however, a new attitude regarding these narratives began to be heard as a result of several leading scholars, who called attention to the sophisticated nature of Hebrew narrative writing. These voices include Brevard Childs, Phyllis Trible, J. P. Fokkelman, Meir Steinberg, and Robert Alter.<sup>2</sup> These scholars' contributions have forced recognition of the distinctive literary features found consistently within the biblical narratives. They have suggested that narrative characteristics, such as word and phrase repetition and conversation inclusion and length, are indicative of implicit theological viewpoints rather than mere evidence of numerous redactors. Alter writes:

<sup>1</sup>Cf., e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Form Criticism: Two Essays on New Testament Research: The Study of Synoptic Gospel*, trans. Frederick C. Grant (New York: Harper, 1962); and Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); see also Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson, eds., *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and idem, *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999); idem, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); idem, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1981); and L. J. De Regt, J. De Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman, eds., *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996). Meir Steinberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 312.

What role does literary art play in the shaping of biblical narrative?

A crucial one, I shall argue, finely modulated from moment to moment, determining in most cases the minute choice of words, and reported details, the pace of narration, the small movements of dialogue, and a whole network of ramified interconnections in the text. . . .

It is a little astonishing that at this late date literary analysis of the Bible of the sort I have tried to illustrate here in this preliminary fashion is only in its infancy. By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units and much else.<sup>3</sup>

Building upon the results of this new literary paradigm, this paper will briefly probe the narrative of the Samaritan woman in John 4. Though this particular narrative was written in the Koine Greek, the writer was a Jew. Thus it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that the John 4 narrative would exhibit the same literary properties that Alter and others have noted are characteristic of Hebrew narrative writing. P. Joseph Cahill agrees that “the Samaritan interlude is not only a masterpiece of narrative design but likewise a story reflecting literary characteristics manifested in Old Testament narratives of great antiquity. . . . [T]hat literary analysis of NT narrative may enlarge the theological significance and secondly indicate dimensions of literary continuity between Old and New Testament narrative.”<sup>4</sup>

*Literary Presuppositions in Regard  
to the John 4 Narrative*

Although there is ongoing discussion regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, this article will assume that it was written by the Apostle John. The intention of this article is not to explore textual issues, but to evaluate the Gospel narrative materials as they now come to us.

The Gospel of John is a textual unity. The writer deliberately mentions the intention to testify to the life of Jesus in such a way as to inspire belief in him. Out of an immense accumulation of incidents and miracles in Jesus' life and ministry, John has selected those which, in his opinion, would particularly reveal that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:30). Further, although much current narrative work assumes the biblical narratives to be myths, this article will argue that the John 4 narrative reports an actual historical event and that there does not necessarily need to be a dichotomy between historical validity and literary

<sup>3</sup>Alter, 312.

<sup>4</sup>P. Joseph Cahill, “Narrative Art in John IV,” *Religious Studies Bulletin* 2/2 (1982): 41.

quality.<sup>5</sup> Finally, any interpretive stance affects and informs hermeneutics. Alister McGrath argues:

We may summarize our analysis of the relation between the biblical narrative and doctrine as follows. Narratives need to be interpreted correctly; Christian doctrine provides the conceptual framework by which the scriptural narrative is interpreted. Narratives demand interpretation. The scriptural narrative is no exception. . . . Doctrine articulates the particular interpretation, or range of interpretations, of the scriptural narrative appropriate to the self-understanding of the Christian community, calling others into question. Thus the assertion "Jesus is the Christ" is a doctrinal affirmation which allows the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth to be viewed in a particular light. This assertion is not, however, arbitrary: it is held to be legitimate in the light of that narrative itself.<sup>6</sup>

### *Scholarly Issues in the John 4 Narrative*

Ongoing discussion of the John 4 narrative in scholarly literature points to a need for reevaluating the numerous details of this passage, particularly as they cast light on the theological significance of the ministry of Jesus and the status of women. All of the verbal and literary subtleties that are characteristic of the many narratives in the Gospel of John, including chapter 4, need to be accorded their proper attention to adequately inform interpretation and theological understanding.

As Alter suggests regarding the sequencing of Hebrew narratives, the theology of John's Gospel is expressed not only by choice of vocabulary, but also by John's careful linkage and balancing of one narrative scene with another. In the John 4 narrative, this becomes obvious with John's association of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a learned Jewish rabbi (John 3), with his conversation with a Samaritan divorcee (John 4). The differences between Nicodemus's and the Samaritan woman's abilities to grasp the meaning of Christ's dialogue are subtly highlighted.

Irony is also a characteristic feature of biblical narrative writing. John's extensive use of irony is masterfully employed in the John 4 narrative. In fact, one of the most ironic questions in the entire Gospel comes when the Samaritan woman asks Jesus: "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (v. 12). The irony of her next comment in v. 15—"Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw"—will elicit a literal fulfillment, although she does not know it yet. She is still thinking of a place, not yet realizing that

<sup>5</sup>This point was argued and defended in my recent dissertation "Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Aesthetic" (Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 113.

“living water” is not dependent on a well or spring.

The number of verses dedicated to this particular narrative alert the reader to 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 OT narratives. The initial conversation in John 4 is one of the longest found in all four Gospels,<sup>7</sup> taking up more than half of this particular narrative. On this basis alone, this passage in John 4 is significant.

There are several ongoing disputes regarding certain details within the John 4 narrative:

1. *Jesus' use of the word "must."* “He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee. And He *must* [ἐδεῖ] of necessity go through Samaria” (4:3-4, emphasis supplied). In an attempt to interpret the word “must” (ἐδεῖ), a number of different suggestions have been given regarding the reason for Christ’s journey from Judea to Galilee through Samaria. If v. 4 is read with vv. 5 and 6, however, there is no ambiguity. Rather, this introductory section provides the narrative with a decisive starting point. And the answer to why Jesus “must” travel by necessity through Samaria lies in the nature of his mission. Careful narrative analysis of the Fourth Gospel finds that Jesus uses the word ἐδεῖ for his mission (3:14; 9:10, 16; 16:12, 14; 29:9). Elsewhere throughout the Gospel, ἐδεῖ is also used with the sense of divine necessity (e.g., 3:14, 30; 9:4). By the time the complete narrative of John 4 is read, concluding with the unexpected harvest in Samaria, it is clear that the ἐδεῖ at the outset does indeed refer to the divine will (4:34).

2. *Literary transition.* There is additional deliberation on Jesus’ seemingly abrupt turn from the subject of water to his request to “Go, call your husband, and come here,” within the first dialogue (v. 16). Some commentators imply that this command disrupts the flow of the conversation. However, 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.” Thus there is no real digression in the conversation. Jesus is responding to the woman’s request that she thirst no more. Before she can receive the gift he desires to bestow, she must be brought to recognize her need of a Savior.

3. *Chiastic structure.* Jesus’ ensuing remarks (vv. 21-24), his longest

<sup>7</sup>The conversation with Nicodemus ends ambiguously in the narrator’s comments.

speech in the first dialogue, are recognized as foundational statements for mission theology, ecclesiology, and the theology of worship. Cahill even suggests a chiasmic structure of this narrative, with the dialogue on true worship as its central focus:

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

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

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

B' Dialogue on true food (vv. 27-38)

A' Meeting of Samaritans and Jesus (vv. 39-42)<sup>8</sup>

Jesus' opening comment of this speech, "Woman, I assure you," gives his declaration special weight, indicating that what he is about to say is something to which the woman should especially devote her attention. Jesus had already shown that he was free from Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans. Now he seeks to break down the prejudice of this Samaritan woman against the Jews. He declares that the great truths of redemption had been committed to the Jews and that from them the Messiah was to appear. In their sacred writings, the Jews had a clear presentation of the character of God and the principles of his government (Ps 103:7).

Jesus then classes himself with the Jews, who are those to whom God had given a knowledge of himself. He also lifted the woman's thoughts above matters of form and ceremony and questions of controversy. The historical problem of Jewish versus Samaritan worship was thus transformed into a statement of the true encounter with God, ultimately climaxing in the dramatic divine claim of "I AM" (v. 26).

At this point in the conversation, Jesus no longer responds to the woman according to her comments and categories, but now introduces his own terms into the conversation. She is faced with a direct, definitive revelation of Jesus, rarely granted to anyone throughout Jesus' entire ministry. It is also strikingly different even from the ironic interplay they had been engaged in so far.

4. *The characterization of the Samaritan woman.* Because the first dialogue in John 4 contains a single reference to the woman's unlawful marital status (vv. 16-18), most exegetes have restricted their understanding of this woman to this single clue. As a result, she has been evaluated in a less than positive light, with commentators apparently ignoring numerous other hints included in the narrative regarding her character and allowing their interpretation to contradict these details. A closer look at the details, however, reveals that Jesus himself did not regard the woman from a negative perspective.

<sup>8</sup>Cahill, "Narrative Art in John 4," 42.

a. *The "sixth hour" of the day.* The time reference to the "sixth hour," when Jesus is said to have arrived at the well (John 4:6), is often interpreted to mean that the woman comes to the well in the middle of the day to avoid meeting anyone in her embarrassment. As William Barclay writes: "May it be that she was so much of a moral outcast that the women even drove her away from the village well and she had to come here to draw water?"<sup>9</sup> Kenneth O. Gangel agrees: "About noon the woman came to the well, obviously a social outcast since that hot hour would have been an unlikely time to lug a heavy water jar back into the city."<sup>10</sup>

However, well use was not restricted to the evening hours, except by the rural shepherds. It is important to remember that no one at that time had running water in their homes! Furthermore, the comment of time in the narrative is immediately connected with Christ's journey and his weariness.

b. *"Living water."* The Samaritan woman seems, at first, to misinterpret Jesus' reference to "living water." Some commentators, such as Raymond E. Brown, wonder if "a Samaritan woman would have been expected to understand even the most basic ideas of the discourse."<sup>11</sup> Barclay exhibits the same attitude: "All Jewish pictorial religious language was full of this idea of the thirst of the soul which could be quenched only with the living water which was the gift of God. But the woman chose to understand this with an almost crude literalism. She was blind because she would not see."<sup>12</sup> By contrast, however, commentators are generally kinder when considering Nicodemus's initial misinterpretation of Jesus' comments. His lack of understanding is characterized as merely a misunderstanding.

Jesus, however, surely knew not only that the Samaritan woman's mind was capable of understanding theological discourse, but, more importantly, that her heart was receptive. In fact, a careful study of the Fourth Gospel narratives reveals that it is women who are the privileged recipients of Jesus' most important self-revelations: the Samaritan woman, who was one of the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah; Martha, who expressed her belief in Jesus' ability to raise her brother Lazarus from the dead (John 11); and Mary, to whom Jesus first appeared after his resurrection and to whom he entrusted the delivering of the news to the apostles (John 20:1-18).

<sup>9</sup>William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 1:148.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth O. Gangel, *John*, Holman New Testament Commentary Series (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 74.

<sup>11</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 176.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

c. "Go call your husband." Commentators view the Samaritan woman's marital status as a primary indication of her low status and unworthiness of Jesus' consideration. For example, Gangel comments that

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.<sup>13</sup>

Others continue the negative picture of a woman living on the outskirts of society: "In order to receive Jesus' living water she must deal with the flagrant misuse of her sexuality. Jesus asked her to fetch her husband."<sup>14</sup> "Jesus finding her not only spiritually obtuse but even inclined to be flippant, tries to sober her by confronting her with the shady side of her own life and thereby to reach a part of her nature wherein he can awaken some response. He therefore bids her, 'Go and call your husband, then come back here.'<sup>15</sup> "And then He opens up her whole confused situation. She has lived with a passing parade of men, five of them technically husbands, and the latest a live-in affair. None of them are lasting, meaningful relationships."<sup>16</sup>

While the Samaritan woman had been married five times, the text never informs the reader why the marriages were dissolved. Perhaps the woman was a five-time divorcee, as most commentators seem to believe, or perhaps there might be another explanation for her many marriages. Perhaps some of the marriages may have ended with the death of a husband. Furthermore, 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."<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the cause for her five marriages, it is important to notice that Jesus was not criticizing the woman's previous marriages, but rather her

<sup>13</sup>Gangel, 76.

<sup>14</sup>Beauford H. Bryant and Mark S. Krause, *John*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 120.

<sup>15</sup>G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John*, MNTC (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1953), 101.

<sup>16</sup>Roger L. Fredrikson, *John*, Communicator's Commentary (Waco: Word, 1985), 99.

<sup>17</sup>C. R. Taber, "Divorce," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 244.

present situation of living with a man without being married. In fact, he twice commends her honesty in describing her present marital status (vv. 17-18).

d. *Political savvy.* The negative castigations of the Samaritan woman have not been informed by this woman's political savvy. She was not culturally naive. For example, the conversation between the woman and Jesus opens with evidence that she is well aware of the political situation between the Samaritans and the Jews (v. 9). She 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 me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans).<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, as the conversation progresses, the Samaritan woman's respect for the mysterious stranger deepens. 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, and, in fact, she discusses the two categories: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain; and you say, that in Jerusalem is the place where man ought to worship" (vv. 19-20).

What the narrative details of John 4 seem to portray is an intelligent woman with a keen mind, who has pondered the theological and political realities of her day and culture. Furthermore, the progression in the dialogue reveals Jesus' desire to bring this woman to faith. 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.

e. "*Come see!*" D. A. Carson describes the Samaritan woman as "unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion."<sup>19</sup> The textual evidence, however, does not support the idea that this woman is a person of "no influence." With her grasp of Jesus as the promised Messiah, she forgets the reason she initially came to the well, which strikingly fulfills Christ's earlier promise regarding "thirst" (v. 10). She leaves her waterpot and hurries to the town, going to where she knew the people were gathered to rest in the heat of the noontide. And at her invitation, they come to see for themselves what this woman was testifying about. Nor does the textual evidence allow her to be the town harlot. For it is hardly a possibility, if she was truly a low-class prostitute, that the men of Samaria would openly follow

<sup>18</sup>Ezra 4:3-6, 11ff.; Matt 10:5; John 8:48; Acts 10:28.

<sup>19</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 216.

her to meet a person whom she described as being able to reveal everything a person ever did.

To this one solitary woman, Jesus proclaimed 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 warned against “casting pearls before swine” (Matt 7:6). Thus Jesus’ regard for the woman is not negative, but instead he entrusts her with his strongest statement of his divinity.

Like modern commentators, Jesus’ disciples did not see any potential in the woman, for when they returned to the well, they wondered why Jesus would be speaking to a woman. Nor had they seen the Samaritans as potential believers, but only a source from which to purchase food.

The woman, however, was of a different mind and went immediately to invite the people of her town to meet Jesus. Jesus then waxes eloquent to the disciples about the “ready harvest” of Samaria: “Say not, ‘There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest.’ Behold, I say to you, ‘Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest’” (4:35).

Some scholars suggest that the Samaritan woman was only half-hearted in her acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. The clues in the narrative suggest, instead, that she was rather immediate in accepting Jesus’ divine claim to be the Messiah. The learned Nicodemus by contrast was unable to make such connections from similar concepts spoken by Jesus in chapter 3. And, unlike Nicodemus, who quietly disappeared from the scene as Jesus’ partner in conversation, the Samaritan woman became Jesus’ coworker by inviting the men and women of Samaria to find the gift of salvation. In contrast to Jesus’ disciples, who went into the city only to buy bread, she hurried there to spread the news of the “Bread of Life.”

The Gospel of John records that the Pharisees despised the simplicity of Jesus, ignoring his miracles and demanding a sign that he was the Son of God (cf. 4:48). But the Samaritans, by contrast, did not ask for a sign, and Jesus performed no miracles among them, except in revealing to the woman the secrets of her life (v. 41). Many in Samaria, however, believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah. In their newfound joy, they said to the woman: “Now we believe, not because of your saying; for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (v. 42). Thus they gave unassailable confirmation of the influence of this woman’s testimony.

### *Conclusion*

The negative picture generally drawn of the Samaritan woman in commentaries on the Gospel of John seems to miss numerous important

narrative details, and, as a result, misinterprets not only the conversations between her and Jesus, but also underestimates the Samaritan woman herself. This woman is not ignorant and base, nor is she the town prostitute. Rather, the Samaritan woman is a well-informed, politically savvy person to whom people listen when she speaks. An entire village believed her testimony regarding the identity of the Jewish man at the well and went to find the one who revealed himself to be the promised Messiah.