

John 4:27-54: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 08 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 4 verses 1 to 26. Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, Give me a drink, for his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, Give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

The woman said to him, Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock. Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. The woman said to him, Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water. Jesus said to her, Go, call your husband and come here. The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, You are right in saying I have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.

The woman said to him, Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship. Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ. When he comes, he will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am he.

[2 : 51] There are depths to the stories that John's gospel tells, depths that may only be recognized by the more observant and patient of its readers. The story of the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4 is an example of such a story. To recognize the depths of such stories, it's important to pay close attention to the ways in which they are told, to their shape, to their key themes, to familiar features, or to peculiar details. For instance, the story of a man meeting a woman at a well is one that we find on several occasions elsewhere in scripture, especially in the Pentateuch. It's the story of Abraham's servant meeting Rebecca, or Jacob meeting Rachel, or Moses meeting the daughters of Jethro. This is what Robert Alter has called a type scene. When we see a woman and a man meeting at a well in the Bible, we should almost always be able to hear the wedding bells in the distance. Jesus' encounter with the woman here is charged with all of this biblical memory and all of the marital themes that we have in the stories of Moses or Jacob or Abraham's servant and Isaac. We should also recognize the way that themes continue here from preceding chapters. There's the theme of water coming up again. There's the theme of eternal life. The marital themes might recall the wedding at Cana and also John the Baptist's statement about himself as the friend of the bridegroom. Jesus' knowledge of human hearts is also revealed here, as is mentioned at the end of chapter 2. Note that, as in the case of Jesus' mother Mary,

John does not name the woman of Samaria. She is simply a woman, or the woman. Jesus has significant encounters or interactions with his mother, at the wedding of Cana and at the cross, with the woman of Samaria, and with Mary Magdalene, all at charged moments or locations, a wedding, a well, his death, and in a garden. He addresses them all as woman, suggesting that each stands for something greater than a mere individual. There is a further woman in chapter 16 verse 21, a woman who gives birth to a man when her hour has come. The coming hour is also an important theme within this chapter.

In each of these particular historical women, we are also encountering a sort of archetypal woman, a woman who we could see as representing the faithful people of God. The events of this chapter are set as Jesus has left Judea and is heading back to Galilee. On the way, he passes through Samaria, through a village called Sychar, which is not far from where Shechem was, where Jacob had possessed some land. Jesus is leaving Judea, as the Pharisees have gotten wind of the fact that his movement is exceeding that of John the Baptist. Nowhere else outside of John chapter 3 and 4 do we see Jesus' earthly ministry presented as a baptizing ministry. It is not clear whether this was just a feature of it during this overlap period with the ministry of John the Baptist, or whether this was a continuing practice of Jesus' followers. The figure of Jacob is foregrounded within this chapter. The field that Jacob gave to Joseph, Jacob's well, the woman's question about whether Jesus is greater than Jacob, who dug the well and drank from it with his sons and livestock. Jesus is perhaps being presented as the true Jacob. He is the one who is going to open up a greater well, the well of the Spirit.

Note also it's about the sixth hour. That detail might seem somewhat extraneous in the context. However, there is a reference to an hour that is coming in verse 23, the seventh hour, and there is a reference to the seventh hour at the end of this chapter. Later in John's gospel, we have another sixth hour at the time of Christ's crucifixion, a context in which Jesus also expresses his thirst and his need for a drink. Perhaps there is some connection to be drawn between these two accounts. Talking about the coming hour in the sixth hour might suggest that the seventh hour is the one awaited, the seventh hour is the one that brings completeness. In addition to a coming hour being spoken of in the context of a sixth hour, we also have a coming man being spoken of in the context of six previous men.

Note the woman has had five husbands and is currently with a man who is not her husband, six men. However, they go on to discuss the coming Messiah, who is the seventh man. Jesus, by implication, is the true husband. Warren Gage, in his discussion of the relationship between the book of John and the book of Revelation, has noted the parallel between, in this chapter, the five husbands, the one she is now with, and the man awaited, and in the case of Babylon the Great, the fact that there are five kings who have fallen, there is one who is, and the other who has not yet come. The woman in Revelation chapter 17 is also sitting on many waters, just as the woman here is sitting at the well. Developing this parallel further, Gage argues that we can see in the relationship between the women at the end of Revelation, the mystery Babylon the Great, and the spotless bride of the Lamb, a connection with the woman of Samaria, who is connected in some ways with both figures, representing the way in which the unfaithful woman could be transformed into the spotless bride. The woman is greatly surprised when Jesus asks for a drink. The statement of verse 9, that Jews do not have dealings with Samaritans, could refer more generally to the fact that Jews, for purity reasons, do not share vessels with Samaritans. However, its meaning is likely more general than that. Jesus' response to her question remarks upon the fact that, if she knew who he was, she would be asking him for a drink. This naturally puzzles her. She can see that he has no vessel to draw with, and the well is a deep one. In expressing her confusion at his statement, she brings in the character of Jacob, who in the Samaritans' understanding was the one who gave them that well in the first place. A comparison and contrast between Jacob or Israel and Christ is being set up as a result. Christ, of course, is greater than Father Jacob. His promise is of a drink that will overcome all thirst, and will become within that person a source of life, a spring springing up to eternal life. Jesus makes a similar statement to this later on, in chapter 7, verse 37 to 39.

[8 : 45] On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. We should consider parallels between this conversation and the conversation with Nicodemus in the preceding chapter. As elsewhere in his gospel, John places a lot of emphasis upon Jesus dealing with particular individual persons, not just upon his teaching to larger crowds.

J. Ramsey Michaels writes about this particular episode, While the parallels with Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus are conspicuous, there is one major difference. Instead of telling the Samaritan woman again and again what is impossible, as with Nicodemus in chapter 3, verses 3, 5 and 12, he freely offers the Spirit and eternal life to whoever drinks of the water that I will give him. For the first time he speaks openly as God's messenger, offering salvation to this woman and to all who hear or read his words.

At several points in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks in ways or concerning matters that would not be understood until later on. He speaks of the gift of the Spirit, of his death, and other matters in ways that lend themselves to deep misunderstanding on the part of his hearers. The woman here clearly does not understand what Jesus means, and responds in a way that presumes that he is referring to physical water. Jesus answers her by opening up a different line of conversation. He inquires about her husband. Her answer that she has no husband, while technically true, is misleading. It covers up the reality of her situation. It's possible that she, drawing water alone, is a socially marginalized woman on account of her history. Jesus reveals that he knows the truth of her history and her current situation. She has had five husbands and the man that she is currently with is not her husband. That this truth that she had attempted to hide, a truth that might have rendered her a moral outcast in her community, was known by this strange Jewish teacher with whom she was conversing, might well have struck her with a sense of despair, reminding her that she could never escape the reputation that clung to her. This stranger, though completely unknown to her, has a sort of power over her. He knows her darkest secrets. However, Jesus employs this power in the most startling way. He addresses her as a worshipper and proceeds to render her a witness to him. When she later speaks concerning him to her people, she will say, come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. Jesus' knowledge of her exercises a liberating, rather than an enslaving effect. Jesus' knowledge of the secrets of the hearts of others and their practices is a recurring theme in the fourth gospel. In chapter 1, verses 47 to 48, he reveals that he knows Nathaniel and where he has been, even before they meet. In chapter 2, verses 24 to 25, we are told that Jesus knew all men and did not need to be told what was in them.

He demonstrates knowledge of people's undeclared sins in chapter 5, verse 14 and 8, verse 11. At various points in the gospel, he shows that he knows what is in the heart of Judas in chapter 6, verses 70 to 72 and 13, verses 18 to 30. In the previous chapter, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus spoke of himself as the light that had come into the world, the light in which the deeds of people were exposed. Jesus' power to expose is not employed in order to condemn, but that the world might be saved through him. As Jesus brings the secrets of such people into his light, rather than exploiting them as a means of control, he breaks their thrall and sets people free. Some commentators have seen a subtle allusion to the rite of Numbers chapter 5 in this exchange. The rite of jealousy described in Numbers chapter 5 was a test by which divine exposure of an adulterous woman was involved.

The woman charged with adultery was given a drink of holy water made bitter with the words of a curse scraped into it. If the woman were guilty, God would expose her sin through the effect that the drink had upon her body. In John chapter 4, the Samaritan woman requests a drink of living water from Jesus, unwittingly, perhaps, initiating the process of the ritual. Jesus immediately exposes the compromising secrets of her past. Yet no curse follows. Rather, the water offered gives eternal life, and washes away all of her sins. It is easy to conceive of God's knowledge of our secret sins by analogy with our government's powers of surveillance and exposure. Yet in the hands of God, the God-like knowledge to which our governments aspire serves less as a means of instilling fear and exerting control than as a means of release from the forces that bind us. Instead of the limited assurance afforded by the conditionality of the claim, if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear, we are granted an unconditional and free offer of comprehensive pardon, the dark and enslaving power of all of our secrets dissolving in the liberty of his light. Recognising that Jesus is a prophet, the woman asks him concerning true worship, where is it to be offered? In Jerusalem or on Mount

[13 : 55] Gerizim, where the Samaritans worship, until 128 BC, when it was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, the Samaritans had their own temple on Mount Gerizim. Jesus speaks of a coming time in which worship will be offered in a different way, no longer in a single geographically central sanctuary to which all must gather, but in a different manner, which he will later describe as in spirit and in truth.

Throughout John's gospel, reference is made to true things, and to the truth, the true vine, the true light, etc. In Christ, the genuine article has arrived, the epitome, the culmination of all of the things anticipated in the Old Testament. The true worshippers will worship the Father in the spirit and in the truth, in Christ. Jesus speaks of a new form of worship that will come, whose location is not that mountain of Gerizim or Jerusalem, but in the true temple of the spirit, the body of Christ.

Worship in spirit and truth is not just referring to really meaningful and heartfelt worship, is a reference to a new manner of worshipping God, no longer geographically bound to the temple at Jerusalem, but occurring in the environment of the spirit. This new form of worship arrives through Christ's death, resurrection and Pentecost, and exists because he is the true tabernacle and temple of God. Responding to Jesus' statements about worship, the woman says that she knows that the Messiah is coming, and that when he comes, he will explain everything. Jesus answers her by declaring directly that he is the Messiah that is awaited. He is the coming man.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the gift of the spirit could be compared to the placing of a well or a spring within us? Where else do we find related images to this in scripture?