

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The Samaritan Woman and Eternal Life

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The Gospel of John

by

Matthew McNutt

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout his gospel, John builds the case for Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God. He strategically chooses stories from the life and ministry of Jesus that prove this point. The story of the Samaritan woman, found in chapter four, is part of a larger narrative demonstrating His divine nature. John's purpose in telling this story is not to let the readers know about the Samaritans being reached, rather, it is through their interactions that the reader is exposed to Jesus' Messianic status and the scope of the salvation He offers. Herman Ridderbos puts it this way, "in their uniqueness and reaction to the encounter with Jesus they [the Samaritan woman, the disciples, the Samaritans] serve as mirrors in which, each time in a different way, the image of Christ is reflected."<sup>1</sup>

One of John's critical methods of communication in his gospel is through his choice of words and language. His choices in how he writes, as well as the stories he tells, often pushes those in his narrative to points of conflict where they must come to a decision whether or not to believe Jesus' claims.<sup>2</sup> Towards that end, John frequently describes events that paint the picture of opposing, or dualistic realities. In this particular context, John uses the idea of physical water and living water, a theme he will repeat in John 7:37-39. There are even deep parallels with the story in the preceding chapter, John 3, and Jesus' interactions with Nicodemus where he used the dualistic reality of new life in God and that of being born.

Through the Samaritan woman narrative John builds on the salvation message already begun with Nicodemus, revealing not only that salvation is through Jesus, the promised Messiah, but that the scope of that salvation is far wider than the Jewish people may have ever realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), Kindle location 3562.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Baker Academic, 2006), 87.

## TRAVELING IN SAMARIA (JOHN 4:1-42)

In this passage, Jesus' is traveling from Judea to Galilee, through Samaria. There were actually three routes available to Him at the time, with this one being the most direct even though it traveled through a people group Jews would normally not associate with.<sup>3</sup> Christ's interactions during this trip through Samaria challenged deeply ingrained attitudes on race, class and gender.<sup>4</sup> The Samaritans were considered a mixed race by the Israelites, a blending of those from the ten tribes left behind after the destruction of Samaria in 722 BC and colonists from the East brought in by Assyrian kings.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there were religious disagreements. While the Samaritans believed in God, they only accepted the writings of Moses and chose to worship on Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

This mix of tensions, magnified over the centuries through various conflicts, left the Jews and Samaritans with deep rooted animosity that fed into a constant distrust and desire for separation. While there seems to be no indication that Jews would avoid traveling through Samaria, they certainly would avoid any contact with Samaritans during their travels.<sup>7</sup>

## WITNESS TO THE SAMARITAN WOMAN (JOHN 4:1-26)

The fourth chapter of John naturally divides into three segments as he shares what John Painter calls a "quest story," one in which individuals or groups seek Jesus the Messiah, whether

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<sup>3</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *John (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)* (Nottingham, England.: IVP Academic, 2008), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Okure, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (Jn4:1-42) in Africa," *Theological Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June, 2009): 403.

<sup>5</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3603.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 255.

<sup>7</sup> Kruse, *John*, 128.

through friendly or hostile questions, seeking His help and often times overcoming obstacles – whether figurative or literal – to do so.<sup>8</sup> The three segments begin with the Samaritan Woman, move on to the Disciples, and then conclude with the Samaritan community.

*Establishing the Scene (John 4:1-6)*

John does not just relay the dialogue, he paints a picture of the scene and the interaction, laying the groundwork for the reader to feel the same shock and confusion he later reveals that he and his fellow disciples felt in this narrative. Having begun to be noticed by the Pharisees, Jesus made the decision to leave Judea. John does not indicate what the reason was; it could be that he did not want to appear to be competing with John the Baptist, a man whose ministry Jesus had endorsed, or could simply be that it was not time to provoke a confrontation with the religious leaders.<sup>9</sup>

In verse four, John writes that Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” It is an interesting phrase, as there were several routes to choose from. While some have suggested that this was due to this route being the shortest option, R.C. Sproul instead explains that Jesus had a “divine appointment” He had to make.<sup>10</sup> Frederick Bruner points out that the Greek in this statement is both strong, as well as strengthened further through the imperfect-continuous-ongoing tense, conveying the idea that Christ “absolutely had to,” literally, “he was having to.”<sup>11</sup> Later in the passage, verses 31-42, will drive home the point that God “impels and accompanies both Jesus” and those who are believers in their ministries, suggesting that this phrase in verse four does not

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<sup>8</sup> Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Kruse, *John*, 128.

<sup>10</sup> R. C. Sproul, *John (St. Andrew's Expository Commentary)* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), Kindle location 808.

<sup>11</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, 236.

point to the length of the route being the point of Jesus having to take it, but that it was God's moving in Jesus, making it an irresistible calling to go through Samaria for this divine appointment.<sup>12</sup>

Through details like pointing out the time of day, the setting being Jacob's Well, John writes in such a way as to "give as natural and human a picture of Jesus' presence at the well as possible," subtly combatting any hints of Docetism that some readers may approach the passage with.<sup>13</sup> Jesus is both fully human and fully God throughout John's gospel.

*Introducing the Samaritan Woman (John 4:7-9)*

Generally, women would go to the well to collect water in the early morning or at dusk to avoid the heat of the day during what would have been a physically intense chore.<sup>14</sup> In addition, they typically did so in groups.<sup>15</sup> The reality that she came to the well at the hottest part of the day, alone, would have stood out to anyone at the time as an indicator that she was someone who felt shame and/or was avoiding contact with others, that she was a social outcast.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus asks for a drink, and then John adds in a parenthetical comment that the disciples were away purchasing food, insinuating to the reader that their absence provides the impetus for Jesus to ask the woman for water instead of them. It is interesting to note that the disciples would have been purchasing food from Samaritans, a more relaxed approach than some Jews would have taken, but it does not compare to the breach in social etiquette Jesus committed in speaking

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3581.

<sup>14</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John: from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 92.

<sup>15</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 217.

<sup>16</sup> Kruse, *John*, 129.

with a Samaritan, a woman, who is clearly an outcast, and receiving water to consume handled by her.<sup>17</sup> Each one of those individually would have been an offence; together it is only compounded, and yet it does not seem to matter to Jesus. “It is as though He were oblivious of the boundaries and barriers that alienate and separate people from each other.”<sup>18</sup>

Her first words in the narrative reveal her shock at Jesus’ request; pointing out that she is a Samaritan woman and He is a Jew, she asks how He can make this request of her? After all, given the social ramifications, His actions would rightfully make no sense to her. Immediately, we see reflected in His interaction with her Christ’s role as a breaker of barriers.<sup>19</sup> It is not just that all are welcome in Christ’s Kingdom; they are all welcome equally.

*Jesus Reveals His Nature (John 4:10-24)*

Jesus’ reply in verse ten is a surprising one. Rather than answer her question, He seemingly ignores it and instead forces her to begin to consider the dueling realities she faces; the same consideration given to Nicodemus in the previous chapter. He challenges her to consider what she is to live for – by what she knows and what is in front of her, or by what is from above and out of her reach but can be given to her by God.<sup>20</sup> In so doing, He begins to shift her focus to who He is and the gift He has to offer. “Living water” would have conveyed two meanings to her according to Carson; the first is the obvious one, it is a phrase which would have been used to reference running water (as opposed to standing water).<sup>21</sup> More significant is the

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<sup>17</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3603.

<sup>19</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, 246.

<sup>20</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3624.

<sup>21</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 217.

second meaning, derived from the Old Testament with its frequent uses of the phrase as a metaphor for God, knowledge of God, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

However, these references to Old Testament metaphors would have been lost on the Samaritan woman, as the Samaritans only recognized the Pentateuch, and they are located elsewhere – and indeed they were as her response clearly indicated.<sup>23</sup> In fact, her response, asking if He thought Himself better than Jacob, conveys an implication that Jesus thinks too highly of Himself.

In verses thirteen and fourteen, we see Christ's response. According to Ridderbos, His answer is "decisive for the interpretation of the entire Fourth Gospel."<sup>24</sup> The progression of Him revealing Himself through this conversation continues as He begins to explain the superiority of what He had to offer her.<sup>25</sup> Through His comments, He points out the temporary relief that comes through the water she has – which, while good, is still only temporary – while what He offers will never leave the recipient wanting again.

What exactly is Christ promising? Certainly not that she will never be literally thirsty again. It is clear that there is a deeper meaning here. Through the context of the Old Testament, and John's use of water as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit throughout his writings, it becomes clear that Jesus is promising that the Holy Spirit's presence will leave the recipient never wanting again. But what will they never thirst for? It cannot mean that they will always be content, or never dissatisfied – the life of Christians today reveals that. Kruse points out that the answer to this question is found in John 14-16 which reveals that the Spirit's role is to take Jesus'

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>23</sup> Kruse, *John*, 131.

<sup>24</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3647.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Kindle location 3624.

place in the disciples' lives once He returns to the Father.<sup>26</sup> Through the Spirit, intimacy with the Father is possible, lasting into eternity and leaving the recipient never thirsty again for God. That thirst will have been satisfied forever.

This type of contrast found in verses thirteen and fourteen is a repeated theme for John in his gospel. In chapter three, he related the contrast between natural birth and being born again. Later, in chapter six, he will do the same through Jesus' contrast with the manna that Moses gave the Israelites and the bread that Jesus will give which will lead them to never lack. There is a critical difference between what humans naturally gravitate towards, which will never truly satisfy, and what God longs to give, which is far more superior.

Verse fifteen contains the woman's response, in which she asks for this water so that she will not have to continue making trips to the well. Her tone has changed; it is no longer the negative tone found in her earlier response, but it is also clear that she does not yet grasp the true meaning behind Jesus' words. R.C. Sproul writes of her request, noting her misguided desire, "people desperately search for the things that only God can give them while at the same time they are fleeing from Him."<sup>27</sup> Jesus' response? Like before, He seemingly ignores her question and instead continues with His own agenda, asking about her husband. This is not a random change in subject, it is a strategic, and loving, move by Jesus to guide the Samaritan woman to the next step in grasping His true nature.

Her simple answer that she has no husband is both confirmed and corrected by Jesus, with Him revealing His knowledge of her five former husbands and that she is not married to the man she is currently with. For the readers of his narrative, this would have been a shocking

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<sup>26</sup> Kruse, *John*, 131.

<sup>27</sup> Sproul, *John (St. Andrew's Expository Commentary)*, Kindle location 853.

revelation – much as it would be in today’s culture. With this revelation it is now fully understood why this woman comes to the well alone at the hottest time of day. Her status as a social outcast, hinted at earlier, is confirmed.

Bruner points out that even with this revelation, it is possible to avoid assuming the worst. “It is not necessary, and it can even be insensitive to paint the woman’s moral life with lurid colors.”<sup>28</sup> She may have had husbands who passed away, or were the ones who abandoned the marriages and divorced her. However, even in that reality, religious traditions frowned on more than three marriages, and the revelation that the man she is currently with is not her husband certainly reveals sin.<sup>29</sup>

Some have suggested that the marriage relationships mentioned are referring to the Samaritan religion, that the five husbands are the five gods of the nations that had settled in Samaria, and the reference to the current man she is not married to refers to the incomplete worship of God by the Samaritans.<sup>30</sup> These explanations are hard to support however, while the acceptance at face value of Christ’s revelation is far more plausible.<sup>31</sup> The purpose was straight forward; in revealing His deep knowledge of her past and present, Jesus led her to the realization in verse nineteen when she identifies Him as a prophet. She still does not see Him as divine, but she now sees a divine connection in Him. His delivery of this information was done in such a way, with a tone of love and grace, that it did not push her into defensiveness or to cause her to leave – instead it brought her closer to Him.

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<sup>28</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, 260.

<sup>29</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3691.

<sup>31</sup> Burge, *John: from Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life*, 94.

In calling Him a prophet, she unintentionally created a link to Him being the Messiah, a common occurrence in John's writings where he has those he writes about thinking and speaking in earthly terms, but in a way that contains more depth than they realize.<sup>32</sup> In this particular instance, it is due to the Samaritans' rejection of all Old Testament writings other than the five books of Moses. As such, they rejected the prophets, and instead saw the promise in Deuteronomy 18:18 regarding a great prophet who would follow Moses as a reference to the Messiah.<sup>33</sup> While she may not have intended to, as a Samaritan her identification of Jesus as a prophet therefore contains messianic connections and expectations.

In verse twenty, the woman begins a discussion on where worship should happen. This topic and its interpretation had deep roots in the animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. A common reaction to her question has been to consider this the latest in a pattern of attempts at redirecting the conversation with Jesus away from her own sin and shame, however this does not actually seem to be the case at this point in the conversation. While her earlier comments may have been attempts at redirection, they were ignored by Jesus who kept His focus on His agenda, reaching this woman. But in this case He answers her question, reflecting an insight into her true intentions. She recognized Him as a prophet and seems to have genuinely wanted His insights on this long running source of contention between her people and His.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, she wants to know how He can offer this deeply spiritual gift to her given the Jewish disdain for Samaritan theology. How could she possibly qualify in His eyes for this offer, much in the same way how she question at the beginning how she could possibly qualify in His eyes as a source for water?

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3737.

With this understanding of her motives, Jesus' response in verses 21-24 becomes much clearer. While he points out that the Jewish understanding of the scriptures is superior to the Samaritans, He points her to a future in which the differences between the Jews and Samaritans that seem so all consuming to them will no longer matter. What He offers is not only superior to what the Samaritans practice, it is superior to what the Jews know as well. This is "a breakthrough that concerned her entire people, indeed, the whole world."<sup>35</sup>

*The Samaritan Woman Believes (John 4:25-26)*

Now fully invested in the conversation, the Samaritan woman acknowledges that a Messiah will come and explain all of this. She is finally close to understanding who she is speaking with, but she essentially says that it is all too difficult for her to understand without the help of the Messiah, that she will have to wait for His arrival.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps she suspects the truth and hopes to provoke an admission, perhaps she genuinely hopes for a day when the Messiah would arrive and reveal the answers. Either way, Jesus is finally ready to identify Himself as the Messiah to her. In a style very fitting John's writings, Jesus uses the Greek word ἔγωγ, an emphatic "I" to identify Himself as the Messiah.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the synoptic gospels, which combined use the word only 34 times, the Jesus in John's gospel uses it 177 times, displaying a frequent and critical self-reference.<sup>38</sup>

While the text does not directly say it, this is the moment that the woman believed. It is revealed in her actions and later testimony. The disciples arrival coincides with her leaving her water jar and going back to the town – to the people she had been avoiding – to share about this

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Kindle location 3759.

<sup>36</sup> Kruse, *John*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>38</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, 271.

Messiah. Had she simply thought Him a prophet, she would not have made such a public invitation to come see and meet Jesus. Her actions reveal her deeper belief.

#### WITNESS TO THE DISCIPLES (JOHN 4:27-38)

Having interrupted the conversation with the Samaritan woman, the disciples invite Christ to eat, a natural response on their part as their task had been to procure food. John's penchant for writing in a way that portrays dueling realities comes through once again, however, as Jesus claims to have food they do not know about it.

In their conversation with Him, Christ's nature is further reflected and revealed, emphasizing the lessons just taught through the conversation with the Samaritan woman to the reader. And much like the woman, they continue to think in terms of literal food in much the same way that she thought of literal water. Instead, Christ is teaching them to look deeper, to see the true meaning behind His words and what is truly important. "Their time with Jesus on earth was for them a continuing school in which Jesus taught them to see with different eyes what till now had only had one valid meaning for them."<sup>39</sup> Where they thought of food as necessary to fill their appetite, He is challenging them to think of reaching the lost as fulfillment of Christ's divine mission.

As revealed in the beginning of the chapter, Jesus had a divine appointment to fill in reaching this woman and her community. Fulfilling that calling was far more satisfying to Him than any meal could ever be. He challenges them to find fulfillment in this same way, revealing to them that they are able to reap the benefits of what has gone before, playing the role of harvester to God's sowing of seed.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3847.

<sup>40</sup> Kruse, *John*, 142.

## WITNESS TO THE SAMARITANS (JOHN 4:39-42)

In an incredible turn of events, one of the first ministers of God's word and the message of salvation through Christ arrives in the form of a Samaritan woman. If this was a work of fiction, would John have ever dreamed up such a shocking scenario as this? At its core this story would come against much of what the Jews both believed and expected. And yet Christ is incredibly revealed through it.

The Samaritan community arrives, believing in Christ first because of the woman's testimony, and later because of what they saw and heard in Jesus. At their request He stayed there for two days to further instruct them, and the final step in Christ's revelation through this passage is reflected in his interaction with the Samaritans in verse 42 where He is acknowledged as "Savior of the world." These words both end the story as well as convey John's ultimate point in this narrative: that salvation is not just for the Jews, it is for everyone, everywhere, regardless of nationality or background.<sup>41</sup> Christ is not the Messiah for the Jews, He is the Messiah for the world.

## CONCLUSION

As he has throughout his gospel, John has woven together another piece of his case for the divinity of Christ in this narrative. The Samaritan woman, the disciples, the community all serve as characters in which Christ's nature is revealed. There is a progression in the passage gradually revealing Jesus' Messianic status summed up by Frederick Bruner:

- (1) "*How come you, a Jewish male ...*" (v.9).
- (2) "*Sir, I have the feeling that you are a prophet ...*" (v.19).
- (3) "*I know a Messiah is coming ...*"; "*I Am he, ...*" (vv.25-26).
- (4) "*Really, this man is the Savior of the World*" (v.42).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary*, Kindle location 3937.

<sup>42</sup> Bruner, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, 278.

In chapter three, John laid the groundwork for understanding salvation through Christ in his story with Nicodemus. Through the story of the Samaritan woman, he has both reinforced that lesson as well as built on it, revealing God's true intent of saving the entire world through Christ, not just the Jewish nation as had been so long assumed. From the beginning it is plain that Jesus had only one intention for this divine appointment, which is fully revealed in the final verse (John 4:42) of this narrative, "this man really is the Savior of the world."

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