

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut**

The Gospel of John

III. A Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well

Introduction:

A setting in Samaria evokes one of the major religio-ethnic divisions of the day in the Land of Israel. The animosity between Judeans and Samaritans is well known to readers of the New Testament, especially of the Gospel of Luke and its parable of the "Good Samaritan." The scene also evokes the shared heritage of Judeans and Samaritans. Both look to their ancestor Jacob (= Israel, the man who saw God), whose well is the focal point of story. To that well comes a tired Jesus, left by his disciples who are off finding a meal. He is joined by an unnamed woman of Samaria who has come to fetch water. The dialogue between them has some of the same dramatic features as the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, different layers of meaning and dramatic misunderstanding about the nature of "living water" that can permanently quench thirst. Such metaphors evoke traditional language of the Jewish Wisdom tradition, that equated true teaching with food and drink and the Gospel resolutely builds on that tradition.

But more is at work in this carefully crafted story. The encounter at the well recalls the many stories in the Pentateuch where a patriarch encounters his future wife at a well. The scene is erotically charged for anyone familiar with that Biblical background. Here, however, the erotic is transformed. Jesus, who according to convention, should be the suitor, becomes the sought. The woman, who has a checkered marital past, falls in love anew with a person who reveals to her who she really is. Jesus, like Aristotle's god, moves by being an object of desire, and the woman becomes not a lover on the physical level, but an emissary of her new love, bringing to him the people of Samaria.

The One whom she serves and the One reflected in the thirsty Jesus is, as Jesus says, Spirit, who wants all to worship him in spirit and in truth.

Questions for Reading:

What stories from the Old Testament does the reference to Jacob's well evoke?

What were the relations between Jews and Samaritans? Do other stories from the Gospels or Acts tell you anything about the subject?

How does the ironic disconnect between Jesus and the woman work? How are they each understanding "living water"?

What does "worship in spirit and truth" suggest?

Does the presence or absence of the disciples of Jesus contribute anything to the story?

Questions for Reflection:

What is the relationship between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman?

Does the character of the woman develop in the course of the story?

In the light of the negative comments in the Gospel about “the Jews” as enemies of Jesus, what do you make of the remark that “salvation is from the Jews.”

Does the prominence accorded to the Samaritan woman, as woman, reflect a concern of the Gospel generally? What do you think of its treatment of women?

What do you make of the “erotic” dimensions of the scene and the “relationship” between Jesus and the woman?

For further study:

Basic:

Jo-Ann A. Brant, "Husband Hunting: Characterization and Narrative Art in the Gospel of John," *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (1996) 205-23

More challenging:

Harold. W. Attridge, "The Cubist Principle in Johannine Imagery: John and the Reading of Images in Contemporary Platonism," in Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, Ruben Zimmermann, eds., with the collaboration of Gabi Kern, *Imagery in the Gospel of John. Terms, Forms, Themes and Theology of Figurative Language* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2006).

Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 43-62