



Women in the Bible

New Testament: The Woman at the Well

John 4:5-30, 39-42

While we have mostly studied named female characters in the Bible, it is also full of unnamed women. One of them, from John 4, has come to be known as the Samaritan woman at the well. In John's gospel, characters tend to get more "airtime," even if they are unnamed, compared with the shorter vignettes in the other three gospels. Some historical and literary background information help us understand quite a lot about this unnamed woman.

Women at the Well

First, we will look at the literary setting of this scene. On Jesus' journey from Judea to Galilee, he stops at a well in Samaria to rest by a well. At noon, it is nearly the hottest part of the day. A Samaritan woman finds him there when she comes to draw water.

Dr. Lin says the ancient audience would have read the setting of this scene the way we might read a scene in a bar. Because of all the books, movies, television shows, and plays that set romantic scenes in bars, it has become a trope. When we read a new piece of literature with that setting, we are primed to expect a romantic undercurrent to the scene.

The same likely would have been true for ancient audiences of John's gospel, in particular if they were familiar with the Hebrew Bible. A well outside the city gates is a place one might expect to find a mate in the Hebrew Bible. This is where Abraham's servant finds Rebekah, who will become Isaac's wife in Genesis 24:10-28. Their interaction begins with the servant asking, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar" (Gen 24:17) and ends with him brokering a marriage deal on behalf of Abraham.

Moses, too, finds his wife at a well outside town in Exodus 2:15-21. After he flees into the land of Midian, he rests at a well until seven sisters come to draw water. When shepherds try to send the women away, Moses comes to their defense. This earns him a seat at their dinner table and, eventually, a place in their family as Zipporah's husband.

These well-known stories of betrothal linger in the back of our minds as we read Jesus' demanding opening line: "Give me a drink" (John 4:7).

Samaritans and Jews

The other undercurrent in this scene is the historical reality of the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. The woman's response to Jesus is, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The text even goes on to explain, "(Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans)" (John 4:9).

The Samaritans shared some of the same Scriptures with Jews but had their own laws and their own temple. Jews did not consider the Samaritan religion to be faithful despite their shared Torah.

The woman at the well is on her home turf in their theological discussion, and she is also the one who has a bucket to access the water in the heat of the day. In those ways, she has some power in this exchange with Jesus, even as she continues to fulfill the gender roles and societal beliefs that are expected of her.

The woman's real power comes toward the end of her story. At the well, Jesus reveals to her his identity as Messiah, and she immediately runs to witness this to her people. "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39). Despite her ethnicity and even her religion, she comes to faith in Jesus immediately because she can see his power. Even as a woman, her cry for them to "Come and see" (John 4:29) compels her people to believe.

Five Husbands

In the context of the romantic overtones that come from the setting at the well, the conversation takes an interesting turn. Jesus says, "Go, call your husband, and come back" (John 4:16). Is he sending for her husband because the conversation has become spiritual, and he wants to talk to a man instead of a woman? After all, when the disciples return, they are surprised to find Jesus speaking to a woman (John 4:27).

But when the woman says she is not married, Jesus shows off his prophet abilities. "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband" (John 4:18). Even though they have just met, Jesus seems to know all her secrets.

In the past, some have read the woman's five husbands (and her current apparently adulterous relationship) as evidence of her sinfulness. She then is grouped with adulterous women and prostitutes, and we read Jesus' conversation with her as compassionate. He cares for her even though she is damaged goods, a sinner on the outskirts of society.

Recently, scholars have been more inclined to read the Samaritan woman as a vulnerable person. In the ancient world, a woman relied on men for safety and many other practical aspects of life. A woman who had to marry over and over again was likely just trying to survive.

To that end, perhaps she is at the well at the hottest part of the day because she is ashamed of her status and wants to go when it is uncrowded. If we read her as a vulnerable person instead of as a fallen woman, it becomes all the more powerful that her people believe her proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah. Her spiritual life *and* her social status have both been transformed by Jesus.

Living Water

Early in their conversation, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The woman seems to misunderstand and asks him to give her that water, so that she never has to go to the well again. She hears his promise as solving a practical problem, rather than a spiritual one.

What is the water that Jesus offers but never gives her – at least literally? Many texts in the Hebrew Bible and in later rabbinic texts liken wisdom to water. For example, “The purposes in the human mind are like deep water, but the intelligent will draw them out” (Proverbs 20:5). Jesus may be offering her something like wisdom. Indeed, she comes to believe that he is the “Savior of the world” (John 4:42). He has helped her “draw out” her faith.

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