

The Character of the Samaritan Woman of John 4

A Woman Transformed

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The “character” of the Samaritan Woman in John 4 is, like many characters in a drama, open to different readings. Stereotypes and literary intertexts hint at, but do not fully determine the ways in which the potential might be realized. However she is initially read, her dialogue with Jesus transforms her. The potentially coquettish object of attraction finds herself attracted to the mysterious stranger and comes more actively to pursue engagement with him as her curiosity drives her to plumb the mystery of his identity. As curiosity changes to wonder, the focus of her life shifts from eros to mission, as she engages in a successful apostolic outreach to her fellow Samaritans. The character of this Woman, like that of other women prominent in the Gospel, thus offers a model of transformative encounter with Jesus.

Although earlier commentators have noted aspects of the “characters” of the Fourth Gospel,¹ formal study of the topic, which began with the rise of contemporary literary-critical approaches to the text, reached a new and informed systematic level with the work of Cornelis Bennema,² who has forcefully argued that many of the characters in the Fourth Gospel are not simply types or conventional figures deployed to make a theological point about how one can or should encounter Jesus. Instead, by the varying degrees of complexity of their characterization, they contribute to the shaping of the narrative and the allure of the Gospel as a work of engaging narrative. So the Samaritan Woman is more than simply a model of a repentant sinner

¹ So, e. g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i–xii)* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966) 175–76, “And if we analyze the repartee at the well, we find quite true-to-life the characterization of the woman as mincing and coy, with a certain light grace (Lagrange, pl. 101). Though characters like Nicodemus, this woman, the paralytic of ch. V, and the blind man of ch. X are – to a certain extent – foils used by the evangelist to permit Jesus to unfold his revelation, still each has his or her own personal characteristics and fitting lines of dialogue.”

² Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009). Bennema provides a useful review of the many treatments of character in contemporary critical literature.

or enthusiastic apostle,³ not simply a representative of the marginalized or the “other,”⁴ but a woman with a personality whose interaction with Jesus can lead to significant insights into the dynamics of this Gospel. Bennema is surely right in this regard and this brief contribution will, I hope, build on his approach, although it will take a slightly different tack, because there remains a good deal of ambiguity about the personality of this character.

I begin with three preliminary observations, and one methodological suggestion. First, the characterization of the Samaritan Woman, known to orthodox tradition as Photina (or Photeine),⁵ is sketched in succinct and somewhat ambivalent terms. Resolving the ambiguity depends primarily on the ways in which her dramatic dialogue with Jesus is to be construed, or, as I shall suggest, “played.” Readers do not hear her inner thoughts and have no information about the development of her personality apart from the interaction in this one episode. Second, the dialogue between Jesus and the Woman, and, in turn, the “character” of the dialogue partners, has been a subject of considerable attention among commentators through the ages, who have in fact “read” the Samaritan Woman in a variety of ways.⁶ Third, one’s perception of the ways in which the dialogue is to be construed is, in part at least, shaped by how a reader construes the overall narrative, what kind of scene it is and what the expectations are that generic qualities may conjure up.

Since interactive dialogue is the primary mode of conveying information about the character, we need to take that dialogue quite seriously. Following the lead of various scholars who have pointed to the “dramatic” dimensions

³ On the importance of the theme of mission in the pericope see Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1–42* (WUNT 2.31; Tübingen: Mohr, 1988). See also Hubert Ritt, “Die Frau als Glaubensbotin: um Verständnis der Samaritanerin von Joh 4,1–42,” in *Vom Urchristentum zu Jesus: FS J. Gnifka* (ed. Hubert Franke-mölle and Klaus Kertelge; Freiburg: Herder, 1988), 287–306.

⁴ For readings of the Samaritan Woman from a feminist perspective, see Sandra M. Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” *BTB* 12 (1982): 40; idem, “A Case Study: A Feminist Interpretation of John 4:1–42,” in idem, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 188–89; Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 326; Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 45–81. While most feminist readings emphasize the role of the Woman as a disciple or apostle, Fehribach’s elaborate reading highlights the Woman’s representative role as symbolic Samaritan bride for her bridegroom.

⁵ See Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1–42 in Retrospect and Prospect* (BIS 41; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 17.

⁶ Day provides a very useful summary of the ways in which both literary commentators (*The Woman*, 7–41) and visual artists (idem, *The Woman at the Well*, 43–12) have interpreted her character. For another useful summary, see Andrea Link, *Was redest du mit ihr? Eine Studie zur Exegese-, Redaktions-, und Theologiegeschichte von Joh 4,1–42* (BU 24; Regensburg: Pustet, 1992).

of the Gospel,⁷ it may be suggestive to construe John 4 as a dramatic script, rendered somewhat loosely. Such a construal invites reflection on the challenges that confront a director of the *performance* of this dramatic scene. How precisely is the actor playing the Samaritan Woman to play her part? What should be the inflection of her voice; the look of her eyes? Should her statements be simple and naïve or should they be laced with irony and innuendo? This approach, which defines the “implied reader” in a specific way,⁸ will, I hope, illustrate the difficulty of too facile a *reading* of the character. The long history of literary and visual interpretation, helpfully traced by Janeth Norfleete Day, abundantly confirms the rich potential of the story. Readers and commentators on this text, like directors of a dramatic script, have made choices about how the part should be played, how the character works. While all have some foundation in the text, what the various directors bring to the text strongly influences what they see in it. Intertextual allusions offer some hints about how the part is to be played, but they do not fully determine the characterization of the Samaritan Woman.

⁷ Brown, *John*, 176, appreciated the dramatic qualities of the gospel, “If, as we suspect, there is a substratum of traditional material, the evangelist has taken it and with his masterful sense of drama and the various techniques of stage setting, has formed it into a superb theological scenario.” More recently and in more detail, see Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 73; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ludger Schenke, *Johanneskommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1998); Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004); George Parsenios, *Departure and Consolation: The Proliferation of Genres in John 13–17: The Johannine Farewell Discourses in Light of Greco-Roman Literature* (NovTSup 117; Leiden: Brill, 2005); idem, *Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif* (WUNT 1.258; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2010).

⁸ The “implied reader” well known to narratological critics, can come in a variety of forms. A “reader” may be explicitly constructed in the text, as, for instance, Theophilus, addressed in the prefaces to Luke’s two volumes (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:10), or the “you,” called upon to believe in the Fourth Gospel (John 19:35; 20:31). The possible characteristics of that reader may, of course, differ from those who actually take the text in hand. Or the reader may be more subtly implied by the kinds of appeals and assumptions that are built into a text. As those appeals and assumptions become more tenuous and opaque, the image of the “implied reader” becomes more subject to the imaginative construction of the real reader who offers an interpretation or “reading” of the text. My “director,” whose notes constitute the bulk of this article, is such a “reader,” “implied” by the dramatic character of the episode, but constructed by the imagination of this interpreter. This construct suggests how much leeway the “reader” has in making sense of this narrative.

John 4 as a Script

Characters: Jesus
 A Samaritan Woman
 The Disciples
 The Townsfolk
 The Narrator

I have blocked out the script into eight segments,⁹ some clearly delineated by formal features, such as a narrator's intervention, or by an abrupt change in the thematic focus of the dialogue. Understanding the possible motivation for such changes will be one important question to address.

1. *Setting*

Jesus is on the road from Judea to Galilee and passes through Samaria, stopping around noon at a town called Sychar, famous as the site of Jacob's well.¹⁰ With his disciples away fetching lunch in town, he stops, wearied and thirsty, at the well. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water.

Director's Note

As many readers of the story of have noted, the setting by a well evokes several episodes in the Hebrew Bible, Gen 24:11; 29:2; Exod 2:15, where a patriarchal hero finds a bride.¹¹ As many note, Jesus has already been labeled the "bride-

⁹ Brown, *John*, 166–68, construes the chapter as a little drama with two scenes, the first portraying the interaction between Jesus and the woman, 4:6–26 and the second, that between Jesus and the disciples, 4:27–38, with an introduction 4:1–6a and conclusion, 4:39–41.

¹⁰ Some commentators suspect that the text here may be corrupt and the town should in fact be Shechem, near the site of the traditional location of Jacob's well. See Brown, *John*, 169. Such commentators may, however, be influenced by later traditions about the location of Jacob's well and Sychar may be the correct original reading. See Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 241–44.

¹¹ See, e. g., John Bligh, "Jesus in Samaria," *HeyJ* 3 (1962): 329–46, here 332, noted by Brown, *John*, 171, as a "curious interpretation." Many, however, have followed suit. See Annie Jaubert, "La symbolique de puits de Jacob: Jean 4,12," in *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac* (3 vols.; Theologie 56; Lyon: Aubier, 1963), 1:70–71; Norman R. Bonneau, "The Woman at the Well, John 4 and Genesis 24," *Bible Today* 67 (1973): 1252–59; Jerome Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4:10–26," *CBQ* 41 (1979): 436–37; Calum M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," *NTS* 26 (1980): 332–46; P. Joseph Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," *Religious Studies Bulletin* 2 (1982): 41–48; Lyle Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well," *Literature and Theology* 1 (1987): 167–83, reprinted in Mark W. G. Stibbe, *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 165–82; from a more general theoretical perspective, Jo-Ann A. Brant, "Husband Hunting: Characterization and Narrative Art in the Gospel of John," *BibInt* 4 (1996) 205–23; Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, "Drawn to Excess, or Reading Beyond Betrothal," *Semeia* 77 (1997): 23–59; Fehribach, *The Women in*

groom” in John 3:29, perhaps anticipating the current scene. The “type scene,” as it is often dubbed, creates expectations of an erotic encounter of some sort, though how those expectations might be realized remains to be seen.

The script offers no hints about how the Samaritan Woman is to be attired or what demeanor she displays in coming to the well. The artistic tradition in visualizing the scene has generally portrayed her modestly, although a few artists play on the scene’s erotic potential with somewhat provocative apparel, although these are in a distinct minority.¹² The actor playing the Woman might be instructed to saunter provocatively up to the well, or to move with simple nonchalance across the stage.

Some readers have taken a cue from the time of the encounter that the Samaritan is perhaps of loose morals,¹³ and hence to be imagined as something of a hussy, since the normal times for drawing water would not be at the sixth hour (probably around noon¹⁴). But the data is ambiguous, it might be shame that sends the Woman out at an unusual hour, or it might be modesty or simple necessity. If shame motivates the timing of her trip, she might be asked to move with head bowed, dispirited and defensive in her demeanor.¹⁵

2. Initial question

Jesus: “Give me something to drink.”

SW: “How is that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”

Narrator: Jews and Samaritans don’t have any use for one another.

the Life of the Bridegroom, 49–52; Mirjam and Ruben Zimmermann, “Brautwerbung in Samarien? Von der moralischen zur metaphorischen Interpretation von Joh 4,” *ZNT* 1 (1998): 40–50; Ellen Aitken, “At the Well of Living Water: Jacob Traditions in John 4,” in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Craig A. Evans; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 342–52. Others see the episode as a parody of the Old Testament type scene. See Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 99–103.

¹² See Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 103–109, for discussion of the visual treatments of the scene by Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734), where the Samaritan’s loose dresses and exposed flesh suggest a woman of somewhat loose morals. An interesting alternative is the depiction by Edouard von Gebhardt (1914), who portrays her as a robust and spirited but somewhat ‘earthy’ character. See Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 112.

¹³ See the extensive discussion in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:593–96, with reference to earlier literature. See also Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 160.

¹⁴ The text says the “sixth hour,” which would be noon on a reckoning of the “hours” of the day from dawn to sunset. There are other, weakly attested, reckonings, beginning with midnight or noon, which would make this either 6:00 a. m. or 6:00 p. m. See Keener, *John*, 1:591–92.

¹⁵ This suggestion comes from an “associate director,” a. k. a., a reader of the manuscript.

Director's Note

Interpreters of the story, whether learned commentators or simple readers, here come to the second major fork in the road. What is the tone of the Woman's response? Is she pleasantly surprised? Does she politely say, in effect, "How is it, good sir, that a Jew such as yourself is asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" Or is there a little edge to her question? "So what's a Jew like you doing asking a Samaritan like me for a drink?"¹⁶ Or is there a hint of flirtation? One might ask the actor to play it a la Mae West: "So, Jew, you wanna nice Samaritan to give you a drink?" We might ask our character actor to convey that with a gesture or a glance. She might respond looking over her shoulder while bending over to pull up her pail, perhaps with her quivering eyes glancing sideways.¹⁷

3. *Living Water?*

Jesus: "If you knew God's gift and who is asking for a drink, you would have made a request to him and he would have given you 'living water.'"

SW: "Sir, you don't have anything with which to draw water and the well is pretty deep. Where are you going to get 'living water'? Are you better than our ancestor Jacob, who provided us the well and drank from it himself along with his sons and his cattle?"

Jesus: "Anyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I give will never thirst. The water that I shall give will become in the one who receives it a well that springs up to eternal life."

SW: "Sir, give me this water, so I won't be thirsty and won't have to come all this way to draw water."

Director's Note

The same question that emerged in the first block resurfaces in the second, set off from the first by the narrator's remark. In this block the Samaritan Woman speaks twice, each time in response to a remark by Jesus. The first comment could also be read or performed in at least two ways. The Woman could be

¹⁶ So Francis Moloney suggests that "The woman responds with mocking surprise" (idem, *The Gospel of John* [SP 4; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998], 115). He later suggests that the response is "arrogant." The warrants for that judgment are not particularly clear. If anything, the abrupt request from Jesus might easily be characterized as arrogant. For an alternative psychological analysis, see Wilhelm H. Wuellner and Robert C. Leslie, *The Surprising Gospel: Intriguing Psychological Insights from the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 40, noted by Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 164, who take the response to indicate that the Woman is a "defensive person."

¹⁷ Some commentators, such as Keener, *John*, 1:605, realize the potential in the scene and suggest that the Woman misunderstands Jesus' request as an advance.

simply expressing astonishment at the bold claim of Jesus, however understood, that he is the one who can provide a good drink.¹⁸ Some commentators want to find here a hint of movement toward Jesus on the part of the woman.¹⁹ Perhaps we would want the actor to say something like, “I just don’t see how you are going to do that, and provide something better than what Jacob gave us.” Or, again, her comment could be read in a more pointed way, perhaps with the intonation of a “valley girl,” “Do you really think that you can do better than our famous ancestor Jacob. You don’t even have a pail. *What* are you *thinking*?” In any case, if there was any erotic tone in the previous exchange, the wording here seems to provide little opportunity for continuing it, unless the actor playing Jesus uses a very lurid tone in talking about “living water.”²⁰

How the Woman’s part is played will depend on how the part of Jesus is played and what connotations might be conveyed by the promise of “living water.” If there is any possibility that there is an erotic double entendre here, as in Prov 5:15–18, or Song 4:12–15, her response would have to take on a flirtatious tone.²¹

The next claim of Jesus ups the ante. Not only, he says, can he provide her some fresh, “living” water. What he can give offers truly lasting satisfaction. A sip from him and she’ll have her own internal fountain (*pege*, better than a

¹⁸ Commentators regularly note the play on “living water.” There is disagreement about whether the woman understands Jesus to be talking on a metaphorical or spiritual level and rejects that or simply misunderstands his claim about the spiritual water of his teaching in terms of fresh, physical water. Her final remark seems to suggest the latter, unless she is being very ironic.

¹⁹ Moloney, *John*, 123 cites Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974), 182–83; Carmichael, “Marriage,” 337–43 and Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l’évangile selon Jean* (3 vols.; Parole de Dieu; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988, 1990, 1993), 1:419, as finding the response positive. He rejects the notion: “The context demands, however, that the woman be judged in terms of her acceptance or refusal of the word of Jesus. On this criterion, ‘the first round in the conversation ends in complete failure. The woman remains level-headed, incredulous’ (citing Hendrikus Boers, *Neither on This Mountain Nor in Jerusalem: A Study of John 4* [SBLMS 35; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988], 169).” I doubt that the context is quite so demanding, except for a director who wants to emphasize the problematic character of the Woman.

²⁰ Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 165, recognizes the difficulties in sorting out the possibilities for reading the character: “Here we have one of those narrative occurrences where our inability to evaluate the intent of the discourse by observing gestures and facial expression or hearing vocal intonation requires that we as readers infer meaning.” The situation that she describes here obtains for the whole of the episode.

²¹ On this possibility, see Carmichael, “Marriage,” 339–40, and Eslinger, “Wooing,” 168–70, noted by Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 54. For more on the symbolic potential of “water” see Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (JSNTSup 145; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* (WUNT 171; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 142–44.

well?²²). The performance instruction for the Woman's next line depends on how this claim of Jesus is read. Does she respond with a kind of pious hope, "Yes, that would be wonderful! Do give me some of what you can provide, so that I won't experience thirst again." Such a response would seem to suggest that she gets the deeper meaning of Jesus' promise of 'living water,' whatever that may be. The conclusion of the remark, however, suggests that a different tone is required. The Woman seems to take Jesus at his word, which would be rather absurd when taken at face value. So her response can be read as somewhat dismissive: "By all means, do go ahead and give me some of this very special water. I would be happy not to have to walk down here every day."²³

Or does the erotic flirtation continue. Does the suggestion that the "living water" that Jesus provides will create something new for the recipient hint at what might happen after a sexual encounter?²⁴ If so, should the Woman respond in a tone that has a hint of amused but skeptical irony, continuing the banter. "I would certainly love it if you could give me a source of never ending water. That would spare me a lot of lugging. If only you could do something like that!"

What suggests that the director should coax out of the character actor something more than a straightforward response is the abrupt change in the dialogue that follows. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman has reached an impasse. He promises something extraordinary, with perhaps more than one level of meaning²⁵; she dismisses him, but the nature of the dismissal remains open to more than one actualization, within a band of emotional ranging from disdainful to wistful.²⁶

²² See the discussion of the possible distinction between "well" and "fountain" in Brown, *John*, 170. For some commentators, such as Moloney, *John*, 123, the change is likely to be simply stylistic.

²³ Commentators wrestle with the level of irony involved. See Gail O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 64, noted by Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 252: "Her ignorance highlights the irony of her response, for the comprehending reader knows that the woman is making the correct request in spite of herself."

²⁴ The possible double entendre might be more obvious if Jesus had used the language that appears in John 7:38 where he promises that water will flow from the "belly" (*koilia*) of the believer.

²⁵ The precise referent of the "living water" is, as one might expect, elusive and debated. Candidates include one or more of the following: the Holy Spirit, eternal life, Jesus' teaching and the knowledge of God that it provides, the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. The commentators, Brown, *John*, 178–80; Moloney, *John*, 117–18, discuss the various possibilities. Our director need not limit the possibilities.

²⁶ Some commentators would limit the range of possibilities here. So Moloney, *John*, 119, "The words of Jesus have been misunderstood in a physical and selfish sense. As 'the Jews' rejected the words of Jesus in 2:20, so does the Samaritan woman in 4:15. She too is presented, at the conclusion of this first moment of her encounter with Jesus, as having no faith."

4. Is there a hubby?

Jesus: "Go, call your husband and come here."

SW: "I don't have a husband."

Jesus: "Right, since you have had five, and the one you have now is not your husband. You spoke the truth, all right."

Director's Note

The next exchange between Jesus and the Woman is much more focused and abrupt than any of the preceding. Without any apparent motivation, Jesus tells the Woman to call her husband. If there had been any sexual banter in the previous conversation, it is now gone, and Jesus' remark has the feel of a rebuke. The Woman, in any case, says that she does not have a husband.²⁷ In response, Jesus reveals that he knows much more about her than anything in their previous dialogue would suggest. Whether the Woman has been arrogantly dismissive of Jesus or more playfully flirting with him, she is taken by surprise at this development. The fact that she will allude to this exchange later shows how significant it was for her.²⁸ It is indeed the pivot on which the whole dialogue turns. The fact that it turns on precisely the point of her marital status might suggest to our director that the earlier readings of her exchanges need to be performed in a more flirtatious way. Flirtation ends when Jesus indicates his knowledge of her unavailability, yet at the same time her attraction to him becomes more serious.

The response of Jesus to the Woman, noting that she has had five husbands and is now with a man who is not her husband, has been the focal point of two major readings of the story. One ekes out an allegorical meaning, finding, for instance, an allusion to the Samaritan belief in only the five books of Moses,²⁹ or to the supposed five gods of the ancient Samaritans.³⁰ Whatever the merits of this approach, it does not illuminate the character of the Woman. The other reading – by far the more common – finds in the facts of marital history evidence of immorality,³¹ leading to such odd moves as the identification of the Samaritan with the woman caught in adultery who appears in chapter 8.

²⁷ An associate director suggests the interesting possibility that the Woman winks as she delivers this line.

²⁸ As Moloney, *John*, 127 notes, "Jesus' knowledge of these 'facts' (scil. of her marital history) is the turning point of the narrative."

²⁹ Origen, *In Joh.* 13.8. See Brown, *John*, 171.

³⁰ 2 Kgs 17:24ff reports on the foreign colonists who came from five cities with their gods, though the number of the gods (vss. 30–31) was seven. As Brown, *John*, 171, notes, Josephus, *Ant.* 9.14.3, 288, reduced the number of gods to five.

³¹ Moloney, *John*, 127, is typical: "She has lived an irregular married life and is currently in a sinful situation, but the point of v. 18 is not to lay bare her sinfulness." Some readers, stressing the theme of immorality, wonder whether the woman was really married to these

Yet a history of five marriages is not a sure pointer to the Woman's character. She may have been unfortunate enough to have been married young to a series of older gentlemen who died before their time. Her current status could perhaps be simply a stage toward husband number 6. Her subsequent comments suggest nothing about repenting of past behavior, only amazement that Jesus knew all that he did about her. The tone going forward needs to be one of astonished fascination on the part of the Woman as she becomes more and more enthralled by her mysterious interlocutor.³²

5. *Where does real worship happen?*

SW: "Sir, I have the sense that you are a prophet. Now, our ancestors worshipped on this mountain and you say that Jerusalem is the place where people should worship."

Jesus: "Ma'am, believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming, and is upon us already, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. For that is the kind of worshipper that the Father seeks. God, you see, is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

SW: "I know that the Messiah, the one who is called the Christ, is coming. When he comes, he will tell us everything."

Jesus: "The one who is speaking with you is that person."

Director's Note

The Woman, now forced from rather light-hearted banter to more serious conversation, changes the subject from her marital status to a perennial religious question. She asks, "Who is right, Jews or Samaritans in their claims about the place where God is truly worshipped?" There is a limited range of options from which our director must choose. The options available in the early part of the discourse have been limited by the abrupt turn caused by the question about marital status. The Woman, though perhaps trying to avoid discussion of a potentially embarrassing topic, asks a serious question.

husbands. See Cantwell, "Immortal Longings," 78–79, noted in Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 64.

³² Stephen Moore, who reads the encounter as one steeped in eros, encapsulates the dynamic involved graphically, perhaps with a bit more verve than is warranted: "Jesus thirsts to arouse her thirst. His desire is to arouse her desire, to be himself desired. His desire is to be the desire of this woman, to have her recognize in him that which she herself lacks. His desire is to fill up her lack. Only thus can his own deeper thirst be assuaged, his own lack be filled." See Stephen Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 44.

Jesus is presented with a dilemma by his now surprisingly thoughtful interlocutor. To affirm the Samaritan option for legitimate worship would ingratiate himself with the Woman but would put him outside the boundaries of his own community. To affirm the Jewish/Judaean claim would probably be a final conversation stopper. Jesus refuses to be caught on the horns of the dilemma, and challenges the Woman to understand that worship of the God, who is Spirit, is not dependent on locale, but on the spirit and truth of the worshipper.³³

The Woman responds with another change of subject, from true worship to the identity of God's eschatological agent. There may well be echoes of Samaritan belief in her description of the Messiah as the "one who will tell all,"³⁴ although that is not particularly relevant to the dynamics of the drama. The question probably functions as a way of deflecting the attempt by Jesus to tell her something about true worship and conclude the discussion. "Well," she says in effect, "we'll find out the answers to all these question when the Messiah comes, since he will tell us what we need to know." Again, something of a dismissive tone might be called for. But, perhaps to her surprise, Jesus responds by identifying himself with that expected figure, something that should not surprise her, since he has told her all about herself.

6. *Aftermath: Disciples and Townspeople*

Narrator: The disciples return and do not ask about the woman, who goes to the people of her town, leaving her water jar behind.

SW: "Come, see a man who told me everything that I ever did. Can he be the Christ?"

Narrator: The townspeople go out of the city.

Director's Note

As many commentators have suggested, whatever their view of the character of the Woman, it is clear by now that she is involved in at least a halting recognition of the significance of the one whom she encountered at the well. The abandonment of her water jar suggests that she is no longer concerned with literal "water," but whatever it is that Jesus can provide. Her question to the townspeople may reflect her own hesitant consideration of his special status or it may be a way of framing her own belief in a deferential fashion that

³³ On the variety of meanings that these terms have, the commentators have much to say. See Keener, *John*, 1:615–19. This intriguing issue need not detain us here.

³⁴ See Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967). For more recent literature, and some doubts about the relevance of expectation of a Ta'eb, see Moloney, *John*, 133.

invites her fellow citizens to share it. In either case, the actor playing the Woman would want to render this line in a positive, upbeat manner.

7. *Jesus and the Disciples*

Disc.: “Eat, Rabbi.”

Jesus: “I have food that you don’t know about.”

Disc.: “Has someone brought him something to eat?”

Jesus: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to accomplish his work. Don’t say that there still four months to the harvest. See, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see the fields, already white for harvest. The one who reaps receives a wage and gathers fruit for eternal life. The one who sows and the one who reaps may then rejoice together. That’s what the saying means, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap what you have not worked at. Others have labored and you have simply joined them.”

Director’s Note

The scene is of interest, with its anticipation of “eating” themes in chapter 6, but it is not relevant to the portrayal of the character of the Woman.

8. *The Townsfolk arrive*

Narrator: And they believed in him because of the testimony of the woman that, “He told me everything I ever did.” They listened to him, believed, and said:

Townsfolk: “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this is indeed the Savior of the World.”

Narrator: After two days Jesus left for Galilee.

Director’s Note

In the final scene in Samaria, the Woman is silent, though the narrator recalls her earlier testimony, the effects of which are clear. The Samaritans who have heard of the remarkable prophetic ability of Jesus have experienced it themselves and come to believe that he is more than a prophet. The Woman now seems to have a certain standing in the community. If her initial portrayal had been one of marginalized shame, she too would have undergone a transformation.³⁵

³⁵ Another intriguing suggestion of the associate director.

Concluding reflections

The role of the Samaritan Woman in this little drama is open to various interpretive renditions, the initial stages of which will emphasize either her shame or her feistiness and provocative, somewhat flirtatious approach to life, or perhaps a bit of both. As the scene develops and she encounters someone who knows her as well as she knows herself, there is a change in her demeanor, but the gumption evident in her initial interaction with Jesus remains and is turned to the service of the mission of telling others about this marvelous stranger.

If those who would highlight the potential erotic dimensions of the scene are correct, there is another element at work in this transformation of the role of the Woman. As we have noted, whatever her initial stance, when she learns how much Jesus knows about her, she is attracted to him in a new way, looking for him to solve a vexing issue that involves the relationship of God to humankind. The resolution that Jesus proposed was not what she expected, but she embraces it, however tentatively. In that embrace, whatever eros lurked in and around the scene was transformed to apostolic service. Did this apostle become, like the Thecla or Mygdonia of later Christian novels, a celibate? The scene gives no hint.

The transformation recalls other models from antiquity in which simple eros is sublimated. The most famous example, of course, is Plato's *Symposium*, where the revelatory speech of the prophetess Diotima elevates the conversation about love onto a new plane.³⁶ Diotima's insistence that true love is the love of beauty that manifests itself in the efforts of the true lover to reproduce the beautiful, or, more specifically, to inculcate virtue in the souls of the beloved is then exemplified in the account by Alcibiades about his relations with Socrates.³⁷ Alcibiades, in a reversal of traditional patterns, had, during their military service together, tried to seduce Socrates, but to no avail. The older and wiser man, with his eyes on the more transcendent beauty of which Diotima spoke, tried, without apparent success, to inculcate virtue in the soul of Alcibiades. In that process, Socrates, like Aristotle's god, "moved as an object of desire"³⁸ attracting the youth to him, but not for his own sake, but for the cause of virtue. There is at least a loose analogy with the interaction of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman.³⁹ She moves from a position ripe with erotic

³⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 201E–212A.

³⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 215A–222C.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.7.

³⁹ Not many commentators make any connection with Socratic traditions. Keener, *John*, 1:608, is an exception, though he calls attention not to Plato's *Symposium*, but to the portrait of Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 3.9.18, which describes Socrates' unwillingness to relate to a particular woman like the many men who pursued her. Keener, *John*, 1:608,

overtone, exemplifying a character that might well take advantage of such a situation, to a position where she has abandoned thought of herself and serves to bring a message of salvation to her neighbors. She is a character who learns from her encounter with Jesus a new meaning for her own life.

fn. 262, suggests “this may be comparable to stories about his academic concern for Alcibiades, in whom most men had other (sexual) interests.”