

Exegetical Notes, John 4:1-30, 39-42

“The Woman At the Well”

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John 4:1-30, 39-42

Verses 1-6

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria.⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

- The Pharisees were attempting to stir tensions between John’s disciples and Jesus’ disciples as both groups were baptizing and appeared to be in competition with each other (see 3:25-26). So Jesus left the southern portion of Israel called Judea and went north into the area called Galilee.
- The quickest way from Judea to Galilee was through an area called Samaria. Good Jews did not usually use this quickest route because of religious differences between good Jews and Samaritans. The differences between Jews and Samaritans is of little importance to the story. It is important to know that good Jews avoided all contact with Samaritans. However, the text says that Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” The necessity lay in Jesus’ mission, not in geography. There was a specific reason in God’s plan for Jesus to take this route to Galilee.
- At the town of Sychar, where Jacob’s well was found (see Genesis 33:18-19, 48:21-22), Jesus rested at the well.

Verses 7-9

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

- As Jesus was resting by the well, his disciples left to go into Sychar to buy food and a Samaritan woman came to draw water from Jacob's well.
- Jesus asked the woman for a drink of water. The woman was shocked at Jesus' request for several reasons: She was a Samaritan and he was Jewish; and she was a woman with whom no rabbi would speak. His approach violated the social customs of the time. Out of her shock, the woman asked Jesus why he was making such a request of her.

Verses 10-15

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?"¹² "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

- Jesus then confronted the woman with spiritual truth. He told her that if she only knew who he was, "the gift of God," (see John 3:16), she would ask him for a drink and he would give her "living water," eternal life.
- But another of John's classic misunderstandings occurs. The woman has no reference by which to understand what Jesus is saying to her. Confused by his remarks she thinks he is talking about giving her a drink of water. But he has nothing to use to draw water from the well and seems to be implying that he has something better to drink than the water from Jacob's well. To her, Jesus is guilty of making himself greater than the patriarch Jacob.
- Jesus reassures her that what he offers her is very different from the water in the well. The drink which he offers wells up to eternal life. The water in Jacob's well cannot provide this.
- The woman, still in misunderstanding, asks Jesus for the water he is offering so that she will not have to come again to draw water from the well. She is almost mocking in response to him.

Verses 16-20

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband."¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."¹⁹ "Sir," the woman

said, “I can see that you are a prophet.”²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

- Because of her attitude and her obvious misunderstanding, Jesus confronts the woman with her own spiritual condition. He told her to call her husband.
- She responded that she could not call her husband because she had no husband, meaning that she was not legally married to anyone. However, she was living openly with a man.
- Jesus credited her for her truthful response and told her that he knew that she had also lived openly with four other men whom she had never married.
- She confessed then, that because he knew such things about her, Jesus must be a prophet, and she attempted to retreat to more comfortable ground. To divert attention from her own sinful background she raised questions about the ancient religious battle between Jews and Samaritans.

Verses 21-26

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

- Jesus told her that the ancient controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans was of little importance. He told her that salvation, the Messiah, would come from the Jews. He told her that this gift of salvation would be open to all people, regardless of their national/racial/religious background. He told her that God’s gift would be given to all who worshiped him in Spirit and in truth, to all who believed (see John 3:18-21).
- The woman then confessed that she knew about the Messiah and was looking for him to come.
- Jesus revealed to her that he was the Messiah, the Christ.

Verse 27

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

- The conversation between Jesus and the woman was interrupted by the disciples return from town. They were shocked to find Jesus in conversation with a woman, but none of them inquired about why he was talking to her. They kept their questions about his behavior to themselves.

Verses 28-30

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

- In haste, the woman retreated into town. She invited the people to come out to see Jesus with her telling them that Jesus, who had never before met her, knew all about her and asking if this man could be the Messiah.
- Because of her excitement people came out to Jacob’s well to see Jesus.

Verses 39-42

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.”⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.⁴² They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

- It was the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did,” which drew the Samaritans to Jesus at first. But once they had listened to Jesus, they became convinced that he was the Messiah, “the Savior of the World.”
- Jesus delayed his journey into Galilee for two days so that he could minister in Samaria.

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