

August 2022

Jesus the Bridegroom in John 4: The Samaritan woman at the well

Introduction

The sun was high, and it was hot. It was the middle of the day—not the usual time of the day for a woman to gather water at the local well. She came alone. This was also not usual; just as gathering water was done in the cool of the day, it was also done with the other women from the village. This was part of the social fabric that held the tight-knit community together. It made the heavy daily chore of hauling precious water more bearable. But she was an outcast, spurned by the others because of her complicated—some would say disgraceful—marital status.

But that day, she was surprised to find out that she was not alone. A strange man was sitting on the edge of the well. He looked tired and thirsty, and contrary to the usual custom of such encounters, he did not move a respectful distance away so that she could draw water. He sat there, letting her approach. And then he spoke to her. This was not the last surprise in this remarkable encounter.

Before we examine the incident further, we need to call to mind the rich literary, geographical, historical, cultural, and theological threads that form the warp and woof of this beautifully woven story. John's audience would have known this background; we have to work at it.

Literary threads

John is a literary genius and a master storyteller. In his gospel he uses irony, and words with double meanings that lead to misunderstandings, many of which won't be cleared up for the disciples until the Holy Spirit has been poured out at Pentecost. John also presents the events from Jesus' life in a way that intrigues his readers and opens up to them various aspects of Jesus' identity. Just before this incident with the woman at the well, he relates that Jesus has left Cana in Galilee to go to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover (John 2: 13; we learn here that Jesus is a faithful Jew). While there, he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple precincts (2:13–25; Jesus has authority over the Temple). He encountered Nicodemus, a powerful Pharisee who had come to him at night (3:1–21; here a leader of the people came under cover of darkness because he was afraid, whereas the Samaritan woman will come to Jesus in the light of day). Then Jesus spent time with his disciples in the Judean countryside, where his disciples were baptizing many who have come to him. This sets up the testimony of John the Baptist. He referred to Jesus as the bridegroom. Here are the Baptist's words: "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.'"²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled" (John 3:28–29). Readers are now well prepared to further recognize the bridegroom in the company of the woman at the well.

Geographical and historical threads

John's audience would have been familiar with the history of the Samaritans and the reason Jews would go out of their way to avoid passing through Samaria when they traveled between

Jerusalem and Galilee. They would have known that the Samaritans were descendants of two groups: the remnant of native Israelites who were not deported after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and foreign colonists brought in by the Assyrians who brought their own gods with them (see 2 Kings 17:24–31).

The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans could be traced back to the time of the separation of Israel in the north from Judah in the south (922 BC). The northerners refused to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, and set up rival temples in the north. To make matters worse, when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon in 538 BC, the Samaritans actively resisted the restoration of Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 4). To make matters worse, in the second century BC, the Samaritans sided with the Syrian king against John Hyrcanus, who ruled Judea from 134–104 BC. Around 113 BC, Hyrcanus destroyed Samaria and the temple on Mount Gerizim. Finally, a few years before the birth of Jesus, the Samaritans retaliated by scattering the bones of the dead in the Temple precincts on the eve of Passover in order to defile the complex and make it impossible for the Jews to keep the feast.

John's audience would have been familiar with the fact that the Samaritans, like the Sadducees, accepted only the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, as sacred Scripture. Further, in the Samaritan book of Exodus, there was an 11th commandment: to build an altar and worship on Mount Gerizim. One more abomination to the Jews.

Theological themes

Our focus in this short series of reflections is on Jesus as the divine bridegroom and the Samaritan woman as a bridal figure. Jesus' encounter with her reveals his intention to bring all nations into a spousal relationship with him. He welcomes saints and sinners. He offers the gift of living water and salvation to all who will receive him. The woman represents the new Israel, who will worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Once transformed, she becomes the first female evangelist. This is a foreshadowing of the women who will be the first witnesses to the resurrection. We see in this story both Jesus' humanity and his divinity; his willingness to break down gender barriers; and his respect for all women.

Finally, Jesus is revealing himself as Lord and savior. There is an important context to these titles. Samaria was a city rebuilt by Herod the Great to flatter his Roman overlords. He built a temple there in honor of the emperor Augustus. After his death in AD 14, Augustus was deified by the Roman Senate and given the title "Divus Augustus." Like many other emperors in the ancient world, he was known as *sōtēr*, or "savior." Augustus and other emperors also took the title "Lord." Their hubris expanded over time, until each one was called "savior of the world."

The customary use of these terms makes it all the more remarkable that the Samaritans were soon to declare to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (4:42).



Pray

God, come to our assistance.

-Lord, make haste to help us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Reading: John 3:25–30

Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." ²⁷ John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

Meditation

Jeremiah prophesied that the voice of the bridegroom would be heard when the descendant of David came as king: "Thus says the LORD. . . 'there shall once more be heard ¹¹ the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, **the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride**, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD:"¹⁴ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.'" Jeremiah 33:10–11, 14–16.

John the Baptist is not the Messiah; he is not the long-awaited bridegroom. Rather, he is the friend of the bridegroom, the best man. In Jewish tradition, the role of best man was very important—so much so that tradition had it that God himself acted as best man at the wedding of Adam and Eve, since there was no one else to fill the role! When speaking about Genesis 2:22, "And he brought her to the man," Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar said: "This teaches that [God] acted as best man to Adam." (Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth 61a).

John the Baptist brings the bride—not a single individual, but the entire people of God, the new Israel—to the groom, Jesus, as God brought Eve to Adam. John, the best man, is full of joy, and announces that "those days" prophesied by Jeremiah have arrived. He has heard the voice of the bridegroom. So can we!

Quiet reflection: *Reflect on one or two ideas that came to mind in the reading or the meditation. Share one idea with your spouse.*

Prayers and Intentions: *As if talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

Lord's Prayer: *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

Blessing: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Unity Prayer: God, make our hearts one. Amen.



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Reading: John 4:1–6a

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" ²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— ³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there.

Meditation

As we think about the marital implications of this story, we should consider why the well is important. In ancient Israel, where would one go to find a bride? In other words, where would one go to find the ladies? Remember, there weren't bars or clubs. Yes, the place where key figures in Israel's history met their future spouse was . . . the local well. The biblical formula was something like this: male foreigner + woman + well = betrothal. See, for example, Moses and Zipporah (Exodus 2:15–21); Abraham and Rebekah (Genesis 24:14–16); Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29:1–9). Note the other parallels. Jesus is a stranger in a foreign land, as are Moses, Abraham's servant, and Jacob in their respective stories. Jesus asks for a drink, as Abraham's servant asked Rebekah for a drink of water to find out if she was the chosen bride (Genesis 24:14–21). Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at "the sixth hour," right around noon (John 4:6), just as Jacob encountered Rachel at the well at "high day," or "midday" (Genesis 29:7). Now, consider the disciples' reaction when they return and find Jesus alone with a woman at the well. "Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'" (4:27). Their tongue-tied astonishment must be at least partly due to the marital implications of such a situation. They know their Scriptures!

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Reading: John 4:6–10

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Meditation

The other day, I was looking at the diamond that I gave to Adella nearly 50 years ago. I must admit that it is small, but it is far from insignificant. I remember scraping together all the money I had in my meager savings to buy a diamond ring for her. I wanted to give her a gift that would indicate that I was prepared to go "all in" for her. I didn't know fully what that meant at the time, but I have come to see that it was the promise of my whole self, for a lifetime.

Scholars point out that in biblical times, a bridegroom would make his intentions known by offering the woman a betrothal gift or "bridal gift" of some sort. For example, when Abraham's servant realized that Rebekah was "the one" for Isaac, he immediately took a gold ring and two bracelets and gave them to her as gifts (Genesis 24:22–27). Jesus offers the Samaritan woman a gift—but not gold or silver. Instead, he offers "the gift of God," in the form of "living water" (John 4:10). From Jeremiah 2:13, we know that God himself is the living water. Further, the gift of God is a person, Jesus, who is the person of God himself. The promise of living water is his promise to go all in for her, and for us!

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Reading: John 4:10–12

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Meditation

Here John displays two of his favorite literary techniques: irony, and confusion caused by words with double meanings. Both involve the expression "living water." The most obvious meaning of "living water" is running water, the flowing water of a stream, for example. It is clear that they are next to a well that is over 100 feet deep—not a stream. So, the woman's confusion is understandable. But there was another tradition associated with this well. It can be found in one of the ancient translation/commentaries on Genesis, known as the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan. It contains a story about Jacob rolling away the massive stone that sat on top of the well, thus causing water to flow from the well for 20 years.

And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother's brother . . . Jacob drew near and, with one of his arms, rolled the stone from the mouth of the well; and the well began to flow, and the waters came up before him, and he watered the flock of Laban . . . and it continued to flow for twenty years. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and raised his voice and wept" (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis 29:10–11).¹

So, the woman's question "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" challenges Jesus to perform a feat equal to or better than that of Jacob. But she doesn't understand that Jesus has a different, better form of living water. Indeed, he is greater than Jacob; he is Jacob's God!

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¹ Translation in Pitre, Brant James . *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*, Image, New York, 2018, p.71.



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Reading: John 4:13–15

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,"¹⁴ but 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."¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Meditation

The woman's misunderstanding persists. She hears the promise of running water and muses that it would make her miserable life easier. If only she didn't have to come by herself to the well every day and lug a heavy bucket of water home in the heat of the day—that would be quite a gift! But Jesus has something much greater in mind. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the term "living water" also refers to the ritual water used in the Tabernacle of Moses and, later, in the Temple of Solomon, for cleansing and purification from sins. And as Scripture scholar Brant Pitre points out, "In an ancient Jewish context, the expression 'living water' was also associated with the custom of a Jewish bride undergoing a ritual bath before her wedding. This connection between living water and the ancient bridal bath can be found in both Jewish Scripture and ancient Jewish writings outside the Bible. For example, the Song of Solomon describes the bride on her wedding day as both a fountain and a well of living water: 'A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed . . . a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon' (Song of Songs 4:12, 15)."²

The truth will dawn on the woman in stages, until finally she will recognize that she is face to face with the Messiah, the long-awaited divine bridegroom. She will leave her bucket behind, no longer looking for running water, to proclaim the good news about Jesus.

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² Pitre, Brant James . *Jesus the Bridegroom*. pp. 73–74.



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Reading: John 4:16–26

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Meditation

At once, we notice that the woman's past is laid bare, her sins made known. But rather than pouring upon her the shame to which she is so accustomed, Jesus treats her like a valuable person. He takes her seriously and reveals himself to her. But there is more going on here. Once again, John plays with words that have multiple meanings. This time the woman begins to see Jesus in a new light: she sees him as a prophet. Her new understanding and the deeper theological truth hinge on the multiple words for "husband" in the Old Testament "*ish*" and "*ba'al*." "*Ba'al*" was also the name of many of the false gods in the ancient world. We saw in Hosea (2:16) that there would come a time when Israel would call Yahweh "my husband" ("*ish*" in Hebrew), and no longer refer to the false gods as "my husband" (*ba'ali* in Hebrew). The Samaritans had a complicated history with foreign gods/ba'als. When the Assyrians replaced a significant portion of the Israelite population with foreigners, those people brought their own gods (ba'als) with them. According to 2 Kings 17:24–31, Samaria had five gods/husbands. And until the woman at the well, representing all Samaritans and all of us, turns from them, the divine bridegroom cannot be her husband—or ours.

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Reading: John 4:25–26, 28–30, 39–43

²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." . . . ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him. . . . ³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." ⁴³ When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee.

Meditation

Unlike the Jews, the Samaritans were not anticipating a messianic ruler, but rather someone more along the line of a teacher like Moses who would proclaim all things to them (see Deuteronomy 18:18). The woman has just recognized Jesus as a prophet. Dare she believe that he is the one, the Messiah? Jesus reveals that he is indeed the Messiah—but not one that anyone—Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile—expects. Again, John does this with words that convey two meanings. On one level, he is simply saying, "I am he, that is, I am the Messiah." On a deeper level (this is much easier to see in the original Greek), Jesus is revealing who he is by using the divine name, "I AM." In the Greek translation of Exodus 3:14, when Moses asked who was speaking to him from the burning bush, God's voice answered with the same exact words: "I AM," or "*ego eimi*." Here and many other times in his gospel, John makes it clear that this phrase, belonging only to God, belongs to Jesus too. The list of "I am" sayings in John's gospel includes: I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the true and living way. I am the vine. Here beside the well, with his simple "I am," Jesus has revealed his true nature to the Samaritan woman. Her response? She leaves everything behind and goes to tell everyone in her village that she has found the Messiah, the divine bridegroom, the savior of the world.

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Reading: John 4:31–38

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Meditation

The disciples return to the well before the woman leaves. As we noted earlier, they are puzzled, not a little, by what they see. A self-respecting rabbi does not even talk to his wife in a public place. So why are Jesus and this Samaritan woman in intimate conversation? But they dare not ask; rather, they ask about the food they have gone into town to fetch. To their puzzlement, Jesus claims to have already eaten. Again, as so often in John's gospel, Jesus speaks at one level, and the disciples hear at a much different one. What kind of food might he be talking about? Food that nourishes the soul, water that brings eternal life—so much that will make sense when they receive the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; 20:22).

The woman came to fill a bucket with water. She returns to her village without a bucket, but is herself overflowing with living water. The disciples return with human food, but find that Jesus has been nourished by eternal food. But that is not all in this remarkable scene. The prophet Amos the day when the harvester of the grapes would follow right behind the plater of the seeds (Amos 9:13-14). Jesus said, "But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together." The divine bridegroom is already preparing the great feast.

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Reading: John 19:28–34

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.³² Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

Meditation

Before we leave our reflections on the wedding feat of Cana and the Samaritan woman at the well, we take one last look at the scene that pulls both of them together. The seventh jar of water, which became the wine that sustains us, flowed from the side of Jesus. The last sip of wine was drunk by the divine bridegroom just before he gave all for us. But the water has another marital significance. As Brant Pitre puts it, "The way the living water that flowed from the side of Jesus crucified reaches his bride is through the cleansing waters of baptism. By means of this water, all believers, prefigured by the Samaritan woman, become part of the bride of Jesus, the people of God, gathered from both Israel and the Gentile nations. That is the true nuptial bath by which the Bridegroom Messiah will cleanse his bride."³

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³ Pitre, Brant James . *Jesus the Bridegroom*. p. 81.