

Spiritual snobs: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; John 4:5-42

by [Scot McKnight](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

It is tempting to sit in judgment on others. Sometimes we do it in jest, as Mark Twain did when commenting on Adam. “Adam was but human—this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple’s sake, he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent.”

But sometimes the serpent eats *us*, and then we judge in earnest.

Just a few days into the wilderness wanderings, the children of Israel encamped at Rephidim and found no water. They blamed Moses. We may be tempted to blame them too. How can these people, we ask, after experiencing a miraculous liberation from a first-class oppressor, after watching the enemy collapse under walls of water, after waking up with manna at their feet—how can they carp about not having water?

In a penetrating essay on the “put-down,” Joseph Epstein says that judging others is “malice formulated in tranquility” and the “civilized person’s equivalent of the perfectly aimed knockout punch.” More recently he puts the whole enterprise together in his study *Snobbery: The American Version*. We too often operate, he suggests, as the “statistician.” He defines “snob” as one who arranges to make himself “feel superior *at the expense* of other people.”

If we judge the children of Israel, whom the psalmist says had hard hearts, we also must judge the apostles. After watching Jesus feed a village of people, the disciples are challenged to think through what Jesus should do—he’s afraid to send the crowd home lest they collapse on the way. But Mark says the apostles had hard hearts (Mark 8), so we condemn them for their faithlessness. But should we?

A parishioner once informed me that if he had been in Jerusalem when Jesus was put to death, he would have been crucified along with him because, as he trumpeted, “I would never have allowed my Lord to be even arrested without fighting for him! Nope, not me. I’m not like the rest of these faint-hearted Christians!” The claim astounded me. His self-promotion was masked as self-perception. Here was a 60-

year-old who hadn't looked in a mirror for a long time.

He is not alone.

The problem is neither logic nor faith. The problem is us. When we look within ourselves or at others, we are prone to self-promotion or blame or judgment. When we see who we really are, we see hearts struggling and minds fighting and souls doubting. And then we are like both the children of Israel and the apostles.

The Samaritan woman sees a better way. Instead of seeing Jesus as simply a Jew, she sees a revelation of God. She sees the good news that comes straight from the mouth of Jesus: water, water that gives new life in the Spirit. Jesus, especially in John, uses the earthy to evoke the eternal. Our scientific, modernist world is giving way, so the experts tell us, to a postmodern world, but both are shackled to the earthy. We need to hear the words of Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann: "The fall is not that [the human] preferred the world to God . . . but that [the human] made the world *material*." We are called to see the eternal through the earthy, to see living water in the water in the well.

What the woman sees is Jesus the Living Water, who summons her from her ageless racisms and divisiveness into eternal life. When she glances into the well, she sees not herself or others but the image of Jesus. Now she understands. Drinking from the living water will give her life and invite her to love rather than judge others.

I've struggled with students for two decades over why Jesus himself was tempted (Matt. 4:1-11). Most of them think he was tempted as an example of how to endure temptation. But the text says that Jesus, in being tempted, relived Israel's experience in the wilderness wanderings. Unlike the children of Israel, who fail over and over, Jesus overcame temptation by trusting God.

In 1979, we lived through the Blizzard, a snowstorm that began on Friday but didn't end until Sunday morning. Soon thereafter our three-year-old daughter, Laura, begged us to let her go outside to play in a clearing the drifting had created. We bundled her up; she stiffly descended the steps toward the clearing. Her obstacle, however, was a drift, and so she jumped onto the drift, thinking she would then walk beyond it to where she could play. She found herself not only stuck in the drift but, because she could no longer move her legs and feet, unable to move. She cried for help; as her adoring father I quickly bundled myself up, grabbed the snow shovel, and descended the steps. I pulled her out of the snow bank, set her down on the

steps, and began the joyful task of carving a path for her to the clearing. Before long, she was with me in the path that was gradually getting closer to the clearing. Without lifting one shovel of snow, she was soon playing. Pure grace.

Jesus, too, paves the path of trust for us. In the Lenten season, we need to face ourselves and see where our heart is focused. When we are tempted to judge others or to promote ourselves, we can remind ourselves that we do not walk this path of love and righteousness under our own power. The Living Water is reaching out to all in love.