

The Samaritan woman vs. our assumptions (John 4:5-42)

She doesn't even have a name. Surely she is a questionable character if she has no name.

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I wonder how many stereotypes and assumptions the Samaritan woman at the well has had to bear over the centuries since she encountered Jesus. After all, she's at the well alone. Aren't biblical women always supposed to travel with a man? Or at least in pairs? Does she go to the well during the heat of the day to avoid the crowds that ostracize her?

Five husbands? Doesn't that make her a prostitute? Maybe she is a "quarrelsome" woman like the sages caution about in Proverbs (19:13 and 27:15). And she doesn't even have a name. Surely she is a questionable character if she has no name.

Those poor biblical characters have had to endure enormous caricatures that we people of faith have created for them. The women of the Bible have especially suffered from our assumptions about them, which mostly reflect our own assumptions about (or patriarchy's desires for) women of all time.

A few examples have become the kernel of false generalizations. *Biblical women have no autonomy.* (But Huldah.) *Biblical women cannot own property.* (But Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.) *Biblical women are never in love relationships, they are only married off as property.* (But the Song of Songs.) *Biblical women have no power.* (But Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother and sister, Pharaoh's daughter—all these women foil Pharaoh.)

A woman at a well? Right away, the Gospel writer's Jewish audience would have envisioned several specific women. Some of the most significant biblical women are introduced at wells: Rachel, Rebekah, Zipporah. In the Hebrew Bible, a meeting at a well is a type-scene for the pairing of a significant couple. Perhaps storytellers tended to place a marriageable woman at a well due to the well's womb-like shape and function. Those of us who have indoor running water in multiple rooms of our homes can easily overlook the value of a well in an ancient desert land. Both a womb and a well encapsulate life.

Five husbands? That scenario may well have connoted Tamar in Genesis 38 and her two husbands (Er and Onan), along with the one who should have been her husband (Shelah) and the patriarch (Judah) who unwittingly took on that role. Tamar's vindication at the end of that story may echo in this one. Judah proclaims, astonishingly, "She is more in the right than I" (Gen 38:26). In John 4, Jesus notably makes no moral commentary on the marital status of the Samaritan woman. His observation of her relationship history only becomes an opportunity for him to highlight his divinity.

That background sets up expectations for this narrative, expectations that go notably unfulfilled. This woman from Samaria challenges cultural mores about who would be a suitable woman for Jesus to meet (at a well!) and engage in a deep theological conversation. Unlike Jesus' last discussion, with a learned and named man—Nicodemus—this woman has no name save her estranged location. But she jumps intelligently into the debate about the proper place to worship and is moved by his symbolic imagery, rather than being put off by it.

The narrator provides so many vivid details in this passage, little asides that invite us to imagine we are listening to a traveling bard recounting this tale to a crowd of rapt listeners. *The disciples had gone off to buy food when this happened*, the storyteller might say. *In case you weren't aware, the Jews and Samaritans were originally siblings but had become estranged centuries earlier. By this time, they had nothing to do with each other. But Jesus didn't heed those social rules.*

Or: She left her water jug at the well, you know. I guess once Jesus gave her living water, she didn't need it anymore. She told her people about Jesus, and they invited him to stay, and so many of them believed! She was an outstanding disciple! Then the bard gives the hairy-eye to listeners who hear their mental hierarchies fall. They must model their discipleship on that of a Samaritan woman?

We thought we would meet Jesus at the well, but maybe the point was conversation with a marginalized matriarch. Does God have something magical-metaphorical-salvific to offer us while we're estranged? Do divine gifts to the alienated translate into transformation? What would be amazing enough to make us leave our water jars at the well?