

THE WOMAN MEETS JESUS AT A WELL

(John 4:1-26)

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". Read John 4:1-10

During the course of his journeys, Jesus traveled from Judea in the south back to Galilee in the north, going via Samaria. Normally, Jewish travelers made a detour around Samaria to avoid contact with Samaritans, but Jesus took the direct route. He came to Sychar, which was a town near Jacob's Well. There had once been a great city there, just where this incident took place. Nearby on the peak of Mount Gerizim had been a temple that rivaled the Temple of Jerusalem.

What the story is about:

The story of the Samaritan woman makes a strong statement about the role of women in the early Christian communities. The woman is not silent, and she is not limited to the private world of women. She has a voice, and she moves out into the public arena, into male space. She enters into debate with Jesus about issues and questions that interest her. She does not wait for permission to do so, but takes the initiative herself.

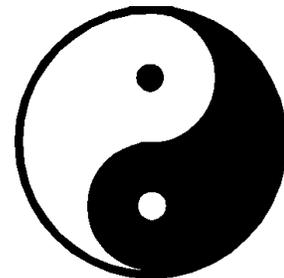
Summary

In this story, a woman experienced the progressive stages of faith in Jesus. She met Jesus, she learnt about him, and she came to believe in him. Then she went and told other people about him. The people listening to her also came to believe in Jesus. It did not matter that she was a woman and a Samaritan. Gender and nationality were not important. No one was excluded from the Christian community.

Greek philosophy was greatly admired at the time of Jesus, and it had a profound impact on the way that people saw their world. One of the greatest philosophers, Plato, proposed the theory of dualism, suggesting that everything in the cosmos had an equal and opposite other. This theory had a profound impact on the way that women were viewed, and it was not to women's advantage. 'Woman' was placed in a category containing elements that were viewed as negative:

Man	-	Woman
Civilization	-	Nature
Reason/logic	-	Emotion
Good	-	Evil
Light	-	Darkness

Keep in mind that



- ◆ **civilization was the ideal; Nature was mistrusted and potentially dangerous**
- ◆ **logic and reason were admired, and emotion was to be subordinated**
- ◆ **goodness was always preferable to evil**
- ◆ **light, especially in the pre-industrial world, was preferred to darkness.**

These are examples only, but they show that Platonic dualism placed women in a negative category. They were seen as closer to the natural/animal world than men. By nature they were irrational and untrustworthy, and therefore unfit to make their own decisions and govern their own lives. They had to be looked after and controlled, never treated as equals.

This differed from the traditional Jewish way of looking at the world, which saw all things in creation as integrated and complementary, rather than as opposites of each other.

An example of this is the creation story of Eve, which relates that the first woman was created from a rib taken by God from Adam's side, thereby suggesting that a man could never be fully complete unless he was in partnership with a woman.

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.)

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”.’ Read John 4:1-10

Every drop of water used in a household had to be carried from the local well. So every day women walked to the bottom of the steps cut into the rock, filled their heavy earthenware jars, returned up the steps, and carried the water home. The strong younger women of the household normally did this task, but this is not happening here. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for something to drink, and here begins the longest conversation recorded between Jesus and any person. It is surprising that this conversation happens with someone who was a woman, and non-Jewish.

The woman herself was certainly surprised when Jesus spoke to her, because Jews and Samaritans did not have anything to do with each other. There had been a long-running conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. Samaria had been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel during the period of the divided kingdoms. In 721BC Assyria conquered Israel, and sent most of its people to live in Assyria.

The Assyrians replaced the original people with five alien tribes who resettled the area (for information on this event, see 2 Kings 17:13-34). Eventually many of the original population returned and intermarried with the five alien tribes. By the time of Jesus, Jews thought that the people who lived in Samaria were not true descendants of the great Jewish ancestors, and that their religion was not true Judaism but a mixture of beliefs.

Jesus blithely disregarded the ancient enmity between the two groups. He began talking to the woman about ‘living water’. The woman questioned him and drew him into conversation. Jesus explained that when people drink ordinary water, they get thirsty again. But he had water that gave eternal, not temporary, life.

Naturally this caught the interest of the woman, burdened as she was with the daily task of carrying water. She asked for some of this ‘living water’. Jesus told her to go and get her husband. She did not have one, she replied. ‘You have had five husbands, said Jesus, but the man you are living with now is not your husband.’



At this stage the story contains a great deal of symbolism. The woman herself stood for Samaria, and her five husbands stood for the five alien tribes. The man she was now living with, who was not her true husband, stood for the Samaritan religion. The woman understood Jesus’ meaning immediately. He was speaking about Samaritan worship in the same way that the Jewish prophets before him had done.

Knowing this, the woman called him a prophet, and began asking him about differences between Samaritan and Jewish worship. She knew that the temple on nearby Mount Gerizim had been the central place of worship for the Samaritans, rivaling the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans and Jews always argued over which of the two temples was the true place to worship.

Basically the woman was talking with Jesus about where and how you should worship God, an issue that interested her. She spoke to him as an intellectual equal, and he responded. Jesus told her that very soon none of these arguments would matter, because the Messiah was coming, and he would change everything. In fact, he said, the Messiah had actually arrived, and it was he.