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“The Journey to Jesus: John 4:19-26”

By Andrew Hagen

ABSTRACT

John 4:19-26 is a part of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. This portion of the conversation includes Jesus’ first revelation of himself as the Messiah and the only way to the Father in what Eric John Wyckoff calls an “astonishing self-revelation unparalleled in its explicitness.”¹ Jesus’ later claims develop these ideas further (John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5)² but this scene serves to not only reveal Jesus as the Messiah-Christ but also to demonstrate how Jesus transcends all the expectations which are associated with the title.

The Journey to Realization

Jesus first transcends the expectations and perceptions of the woman he encounters at the well. Her perception of Jesus moves from thirsty Jew, to puzzling man, to prophet, and finally to Messiah.³ She first perceives Jesus’ identity as Jew but is soon baffled by his discussion of living water. Then, when he demonstrates his knowledge of her life, she declares him a prophet but then Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah and the Christ. When Jesus first encounters the woman, she is astonished that he would even dare to ask her for water. This is because Jews did not associate with Samaritans. She is confused by Jesus’ teaching of living water and begins to see that Jesus might be more than he appears. This is validated by his ability to know what she has done and she proclaims that he must be a prophet and quickly changes the subject to something less personal. Jesus steps into this role of prophet by answering her question, however he does not give an answer regarding who is right or wrong in the argument of where to worship.⁴ He does not give an answer to her question, which she might have expected, but instead supplies an answer that creates even more questions. His answer would have been initially disappointing to the woman⁵ but as he continues to teach with authority, his answer transcends her earthly view of the issue and causes her to question whether he is the Messiah. In response, Jesus reveals that he is speaking on the authority of God and is more than just what the woman expects of him.⁶ She discovers that the man she sarcastically proposes is “as great as Jacob” has proven to be the Messiah and indeed greater than Jacob.⁷ This episode is only one

story of a soul struggling to come to a belief in Jesus and his oneness with the Father.⁸ Looking at other situations may reveal some deeper meaning here.

Others' Journey

We can compare this exchange to the journey of other characters in John's gospel. This theme of coming to grips with Jesus' identity is present in Jesus' interactions with the people in Jerusalem (John 2:13-23), Nicodemus (3:1-15) and Pilate (18:28-19:25).⁹ Jesus' dialogs with the group from Jerusalem, with Nicodemus, and with the Samaritan all result in misunderstanding. The difference is in their respective response to their confusion. When the Jews in Jerusalem hear Jesus' prophecy about destroying and rebuilding the temple, they think he is referring to the actual structure and they scoff at him and dismiss his claim as ridiculous. Nicodemus responds to the idea of a second birth in confusion and asks for more explanation. "How can this be?" (John 3:9), he asks, and then goes away without it being made clear if he became a follower of Christ. It remains unclear even when he questions the Sanhedrin in John 7, and it is not until after Jesus' death that he really appears as a loyal follower alongside Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus' burial in John 19. Jesus moves on after these men of his own culture and religion fail to recognize him because salvation comes from the Jews and they have the resources to recognize who it is that is speaking to them.¹⁰ Because they should be ready to experience the truth that Jesus brings, their reactions are contrasted with that of the woman who had none of these advantages.

The Samaritan woman would seemingly be the last person to recognize Jesus, but instead she is one of the first. Alan Culpepper, in talking about the Samaritan woman, says that she "lacks all of Nicodemus' advantages. He is a male teacher of Israel; she is a woman of Samaria. He has a noble heritage; she has a shameful past. He has seen signs and knows Jesus is "from God"; she meets Jesus as a complete stranger."¹¹ However, the Samaritan woman is able to recognize Jesus because as she grasps more and more is she is ready to receive at each stage: asking for the "living" water, proclaiming him a prophet, and then inviting her village to see "the Christ."¹² She is openly seeking the truth and is ready for something new that transcends her previous ways of thinking, rather than holding onto the things she knows. Because of her response to Jesus, she becomes the first convert from outside of Israel and then becomes instrumental in converting

other non-Jews as she witnesses to her community and they come to see Jesus. Her reaction to Jesus is powerful and immediate, completely different from that of the Jews that encounter Jesus prior to this story.

Crossing Boundaries

This passage also illustrates how Jesus' ministry and true worship transcends cultural boundaries and typical modes of operation. Rather than use the strong and mighty, Jesus chooses the weak and marginalized to do his will. One obvious boundary is the fact that the woman is a Samaritan and, as stated in the text, Jews don't associate with Samaritans. Jesus not only engages her, but also engages her in a lofty theological and spiritual discussion in which she can respond and challenge him.¹³ She does all this in spite of the fact that she worships what she does not know. Jesus puts forth the statement that salvation comes from the Jews and that they know what they worship. Yet he does not exclude her from the opportunity to receive this salvation and worship this God. In the context of the larger narrative we can see that salvation does come from the Jews through Jesus. Rather, he is rejected by his own people, which is why John often paints them in a negative light.¹⁴ Jesus now ministers also to the people outside of Israel. Additionally, it is ironic that these people who do not know what they worship have more of an accurate idea of the Messiah than the Jews. The Samaritan *Tabeb* seems to be more of a teacher or prophet than a king, more the kind of Messiah that Jesus proclaims himself to be.¹⁵ This sits in stark contrast with John 6:15 where some Jews try to force Jesus to be some earthly king. This group, so disdained by the Jews, was closer to understanding the Messiah and Jesus goes to them to make his first self-revelation in John.

Another obvious boundary is in the fact that she is a woman. Feminist critics would argue that the disciples' incredulity is less because of the ethnic issue so much as the gender issue. This view is reinforced by the disciples' surprise at her being a woman, more than at her being a Samaritan. The fact that Jesus is talking with this woman at all is an act of feminist empowerment.¹⁶ Even his address to her as "woman" at the beginning of the exchange can be seen as a respectful title towards a woman or one's mother.¹⁷ Jean K. Kim comments that the woman is not referred to as just a Samaritan but as a Samaritan woman, which emphasizes her femininity.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the way that the woman brings "many Samaritans" to believe in

Jesus it can be said that Jesus used women as missionaries, important and even determinative in his ministry to non-Israelites.¹⁹ This woman is the first non-Jew to become part of Jesus' movement in John's gospel. Jesus even references the fact that the disciples are reaping what they did not sow (John 4:38); they are working off of the Samaritan woman's labor in their missionary work to Samaria.²⁰ Through this progression, social and religious barriers are crossed as Jesus gives to this woman an almost apostolic status: she calls others as Jesus did and they believe because of her word.²¹

To Jesus, these distinctions do not matter as he ministers both to Nicodemus, the upright Jewish male, and to this shameful Samaritan woman.²² Wyckoff points out that "the problematic relationship between those two groups had to be transcended in order to find true worship as revealed by Jesus."²³ From this, he concludes that Jesus is revealing that "human divisions cannot be ignored but neither can they be allowed to persist as obstacles."²⁴ Jesus allows for a way to transcend these obstacles in spirit and truth.

The Woman at the Well Type

Aside from the boundaries, the ways in which Jesus transcends culture can be seen in how this scene compares with the typical Jewish scene at a well. This type of scene was popular in Old Testament stories; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all met their future wives at a well and the patriarchs are even referenced in this exchange in Jacob's well.²⁵ The male will usually do or say something characteristic of his role; someone will draw the water and then the woman goes home to prepare for the male to meet the father.²⁶ Culpepper points out the differences in this episode from the typical type-scene.

In John...conventional elements are treated unconventionally; Jesus asks for water but apparently receives none. Dialogue rather than action carries the scene. Living water, of which Jesus is the source, rather than well water, to which the Samaritan woman has access becomes the central concern. And the woman is no marriageable maiden; she has had five husbands. Still, Jesus goes to her village, and she receives him as her Lord.²⁷

This scene is so drastically different from what the Jewish audience would expect from the meeting of a woman at a well. However, the result is Jesus finding a bride, not in the typical earthly sense, but in the sense that the church is the bride of Christ. Jesus' bride is not the well-

groomed or the righteous but instead the sinful and lost who come to believe in Jesus as Messiah. This is a beautiful picture of Jesus' gospel and ministry as he comes not "to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Through this interaction, the woman's shameful status as a woman without kin ties and accompanying females is cast aside. Instead, she becomes the basis for the belief in Jesus' by many in her community.

A Destination More Beautiful Than Imagined

Jesus transcends expectations not only in who he is and in his actions, but also in what he teaches. Jesus had already turned water into wine in Cana but now he contrasts the water of Jacob's well with the Living Water that he could provide.²⁸ In John 4:19-26, he teaches how this Living Water brings a new mode of worship. This worship is worshiping God in "spirit and truth."

First, it is important to recognize that Jesus' answer is something new and revolutionary. The Jews and Samaritans both have a place where they think worship should occur, Jerusalem and Gerizim. Jesus, however, champions neither location, but instead speaks of an hour that is coming and has now come when worship of God will not be tied to a place.²⁹ This change effectively deemphasizes the issue of who is right and wrong in the area of worship. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the comment of Jesus to worship in "spirit and truth" refers partially to the fact that true worship removes the social-religious distinctions of Jew and Samaritan or man and woman.³⁰ Fiorenza points out that in this gospel, there is a theme that Jesus' community is outside of the hate of the world and is therefore outside of the patriarchal power structure.³¹ This can be supported by this episode in which Jesus teaches on true worship with someone who is usually separated by both culture and gender. According to Wyckoff, this reveals the transcendent, non-exclusive nature of the true worship that the Father seeks.³² Wyckoff proposes, "True worship transcends all divisions brought about by ethnicity, geography, gender, religious tradition, past history or any other human condition."³³

In addition to bringing people together and transcending boundaries, it is also a completely new form of worship, which, without Jesus, is impossible. The word truth (ἀλήθεια) is used 25 times in John's Gospel and 20 times in his epistles and John describes Jesus as the revealer of truth and

the one who possesses the truth in its fullness.³⁴ John even refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. In this passage, ἀλήθεια becomes the very nature of the worshiper through this Spirit of Truth.³⁵ Through Christ, the revealer of truth, the worshiper can worship in the Spirit of Truth and in spirit and truth. Wyckoff claims that “worship in truth is in and through the divine reality revealed by Jesus, which believers are called to share in.”³⁶ In Ernst Haenchen’s commentary on the Fourth Gospel he proposes that “truth” (ἀλήθεια) concerns the reality of God, and worshiping in truth means worshiping in the fullness of Christ rather than worshiping in Jerusalem or Gerizim.³⁷

With this view of the word truth, it becomes evident that true worshippers worship in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. This heightened connection of Jesus with the Father reveals more of his divinity and authority as the Messiah. Only through experiencing truth fully, through Christ, can we truly worship. True worship is a result of knowing Christ. By experiencing all that Christ is and realizing how much greater he is than we could have imagined, the true worshiper comes to the Father. Worshiping in spirit and truth is thus a result and a response to the incarnation. Out of our knowledge, love, and awe of Jesus we worship. In true worship, we, like the woman, approach God in humility, ready to take what he gives us. In true worship, we, like Christ, give up all divisions and all delusions of power and instead embrace the truth. In true worship, we can come to love God with all of our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is in Christ that we find the Father.

Endnotes

- ¹ Eric John Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria (John 4:4-42): A Model for Cross Cultural Ministry," *BTB* 35 (2005): 89-98.
- ² Francis J. Moloney and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville, Minn.; Liturgical Press, 1998), 126-130.
- ³ Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language; an empirical placing of theological phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 196), 143-145.
- ⁴ Victor Matthews, "Conversation and Identity: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," *BTB* 40 (2010): 215-226.
- ⁵ Matthews, "Conversation," 224.
- ⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Nashville; Thomas Nelson, 1999), 60.
- ⁷ Matthews, "Conversation," 224.
- ⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (AB29; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 177-178.
- ⁹ Tom Thatcher, "Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel: Past, Present and Future," in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* (ed. T. Thatcher and S. D. Moore; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 25.
- ¹⁰ Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria," 94.
- ¹¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 136.
- ¹² Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 137.
- ¹³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 138.
- ¹⁴ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 127.
- ¹⁵ Matthews, "Conversation," 224.
- ¹⁶ Cullen Murphy, *The Word According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 136.
- ¹⁷ Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, 107-109.
- ¹⁸ Jean K. Kim, *Woman and Nation: An Intercontextual Reading of the Gospel of John from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 109.
- ¹⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 138.
- ²⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 327.

- ²¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 137.
- ²² Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 137.
- ²³ Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria," 94.
- ²⁴ Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria," 94.
- ²⁵ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 136.
- ²⁶ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 51-58.
- ²⁷ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 136.
- ²⁸ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 58-59.
- ²⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 61.
- ³⁰ Schu ssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 329.
- ³¹ Schu ssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 323.
- ³² Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria," 93.
- ³³ Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria," 94.
- ³⁴ Ceslas Spicq, "       ," *TLNT* 1:74.
- ³⁵ Krister Stendahl, "Truth," *IDB* 4:713-717
- ³⁶ Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria," 94.
- ³⁷ Haenchen, Ernst, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Hermeneia ; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 223.

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