

Chapter 11

THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA: HER CHARACTERIZATION, NARRATIVE, AND THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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I. Introduction

How often does one pick up a novel and find a disclaimer: 'Characters in this book are purely fictional and bear no relation to people in real life. When historical characters are involved the author has created scenes and conversations for which there is no evidence in current documentation.' Such disclaimers remind the reader that they are dealing with a text of fiction. Even though it may be an 'historical' novel, and the author has done research into the history of the person and the times, the overall aim of the book is to present an author's perspective on the events and people recorded. There is no claim for biographical or historical accuracy.

The authors of the Gospels provide no such disclaimer, but readers would do well to realize that the Gospels are a particular type of literature, and the authors' aims are not to reproduce historical 'facts' as we moderns might expect. The aims of the Fourth Gospel are clearly stated: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (20.30-31).¹

Having such an explicit goal the Gospel cannot be considered simply an artistic discourse but needs to be read as an 'ideological discourse that originated in a particular real-life context'.² The writer, a believer in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, has a particular view of events that took place during the life of Jesus, a point of view that is clearer now, in the post-resurrection time, than it was during the disciples' experience.³ In the post-resurrection

¹ English translations of the NT are my own unless otherwise indicated. The manuscript traditions allow for both 'you may believe' and 'you may continue to believe'. See the discussion in Bruce M. Metzger (ed.), *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 4th rev. edn, 1994), p. 219.

² Petri Merenlahi and Raimo Hakola, 'Reconceiving Narrative Criticism', in David Rhoads and Kari Syreani (eds), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (JSNTSup, 184; London: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 13-47 (17).

³ John makes this retrospective faith and perception explicit: 'When therefore he was

time, the author now shapes and writes a text to convey the post-Easter faith and perception of the community. This text, while based on memory and even eyewitness testimony (19.35), is not restricted to conveying events from a pre-Easter, partial-faith perspective, but the writer is now free to write of those events retrospectively, from his post-Easter faith.⁴ A narrative-critical approach to the text asks how a narrator uses 'setting, rhetoric, character and plot to persuade the reader to adopt his evaluative point of view'.⁵

In this essay on the Samaritan woman in John 4, I will make use of the insights of James Resseguie and those other narrative critics who ask questions about how a character serves the ideological 'point of view' of the writers. My interest is not simply about what type of character this woman is, but how her characterization works to contribute to the theological perspective of the Gospel. Shimon Bar-Effat writes that it is the characters 'who transmit the significance and values of the narrative to the readers'.⁶ Another writer, who also emphasizes the importance of considering characterization in relation to the ideological or theological purpose of the Gospel, is Petri Merenlahi, who writes:

Rather than static elements of design picked by a master author to fill a distinct literary or rhetorical purpose, they [the characters] are constantly being reshaped by distinct ideological dynamics. This ideologically attuned nature of character presents a challenge for any theory or model of characterization for the Gospel narrative . . . analysis of ideology should be an integral part of the analysis of the formal features of narrative.⁷

My interest in the woman of Samaria is not primarily on her developing perception of Jesus' identity or her faith journey. This has been the focus of a number of studies. My interest is why she is introduced into the narrative at this point? Is it important that the character is a *woman*? Is it important that she is a *Samaritan*? How does she, as a character, contribute to the plot of the Gospel? How does she, as a character, relate to the ideological point of view of the evangelist?

raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken' (2.22).

⁴ On reading the Gospel of John from a post-Easter perspective see the work of Franz Mussner: *Die johanneische Sehweise und die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (Quaestiones Disputatae, 28; Freiburg: Herder, 1965), and Christina Hoegen-Rohls, *Der nachsterfliche Johannes: Die Abschiedsreden als hermeneutischer Schlüssel zum vierten Evangelium* (WUNT, 117/84; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996).

⁵ James L. Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John* (BIS, 56; Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 2.

⁶ Shimon Bar-Effat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup, 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), p. 47.

⁷ Petri Merenlahi, 'Characters in the Making: Individuality and Ideology in the Gospels', in Rhoads and Syreem (eds), *Characterization in the Gospels*, pp. 49–72 (50).

II. The Narrative Context

Before Jesus arrives in Samaria, the Gospel has already set the scene for this encounter in two ways; first, by the portrayal of John the Baptist, and second in what the Gospel has already claimed about Jesus' identity. The role and identity of both of these male characters are critical for assessing the role of the Samaritan woman.

a. John

In the Prologue John is described as 'one who came for testimony, to bear witness to the light' (1.7). John speaks of himself as a voice, 'crying in the wilderness' (1.23), then, immediately before Jesus' journey through Samaria, John describes himself as 'the friend of the bridegroom' (3.29). I have dealt with John's characterization as 'friend of the bridegroom' elsewhere and so here I will summarize the salient features.⁸

The friend of the bridegroom, or deputy, was the one who went with the father of the prospective groom to begin the negotiations about a future marriage. Because of the significance of this event for both families, and the possible loss of face if the negotiations are not successful,⁹ both fathers, of the bride and the groom, make use of a deputy. The friend/deputy therefore has the important task of being the voice of the bridegroom and bearing witness to his qualities so that a betrothal may eventuate. His negotiations play a crucial part in the father of the bride granting consent. It is for this reason that there were ancient laws forbidding the woman's father, should he refuse the request of the intended bridegroom, to give his daughter to the bridegroom's friend.

If a son-in-law [intended] has entered the house of his [intended] father-in-law and has performed the betrothal gift, and afterwards they have made him go out and have given his wife to his companion – they shall present to him the betrothal gift which he has brought and that wife may not marry his companion.¹⁰

The term companion in this passage refers to the formal role called today in Western cultures, 'the best man', or in the Fourth Gospel, the 'friend of the bridegroom' (3.29). It is the deputies who negotiate the amount of dowry, the down-payment at the time of betrothal, the amount to be received at the time of the wedding and the likely date of the wedding.¹¹ When all such contractual

⁸ See Mary L. Coloe, 'Witness and Friend: Symbolism associated with John the Baptist', in Jörg Frey, Jan van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann (eds), *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes and Theology of Figurative Language* (WUNT, 200), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 319–32; *ibid.*, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007), esp. ch. 2.

⁹ On the potential honour and shame involved in marriage negotiations see Frank P. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 104.

¹⁰ Adrian van Selms, 'The Best Man and Bride: From Sumar to St. John', *JNES* 9 (1950), pp. 65–70.

¹¹ Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), p. 127.

matters have been arranged, then the prospective fathers-in-law rejoin the discussion to seal this arrangement in some way. On the day of the wedding the friend/deputy may be the one to lead the bride from her father's house to the house of the groom's father, where she will wait until after the festivities.¹² The friend/deputy will then conduct the groom into the bridal chamber, where the couple may see each other for the first time. The friend/deputy will wait outside to hear the sounds of joy as the couple meet each other. The deputy may then be the one to bring out the bridal sheet the following morning to bear witness to the bride's virginity.¹³

In the Fourth Gospel, John acts as this deputy/friend with respect to Jesus. He identifies himself as 'a witness' and 'the voice' (1.15, 23); he is the one to direct disciples to Jesus, and the narrator indicates that this took place about the tenth hour (1.36-39), which is the traditional time for a wedding, in the late afternoon.¹⁴ Following the gathering of the first disciples, Jesus then attends a wedding where the wine runs out (2.1-12). Miraculously, Jesus intervenes to produce high-quality wine. What is significant is the action of the chief steward, who goes to the *bridegroom* and congratulates him on saving the best wine until later (2.10). The words of the steward indicate that it was the role of the bridegroom to provide the wine for the wedding, but in this case the wine was provided by Jesus. In this subtle, symbolic way the evangelist points to an aspect of Jesus' identity and role: he is the bridegroom. Jesus' identity as the bridegroom will later be confirmed by John (3.29).

There are textual indicators that this wedding took place within the festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost) – the festival that celebrates the making of the Covenant at Sinai.¹⁵ In the Old Testament the covenant between God and Israel was frequently described using the image of betrothal and marriage (Jer. 31.32; Ezek. 16.8-14; Isa. 54.5; Hos. 2.7; Joel 1.8). Here, at Cana, Jesus is identified as the presence of the covenantal God, the bridegroom of Israel. Immediately after the wedding he takes his disciples, his mother, and his brothers and sisters into the temple (2.13) which he names as 'My Father's House' (2.15). According to social customs, the father's house is where the

12 M.-Émile Boismard, 'L'ami de l'Époux (Jo., 111, 29)', in A. Barneq, et al. (eds), *À la rencontre de Dieu: Mémoires Albert Gelin* (Bibliothèque de la Faculté catholique de théologie de Lyon, 8; Le Puy: Xavier Mappus, 1961), pp. 289–95 (292).

13 Joachim Jeremias, 'νυμφῆν, νυμφίος', *TDNT*, Vol. 4, pp. 1099–106 (1101).

14 H. Clay Trumbull, *Shades in Oriental Social Life* (Philadelphia: The Sunday School Times Co., 1894), pp. 39–44; Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of Christ* (trans. A. H. Holmsten; New York: Armstrong and Son, 1885), p. 163.

15 The repetition of the phrase 'the next day', the statement that the episode at Cana took place 'on the third day', and the disciples' recognizing Jesus' 'glory' are some of the indicators that recall the initial Sinai covenant described in Exodus 19. Here, the people of Israel are told to get ready for 'the third day', when God's glory will be revealed on Sinai. This event was celebrated in the Festival of Weeks, Pentecost. Francis Moloney first noted the link between Cana and Pentecost and I have developed this further. See Francis J. Moloney, *John* (SP, 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), p. 50; Mary L. Coloe, 'The Johannine Pentecost: John 1.19–2.12', *AsBtR* 55 (2007), pp. 41–56.

bridegroom and bride will establish their own household. The next episode with Nicodemus speaks of birth, and rebirth (3.3-5). The deep structure of the narrative has thus far appropriated the customs of a marriage from betrothal (1.36-39), to wedding (2.1-12), to setting up a household in the Father's house (2.13), to birth (3.3, 5). This process is then concluded in the words of John, who explicitly identifies himself as the friend of the bridegroom (3.29). John introduces and concludes this narrative sequence, which has so far focused on Jewish characters. In chapter 4, the narrator moves beyond the world of Orthodox Judaism into the world of Samaria.

b. Jesus the Bridegroom and Temple

When Jesus enters Samaria he sits upon a well that is clearly associated with Jacob. It is called Jacob's well (4.6). The village of Sychar is near the field Jacob gave to Joseph (4.5). According to the Samaritan woman, Jacob is the one who gave the well to the people (4.12). The narrator indicates the time – 'about the sixth hour' (4.6). Then a woman of Samaria approaches (4.7). The scene is set. The characters are now present. What modern readers frequently miss are the many resonances of this description with other Old Testament well-meetings, which always lead to betrothal and marriage.¹⁶ Abraham's servant met Rebecca, the future wife of Isaac, at a well (Gen. 24.10-33); Moses met his wife at a well (Exod. 2.15-22), and, most importantly for this episode, Jacob met Rachel at a well, in the middle of the day (Gen. 29.1-14), the same time indicated in the Johannine narrative. The many references to Jacob, and the apparently inconsequential piece of information about the time of the meeting between Jesus and the woman,¹⁷ are all clues provided by the narrator to alert the reader to the deeper symbolism and portent of this episode.

A second important aspect of the narrative so far is the use of tabernacle and temple symbolism to point to the identity of Jesus. In John 1.14, the reader hears first-hand testimony of the Word taking flesh and dwelling among us. The Greek text uses the verb σκηνώω, which could more literally be translated as 'pitched his tent' or 'tabernacled' among us, since the noun form, σκηνή, is the word used in the OT to speak of the Tent associated with the Ark of the Covenant, and that, in later traditions, is called the tabernacle.¹⁸

¹⁶ Robert Alter calls such meetings between a man and woman at a well a 'biblical type-scene'. See his discussion on the characteristics of such scenes in Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 51-2.

¹⁷ Juan Leal offers four criteria that can indicate when the narrative has a symbolic as well as a literal meaning: (i) inconsequential details that seem to play no part in the narrative, (ii) a discourse set within the narrative of an event such that they are mutually illuminating, (iii) when the evangelist accentuates the importance of a person who has no significant role in context, and (iv) when later liturgical and Christian expressions are used. See Juan Leal, 'El simbolismo histórico del IV Evangelio', *EstBib* 19 (1960), pp. 329-48 (344-6).

¹⁸ Wilhelm Michaelis, *οκνηή*, *TDNT*, Vol. 7, pp. 368-94 (369-71). On the Ark, Tent of Meeting and Tabernacle traditions see Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), esp. ch. 3; Craig R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and*

Then in John 2 the narrator identifies Jesus as the temple: 'He spoke of the temple of his body' (2.21). Jesus is now the place in history where God dwells. The identification of Jesus as the temple of God's presence sheds light on the initial discussion between the Samaritan woman and Jesus.

In the first part of this episode Jesus and the woman enter into a dialogue about water. While the woman speaks of natural water, Jesus begins to speak of living water.¹⁹ This image only makes sense in the light of Jewish traditions that associate the temple with the source of all the waters of creation. According to these traditions, the temple rests upon the fissure above the great abyss which is the source of the creative waters in Genesis 2.8.²⁰ After the great flood, the rock of Noah's altar sealed up the waters of the abyss, making this altar the foundation stone of a new creation. Jewish traditions link the altar of Noah with the foundation stone in the Holy of Holies that once supported the Ark of the Covenant.²¹ According to this mythology the temple lies upon the wellspring of the earth, the centre and source of creation.²² 'The waters under the earth were all gathered beneath the temple, they believed, and it was necessary to ensure that sufficient was released to ensure fertility, flood.'²³

In verse 6, the evangelist uses the preposition *èrî* and most texts translate this word as 'beside', and so place Jesus on the ground beside the well. Possibly translators have in mind an image of above-ground wells, walled around with bricks and having a windlass to lower and raise a bucket. But this is both an incorrect image of a typical Middle-Eastern well, and a poor translation of the preposition *èrî* which, with the dative, usually means 'on' or 'upon'.²⁴ In the Middle East, wells were simply holes in the ground with a cover such as a large rock to protect them. This type of well is described in the meeting of Jacob and Rachel, where Jacob rolls the stone from the mouth of the well (Gen. 29.10). In John 4, the evangelist depicts Jesus sitting *on* (*èrî*) the well, presumably on the rock slab that lies across the well opening.²⁵ Just as the temple, in Jewish mythology, rests on the foundation stone above the waters of the great abyss, now Jesus, the new temple, rests upon the rock over the waters

the New Testament (CBQMS, 22; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989).

¹⁹ For further discussion on the symbolism of 'living waters' and the possible reference to the Spirit or revelation see Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, pp. 93-6. Here I argue that the strongest OT allusion is to Ezekiel 47 and the description of the life-giving waters flowing from the Temple.

²⁰ Frédéric Mauns, *Le symbole eau-esprit dans le judaïsme ancien* (SBFA, 19; Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1983), p. 285.

²¹ Frédéric Mauns, *L'Évangile de Jean à la lumière du judaïsme* (SBFA, 33; Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1991), p. 135.

²² In Ezekiel, Jerusalem is called the Earth's navel, reflecting this mythological image (Ezek. 5.5; 38.12).

²³ Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 18.

²⁴ Wilhelm Köhler, 'èrî', *EDNT*, Vol. 2, pp. 21-3.

²⁵ Brown notes that Jesus was sitting 'literally on the well'; see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB, 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 169.

of Jacob's well. It is because Jesus is now the living Temple of God's presence that he is able to provide a type of living water that can well up to *eternity life*.

III. The Woman of Samaria

a. Water and Wells

In the opening dialogue, there is a significant shift in the woman's perception of Jesus, indicating a growing receptivity and openness to his words. She begins the meeting with some hostility, responding to Jesus' request for water by pointing to the long and traditional animosity between Jews and Samaritans and the further breaking of conventions of a man speaking to a woman who is not his wife: 'How is it that you, a Judean (λουδαῖος) ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (4.9).²⁶ In terms of the theology that will develop in this scene, her self-designation as 'a woman of Samaria' is critical, as is her description of Jesus as a 'Judean'. These two designations, Samaria and Judea, recall that time in Israel's history when the one Kingdom of David and Solomon was divided into two: the Northern Kingdom (Israel), with its capital in Samaria, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) with its capital in Jerusalem. Within the land of Palestine, the usual self-designation of a person in the southern region uses the term ἰσραηλῖτης, translating the frequent Hebrew appellation 'children of Israel'.²⁷ So Nicodemus is called a teacher of Israel (3.10) and Jesus calls Nathanael an Israelite (1.47). But the Samaritans considered themselves to be the descendants of two Northern tribes who survived the Assyrian conquest and deportation in 722 BCE and thus believed themselves to be true Israelites.²⁸

In calling Jesus a λουδαῖος the woman is speaking from within a Samaritan context, describing Jesus as a Judean who is outside the true (i.e. Samaritan) Israel. Here at the well of Jacob, who was renamed Israel (Gen. 32.28; 35.10), the initial hostility of the woman plays out the tragic division of David's Kingdom, which ultimately led to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom (Israel), the deportation of many of its inhabitants, the resettling of foreigners and the subsequent hostility between the two regions of Samaria and Judea.

²⁶ How to translate the term λουδαῖος is a vexed question in Johannine scholarship. At times it appears to be neutral, simply a description of those following the religious customs and laws of Moses (e.g. 2.6; 5.1; 6.4); while most times it is used negatively to portray those characters in the text who stand against Jesus and his claims (e.g. 2.20; 5.16; 7.1). In some cases it could simply designate those people from the geographical region of Judaea (e.g. 11.19, 31, 36). At this point in 4.9 I believe the term has this geographical sense to make the contrast between a Judean man and a Samaritan woman; it is also the only time in the Gospel that Jesus is called a λουδαῖος. See also the discussion in Malcolm Lowe, 'Who were the IOUDΑΙΟΙ?', *NovT* 18 (1976), pp. 101–30 (102–3). Many of the positive senses of the term could in fact have this same geographical sense, even when this is associated with believing λουδαῖοι (e.g. 11.45; 12.9, 11), since these episodes occur in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

²⁷ Walter Gutberod, 'λουδαῖος, ἰσραηλῖτης, Ἐβραῖος in Greek Hellenistic Literature', *TDMT*, Vol. 3, pp. 369–91 (385).

²⁸ Robert T. Anderson, 'Samaritans', *ABD*, Vol. 7, pp. 940–7 (941).

The next time she speaks she uses a more polite form of address: 'Sir (κύριε)' (4.11). While still ignorant of his identity and perplexed by his statement about being able to offer her living water, the woman does not disengage from the conversation. In John 2, the Jewish authorities in the temple scoffed at Jesus' claim to rebuild the temple in three days by throwing his own words back at him (2.20).²⁹ They completely reject his claim. Nicodemus, in his encounter with Jesus, cannot move beyond what he knows and says to Jesus, 'this is not possible' (ἡὺ δύνάτοισι, 3.4), then concludes the discussion with a rhetorical final statement, 'How is this possible?' (3.9). By contrast, the woman responds to Jesus' strange words about 'living water' with a question that enables further dialogue. Rightly, she points out that Jesus has no bucket and that the well is deep, so she asks from where he can get this water (4.11). At this point she begins to compare Jesus with the eponymous father of the Northern Kingdom, Jacob/Israel: 'Are you greater than our father Jacob?' (4.12).

To follow the implications of the woman's question – Are you greater than our father Jacob? – it is necessary to know the Targumic traditions surrounding Jacob.³⁰ In the Genesis account, Jacob simply lifts the stone, and waters the flock. 'Now when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother' (Gen. 29.10).³¹

When this narrative was translated into Aramaic for use in the synagogues, the Targumist did not simply make a translation of the text but rendered it: 'When our father Jacob raised the stone from above the mouth of the well, the well overflowed and came up to its mouth, and was overflowing for twenty years – all the days that he dwelt in Haran' (*Tg. Neof.* Gen. 29.10).

The Targums elaborated on Jacob's action so that when Jacob lifts the stone, water gushes up to the mouth of the well and then overflows for 20 years. Through this miracle Jacob does not need a bucket; not only at this meeting but for the whole time he dwelt in Haran. The Targumic tradition lies behind the woman's question about Jesus' lack of a bucket, and the possibility that he might be able to do something even greater than Jacob. This woman of Samaria knows her people's history and scriptures.

In response to her question 'Are you greater than our father Jacob?' Jesus speaks of water welling up not just for 20 years but for eternity life (ζῶσιν αἰώνιον).³²

²⁹ Francis J. Moloney, 'From Cana to Cana (Jn. 2.1–4.54) and the Fourth Evangelist's Concept of Correct (and Incorrect) Faith', *Sac 40* (1978), pp. 817–43 (831).

³⁰ The Targums were Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scripture for use in the synagogues within Palestine. While their dating is problematic since some parts of the text appear to be influenced by the New Testament and are therefore later than the first century, the texts do reflect a liturgical origin, making it possible that these texts pre-date the Gospel. See the discussion in Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983), pp. 74–88, especially his conclusion on p. 85.

³¹ English translations of the OT are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

³² Most editions translate ζῶσιν αἰώνιον as eternal life. This seems to emphasize the temporal sense of life continuing forever. I prefer to translate ζῶσιν αἰώνιον as eternity life to

He is far superior to Jacob. The woman now undergoes a complete change of attitude as she asks for this water. 'Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw' (4.15). The roles have now reversed. The dialogue began with Jesus asking her for water; now she asks for the water that he can give.

b. *Husbands*

The reader who is unaware of the deeper narrative structure, the clues provided by the narrator in the previous chapters and the setting of this scene at Jacob's well, may be caught by surprise with the shift of focus from water to husbands. But knowing Jesus' identity as the covenantal husband of Israel and the biblical typology of the well as a meeting place for a betrothal, we can understand the statement by Jesus, 'Go call your husband?' (4.16) as the primary purpose of this encounter.

The woman responds that she currently has no husband (4.17). Jesus' approves her answer and then provides information that she has in fact had six prior relationships – five previous husbands and the man she now has who is not her husband (4.18). At these words, those who treat this encounter in a literal, historical manner will miss the point of the Johannine symbolism within this exchange.³³ Some see in the reference to the five husbands an allegorical presentation of the former history of the Samaritans, alluding to the five foreign nations and their gods who were brought into Samaria following the Assyrian conquest in 721 BCE (2 Kgs 17.19-34).³⁴ This analogy breaks down however, since there are seven imported gods which were worshipped alongside YHWH (2 Kgs 17.30-32). A further consideration is that 'The Evangelist does not use allegorization, but rather symbolic representation as his main literary device.'³⁵

In the prophetic literature, the infidelity of Samaria, and their worshipping of foreign gods (*ba'alim*), is depicted as adultery (Hos. 2.2-5), where there is a play on the double meaning of the word *ba'al*, which means both a pagan god and husband in Hebrew.³⁶ Israel/Samaria's true husband is God. The prophet

stress that the life Jesus offers is a different quality of life; it is a participation in the life of God in eternity.

³³ Those who take this exchange literally explain its relevance as an indicator of Jesus' prophetic knowledge. See, for example, Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972), p. 184; Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G. R. Beasley Murray, et al.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), p. 187; Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1, p. 171.

³⁴ So Manns, *L'Evangile de Jean à la lumière du judaïsme*, p. 135; Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (F. N. Davis [ed.]; London: Faber & Faber, 1947), p. 243; Birger Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-linguistic Analysis of John 2.1-11 and 4.1-42* (COBNT, 6; Lund: Gleerup, 1974), p. 186.

³⁵ Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, p. 188, n. 3.

³⁶ Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1, p. 171.

Hosea, speaking to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, uses marital imagery to call Israel to fidelity to the covenant. Hosea speaks of Israel being led out into the wilderness again, and there entering again into a betrothal (Hos. 2:14-15). 'Jesus' declaration that Samaria "has no husband" is a classic prophetic denunciation of false worship.³⁷ The five previous husbands plus her current one give a total of six, which symbolically indicates the inadequacy of Samaritan worship just as at the wedding in Cana, in a Jewish context, the six jars of water symbolized the lack of perfection of Jewish rituals. Jesus, the divine Bridegroom of Israel, now stands before her.³⁸ How will this woman respond?

Although a modern reader, not familiar with Israel's traditions and scriptures, finds the dialogue difficult to follow, the Samaritan woman emerges as a perfect dialogue partner with Jesus. She is able to follow the deeper, symbolic logic of this encounter. She knows the prophetic tradition and the use of marital language to speak of Israel's relationship with God. She realizes that at the heart of this dialogue is the question of worship. As the prophet Elijah declared to the Samaritans during the reign of Ahab, 'If YHWH is God, follow him; but if Ba' al, then follow him' (1 Kgs 18:21). She now perceives that Jesus, also, might be a prophet (4.19) and so asks where is the right place of worship. Where can we encounter the God of the covenant, the true bridegroom of Israel? She asks about the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and about the Samaritan place of worship on Mount Gerizim (4.20). Jesus replies that both are inadequate – neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will one encounter God (4.21). Since God is Spirit, the place to meet God can only be 'in Spirit': 'But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (4.23). Jesus' answer indicates that this place of worship is a present reality. Because Jesus is the living temple of God, true worship can only happen in him.

Jesus' words about worship 'in spirit' lead the woman to speak of the Messiah, since the outpouring of the Spirit is associated with the end-time and the messianic days.³⁹ Because Jesus speaks of the Spirit as a present reality

³⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 191.

³⁸ 'Such implications are realistic options here. In the language of the Gospel, John the Baptist has already acknowledged that Jesus, who has the bride, is the bridegroom (3.29). Jesus, moreover, has attended a marriage feast (2.1-11) where he replaced the waters of purification with his own superb wine.' See Jerome H. Neyrey, 'Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4.10-26', *CHQ* 41 (1979), pp. 419-37 (426). Within Semitic traditions the number seven took on cosmic and religious significance to represent a state of completion or perfection and by analogy six represented less than perfect. 'The number seven thus bears the character of totality, i.e., of the totality desired and ordained by God.' See Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, 'ἑπτὰ', in *TDNT*, Vol. 2, pp. 627-35 (628).

³⁹ In the 'end times' the Messiah will be endowed with the Spirit (Isa. 11.2; 28.5; 42.1; 61.1) as will the people (Ezek. 36.27; 37.14; 39.29; Joel 3.1, 2; Isa. 32.15; Zech. 12.10; Hag. 2.5). The intertestamental literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls also provide evidence of this expectation (*Pss. Sol.* 17.37; 18.7; *I En.* 49.3; 62.2; *T. Levi* 18.7; *T. Jud.* 24.2; 1QS Col. iv: 20-23; 1QS Sb 5.24, 25; 11QMelch 18). See F. W. Horn, 'Holy Spirit', *ABD*, Vol. 3, p. 265.

and he has revealed things to her about the true worship of God, she wonders if Jesus could be 'a Messiah' (4.25). According to Josephus (*Ant.* xviii, 85-8) the Samaritans, like the Jews, had messianic hopes, but the Samaritan hopes centred on a 'prophet-like-Moses' figure rather than a Davidic king. According to a later document, the *Memar Margah*, this figure was to be a revealer who would uncover the hidden sanctuary on Mount Gerizim where the priest Eli had hidden the Ark of the Covenant.⁴⁰ 'The woman said to him, "I know that [a] Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things"' (4.25). Jesus responds in words that far surpass any messianic expectations. He reveals himself as 'I AM' (4.26), thus naming himself in the same way that Israel's God was named in the scriptures (EYCS Eἶμι – LXX). The woman of Samaria is the first in the Gospel to receive this revelation.

With the return of the disciples, the woman leaves her water pot (4.28) and returns to the village, inviting the villagers to 'Come, see . . .' (4.29). There is speculation about the woman leaving her water jar behind. Some consider it a sign of discipleship. Although the language of leaving everything behind is more a Synoptic image, I think this is an accurate interpretation, but it is discipleship in Johannine terms. Earlier in the conversation she had asked for the water that Jesus offered so that she would not need to come to the well (v. 15); in leaving her jar, I suggest that she has received this gift of living water and so no longer needs her water jar. It is also significant that her invitation to the villagers is similar to Jesus' invitation to John's disciples, and Philip's invitation to Nathanael: 'Come, see . . .' (4.29; cf. 1.39, 46). Just as the first disciples of Jesus went and invited others to him, now this woman-disciple invites the people of her village to him. She speaks of Jesus first as a revealer, and then poses a question, 'Perhaps he is the Christ/Messiah?'⁴¹ In response to her words, the Samaritans go and invite Jesus to dwell with them and he dwells there for two days (4.40).

⁴⁰ The *Memar Margah* is dated to the fourth century and its late dating makes it difficult to make precise claims about Samaritan beliefs in the first century. The anarthrous use of the term Messiah and the woman's emphasis that the Messiah 'will reveal all things' (4.25) suggest that this tradition about the *Tahob* does influence first-century Samaritan traditions. See Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1, p. 72; R. Lowe, "'Salvation" is Not of the Jews', *JTS* 32 (1981), pp. 341-68 (342); Koester, *The Dwelling of God*, pp. 55-9.

⁴¹ While some interpret her question as a form of doubt (e.g. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1, p. 173; Moloney, *John*, p. 131; and Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, Vol. 1 [trans. K. Smyth, et al.]; HTCNT; London: Burns & Oates, 1968-82], p. 444), I believe it is a rhetorical device allowing the villagers to hear her words as an invitation and to make their own journey towards faith in Jesus. Teresa Okure suggests that her comments are 'a veiled confession couched in the form of a question in order to appeal to the personal judgment of the Samaritans, get them to reflect, and so arouse their interest in Jesus'. See Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4.1-42* (WUNT, II/32; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988), p. 174. Also, a woman in that cultural context is not considered to be a reliable witness. On the issue of the role of women in Jewish legal testimony see R. G. Maccini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (JSNTSup. 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), esp. ch. 3.

Through this intense theological dialogue, the woman has been able to shift her perspective, to remain open and receptive to Jesus' words, to continue to ask questions for further understanding, and to follow the theological thinking that maintains a logical thread throughout the dialogue which flows from water, to husbands, to worship, to messianic expectations. Through this woman of Samaria, her people welcome Jesus and come to acknowledge him as 'the saviour of the world' (4.42).

IV. The Woman's Characterization and its Narrative Significance

At the beginning of this essay I expressed my indebtedness to the narrative studies of Petri Merenlahti and James Resseguie, and I noted the words of Shimon Bar-Efrat on the importance of the characters for understanding the ideological purpose of a narrative: it is the characters 'who transmit the significance and values of the narrative to the readers'.⁴² Following the discussion of my approach I began with the consideration of John and Jesus across the first three chapters, and the way the narrative develops the identity of Jesus through the symbolism of the bridegroom and the temple. These first chapters are situated within the world of Judaism. In chapter 4 the narrative moves beyond the world of Orthodox Judaism into the geographical location of Samaria with its complex historical and theological alienation from Judaism. In the above discussion of the episode in Samaria the two symbols of temple and bridegroom have continued to play an important part in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman. These symbols of Jesus' identity are part of the deeper narrative structure that enables a discerning reader to follow the logic of this complex passage. In this final section I return to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay about how this episode, and in particular, how the characterization of the woman of Samaria, furthers the plot and the ideological purpose of the Gospel.

A passage from Ezekiel can help elucidate the deeper significance of the meeting between Jesus, a man from Judaea, and the unnamed woman of Samaria. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is told:

Son of man, take a stick and write on it, 'For Judah, and the children of Israel associated with him'; then take another stick and write upon it, 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him'; and join them together into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. (Ezek. 37.16-17)

Following this action, the prophetic sign is explained:

Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all sides, and bring them to their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, upon the mountains of Israel; and one king

42 Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 47.

shall be king over them all; and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. (Ezek. 37.21-22)

The passage from Ezekiel, addressed to the Exiles in Babylon, looks to a future when the divided kingdoms will be joined and Israel will be reconstituted as one. One stick is named 'for Joseph (the stick of Ephraim)'. After the Exodus, when the Israelites move into the land of Canaan, Moses is reputed to have divided the land among the 12 ancient tribes; in this division the tribe of Levi was not allocated a portion; instead the tribe of Joseph was allocated a double settlement named after his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Josh. 14.3-4). The Samaritans consider themselves to be the direct descendants of these two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh.⁴³ At the time, when Judah and Israel are reunited, then the promise is made that the covenant will be renewed: 'I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God' (Ezek. 37.23).

The episode by the well of Jacob symbolically presents the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophetic action. Jesus, a man from Judaea, has come to a well, which was a typical meeting place for a betrothal; and the narrative has already established Jesus' identity as a 'bridegroom'. With strong echoes of the meeting with Jacob and Rachel,⁴⁴ Jesus meets a woman of Samaria and in this meeting he reveals himself as one 'greater than our father Jacob'. Without needing a bucket, Jesus is able to offer the woman waters welling up to eternity life. When the woman responds positively to his offer, the conversation moves to speak of her husbands. At this point it becomes clear that that woman has been in six relationships prior to meeting Jesus; this number suggests both the inadequacy of these prior relationships and the arrival of the 'seventh' bridegroom – Jesus. The symbolism of marriage, which runs through this entire encounter, recalls the OT covenant relationship between God and Israel, which was frequently likened to a marriage. In this 'betrothal-type' meeting between a Judean man and a Samaritan woman, Judah and Samaria are once again united into one covenant people of God.

The dialogue then shifts to speak of the right place of worship and the necessity to worship 'in Spirit'. The mention of the Spirit leads the woman to consider if Jesus could be the Messiah associated with the end-time outpouring of the Spirit and the one who, according to Samaritan traditions, would reveal the hidden sanctuary.

Once again, the passage from Ezekiel 37 provides the theological background to the flow of this dialogue. In Ezekiel, when the two kingdoms are once again united then God will dwell with them.

⁴³ Anderson, 'Samaritans', p. 941.

⁴⁴ Jesus meets the woman at the sixth hour, the same time of Jacob's meeting with Rachel; also Jacob is explicitly named a number of times in this encounter and the woman compares Jesus to Jacob (4.12).

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My dwelling place (κατοικησούσις) shall be with them;⁴⁵ and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Ezek. 37.26-27)

In the final scene with the Samaritan villagers, Jesus is present to them as the covenant God (Ἐγὼς Εἰμι), the bridegroom of Israel, and the temple, the dwelling place of God. When the Samaritans come to Jesus we are told 'they asked him to dwell (μεῖνω) with them; and he dwelt (ἐμεῖωεν) there two days' (4.40). In the Last Discourse the verb 'to dwell (μεῖνω)' takes on a rich theological meaning and this verb is used to describe the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, Spirit and believer. The rich theology of divine/human intimacy, which is the basis for the logic across these final chapters (esp. 14.1-15.17) is sustained by this verb 'to dwell'. In looking at the many places where this word is employed across the entire Gospel, Klaus Scholtssek identifies only six places where μεῖνω is used in a local sense meaning 'stay' (2.12; 4.40; 7.9; 10.40; 11.6; 19.31) compared to 32 times in a theological sense.⁴⁶ Although Scholtssek considers its use in 4.40 to have a neutral sense, given the symbolism of the entire passage, particularly the temple and marital symbolism, and in the light of Ezekiel 37, I would add 4.40 to the list of places where 'dwell' has a rich theological sense. Within this covenant-temple symbolic context, the 'two days' may allude to the glory cloud that hovered over the tabernacle during the time of Israel's wandering in the Sinai wilderness.⁴⁷

The entire chapter is a symbolic enactment of the words of Ezekiel—Samaria and Judaea are joined as one covenant people and God's temple dwells in their midst. For these prophetic words to be fulfilled the woman of Samaria is essential for the narrative plot. The marital symbolism can only be evoked by the meeting between a *man* and a *woman* at the well. The unification of the divided kingdoms can only be evoked if the encounter is between a *Judaean* and a *Samaritan*. The Samaritan woman is thus an essential character at this

⁴⁵ The term used to speak of God's dwelling place (κατοικησούσις) is related to the verb οἰκνύω, which is the verb used in the Fourth Gospel to describe the flesh-taking of the Word in John 1.14: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt (ἐοικτύωσεν) among us.'

⁴⁶ See Klaus Scholtssek, *In Ihm Sein and Bleiben: Die Sprache der Immanenz in den Johanneseischen Schriften* (Herder's Biblical Studies, 21; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), pp. 155-6. For the theological sense he identifies: 1.32, 33, 38, 39², 3.36; 5.38; 6.27, 56; 8.31, 35², 9.41; 12.24, 34, 46; 14.10, 17, 25; 15.4³, 5, 6, 7², 9, 10², 16; 21.22, 23. I would also add the use of μωοσι (14.2) and μωοσι (14.23). On the theological sense of the verb 'to dwell', see also the articles by Dorothy A. Lee, 'Abiding in the Fourth Gospel: A Case-study in Feminist Biblical Theology', *Pac* 10 (1997), pp. 123-36, and Ignace de la Potterie, 'Le verbe «demourer» dans la mystique johannique', *NRT* 117 (1995), pp. 843-59.

⁴⁷ 'And sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning; and when the cloud was taken up in the morning, they set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud was taken up they set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out; but when it was taken up they set out' (Num. 9.21-22).

point in the narrative to convey the ideological point of view of the evangelist. In the first three chapters Jesus came as the bridegroom/temple for the Jews. In chapter 4 he comes to those beyond Judaism.

Here in Samaria Jesus is recognized not simply in terms of Jewish or Samaritan messianic hopes but in terms of his divine purpose for all people: 'God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the *world* might be saved through him' (3.17). The Samaritans come to believe that he is 'the saviour of the world' (4.42). Such faith is the aim of the Gospel's ideological discourse (20.30-31), and such faith is only possible because of the openness, theological insight and words of this woman of Samaria (cf. 4.42).

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Edited by

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B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY
2013