

## Rethinking the Woman at the Well in John 4

John 4.4-42 relates Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman by the well at Sychar. Most sermons and commentaries on the passage will explain that the woman is an outcast, ostracised because of her sinful life, and so is at the well at midday because she is avoiding the other women in her community. This interpretation forms 'the majority view'.

I believe that this interpretation cannot be justified. There are elements within the account which do not tally with this view and there are other explanations which seem to me to make more sense of the whole passage. Four key arguments are normally used to support the view that the woman is immoral and an outcast. In the next section, I present them in the order in which they appear in John 4, but also (in my view, based on how they appear in various commentaries and other books) in order of decreasing strength and importance. Further sections will present the counter-arguments and the final section will highlight further evidence within the text which presents a rather more positive view of the woman.

### The arguments for the traditional view

**1. Her timing.** From John 4.6-7, the woman appears to be coming to the well to draw water on her own, at 'the sixth hour' (ESV). Other translations, such as the NIV and NRSV try to clarify this for a modern audience by stating that 'It was about noon' (as does an ESV footnote). The argument is that nobody would willingly choose to draw water, and then carry it home, at the hottest part of the day. Commentators conclude that the woman must have been there at that time to avoid contact with her community and so must have been an outcast due to her immoral lifestyle. Others add that because of this she may also have been considered ritually unclean.

**2. Her marital status.** Jesus discloses his knowledge of the woman's past by telling her that she has had five husbands and that the man she now has is not her husband (John 4.18). Commentators usually see this as the sign of a sinful or immoral life. As one example, Ben Witherington III maintains that 'In the context of Judaism it was not the custom to have more than three marriages in a lifetime — legally, any number might be admissible, but morally more than three would be suspect'.<sup>1</sup> So the woman is deemed 'suspect' for having been married to five husbands, a legal but perhaps an unusual situation. The man she was currently with was not her husband for which Witherington calls her 'immoral' and 'sinful', also describing her as a 'known harlot' and a 'woman of ill repute'. Witherington's condemnation of the woman in these terms is by no means the harshest found in the commentators. Other sources have described her as 'a prostitute', 'a tramp', 'a five-time loser', 'lascivious', 'carnal' and more.

**3. Her change of topic.** Once Jesus has stated his knowledge of her past and current marital status, adding 'What you have said is true', the woman changed the topic from her personal life to a theological issue of contention between Samaritans and Jews: where worship should take place. This is proposed as further evidence that the woman was embarrassed by discussion of her past life due to its immorality and so she deliberately changed the subject, being unwilling to discuss her relationships further and desperate to find another topic of conversation.

**4. Her testimony.** Finally, the woman's own words to her fellow townspeople 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?' (John 4.29) are said 'to speak openly of her own notoriety'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.60.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.61.

Various authors have started to question whether these arguments for the woman's outcast status and immorality are really as strong as the majority of commentators usually imply. The Bibliography gives a few key texts, from which I have drawn.

### **Counter-arguments to the traditional view**

The traditional arguments concerning the woman make certain assumptions about the encounter with Jesus or about the social context and usually do not consider whether any alternative explanation could equally well account for the evidence in the passage. In this section, I will examine the four arguments above to show that they are weak or inconclusive.

**The woman's timing** in coming to the well in the heat of the midday sun is usually seen as conclusive. Why would she be there at that time, it is argued, except because she was shunned by her community and so it was not possible for her to go either early in the morning or in the cool of evening? This timing, along with the woman's marital history, are interpreted as mutually reinforcing the woman's dubious character.

Firstly, I will consider other explanations for why a visit to draw water at midday might have been necessary. Secondly, as the Greek text of John 4.6 actually says 'about the sixth hour', we need to consider whether that definitely means 'noon' in John's gospel.

Most commentators offer no alternative explanations for why a woman might need to draw water at midday. Although the normal time for women to draw water appears to have been towards evening (Genesis 24.11), this cannot have been a strict rule. Rachel came to a well to water her sheep while it was 'still high day', although Jacob and the other shepherds did not consider it yet time to water flocks (Genesis 29.6-8). Unusual circumstances can sometimes dictate a departure from normal procedure. The bucket of water drawn previously (the evening before?) could simply have been spilt or knocked over. If there were children in or around the household, this is not inconceivable, as any parent will attest. The woman herself may have stumbled and spilt some of the water on her previous return journey, and so needed to replenish it earlier than normal. An alternative is that she simply ran out of water, due to visitors or extra household tasks requiring more water than usual and this was the point at which she needed more. It has also been suggested that her daily work, or that of her household, required more than normal amounts of water, and that she therefore visited the well a number of times as part of her usual daily activities.

Janeth Norfleete Day suggests yet another possibility.<sup>3</sup> Even if the woman did seek to avoid the other women of the town, perhaps this was not because she was shunned but rather because she was pitied or even ridiculed by them for her difficult life circumstances. The sadness of her life in losing five husbands, whatever the reasons for it, could have made the woman the object of pity or ridicule (or both) by her community and hence the woman may have tried to avoid any contact at the well. Perhaps it was the other women's awkward silence, not knowing what to say and feeling unable to talk together freely about husbands, children and home life, which caused this woman to avoid the others.

We simply do not know the actual reason for this woman being at the well at noon (if indeed it was noon – see below). But it is certainly unjustifiable to infer that the woman is an outcast based on the time she comes to draw water when many alternative explanations are possible. As Bonnie Thurston

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<sup>3</sup> Day, Janeth Norfleete, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4.1-42 in Retrospect and Prospect* Biblical Interpretation Series 61 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.170.

remarks concerning this passage: 'I should hate to have my morals impugned because I occasionally go to the grocery store late in the evening!'.<sup>4</sup>

On the meaning of 'the sixth hour', there were at least two ways of counting hours in the first century. The typical 'Jewish' system referenced the hours from sunrise or sunset. So with a typical sunrise of about 6 am, the first hour would end at 7 am with 7 am being called 'the first hour'. Similarly, the sixth hour would be midday. The Synoptic gospels use this system throughout.

An alternative timing system was also in use, counting hours from the reference point of midnight, which was the start of the Roman 'civil' day. So the sixth hour could be 6 am, but the hourly count resets at noon so that the sixth hour could also refer to 6 pm. This is often referred to as the 'Roman' or 'modern' system.

Mark gospel states that it was at the third hour that Jesus was crucified (ie. 9 am, Mark 15.25), with darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour (ie. 12 noon to 3 pm, Mark 15.33), and with Jesus dying at the ninth hour (ie. 3 pm, Mark 15.34). However, John's gospel tells us that Pilate delivered judgment on Jesus on the Day of Preparation (Friday) at 'about the sixth hour' (John 19.14). Is this 6 am (Roman system) or noon (Jewish system)? Clearly, if the author of John is using the same hourly system as the Synoptics (ie, this is noon) then this contradicts their accounts, in which Jesus was already on the cross at the sixth hour (12 noon), with darkness then coming over the land. The inconsistency with the Synoptics disappears, however, if John's gospel used the 'modern' time system, as this then gives internal consistency within John's gospel between 'early [morning]' (John 18.28) and 'the sixth hour' (John 19.14) as well as external consistency with the Synoptics.

[It should be noted that John's gospel tells us that Jesus was taken to Pilate by the Jewish authorities 'early' (John 18.28). Although often translated 'early morning', the Greek actually just says 'early', with a natural extension of meaning to early morning. John 20.1 uses the same Greek word and there clarifies that it was still dark, so Jesus' appearance before Pilate could easily have started well before sunrise (which Colin Humphreys calculates was about 5.45am<sup>5</sup>). Depending on various assumptions, this still gives enough time for the trial before Pilate and Herod before Pilate delivered judgment on Jesus at 'about the sixth hour'.]

Jack Finegan argues for this difference in timing systems between the Synoptics and John's gospel.<sup>6</sup> Other commentators on John's gospel concur, including B.F. Westcott and more recently R. Alan Culpepper.<sup>7</sup> Norman Walker's 1960 article in *Novum Testamentum*<sup>8</sup> gives much of the evidence and arguments, plausibly showing why the other hour references in John's gospel are better explained on this basis. Walker also includes two examples where this system seems to have been used in first century Smyrna, an important port city of the Roman Empire, which was not far from Ephesus where many think John's gospel was written.

Returning to the implications for John 4.6, this difference must raise the question of whether the reference to the sixth hour really does mean noon or actually refers to about 6 pm (about sunset).

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<sup>4</sup> Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p.84.

<sup>5</sup> Colin J. Humphreys, *The Mystery of the Last Supper: Reconstructing the Final Days of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.179.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, Revised Edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), pp.10-11.

<sup>7</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p.219.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Walker, 'The Reckoning of Hours in the Fourth Gospel', *Novum Testamentum* 4 (1960), pp.69-73.

Jesus was tired from his journey and so this could just as well have been about 6 pm because he had had a full day of walking, rather than being purely because of the heat of the sun at noon. On this revised timing, the woman's presence at the well at this time is not particularly abnormal. A time of about 6 pm might be a little late for collecting water so near to sunset, which may explain why she was there on her own, but there are various possible reasons why she might have been delayed or needed to collect more water, as outlined previously. Nevertheless, if we had been told that this encounter occurred as sunset approached, it is unlikely that anyone would have concluded that the woman was particularly immoral on that basis. We cannot use the timing of the incident, nor the fact that the woman was on her own, to draw any conclusion about her personal life without further evidence to corroborate it.

Although I hope I have shown that even if this incident did occur at noon, the reason for the woman's presence at the well at that time is definitely unclear, with the additional uncertainty about what time is indicated by 'the sixth hour', we can draw no definite conclusion about the woman from the timing.

So what about the woman's **marital status**, her five husbands and the man she was currently with? The social and human context of marriage in the first century was very different to ours. Michael Satlow suggests an average life expectancy of only about 25 years at this time, with an average age of first marriage of 30 years for men and 20 years for women.<sup>9</sup> Hence death of a spouse, with a relatively fast re-marriage, could not have been unusual (with a 3 month delay for a woman allowing time to see if she is already pregnant). Divorce was also not uncommon, for various reasons, with some schools of thought requiring little 'cause'. Note the shock of the disciples at Jesus' teaching on the strict limitation to divorce – 'it is better not to marry' (Matthew 19.10)! But divorce was instigated almost exclusively by the husband, not the wife (women could initiate a divorce in some circumstances but required a male relative to enact the process in court). These two factors alone could easily lead to a number of marriages for a woman. As the livelihood and economic security of most women at this time (outside the rich elite) lay largely in her husband and children, especially if she had no other close relatives who could or would support her, re-marriage may easily be the only way to survive a husband's death without resort to prostitution, especially while any children were still young. The return of the dowry after a divorce (except in the case of the woman's adultery) would provide some buffer, but would not be a long term solution. Even if the woman had a surviving male relative, re-marriage would largely be a further business arrangement enacted by this relative rather than being the woman's own decision.

There could easily be good reasons, therefore, why a woman ended up having had five husbands. A woman could in theory decline a marriage but in practice had little option but to agree. Although there is evidence that rabbis frowned upon more than three marriages, this was not illegal. The hypothetical case raised with Jesus by the Sadducees (Mark 12.18-23) shows that they regarded seven husbands as possible in at least some circumstances. Indeed, if Levirate marriage accounts for the Samaritan woman's situation, then the number of husbands again points to her being a pious, law-abiding woman, rather than an immoral, sinful woman. Her situation may even parallel that of Tamar, having been denied marriage to the next rightful son (Genesis 38.11).

If this was not a case of Levirate marriage, the fact that so many men had been willing to marry this Samaritan woman might suggest that she had birthed children, as even a suspicion of infertility would tend to make any woman (particularly relatively young ones) undesirable as a wife. However, the overriding need to provide for young children as well as herself would also mean that re-

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<sup>9</sup> Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.110; Caryn Reeder suggests the age of marriage as late twenties and late teens, respectively: Caryn A. Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman's Story: Reconsidering John 4 After #ChurchToo* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2022), p.130.

marriage was an economic necessity (whether arranged by herself or her family). Bonnie Thurston sums it up as: 'this woman may have felt it imperative to remarry precisely to *preserve* her reputation'.<sup>10</sup>

Does Jesus' comment about the man she currently had not being her husband (John 4.18) change that assessment? It may do, but again the conclusion that she is in a consensual, but unmarried, sexual relationship with this man is not the only possibility and it is difficult to see how the text justifies the accusation of immorality or prostitution. We should also note Jesus' affirming comment at the end of the verse, '... this you said truly.' To me, this sounds sympathetic and affirming, not condemnatory.

If Jesus' words do indicate that she is in a sexual relationship with the man, it could be that she had been taken in by a widowed man but was not formally married to him. Marriages did not require a formal contract or public ceremony, and a man and a woman living together in this way may not always have termed themselves as husband and wife. There were various reasons why two parties may not legally be able to marry, and so the woman's final relationship could have been co-habitation, accepted and recognised as an 'informal marriage' rather than as a sinful or immoral liaison.<sup>11</sup> Reasons for this could include the man's desire to protect his current heirs, or a difference in social status. Being a slave, a freed slave or illegitimate all severely restricted the right to marry, as did being a priest or soldier for a man. Co-habitation with this man may, therefore, have been the only, but still a morally acceptable, option for the Samaritan woman. Such informal marriages were not classed as immoral by Romans, Jews or Samaritans.

It has also been suggested that the woman's relationship may have been that of a concubine or mistress. The biblical and rabbinic view of a concubine as an inferior quasi-wife differed from the Roman view of a concubine as a cohabiting relationship where marriage was not possible.<sup>12</sup> The evidence on this for first century Israel is 'scant' according to Satlow, although he does not dismiss their existence.<sup>13</sup> Two of the issues are whether an informal or irregular relationship could be converted to a formal contractual marriage and whether any children from the relationship could inherit. As it is often difficult to see the practical difference between cohabitation and a concubine, I will not discuss this aspect further.

After five regular marriages, co-habitation or concubinage may have been the only options available to enable this woman (and any family who might still be dependent on her) to survive – and it may not have been what she wanted. Her age, lack of other family, the preference of men for young wives, preferably virgins, and the possible lack of money for a dowry, could have made such an arrangement the only option – an economic necessity rather than a moral choice, deserving our sympathy rather than our condemnation.

On the other hand, the woman may not even have been in a sexual relationship with her current 'man'. Although Jesus' wording suggests that the woman's current relationship is being paralleled with that of her previous husbands, this is not certain. The man with whom the woman was then living could have been one of her brothers (or a son from one her early marriages or even her father or an uncle, although it seems more likely that the latter would be dead by this time). Such an arrangement was not unusual for a divorced woman or widow (see John 19.26-27), at least until re-marriage. However, if the woman had no surviving relations, then her situation may indeed have

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<sup>10</sup> Thurston, *Women in the New Testament*, p.85.

<sup>11</sup> Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman's Story*, pp.136-40. See also Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, Chapter 8 'Irregular Unions', pp.182-195.

<sup>12</sup> Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, pp.192-195.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

been desperate, marriage may not have been open to her and living in some form of informal marriage may have been her last resort.

I do not present the various options outlined above in order definitively to decide the woman's past and present situation. The point is that there are simply too many uncertainties and alternative scenarios to allow us to decide between them on the evidence before us. That, in itself, should deter us from jumping to any adverse conclusion about the woman's character on this basis.

The woman's **change of topic** from her marital status in John 4.18 to worship at the temple in John 4.19 is sometimes quoted as desperation to change the subject after the shame that her sinful, private life had been exposed. This is possible, but we should perhaps ask whether we would draw the same conclusion if a man changed the subject in a similar way? Were we to read John 1.47-48 in the same way, we might note that Nathanael changed the subject from being under the fig tree to Jesus being a Rabbi, the Son of God, the King of Israel. But it would be ridiculous to conclude that Nathanael was embarrassed or ashamed about what he had been doing or pondering under the fig tree and so changed the subject. Women, as well as men, may engage in theological dialogue sincerely, not merely to avoid more personal topics.

We can justifiably take the woman's change of topic at face value – a recognition that this man was a prophet with supernaturally revealed insight. As Bultmann acknowledges in his commentary on John, the woman's response reveals more amazement than guilt.<sup>14</sup> In that light, asking a question about where God should be worshipped is eminently sensible. One of the key theological differences between Jew and Samaritan was this very question. The woman had already recognised Jesus as a Jew so after his display of supernatural knowledge, akin to that of a prophet, this question would be the most natural question to raise. What topic would we expect her to raise in that situation?

Finally, we need briefly to consider the woman's **testimony** to the town, 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?' (John 4.28-30, 39). On its own, this can hardly be seen as an open confession of 'her own notoriety' unless we have already made up our minds to see the woman in that light and interpret all of her words to reinforce this. In the woman's own mind, it is quite possible that her daily life and her identity were deeply linked to the sadness and disappointments of her past marriages and current situation, brilliantly summarised in the phrase 'all that I ever did'. Jesus' words to her captured those details exactly. Who would not be amazed? We will consider the woman's testimony further in the next section shortly, when we consider the evidence in favour of this woman's character.

### **Further considerations for a new perspective**

The four key arguments behind the assertion that we see in this passage a sinful woman, who has been outcast from her community, are weak and inconclusive. I have shown that they are open to other, less condemnatory, and in my view more reasonable interpretations. Certainty, one way or the other, may not be possible on the arguments above, but I think the full available evidence actually points away from the majority view.

Apart from the re-interpretations already given, there are three further pieces of evidence which present or suggest a positive view of the woman's character. The first shows she was unlikely to have been an outcast, the second indicates that Jesus did not view sin as a particular issue needing be tackled with this woman and the third again suggests a godly woman.

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<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971 [1966]), p.188.

The first piece of positive evidence concerns the reception the woman received when she returned to her village after the disciples had come back to the well. The woman returned to tell the people about the stranger she had met, even asking whether he might be the Christ (John 4.28-30). Even with such an incredible suggestion being made by the woman, John 4.30 suggests a large number of the people left the village to see Jesus at the well. We are then told that 'Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."' (John 4.39). If the woman was an outcast, it is difficult to believe that many of the villagers would have believed in Jesus because of *her* testimony. Psychologically, this is highly implausible. At this stage there may have been some uncertainty in many of the people's minds about who exactly Jesus was, but they believed the woman sufficiently to go out to meet him. Duly impressed, they asked him to stay longer, so that many more also heard Jesus and came to believe.

This aspect of the encounter provides positive evidence that this woman was not treated by her community as an outcast or viewed as particularly sinful. The woman had not gone to the well to avoid contact with others, whether to avoid their pity or their censure. We do not know the reason she was at the well on her own (except that she clearly required more water). However, the woman does appear to be a respected member of her community. The people's final words in John 4.42 emphasise even more the impact of the woman's testimony: 'They said to the woman, "It is **no longer** because of what **you** said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.'" Personal observation is always more powerful than another person's testimony. Yet we find acceptance of the testimony of a single female witness about a total stranger perhaps being 'the Christ' (4.29). The woman was clearly held in high regard and her word was accepted as truthful, even in the absence of other witnesses. This does not sound like a woman looked down on and ostracised for her sinful way of life.

The second piece of evidence is that Jesus does not appear to have seen sin, sexual or otherwise, as a key issue in the woman's life. This can be inferred from the absence of any words from Jesus (or glosses from the author/narrator) mentioning sin or condemnation of the woman, although such words do occur a number of other times in John's gospel when Jesus engages with other individuals or groups (eg. John 5.14, 8.11, 8.24, 9.41). Taken with the other positive indications of Jesus' respect and regard for the woman, the absence of such words reinforces the positive view endorsed by her community's belief of her testimony and should make us hesitate in seeing sin as a key issue in this woman's life.

I present the third piece of positive evidence more tentatively. After the woman expresses a surprised, defensive response that a male Jew should ask a Samaritan woman for a drink, Jesus tells the woman in John 4.10 that if she had known to whom she was speaking, she would have asked him and he would have given her living water. That is, if she had known who he truly was, she would have responded positively to him, asking Jesus for 'living water', which is usually interpreted as equivalent to receiving eternal life. Jeremiah 2.13 and 7.13 makes it clear that the source of living water is God himself (although Jeremiah would not have been viewed as 'Scripture' by the Samaritan woman). Jesus seems to be implying that the woman was spiritually aware enough to have known her need of God and would have verbalised it if she had known who Jesus truly was. Indeed, in verse 15 she respectfully calls Jesus 'Sir' (as also in verses 11 and 19), and displays faith in Jesus by asking for this water, although perhaps not yet fully understanding what it really was or who Jesus really was. In verses 17-18, Jesus also affirms the truth of her words that she has no husband. Along with the previous two points, these are all consistent with a pious woman, who was seeking to live a godly life in a difficult situation.

These three pieces of evidence present the woman in a positive light. Along with the alternative interpretations of the points usually quoted which are used to present the woman in a negative

light, I suggest that the majority interpretation of the woman as an immoral outcast can no longer be supported. Re-reading the whole passage in the light of the points made above, paints a more likely picture of a woman who has endured a difficult life, but who is a respected and trusted member of her community, whose word was listened to and readily believed by her community, bringing many others to belief in Jesus. From all the available evidence, Janeth Norfleete Day concludes that: 'This was a woman who lived every day in intimate contact with her need. Her trust in God and his ultimate justice and mercy may well have been the secret of her ability to endure the existence that was hers.'<sup>15</sup>

The arguments and evidence above suggest to me that the majority view of the woman at the well needs to be rejected. We should be wary of making untested (and untestable) assumptions about a passage which are unlikely to bring us to the truth. We must be cautious in our judgment of this woman whose life actually shows an intelligent openness in her conversation with Jesus and an apostolic willingness to share her testimony, bringing others to him. If the arguments above are accepted, this will undoubtedly amend how we understand, teach or preach on this passage.

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<sup>15</sup> Day, *The Woman at the Well*, p.172.



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