



The Gospel of John

A Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well

A setting in Samaria evokes one of the major religio-ethnic divisions of the day in the Land of Israel. The animosity between Judeans and Samaritans is well known to readers of the New Testament, especially of the Gospel of Luke and its parable of the "Good Samaritan." The scene also evokes the shared heritage of Judeans and Samaritans. Both look to their ancestor Jacob (= Israel, the man who saw God), whose well is the focal point of story. To that well comes a tired Jesus, left by his disciples who are off finding a meal. He is joined by an unnamed woman of Samaria who has come to fetch water. The dialogue between them has some of the same dramatic features as the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, different layers of meaning and dramatic misunderstanding about the nature of "living water" that can permanently quench thirst. Such metaphors evoke traditional language of the Jewish Wisdom tradition, that equated true teaching with food and drink and the Gospel resolutely builds on that tradition.

But more is at work in this carefully crafted story. The encounter at the well recalls the many stories in the Pentateuch where a patriarch encounters his future wife at a well. The scene is erotically charged for anyone familiar with that Biblical background. Here, however, the erotic is transformed. Jesus, who according to convention, should be the suitor, becomes the sought. The woman, who has a checkered marital past, falls in love anew with a person who reveals to her who she really is. Jesus, like Aristotle's god, moves by being an object of desire, and the woman becomes not a lover on the physical level, but an emissary of her new love, bringing to him the people of Samaria.

The One whom she serves and the One reflected in the thirsty Jesus is, as Jesus says, Spirit, who wants all to worship him in spirit and in truth.

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