

Wedding at the Well:
Nuptial Symbolism in Christ's Interaction with the Samaritan Woman
and its Relevance to the Nature of the New Covenant

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Introduction

John's depiction of Christ's interaction with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:1-42) is a linchpin passage, which connects the Fourth Gospel to the Old Testament, and serves as a bridge between central themes and passages within the Gospel itself. By analyzing this pericope's role in the Gospel of John in the light of its Old Testament background, one discovers its importance in the Johannine presentation of the nature of the new covenant.

Synopsis of the Pericope

In John's Gospel, Christ's ministry is heralded by John the Baptist, who bears witness to His messianic status (Jn. 1:29-34). After being introduced by the Baptist, Jesus manifests Himself directly to Israel—first publicly with His initial miracle-sign at the Wedding at Cana in Galilee (2:1-12) and His subsequent cleansing of the Temple (2:13-25), then privately during His evening instruction of the ruler and Pharisee, Nicodemus (3:1-21). Having manifested Himself to Israel, Jesus journeys to Samaria, where He encounters a woman at a well (4:1-42). The Samaritans were half-Jewish and half-Gentile, both ethnically and religiously, the product of the intermarriage between the two groups that followed the colonization of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in the eighth century BC, as recorded in 2 Kings 17:24-41.

Christ's journey to Samaria is representative of His desire to bring the Samaritans into the new covenant, and His encounter with the woman at the well can be seen as archetypal of the invitation He extends to her entire people. The interaction begins when Jesus, noticing a woman has come to the well, asks her to give Him a drink (Jn. 4:7). The woman is indignant, wondering how a "Jew" like Jesus could ask anything of a Samaritan (v. 9). Jesus responds by informing the woman that He can provide her with "living water," and she remains stubborn, asking if He

thinks that He is greater than their father, Jacob, who gave her people this well (v. 10-12). When Jesus tells the woman that the “living water” He offers can provide her with “eternal life,” her disposition changes, and she, now referring to Him as “Sir,” asks Him to give her this water (v. 13-15).

The second half of their interaction begins when Jesus asks the woman to call her husband, to which she replies that she has none. Christ confirms this, revealing His supernatural knowledge of her life, by clarifying that she has had five husbands, and that the one she has now is not her husband (v. 16-18). With this, the woman recognizes Jesus as a prophet, and she asks Him a question about whether proper worship should take place in Jerusalem or in Samaria. Jesus answers by informing her that “the hour is coming” when true worship of the Father will take place neither here nor there, but in “spirit and truth.” The woman says she knows that things will change when the Messiah comes, and Jesus reveals that He is the Messiah (v. 19-26). After this, the woman runs into the city, leaving the jar she brought to gather water, and tells the people therein to come and see Jesus—who might be the Christ—and many Samaritans come to believe in Him as a result (v. 27-42).

Old Testament Background: The Betrothal Type-Scene

It is impossible to develop an in-depth understanding of any New Testament passage without first having an awareness of both its immediate setting and its place in the larger context of salvation history, as beginning in the Old Testament. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter shines a light on both the immediate setting and the Old Testament background of Jesus’s interaction with the Samaritan woman during his discussion of what he calls the “betrothal type-

scene,” which he argues is a literary convention found in the Old Testament.¹ According to Alter, the betrothal type-scene was used by certain biblical authors to signal the occurrence of a significant transition in the narrative (in this example, when a particular hero was about to get married) to the audience. Alter’s research reveals that the betrothal type-scene consists of several parts:

- 1) First, the “future bridegroom, or his surrogate” journeys to a foreign land;
- 2) There, “he encounters a girl” or girls at a well.
- 3) One of the parties draws water from said well, after which
- 4) The girl or girls run home with news of the man’s arrival, so that
- 5) The family may be notified, and the betrothal may be discussed and enacted.

Alter notes that such scenes precede the marriages of multiple Old Testament figures, including Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 24), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29), and Moses and Zippo’rah (Ex. 2:15-22). While Alter recognizes the importance of noticing the presence of such a literary convention in the Old Testament, he insists that “what is really interesting is not the schema of the convention” itself, but rather “what is done in each individual application of the schema to give it a sudden tilt of innovation or even to refashion it radically for the imaginative purposes at hand.”² For example, while Jacob had to wrestle away a stone which was blocking the mouth of the well before water could be drawn from it (symbolizing and foreshadowing Rachel’s future fertility issues), Moses had to fend off a group of ruffians from the well where he met Zippo’rah (symbolizing and foreshadowing his future role in delivering his people from their Egyptian enemies).

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 62.

² *Ibid*, 63.

With knowledge of this literary convention in mind, the otherwise not so obvious nuptial symbolism underlying Christ's interaction with the Samaritan woman comes clearly into view—as do the ways in which this pericope deviates from the standard betrothal type-scene. Bejon notes the *twists* on the standard betrothal type-scene found in Christ's interaction with the Samaritan woman, including the fact that “water is never actually drawn forth from the well,” since ultimately Jesus's “interest is not in the water per se, but in its *spiritual* significance.”³ Jesus comes to Samaria not to seek well water, but to offer “living water”—which, as Brown observes, is itself a symbol for baptism.⁴ Bejon also notes that rather than ruffians or a stone, the obstacle between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a lack of faith, symbolized by her marital history. The woman's previous five husbands can be seen as symbols either of the five books of the Pentateuch (the only Scriptures recognized as canonical by the Samaritans) or of the five pagan gods that were incorporated into the Samaritan religion as a result of Assyrian colonization—or of both.⁵ Jesus knows that neither the Law nor pagan worship will be able to save the Samaritan woman and her people, so He offers them a new bridegroom, one capable of doing so: Himself.

Connecting Johannine Themes: Marriage and the “Hour”

Having covered the importance of this pericope's immediate setting (at a well) and its broader Old Testament context (in the mode of the betrothal type-scene), an analysis of its role in the Gospel of John must take place before its full meaning can be appreciated. As mentioned,

³ James Bejon, “An Altered Perspective on the Woman at the Well” (Tyndale House, Cambridge, 2019), https://www.academia.edu/40181445/An_Altered_Perspective_on_the_Woman_at_the_Well.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 37.

⁵ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), Hoopla Ebooks, 162.

Christ's interaction with the Samaritan woman serves as a linchpin passage, which connects two major Johannine themes: those of marriage and the "hour." Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman—now understood in the light of its underlying nuptial symbolism—is one of the major passages in John's Gospel where He speaks of His impending hour ("the hour is coming when..."). Another such passage, one in which the marital symbolism is more overt, is found earlier in John's Gospel: that of the Wedding at Cana.

While attending a marriage feast with His disciples, Jesus is presented with a dilemma by His mother: the wine has run dry. Brown speculates that the fact that those at the wedding "have no wine" (Jn. 2:3) "may be a Johannine commentary on the barrenness of Judaism."⁶ One finds a parallel to this when Jesus, speaking of the water in the Samaritan well, observes that "[e]veryone who drinks of this water will thirst again" (Jn. 4:13), perhaps as a comment on the fact that the Samaritan traditions (symbolized by Jacob's well), are—like those of the Jews in Galilee—ultimately incapable of bringing about their salvation.

Jesus responds to His mother's request by asking her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (Jn. 2:4). The implication is that Jesus was already planning to solve this problem (the lack of wine, symbolic of Judaism's inability to save) at the appropriate hour. Also, as Brown observes, by referring to Mary as "woman," Jesus (the New Adam) alludes to her role as the New Eve.⁷ Jesus responds in a similar manner to the Samaritan woman's inquiry about the proper location of worship, even addressing her the same way, when He says, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father . . . the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:21-23). Again, the implication is

⁶ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*

that the question of true worship will be resolved at the coming of Christ's "hour." Yet, when is this?

The hour is Christ's Passion, during which His side is pierced, causing blood and water to spill forth (Jn. 19:34). The blood is symbolic of the Eucharistic wine, given in fulfillment of that which Christ miraculously provided at Cana, while the water is symbolic of baptism, the "living water" promised to the Samaritan woman and her people—and these are also both deeply marital symbols. For, as Brown keenly observes, just as Adam's bride was taken from his side, so too Christ's bride, the Church, was formed from the blood and water (baptism and the Eucharist) that flowed from His side during His "deep sleep" on the Cross.⁸

Conclusion

Thus, in understanding the nuptial symbolism underlying Christ's interaction with the Samaritan woman, one perceives also the nuptial nature of the new covenant into which He invites her. To accept this invitation is to become His bride through the "living water" of baptism which, like the water at Cana, ultimately leads to the wine of His blood, the Eucharist—so that, when Christ sees His bride, He may rejoice with Adam, saying, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" (Gen. 2:23).

⁸ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 95.

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