

Sample NIV Application Commentary John 4:1-54

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THE PHARISEES HEARD that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, ²although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

⁴Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹ Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

³¹ Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."

³³ Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?"

³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.

⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

⁴³ After the two days he left for Galilee. ⁴⁴ (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.) ⁴⁵ When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there.

⁴⁶Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. ⁴⁷When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

⁴⁸"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."

⁴⁹The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

⁵⁰Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live."

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. ⁵¹While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. ⁵²When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour."

⁵³Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and all his household believed.

⁵⁴This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee.

Original Meaning

THE LENGTHY AND IMPORTANT story about Jesus' interaction with a Samaritan woman continues the form begun in chapter 3, where Jesus speaks with particular people who bear so many features of the world of first-century Palestine. The dialogue with Nicodemus makes perfect sense—a Jerusalem rabbi and leader interviews a seemingly outrageous teacher from Galilee—but here in chapter 4 we have a story that amuses as much as it surprises.

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (4:1-26)

THIS NEW CHARACTER is a woman—a Samaritan woman, no less—and a person of questionable moral character. As we will note below, in this culture it was highly irregular for a man with Jesus' profile to speak with anyone possessing such features. He is male, single, religious, and Jewish, and clearly defined social boundaries ought to keep him from speaking with a woman in such a private setting.

But here is the irony in the story. As Nicodemus's character fell silent in chapter 3, leaving us to wonder what would become of this religious Jewish leader, suddenly we see that this irreligious woman takes the unexpected step: She acknowledges Jesus' lordship, remains "in the light," and exhibits some of the signs of discipleship we learned in chapter 1. She runs and tells others,

bringing them to Jesus, and as a result many come to believe (4:39). It is no accident that the story of Nicodemus takes place "at night" and this episode occurs at about noon (4:6). Light and darkness are such prominent Johannine motifs that their presence in the narrative signals important theological meanings.

But there is another level of interest in the story linking it to what has gone before. I have argued that we are reading a series of probings in which Jesus' messianic presence overwhelms some feature or institution of Judaism. In chapter 2 Jesus revealed his glory as he refilled Jewish purification pots, and then went to the temple indicating that it would be refilled or replaced with his own life. In chapter 3 Jesus challenges Judaism's teaching office, asking how it is that a rabbi like Nicodemus could not understand basic things about God. Now Jesus moves to the periphery of Judaism, to Samaria, and here he not only meets a woman, but he demonstrates that his gift surpasses any gift that can be found in a deeply historic, potentially superstitious well. Jacob's well is no match for Jesus' well. One of the challenges set before the woman is for her to unravel the mystery of Jesus' words as he replaces the very well she reveres. He has water she has never seen, and she must discern how to get it.

John 4:1-3 provides the setting. It is not surprising that the Pharisees take an interest in Jesus (4:1) since they have already investigated the work of the Baptist (1:19, 24). It would take little searching to discover that many of Jesus' followers had come from the ranks of the Baptist (1:35-37). Later, when Jesus arrives in Galilee, inquiries by Herod Antipas firmly identify Jesus with the Baptist as well (Mark 6:14-16).

Since the Synoptics describe Jesus' public ministry beginning in Galilee (along with the call of the disciples, Mark 1:14-20), some critical scholars are reluctant to accept John's account of an earlier Judean ministry. That Jesus' work had already begun and that his fame was spreading and his circle of disciples growing at this point is unrecorded elsewhere. But this early Judean popularity is suggested in the Synoptics from another vantage. It is not until John is arrested in Perea (across the Jordan) that Jesus moves to Galilee (Mark 1:14). Jesus likely had reason to fear his own arrest (hence his move north) *because of* his association with the now-imprisoned John. Jesus no doubt works at length with his new disciples, having them continue their baptizing work (4:1-2); then in Galilee as the ranks of his followers grows, he calls a select number to full-time ministry.

This crisis in Judea may also explain Jesus' decision to travel north through Samaria (4:4). This route was *not* the usual way for a Jew to travel between Judea and Galilee. It was faster, but not preferred by most religious Jews.

Travelers would generally go east to Jerich and then travel north, skirting the hills of Judea and Samaria just west of the Jordan River. When Mount Gilboa came into view, they came to the city of Scythopolis (Old Testament Beth Shan) and turned west into the Jezreel Valley, whose open, well-watered plains guided them into the Galilee interior. The route through Samaria was easier, but it forced the traveler to enter this region of mountains inhabited by people with whom rivalry and strife had an ancient history.

The apostasy of the Old Testament northern kingdom of Israel (finally based in the city of Samaria) was well known. When the Assyrians conquered and exiled the northern kingdom in 722 B.C., they repopulated the region with people from throughout their empire ([2 Kings 17:23-24](#)). Remnants of the defeated Israelite kingdom now mixed with Persians and other conquered peoples. The paganism known to Jeroboam now was mixed with countless other practices, making the religious impurity of the land infamous ([2 Kings 17:25ff.](#)).

In time, the monotheism of Judaism prevailed, but it suffered important modifications. The Samaritans rejected the writings of the Prophets (including the histories [1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles]) and wisdom literature (Proverbs, Psalms, etc.) because of these writings' emphasis on Judea and David's line centered on Jerusalem. Their Scriptures were limited to the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), and their worship was centered on a new temple on Mount Gerizim, towering above ancient Shechem, while Jerusalem was rejected as a place of pilgrimage. Following the Babylonian exile when Zerubbabel led the rebuilding of the temple, Samaritan help was adamantly refused ([Ezra 4:2-3](#)), which fueled more conflict. When Alexander the Great and later Greek generals controlled Palestine (beginning about 330 B.C.), they made Samaria an important base, knowing that here they could find sympathetic, anti-Jewish allies. When the Jews had their opportunity (128 B.C.) they attacked Samaria, destroyed Shechem, and burned the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim.

By Jesus' day, a smoldering tension existed between the regions of Judea and Samaria. Partly based on race and religion, it echoed many centuries of terrible political fights. Therefore when we read that Jesus, in passing through the region, meets a "Samaritan woman," the story does not mean that she is a resident of the city of Samaria, but that she is from the region of Samaria. She is a woman bearing the history, language, religion, and attitudes of people on the far margin of Judaism. A first-century reader would barely expect Jesus and the woman to acknowledge each other's presence, much less speak.

The location of Sychar ([4:5](#)) is problematic since no ancient literature refers to it. Sychar may be the modern Arab village of 'Askar, although scholars are divided since 'Askar is an early medieval town Jacob did indeed purchase land in the vicinity, naming it "Shechem" (from the Heb. word for "shoulder," the shoulder of a hill, [Gen. 33:19](#)), and he gave some of it to Joseph ([48:22](#)). Even though we have no account of Jacob's digging a well, it is not unlikely and today an ancient well is accessible adjacent to Shechem (Arab Balata). It is probably best to conclude that Sychar refers then to Shechem and that the well nearby (visited by many pilgrims) is the historic well. One of the wonderful things about sites like this in the Middle East is that bedrock wells from antiquity do not change their location over time.

In [John 4:6](#) the Greek word for "well" actually refers to a "spring" (Gk. *pege*), that is, a free-flowing water source or fountain (such as Jerusalem's Gihon Spring). By contrast, a well, properly speaking (Gk. *phrear*, [4:11-12](#)), is dug by hand. Rather than an ironic comparison with Jesus' "spring" ([4:10](#)), this is likely a commonplace description of a dug well that has tapped a free-flowing spring (which the hundred-foot well does today). In the first century, the well would have had a short perimeter wall around its mouth (preventing people, animals, and

debris from falling in), a stone lid (see [Gen. 29:2](#)), a stone trough nearby for animals to be watered, and perhaps a tripod for attaching a rope/container for drawing water.

Jesus arrives at the well, sits on the wall at its edge to relieve his fatigue, and presents an unavoidable obstacle to a woman who has come to get water. His fatigue is an interesting note. Throughout this Gospel, John emphasizes the divinity of Jesus in the strongest terms. But here he easily and comfortably shows an incidental human feature: Jesus is tired. John's Christology does not emphasize one dimension of Jesus at the expense of the other.

It is the sixth hour, that is, noon. Two notes are helpful. (1) In this culture water collection was a responsibility of women. In a world that isolated women socially, the task was not entirely burdensome but became an opportunity for women to meet and talk. Therefore wells became the one locale where women could be either avoided or met. When Abraham's servant returned north to Haran looking for a wife for Isaac, he found the local well ([Gen. 24](#)) and met Rebekah there. Likewise Moses fled to Midian and at a well met the daughters of Jethro ([Ex. 2:15-16](#)), one of whom became his wife (Zipporah). This motif is so prominent, some scholars have suggested [John 4](#) may be influenced by ancient betrothal scenes in which (symbolically) Jesus calls a woman without proper marriage to a new, redeeming relationship with him. (2) Historically, water-drawing took place either in the early morning or at dusk in order to avoid the Mediterranean heat. While mid-afternoon work like this was not unknown, the scene reminds us of this woman's social isolation. She draws water when other women are absent. Later, of course, we learn the reason for her isolation ([4:18](#)): She has doomed her reputation and broken the morals of her community. This makes Jesus' overture and conversation all the more remarkable. He is crossing many boundaries. In this world men rarely speak to women in public, even if they are married to them. Single men *never* speak to or touch women at any time.

Above all, a rabbi (as Jesus is known) would observe these ideals scrupulously. This explains the woman's surprise in [4:9](#): She is not merely a Samaritan, but a Samaritan *woman*. This also explains the disciples' astonishment in [4:27](#) when they return to him after purchasing some food (cf. [4:8](#)). Their minds are racing with thoughts they dare not express: "What is going on here? Why this irregular conversation?" The surprising thing is not that Jesus would ask her for help with a drink; rather, it is that he would ask her *anything*.

The conversation between Jesus and the woman is a delightful, dramatic play. As a classic Johannine discourse, questions are asked that will bring Jesus' listener from earthly thoughts (well water) to heavenly realities (living water). Raymond Brown has convincingly outlined how the passage provides two scenes in which earthly and heavenly realities are addressed. In [4:7-15](#) Jesus explores the meaning of living water; in [4:16-26](#) Jesus discusses the sinful life of the woman and talks about true worship. In each case, conversations begin with mundane, earthly subjects (wells, husbands), and Jesus presses the woman to examine what these earthly things really mean for her. Woven through these sections are two questions, two challenges launched by Jesus in [4:10](#): Will this woman comprehend the gift of God and its giver? Will she ask for a

drink? We are left in suspense, wondering if the woman will have the courage to ask Jesus to be her water source and will identify him accurately for who he is.

As with Nicodemus, earthly questioners cannot understand heavenly things. They stumble over misunderstandings, which lead to humorous, ironic double meanings. As a resident of Shechem, the woman knows the location of every water source. But here Jesus says something unexpected: He is able to provide "living water" (4:10b). "Living water" refers to water that flows as in a spring, river, or stream, that is, *moving* water. Other water stood still, and one could find it in a well, cistern or pond. Living water was precious and valued and, according to rabbinic law, was the only water that could be used in ritual washings to make pure unclean worshipers. Everyone knew that Shechem had no rivers or streams. Even Jacob had to dig a well in order to water his flocks here (4:12). How could a Jewish outsider, someone who barely knew the terrain, offer water that no one else had found? *There is no living water in Shechem.*

But the woman stumbles on the metaphor and misunderstands. She is curious about the possibility of a nearby stream or spring (4:11b), but Jesus wants her to look beyond, to the spiritual significance of what this water means. This is water that eliminates thirst (4:13), a water that leads to eternal life (4:14). It is no surprise that in this arid country, something so precious as running water would take on symbolic meaning. Living water is life nourished by God. Jeremiah rebukes Israel saying, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jer. 2:13). God is the source of spiritual renewal, and other avenues simply must be rejected.

Isaiah uses this imagery when he exhorts all in Israel who are thirsty to come to the waters supplied by God (Isa. 55:1). At the end of time, when God's blessings deluge the land, Ezekiel and Zechariah foresee such living water literally flowing out of Jerusalem's temple, entering the Dead Sea in the east and the Mediterranean Sea in the west (Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8). However, rabbinic interpreters in Jesus' day understood this to be a prophetic symbol of the Holy Spirit that would renew and cleanse the earth in the last days (Ezek. 36:25-27).

Jesus is talking about a new life that is available through the Spirit of God (4:14). Water has become a symbol of this new reality since the beginning of the book (1:31; 2:7; 3:5) and later will be defined as the Holy Spirit (7:37-39). Christ himself is the source of precious living water, which can transform even this woman in her isolation. It is the "gift" (*dorea*) of God—a word that later Christians associated with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; Heb. 6:4).

But Jesus takes this promise a step further. It is not simply an experience that changes our "state" (such as a "state of salvation"), but it is a dynamic experience that makes a life as living as the water itself. The water (or Spirit) will transform a life into a well that "wells up" (Gk. *allomai*, 4:14). In the LXX, this word is used of the Holy Spirit that "leaps" on great leaders such as Samson, Saul, and David. Jesus' image is dramatic: The woman in search of a well discovers that the Spirit could transform her life into a well that does not require reaching and dipping, but which roils and gurgles with water until it spills over its rim.

The woman is clearly intrigued but incredulous. But in 4:15 she makes a request that fulfills one of Jesus' earlier two challenges from 4:10, "Sir, give me this water." Yet her perception of what she is asking is flawed. She is still seeking literal water (as Nicodemus questioned a literal rebirth [3:4] and as the Galileans will ask for bread [6:34]). She is still thinking about earthly things—about water for her jar, not living water for her soul.

The woman has requested water, but she does not understand the gift, nor does she know the identity of the giver. The second round of questions (4:16-26) now must pursue this second theme of Jesus' identity and fulfill Jesus' second challenge of 4:10. No doubt Jesus' request that she summon her husband was a shock (4:16). Her response that she has no husband (4:17) may have been true were she divorced or a widow. But Jesus knows it is untrue. Unveiling his divine capacity (cf. Nathanael, 1:49), he reminds her that she has had five husbands, and her current lover is either a sixth husband or a man to whom she is not married.

This number should not be allegorized but taken at its most simple level.

Either way, she has sinned, and the reputation that has dogged her incessantly now has surfaced again. But Jesus is not simply judging her. She rightly sees that this uncovers his abilities as a messenger from God and recoils, looking for a way to deflect the moral probings of this stranger. Despite what she says in 4:19-20, she continues to "remain in the light," for she continues to speak with Jesus and not walk away.

The Samaritans did not believe that there were prophets such as Amos and Isaiah in the biblical period. Since they embraced only the Pentateuch, they understood the expectation of Deuteronomy 18:18, which said a great prophet would follow Moses ("I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him"). But this was to be the messianic figure of the final day. Therefore in referring to Jesus as a prophet (*the prophet?*), the woman unwittingly has opened the subject of messianism for Jesus. This is a common Johannine technique, in which characters operating on an earthly plane not only fail to understand spiritual things, but occasionally use language that bears a meaning more profound than they realize (cf. 10:50; 18:37, 39; 19:19-22).

In 4:20 the woman launches what she hopes will be her most potent salvo. To free herself from the shame of her past (and present) in the eyes of this prophet, to deflect any more of his questions, she refers to the historic religious division between Jews and Samaritans. Both groups understood that God had commanded a place be set aside for worship, where his name might be known (Deut. 12:5), but they had serious disagreements about its location. King David decided to select Jerusalem, and after he acquired land and brought the tabernacle there, his son Solomon built God's temple. Even after its destruction, the site was continuously rebuilt.

The Samaritans rejected this tradition (when they rejected the later Old Testament books). In the Pentateuch the first place where Abraham built an altar was at Shechem beneath Mount

Gerizim. This same mountain was also the destination of the Israelites when they entered Canaan under Joshua's command ([Deut. 11:29; 27:12; Josh. 8:33](#)) so that the law and its blessings could be read aloud. Thus, given their historical commitments, it made sense that this mountain was deemed to be the place chosen by God. Even following the destruction of the Samaritan temple in the second century B.C., priests continued to sacrifice and worship there.

Jesus is therefore being invited to enter this historical-religious quagmire and give comment. The woman's reference to "our fathers" does not point to recent history, but to antiquity when Abraham ([Gen. 12:7](#)) and Jacob ([33:20](#)) revered this area. This mountain, the woman avers, has historic religious importance, validated not merely by her people but by the patriarchs. Yet the "you" in [John 4:20b](#) is emphatic, referring not to Jesus, but to the Jewish nation he represents. "Your people worship in Jerusalem and our people worship here; therefore, we have little in common" paraphrases nicely the woman's intention. But once again Jesus deflects her appeal to racial division (as he did in [4:9](#)) and supplies a sharp commentary on worship ([4:21-24](#)). (On Jesus' formal use of "woman" as a word of respectful address in [4:21](#), see comment on [2:4](#).)

(1) Jesus comments on the inadequacy of Samaritan worship ([4:22](#)). Unlike anywhere else in the New Testament, he aligns himself with the traditions of Judaism: "We [emphatic] worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews." Jesus is a Jew. The Messiah was to be a Jew. Therefore Judaism is the trajectory of religious history through which God has been at work. This is an uncompromising remark about the deficiencies of Samaritan beliefs. "You [pl., emphatic] ... worship what you do not know" is directed to her tradition and world.

(2) Jesus indicates that the debate between Gerizim and Jerusalem is only marginally important anyway since both places will soon be obsolete ([4:21](#)). In [2:19-22](#) we already heard a hint of this when Jesus mentioned destroying "this temple" and John immediately explained that Jesus was referring to the temple of "his body." Thus Jesus' body (the locale of God's presence, [1:14](#)) and the temple share similar fates, or at least interpret one another. The NIV obscures an important word here when Jesus says, "The hour [*hora*; NIV time] is coming..." We met the theological use of this word initially in [2:4](#) and learned that it refers to "the hour" of Jesus' glorification (in John, his death and resurrection). Hence a cataclysmic change will occur *in worship* when Jesus comes to the cross, offering himself as sacrifice.

(3) Finally, Jesus defines carefully what is coming and what is even now dawning on earth ([4:23-24](#)). Worship in "spirit and truth" ([v. 23](#)) is the key phrase that controls what Jesus means and is no doubt tied to Jesus' affirmation that "God is spirit" ([v. 24](#)). This is not merely a commonplace explanation about the incorporeality of God. Jesus is not speaking about metaphysics. Rather, he is describing something of the dynamic and life-giving character of God. As in [3:8](#), this God cannot be apprehended, but his effects cannot be denied. Just as "God is love" or "God is light," so "God is spirit."

These describe the ways God reveals himself to and impacts men and women in our world. Therefore "worship in spirit" does not refer to "the human spirit. It is worship that is

dynamically animated by God's Holy Spirit. But it is more. One preposition governs "spirit and truth" in [4:23-24](#) (which the NIV shows incorrectly). Such worship "in spirit and truth" means that we do not have a catalogue of two features here, but one inseparable concept. This is worship empowered by God but also informed by the revelation of God and provided to humans by the One who is the truth, Jesus Christ ([14:6](#)). Later Jesus will refer to this Spirit as "the Spirit of truth" ([14:17](#); [15:26](#)). This is worship not tied to holy places but impacted by a holy Person, who through his cross will inaugurate the era in which the Holy Spirit will change everything.

The woman's final statement to Jesus ([4:26](#)) again tries to deflect his clarification. The Samaritans did believe in the coming of the Messiah, based on [Deuteronomy 18:18](#), and understood that this person would explain everything to them. But the woman implies that both she and Jesus will have to wait. "When *he* comes" disguises the Greek emphatic pronoun, meaning that to this woman, Jesus does not qualify to be this Messiah, but that such spiritual explanations are on the horizon for them. But unwittingly, she has used the very words that best describe Jesus. With simple dignity, Jesus accepts the titles for himself ([4:26](#)). This now completes the second challenge of [4:10](#). The woman has rightly identified Jesus (cf. [4:29b](#)).

The Greek phrase of [4:26](#) (lit., "I am—who speaks to you") holds a term that is peculiar to the Fourth Gospel and will recur with some frequency: "I am" (Gk. *ego eimi*). This expression may be a mere self-identification (so the NIV, NRSV, etc.) but the pronoun "he" in "I who speak to you am *he*" does not exist in the Greek sentence. The phrase is emphatic and unusual. As we will see later ([8:58](#)), it is not always just a term of self-identification that bears a predicate (e.g., "I am the bread of life," [6:48](#)). It is also the divine name of God uttered on Mount Sinai to Moses (see [Ex. 3:14](#)). When this term (Heb. *Yahweh*) was translated into Greek, it became *ego eimi* ("I am"), and throughout John we will see Jesus' absolute use of this phrase without a predicate to disclose more of his divine identity.

The Food of Jesus ([4:27-42](#))

THE COMPLETION OF the second challenge from [4:10](#) closes this frame of the discourse. Jesus' disciples, who had left to get food ([4:8](#)), now return and express normal amazement that he is talking with a woman, much less a Samaritan ([4:27](#)). Of course they are likely thinking about the prohibitions lived in tradition and written in law that forbade a man to talk casually with a woman (see above). But they may also have been intrigued that Jesus would engage a woman *theologically*. The rabbis taught that theological education, that is, instruction in the law, was for men alone. To teach women or girls not only was a waste of time, but a profaning of sacred things. Jesus disregards such custom and here is talking to a singularly *irreligious* woman about matters of utmost spiritual profundity.

Much has been made of the woman leaving her jar behind ([4:28](#)) in order to report to her neighbors. For some, this is an irresistible opportunity for allegory (her former life? the law?), but it must be resisted. Perhaps she is leaving the jar for Jesus to drink. Perhaps she does not want to carry it home when she intends soon to return. Most likely her zeal to share her

discovery made her leave behind anything that would hinder her. Morris prefers a mild symbolism: "She abandoned the bringing of water for the bringing of men."

This is the heart of John's meaning. One sign of discipleship is the testimony given to others—words that eagerly spill out because of the preciousness of discovery. "Come, see" (4:29) is a Johannine phrase of invitation (1:39, 46). Potential converts do not need mere information about Jesus—note that the woman is even tentative about Jesus' identity as the Christ (4:29); they need only to come and have their own experience with him.

In the woman's absence, the disciples urge Jesus to eat. Suddenly we find ourselves in a mini-discourse bearing all the features already seen in chapter 4. Jesus' claim to possess food (4:32) baffles them since their assignment was to acquire food. Could someone (the woman?) have given him food (4:34)? But they are thinking of earthly things, and their misunderstanding enables Jesus to press their thinking to another level. Obeying the Father is Jesus' more deeply satisfying task. The Father has given the Son work to do (5:30; 6:38; 7:18; 8:50; 9:4; 10:37-38; 12:49-50) and his mission is to see it to completion. In his final prayer Jesus will say, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (17:4). When Jesus says "It is finished" on the cross, it is not merely his life expiring, but a gratifying expression of the climax of his life of obedience.

In 4:35 Jesus reminds his disciples of a farming proverb in order to point them to their present obedience. Scholars have wondered about the origin of this saying (it is not attested anywhere) and its meaning (grain harvests take more than four months to ripen). Further, what harvests are "white" (NIV "ripe") when harvested? Endless speculation about Jewish and Samaritan festival origins seems futile; instead, we are likely hearing a village proverb shared orally (of which the Middle East seems to have no end of supply).

Jesus is thinking about the span of time between planting and harvest when the grain is growing but not mature, when the fields are full but not ready for cutting. The farmer relaxes and enjoys the promise of plenty. But Jesus abruptly changes the image. The fields are *now* ready for gathering! He has planted the seed (at the well) and now the harvest (of Samaritans) is coming in. As he thinks about white harvests, some wonder if he is reflecting on the approaching Samaritans (4:40, dressed in white?), who will become a crop for eternal life (4:36). Jesus is in the world, God has invaded the field with seed, and it is bearing fruit already.

Jesus reaches for another agricultural metaphor in 4:37-38 as he explains what he expects of his disciples. In farming (as in so many other labors) significant labor precedes harvest. Sometimes those who do the preparatory work are not the same as those who harvest. But what does Jesus mean by "others [who] have done the hard work" This is possibly John the Baptist or Jesus himself, who has prepared the way for the coming church. Either way it is an important theological statement since it defines Christian mission in terms of what has gone on before, what God has been doing in advance of our efforts. Christian labor is never a solitary effort, divorced from the labor of God. Christians are called to go where God has already "done the hard work" and in this place reap the harvest.

In [4:39](#) the Samaritans reenter the scene and the harvest is at hand. Their faith (they "believed in him") is based on the woman's testimony, which underscores the value of human witness to the work of God ([17:20](#)). Evangelism is a cooperative effort, in which the preparatory work of God joins with our witness to what he has done and is doing in the world. Jesus and his followers agree to remain two days ([4:40](#)), which confirms the Samaritans' conviction that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Their stay there brought even more successes since many more came to faith. It is likely this groundwork that contributes to the later efforts of Philip in [Acts 8](#) when he comes to Samaria following Stephen's martyrdom. The Samaritans eagerly receive Philip, confess their faith, are baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit.

The narrative's final statement ([4:42](#)) is an important summary of the fruit of the woman's labor. The Samaritans evidence what every believer must have—a faith that is not secondary or dependent on someone else. *Rather, they have come and seen and experienced Christ for themselves.* This personal experiential feature is a constant concern for John. Potential converts must not only have their beliefs in order, but they must also be able to testify to a personal experience ("He told me everything I ever did!" [4:39b](#)). But there is one more intriguing aspect of the Samaritans' testimony. They refer to Jesus as "the Savior of the world." This is an unusual phrase, which occurs in only one other place in the New Testament ([1 John 4:14](#)). But it parallels [3:17](#) in thought: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

The "world" points to the far horizon of paganism and disbelief beyond Jewish and Samaritan cultural frontiers. God's work in Christ is not limited to Israel (or even Samaria). This is a first glimpse of the universal mission of Jesus, to reach those outside the boundaries of Judaism. In a similar way Jesus remarks in [10:16](#) that he has "*other* sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also" (italics added). The harvest of Jesus is barely what the disciples can imagine.

Jesus Returns to Cana ([4:43-54](#))

JESUS LEAVES SAMARIA after his two-day stay ([4:40, 43](#)) and continues north, crossing the Jezreel Valley and entering the region of Galilee. This small story brings us full circle from where Jesus began his public ministry, namely, in Cana. In fact, the story provides a closing "frame" to the section of the Gospel that outlines Jesus and four institutions of Judaism (purification, temple, rabbi, a well). As I mentioned in the Introduction, the original edition of the Fourth Gospel did not have chapter divisions and so literary markers invite us to note the progress of the story. Each Cana miracle is even numbered for our convenience ([2:11](#); [4:54](#)).

- Jesus works a miracle in Cana (his *first* sign, [2:11](#))
- Jesus and the Jerusalem temple
- Jesus and a Jerusalem rabbi
- Jesus and a Samaritan woman
- Jesus works a miracle in Cana (his *second* sign, [4:54](#))

This numbering clears up questions that readers often have for [4:54](#) and the sequencing of signs. This is not the second sign Jesus did since Jesus had done other signs ([2:23](#)). Even the language of the text betrays its purpose: (lit.) "This he did [as] a second sign." This is now the second sign Jesus is working in Galilee, matching the first one at the Cana wedding.

The parenthetical comment in [4:44](#) has given commentators endless problems, and Carson notes no fewer than ten solutions. The problem is simple: Jesus says prophets have no honor in their own country. However if Galilee is his country, it is a peculiar statement because in [4:45](#) the Galileans welcome him, and we have nothing in John like Luke's story of the rejection at Nazareth ([Luke 4](#)). Some (Westcott, Hoskyns) make Judea "his country," thereby explaining the ultimate rejection there in Jerusalem. But this interpretation fails when we remember how often John (and the Synoptics) refer to Nazareth as Jesus' home ([1:45-46](#); [18:5, 7](#); [19:19](#); cf. [7:41](#) ["Galilee"]). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all refer to this saying following Jesus' visit to Nazareth ([Matt. 13:57](#); [Mark 6:4](#); [Luke 4:24](#)).

Carson effectively suggests that we should think of "Israel" as his country. The comparison in [4:44](#) is not between Judea and Galilee, but between Samaria (which he has just left) and the Jewish regions of the country. In Samaria Jesus has just enjoyed an overwhelming success. At best, his audiences in Jerusalem were cautious; in [2:18, 20](#) the Jews challenged him there. The Galileans in the present story welcome him not because he might be the Messiah (cf. the Samaritans, [4:29, 41](#)) but because they have witnessed his activity in Jerusalem ([4:45b](#)), which likely refers to his cleansing of the temple. Their interest in Jesus, therefore, refers to his role in opposition to the temple authorities. Even Jesus' rebuke in [4:48](#) is in the plural, showing that he is speaking of everyone in Galilee ("Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe").

In other words, John is writing with genuine irony in [4:45](#) when he talks about the Galileans' welcome. As the next section in Galilee makes clear, they do not understand him; in fact, they readily misrepresent his aims ([6:15](#)), and some of his disciples even fall away ([6:66](#)). As a Jew, Jesus is commenting on his home culture, Judaism, which cannot provide one of its own prophets with honor.

When Jesus visits Cana, he is approached by a man from Capernaum ([4:46](#)) whose son is desperately ill and about to die. He was an important man ("a royal official") since he likely worked for Herod Antipas in Galilee. The man asks Jesus persistently if he will come down to Capernaum to heal his son ([4:47, 49](#)). Since Cana is in the hills of Galilee and Capernaum is by the sea, "coming down" is a note of accuracy embedded in the story. The two villages were about twenty miles apart, separated by hills. Jesus heals the boy at a distance instead of traveling to Capernaum ([4:50](#)). Later, as the man returns home, his servants meet him with news of the healing ([4:52](#)) that occurred precisely when Jesus uttered his words of healing ([4:53](#)).

On two other occasions Jesus heals from a distance: the healing of the centurion's slave ([Matt. 8:5-13](#); [Luke 7:2-10](#)) and the healing of the Phoenician woman's daughter ([Matt. 15:21-](#)

28; [Mark 7:24-30](#)). These stories invite comparisons with the Johannine story since there are parallels (even verbal parallels), particularly with the story of the centurion's slave. For some scholars, John's story (set in Cana) and the centurion story (set in Capernaum) describe the same event. But this seems unlikely. In the Synoptics we read about a Gentile soldier who has a slave that is paralyzed. Jewish elders plead with Jesus in Capernaum (because the Gentile had built the Capernaum synagogue), but the soldier insists that Jesus not come to his home. In the end, the soldier's faith is praised ("I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel," Jesus remarks in [Luke 7:9](#)). By contrast, our story is set in Cana with a hapless father who begs Jesus to enter his home far away. He pleads alone for his son who has a fever and is never praised by Jesus. In the end, these stories are anchored in two important personalities—a famous military officer and a Herodian bureaucrat—and have more differences than similarities.

Even though the official and his family believe in Jesus ([4:53](#)), the critical sentence in the story is [4:48](#): "'Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,' Jesus told him, 'you will never believe.' " The attitude of the Galileans is the issue here. As noted at [2:11](#), the word "sign" describes a revelatory unveiling of God that may be worked through a miracle. When John links "sign" with "wonder" (Gk. *teras*), he is describing a different phenomenon. The Galileans want Jesus to *prove himself* with an act of power. The same attitude surfaces in Galilee in [6:30](#) after Jesus feeds the five thousand. In this case, the Galileans miss the *revelatory sign* Jesus has given and press him to do something spectacular so that they can believe. Jesus' point is sharp: They simply want miracles, but they do not want to see what God is really doing among them ([6:26](#)).

The NIV softens the language of the exchange between Jesus and the official. "Come down [an imperative], for my little child dies" ([4:49](#), lit. trans.) is matched by Jesus' equally abrupt response, "Go [also an imperative], for 'your son' lives." Despite the man's later belief, he still views Jesus as a miracle worker who may be commanded to come and go. The royal official has given an order; Jesus now does the same.

Bridging Contexts

JESUS AND THE Samaritan woman. It is not the task of the exegete to unfold the psychological or social profile of this woman (or most of the characters in John). This has been done at length in the church, making the woman in her isolation, sin, and openness the center of the story's interest. Much imaginative preaching has succeeded to dramatize the story along these lines, but it misrepresents John's intention. Evangelicals have been guilty of this, but the same is true of other exegetes.

On some occasions writers have emphasized the nameless, faceless character of the woman and tried to uncover a tendency in the Scripture to marginalize not just this woman but every woman. But this too is far from John's mind. He is not writing about how women are marginalized and how Jesus has come to rescue them. Nor is he inviting us to probe the inner

world of this woman. She remains in the background so that John's Christological focus can stay solidly in the foreground. Nicodemus receives a name because he becomes an ongoing player in the story, speaking up for Jesus in the Sanhedrin and assisting in his burial (7:50; 19:39). This woman becomes a temporary player on the Johannine stage in order to model to us an appropriate response to Christ. She clings to her tradition as a religious cover to dodge this discerning rabbi.

Characters such as this woman are mirrors in which to view Jesus from another angle. The best that can be said is that Nicodemus is a closed religious character and the woman is an open irreligious character—and each demonstrates different levels of receptivity to Jesus and his message. Nicodemus launches questions; the woman is looking for Jesus' answers.

To be sure, this woman is a person of courage, a person who has lost all hope and who is socially isolated, living on the periphery of society. We know from many Synoptic accounts that Jesus is keenly interested in such people. Note again [Mark 2:17](#): "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." In fact, his commitment to such people was a regular source of criticism for him ([Luke 15:1-2](#)). But our task is to locate and develop what is central to the passage, what is pressing on John's mind as he explores this conversation in Samaria for us (1) *Jesus and religion*. The leading message of the story is about Jesus and his relation to religion. On one level we can speak about Jesus and his impact on historic first-century Judaism. As we witnessed in all of the institutions of Judaism that Jesus confronts (ritual purity at Cana, the Jerusalem temple, Nicodemus), he overwhelms and replaces abundantly those things that the institutions offered. Jesus fills water vessels with wine, astonishing a party; he challenges the temple, suggesting that he himself will replace what it offers; he instructs a Jewish teacher in the deeper things of God. Now he comes to a traditional well associated with one of Israel's greatest heroes, Jacob, and he offers what Jacob never could: living water (interpreted as the Holy Spirit) that turns people into life-giving wells ([4:14](#)). Jesus even challenges the sanctity and significance of Mount Gerizim and Jerusalem, holy places to Samaritans and Jews. "Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" ([4:21](#)) are shocking words to anyone who has any investment in history and tradition.

On another level we can also say that John views the advent of Jesus in history as upending the way that men and women should embrace the religious traditions in which they may take refuge. The Samaritan woman provides a classic case study of someone who, when challenged to assess the reality of her spirituality, immediately tosses up the barrier and says, as it were, "But look, I am a Samaritan and we have our own way of doing things" (cf. [4:20](#)). Jesus will not permit his presence to be invalidated by human claims to culture, history, or tradition. If Jesus—the Rabbi, Messiah, Son of God—can question the religious significance of Jerusalem ([4:21](#)), what else could stand in his way? The woman's argument for Mount Gerizim does not stand a chance (especially in light of its dubious historical moorings). But likewise, John would insist, those items that we have turned into sacred mountains do not stand a chance either. This is a troubling and fruitful theme that [John 4](#) invites us to explore.

(2) *The Samaritan woman and religion.* There is likewise much to learn from the profile of this woman. The key here is not so much her background (except that she is marginalized from Judaism as a Samaritan and isolated from the community of women) as it is her attitude to Jesus. John invites us to step into her shoes, to marvel at Jesus' interest, and to examine the themes he raises. We should take careful note that Jesus even speaks to her at all. No self-respecting rabbi in the first century would have spoken to a woman in this setting. But Jesus delights in breaking traditional cultural barriers that separate people. He takes a risk. He reaches out. He speaks. And, John would have us reflect, if Jesus is willing to speak to her, who won't he speak to in the first century or today?

No doubt as readers we anticipate the climax in 4:17, "I have no husband." Watching the conversation unfold is like watching someone unwrap a box in which is hidden a lively spring. When Jesus inquires about her marital status, the spring is loosed and we wonder what will happen next. Here we have a potential disciple who has hidden a profound sin in her life. Perhaps it is a way of life that must be addressed. But Jesus recognizes that there is no going forward, no reaching the living water, until this hidden thing is exposed and cleansed. But in the end I admire this woman. Throughout the conversation with Jesus she must choose whether to remain in the light with Jesus or walk away. In some respects, she dramatizes what we learned in 3:20, "Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come to the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." The light has exposed her, but she chooses to remain, and it must have been a decision of remarkable courage and will.

But as a potential disciple, what should be expected of this woman? Since chapter 1, we have watched men and woman come forward, listen to Jesus, and respond. As this Gospel unfolds, we will see more. But here in this story we have the development of a profile, a template perhaps, of what it means to become a disciple. Note once again Jesus' challenge in 4:10. Converts must know how to identify the gift and its giver and converts must ask for a drink.

I see two dimensions to conversion here, one cognitive and one experiential. (a) The woman must be able to identify correctly who Jesus is. In theological terms, there is a doctrinal expectation. Content matters. To have a spirituality (no matter how profound) that is not based on the truth should not be trusted. "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (4:24). (b) There is an experiential hope. To have correct theology, to be doctrinally sound and orthodox, but to have never tasted the water or to have never felt the Holy Spirit is to miss a vital component of discipleship. For John, the "head" and the "heart" must both be engaged.

But there is also a necessary corollary. The motif of misunderstanding at work in the discourse implies that men and women who do not believe, who have not experienced the Holy Spirit, who do not know the living water— such people are incapable of understanding the deep things of God. Jesus tries to elevate understanding but fails because his subjects constantly view things from an earthly vantage. What does this mean for our understanding of revelation? When we read the Scriptures, for instance, does the Spirit supply some facility to the Christian that is inaccessible to others? Is belief a necessary prerequisite for understanding?

Now if we return as readers to the passage with this profile of confession and experience in mind, we see some amazing new things because John wants us as readers to have a relationship with Jesus just as it may have happened for the woman. Note as the story unfolds how there is a remarkable display of titles for Jesus (exactly as we saw in [1:35-51](#)). The woman and the story mature in their perception of Jesus:

- Jesus ([4:6](#))
- Jew ([4:9](#))
- Sir (Lord) ([4:11](#), [15](#), [19](#))
- Prophet ([4:19](#))
- Messiah ([4:25](#))
- Christ ([4:25](#), [29](#))
- I am ([4:26](#))
- Rabbi ([4:31](#))
- Savior of the world ([4:42](#))

Such a list is not accidental. As readers we cannot overlook how titles of respect evolve into titles of belief. In other words, the story's language models for us the demand for intelligent belief, for identifying Jesus properly and fully.

The woman offers one final model of discipleship, namely, her desire to bear witness to what she now believes and has experienced. I find this decision on her part to be courageous and heroic as well. She is living on the margin of her community. This is a society where life is lived in public, where secrets are always brought into the public forum. And this woman is a sinner. Nevertheless, she takes a tremendous risk, returning to her town and telling the townsfolk about religion as one who has flaunted its precepts for years. The striking part is that they listen to her and respond. In some fashion the story is telling us that when people who are irreligious meet God, their words have a potency that surpasses those of the pious.

(3) The life and mission of the church. Even though this story is set in the first century, its attention to harvests ([4:34-38](#)), the role of the disciples, and Jesus' comments on worship each suggest that the life and mission of the church are a theme here. Writing in the mid-first century, John understood fully the significance of Jesus' traveling through Samaria. When Philip had evangelized Samaria ([Acts 8:5](#)), John was one of the apostles sent there with Peter to facilitate the coming of the Spirit. Therefore this story was important to him, and we cannot help but wonder whether, when John went to Samaria, he met some of these same people.

This means that the story before us did indeed have meaning for the later church inasmuch as mission to Samaria was a part of the church's vision. This story spoke volumes to where the church should go and what it could expect when it got there. No doubt sayings such as [4:38](#) were treasured: "I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." Here we have a theological comment about the nature of evangelism and God's participation with us.

Moreover, Jesus' mission to Samaria presented a challenge to communities for whom travel beyond their cultural frontiers was difficult. John's account asks a probing question: If Jesus could go to Samaria, where are there "new Samaritans" for the church today? If the [John 4/Acts 8](#) parallel is helpful, then when we find these places, we will likely discover that Jesus has been there already.

[John 4](#) also offers an unavoidable critique about worship and tradition. On the historical plane, it is easy for us to understand how the historic sites of Gerizim and Jerusalem have changed their importance in light of Jesus' death and resurrection. Here Jesus is announcing a new immediacy with God that will not be mediated through place, but rather through the Spirit. Juxtaposed to the Spirit is no doubt the tradition that the Samaritan woman and every first-century Jew was willing to defend. But today similar questions can be asked. What traditions of place, form, or ritual do we defend that suddenly find themselves at odds with the work of the Holy Spirit? Do humans (Christian and non-Christian alike) have a tendency to create religious traditions as a part of the architecture of their lives? Does tradition have limited value? Are Jesus' work and the work of the Spirit at odds with such traditions?

Jesus returns to Cana. The healing of the royal official's son at its most basic level is a story of compassion. Sons were of unique value to families in first-century Jewish culture. Fathers never referred to the number of their "children." They would always describe how many sons and daughters they had, with emphasis on the former. In fact, the father in our story uses a Greek term of endearment to describe his "little boy" ([4:49](#)). The phrase tells us that this is not merely one of the man's "sons." This is a child, a little boy whose illness has torn his father's heart. Perhaps this is the man's firstborn son, in which case there is a great deal at stake. Firstborn sons carried the heritage of the family: property, name, and responsibility for women. Jesus understands these emotions and values, and he acts with compassion and speed.

Therefore I can look at this story and rightly see a message about Jesus' interest in meeting the needs of the suffering. But John offers a few unique twists. We have become accustomed to reading about Jesus' care for the poor in many Gospel stories. But here we see Jesus interacting with a man of some means, a man of power, a man who is linked to politics, much like Nicodemus was linked to religion. Even though this man at first insists and then orders Jesus to do what he wants, Jesus complies. What are some avenues of exploration for us? No doubt we should reflect on the healing work of Jesus, but also on his compassion when people misunderstand his purposes and even when they may wish to exploit him.

One of the curious themes in the Fourth Gospel is the "absence of Jesus."

On more than one occasion, Jesus chooses not to be where he is expected.

Sometimes Jesus is sought by officials ([9:12](#)) or crowds ([7:11](#)) who cannot find him. Nathanael is perplexed ([1:48](#)) because Jesus can see things when he is not there. Jesus suddenly appears across the Sea of Galilee when the crowds are looking for him elsewhere ([6:22ff.](#)). Jesus must explain that not only is his origin a mystery but his destination will be unexpected ([7:28-29](#), [33-](#)

36; 8:21). When he is expected in Bethany for the ailing Lazarus, he chooses to be absent (11:21). And of course, when the women look for him at his tomb, he is absent as well (20:1-2).

What does all of this mean? Why is it unnecessary for Jesus to travel to Capernaum to heal this young boy? At the very least this lends a dimension of mystery to Jesus' movements and activity. Jesus is not confined to place. His capacity, his knowledge, and his interest go beyond human imagination and ability. His power makes his movements and his actions indecipherable to those who do not have faith.

Finally, John is supplying a theologically sophisticated comment here about faith based on signs. This aspect of the story is likely one of the central reasons why the apostle included it in his Gospel. God's desire to disclose himself in the natural world results in revelatory "signs." When this display involves acts of power, miracles result. Such self-disclosure by God should lead men and women to faith so that they see the dramatic penetration of God in the world and praise and worship him. But here is the problem. Those who witness these signs and who are captive to the darkness of this world will only see deeds of power, not divine deeds of revelation. John therefore is asking us to reflect on the relation among signs and miracles and faith.

Or more broadly, John is opening up the question of the relation of history to revelation and whether God discloses himself historically—and if he does, how it can be beneficial. Can humans witness anything from God, given the nature of the world? The Galileans were seeking signs, but this Gospel gives a critique of faith based merely on signs and announces a blessing on those who believe without having seen (signs) at all (20:29). Nevertheless, Jesus came to offer such "signs," and he provided them generously (12:37; 20:30). The question for us is related to this: What can we expect from God? Can we expect signs and wonders? What pitfalls await those seeking such things?

Contemporary Significance

THE BRIDGING CONTEXTS section shows that there are many themes in [John 4](#) that must be pressed into service in today's contemporary church. This is not simply a story about a woman who meets the Lord, discovers her sin, and then begins a walk of faith in light of her discovery. It is more. Far more.

Jesus and the world. Where is Samaria today? I am not referring to the geographical location of hills a few miles north of Jerusalem. I am thinking about Samaria as a metaphor that represents a major political and cultural boundary that stands between the church and a needy people. Jesus has crossed such a boundary and so should we. At the end of the story, he is described as "Savior of *the world*"—a remarkable title coming from a society that was as ethnically and

culturally divided as ours. We must think about those social, economic, and political boundaries that circumscribe the church's activity, and we must cross them.

Witherington perceptively identifies the tendency today among Christians to concentrate on those audiences that will be most receptive to their message.

The suggestion is that one should target certain *kinds* of people to recruit for one's church, because they can be more easily assimilated into the preexisting mix of one's congregation for the very good reason that they are so much like the congregation in race, ethnic origins, socioeconomic status, education, and the like.

This has led to selective activity that avoids "Samaria," making Sunday morning one of the most segregated times of our week. We talk about going to Samaria, we study the possibilities, but we rarely get there. Commentator G. Campbell Morgan once asked what would have happened if Jesus invited his followers to study the prospect of going to Samaria.

If those disciples had been appointed as a commission of inquiry as to the possibilities of Christian enterprise in Samaria I know exactly the resolution they would have passed. The resolution would have been: Samaria undoubtedly needs our Master's message, but it is not ready for it. There must be first ploughing, then sowing, and then waiting. It is needy, but it is not ready.

[John 4](#) challenges us to take a risk, to examine the margins of our world and cross them. I am impressed that a trip to Samaria meant nothing short of "risk" for Jesus. It meant leaving the usually traveled highway that was well known and comfortable. It meant traveling without the usual companions. And when Jesus went into Samaria as an outsider, risk was joined to cost. As any traveler knows, prices change when the retailer hears your accent.

But there is another intriguing aspect. A comparison of the woman with Nicodemus shows how far she is from the "acceptable standards" of Jewish society. Yet unlike Nicodemus, she responds in a way that no doubt delights Jesus. Unfettered by the theological questions that followed Nicodemus like a shadow, this woman in her simplicity gets it right. She knows a prophet when she meets one and concludes that he may well be the Messiah. And she is willing to tell her friends. Those to whom the Gospel is truly "new" news, who live on the far periphery of religion, sometimes see the meaning of God's Word with a simple and refreshing clarity.

I recently had a conversation with a friend who has worked at a car rental agency since his release from prison. As a young believer, he sees the commands of Jesus simply and obeys them. When I talk with graduate students about those same commands, we suddenly find ourselves enmeshed in all sorts of theological debates.

There are also many insights here concerning evangelism. The woman's comment, "I have no husband," reminds me of the phrase in Judges, "Israel had no king" ([Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25](#)). In fact, this woman has a list of husbands, just as the Israelites had decided to be their own kings. Each one needs one King, one Husband. As Jesus' conversation with the woman unfolds, he will not let himself get sidetracked by secondary issues but continues to press home his interest in her personal life. Her ethnicity, religious history, and gender may not become barriers. *She needs living water.*

In evangelism the same situation often arises. Muslims will make a last ditch appeal to Muhammad and centuries of mosque/church rivalry. They may even ask about the state of Israel, another minefield of troubles. "What do you think of gays in the church?" is always a conversation stopper when you suspect that the question bears some relevance to the person's identity and life. "But don't evangelicals really put down women?" is another statement designed to give pause. These sentences and hundreds of others like them are attempts to deflect the real issue at hand. Jesus will have none of it. In [John 4:10](#) we learn his double agenda: Do you know the Christ? And will you drink his living water?

Not every evangelical is comfortable with Jesus' evangelistic strategy here. Indeed, he challenges the woman's presuppositions, exhibits care in her life and background, and gently uncovers her sin. We like these approaches. But it is not until Jesus utters a word of prophecy that suddenly the woman's eyes are opened in a new way. *Jesus exhibits the power of the Spirit at work for her and thereby models the power of the Spirit that may some day be within her.*

We may quickly say that this prophetic word was simply a feature of Jesus' sonship. But I am sure John would disagree. Jesus affirms that our abilities will imitate his. "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" ([14:12](#)). Jesus is explaining that the endowment of the Spirit given to the disciples following his glorification will equip them in a way similar to his. Even the letters of John indicate that prophecy was a gift that was active in John's churches ([1 John 4:1](#)). But what does this mean for evangelism? Is a convincing testimony simply about a coherent presentation of belief or a persuasive presentation of the facts? It must be more. Those outside the kingdom deserve to see signs; they deserve to see the Holy Spirit in us before they will step closer to faith themselves.

I believe that John is also telling us something about the incapacity of this woman—or any other person, for that matter—to grasp the things of God by themselves. This is the meaning of the misunderstandings in the discourse. *She does not understand what Jesus is talking about.* She cannot. Jesus is bringing a divine revelation to darkness. We live in darkness. Our senses, our morals, our instincts, and our intellect are all fallen beyond our ability to repair them. In fact, God's effort in the Incarnation is an attempt to penetrate this darkness in his Son, Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is his effort to penetrate our hearts so that we can believe and understand. John repeats this theme in one of his later letters: "This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and

blood. And it is the *Spirit* who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth" (1 John 5:6, italics added).

When Jesus asked his disciples who he was at Caesarea Philippi, all but Peter answered incorrectly. Then Jesus remarks, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). Spiritual discernment is entirely a work of God, initiated by God and directed by him. Thus Jesus says, "Others have done the hard work" (John 4:38), meaning that harvesters (evangelists) can be assured God has gone before them.

Calvin stressed this point with powerful clarity (see his *Institutes*, 2.2.18-21). He compared human reason to a man walking through a field in the dark of night. We are like travelers "who in a momentary lightning flash see far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that [they are] plunged again into the darkness of the night before [they] can even take a step. God illumines us sufficiently for us to know that there are villages and mountains on the horizon, but we cannot make a map or find our way successfully. Spiritual transformation is thus an act of grace that enables us to understand the things we yearn to know.

Jesus, tradition, and "place." Both Jews and Samaritans had their sacred mountains. Mount Gerizim and Mount Zion (Jerusalem) both held a sacred history that anchored the religious identities of their people. They provided a means for each group to consolidate itself, to identify itself over against others, to gain religious prestige, and to enjoy assurance that "on *this* mountain" God is rightly worshiped and heard. In the story these mountains not only come up for criticism by Jesus (4:21), but they become a way for the woman to deflect Jesus' word to her. She appeals to her tradition and hopes that her position will keep Jesus at bay.

Such mountains are enclaves of refuge where religion can be embraced, but likewise where God *might* be avoided. Religious mountains can have as much to do with the Truth as a well in Shechem has to do with the living Water offered by God. One of the deepest memories I have comes from my upbringing in a Christian tradition that is as old as the sixteenth century. From childhood I grew up in the Swedish Lutheran community that had its roots in Chicago. I say "Swedish" because *aseveryone* seemed to know, the German Lutherans simply did not have a corner on the truth. Through Sunday School, worship services (where I was an acolyte), and confirmation, I learned to be proud of this tradition. I memorized the liturgies and Luther's Shorter Catechism. My Catholic friends wore fashionable "St. Christopher" medallions and I dutifully wore a chain inscribed on one side with Lutheran symbols (heart and cross) and on the other the words, "I am a Lutheran." It did not occur to me that it could have said, "I am a Christian." Lutheran was a subset of Christian—a superior subset.

This identity worked fine until at my university I met a graduate student in chemistry who led a Bible study sponsored by Calvary Chapel (Costa Mesa, California). It was 1972, the Jesus Movement was just underway, and the beach ministries of Calvary Chapel were being born. Anyone can guess what I said when pressed about my faith: "I am a Lutheran." Luther was my hero. I even possessed my grandfather's catechism texts from Europe to prove it in case my

medallion was insufficient. But then he asked irritating questions about Jesus and the Bible ("What about Luther and the Catechism?") and probed whether it was possible to be religious without being Christian.

Jesus is not interested in Samaritan identities any more than he is interested in Lutheran credentials. The questions remain the same: Have you discovered living water? And do you know who supplies it?

Tradition is not the evil some evangelicals would think, however. Tradition can give needed perspective and depth, which today I seek and value. However, religious tradition can become a badge that is more important than our faith itself. Do evangelicals possess such traditions, such places of identity that have little to do with God? I can think of coalitions, institutions, churches, colleges— even special interests—that become so important to evangelicals that these items define what it means to be spiritual. We become impenetrable to the work of God but nevertheless remain thoroughly religious.

Tradition receives its most poignant critique from Jesus and its most lively debates today when the subject of worship is raised. "Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" has its historical moorings, but imagine what it meant for subsequent Christians wrestling with competing worship traditions. When early Christians from Antioch met with Christians from Rome, were there struggles? What would [4:24](#) have meant to them? "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

In countless churches today congregations struggle with the nature of worship and the perceived forms that are traditional and "holy." I have witnessed this in two congregations. Younger people want something "contemporary" while older folks (who don't realize that their liturgies began in the 1940s or 1950s) defend traditional forms. "Spirit and truth" ought to be an exhortation aimed at both parties. Neither synthesizers nor eighteenth-century hymns guarantee genuine worship that engages the Spirit of God.

Finally, the story of the Samaritan woman places a question mark over another reflex so common among us. When Jesus challenges the sanctity of Gerizim, I can recognize this as a correction to erroneous Samaritan thinking. But when he questions the ongoing validity of Jerusalem as a *locale* of worship and reverence ([4:21](#)), something different has happened. "Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" addresses something profound about how our architects build religion. Because our faith is historically anchored (and not gnostic), "place" becomes important as does "time." Questions of *when* and *where* are vital to theological discourse. The problem comes when these places become ends in themselves, when they are protected and revered in unholy ways, when they no longer point to the God who was there, but instead point to the place where he acted.

Of course, this propensity has been with us for a long time. I am not thinking here about religiously historic places such as Dallas, Colorado Springs, or Wheaton (or any host of names); I am thinking quite literally about Jerusalem in the Middle East. It does not take long for a visitor

in Israel to get a sense of holy places, and the defense of these places has led to terrible examples of violence and bloodshed. The Crusades are one severe example. But even recently outside Bethlehem, Rachel's tomb is a place where Jews have decided they must pray, and the violence there became so acute that Israeli authorities have now built a twelve-foot wall around it to cordon off the worshipers. Passersby cannot even see the tomb from the road anymore.

Evangelical Christians today have had an unholy relation to Jerusalem and the land of Israel. They have adopted a "Holy Land Theology," in which the defense of "place" has become a religious duty. So-called embassies, federations, and foundations have organized evangelical money and clout in order to defend political interests in the region. What is most distressing is that as evangelicals have defended this "place," they have forgotten that they have Arab brothers and sisters in Christ (135,000 of them) who often suffer because of these politics.

Christians may well speak to issues of peace and justice in the Middle East, but when mountains are defended in the name of God and people are sacrificed, something is amiss. "Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" is Jesus' critique of "place." God is spirit (4:24), which at the very least means he is not tied to "place," but transcends all such things.

Jesus, miracles, and faith. I have a friend (whom I will call Anthony) who claims to have a secret library hidden under his bed. He is a mainline minister whose reputation and prestige are likely the envy of many of his colleagues. Anthony pastors a "tall steeple" church and has even had experience as a college and seminary professor. When someone visits his office, they can see the appropriately displayed volumes of Luther, Calvin, and Barth mixed with the best in contemporary theology and exegesis. But then there is this hidden library, which, he swears, would be his undoing if anyone found out.

This library is about miraculous healing and exorcism. Some of these books bear titles that amaze and entertain; many are from publishers no one has ever seen before. They have breathtaking cover art. Not only does Anthony read these things but he has taken a step further, attending meetings where the "full gospel" can be heard *and experienced*. His sermons exhibit genuine sophistication, eloquence, and rigorous theological orthodoxy. He is a homiletic marvel. But his secret library seems never to penetrate these sermons.

I have often wondered about the value of these paperback theologies to Anthony. One time he gave me a glimpse into their unexpected secrets. Their miraculous stories provided certainty amidst his many questions— assurance that God was real and powerful when orthodox rationality and logic did not satisfy his heart. Once he said that *if* these things were true, just imagine how it would revolutionize the church. "If?" He had come upon one claiming that they were absolutely true. He had even tasted some of their powerful promises himself.

Anthony had concluded that the miraculous sign was the ultimate validation of God's reality. He assumed that if he had sufficient exposure to these things—if the church had sufficient exposure—the demons of doubt and sin and disbelief would vanish. But as most Pentecostal

ministers (for whom this sort of thing is their stock and trade) admit, it isn't so easy. Miraculous signs do not automatically lead to faith, nor do they vanquish the darkness that haunts us.

[John 4:43-54](#) opens a question that it does not entirely answer, namely, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a faith based on miraculous signs? Jesus' surprising rebuke in [4:48](#), "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders ... you will never believe," suggests that the evidence sought by the Galileans did not meet with Jesus' favor. While in Jerusalem, Jesus had the same feeling about the Jews who believed because he could work a sign ([2:23-25](#)). Later, when he was in Galilee, the crowd pursued him not because of his sonship, but because of his miracle: "not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill" ([6:26](#)). The crowds saw a miraculous supply of bread, but they did not necessarily see who gave the bread (the Bread of Life!) or what it really meant.

For John, a sign is a divine revelation that leads to an enlightened faith in God. But most who live in this world can only experience the surface apprehension of power. For each of us burdened by human frailty, God must help. This is where my friend Anthony's theological fantasy is fundamentally flawed. It suggests that if the church or the world sees more miracles, only then will it embrace true faith.

During my first semester in seminary a professor told me a remarkable story from his early years as a pastor. A young woman had become critically ill and her prognosis was grim; she would likely die within the year. Her family had a nominal "Easter and Christmas Eve" commitment to the church, so the discussions in the hospital between this young pastor and this family always plowed new ground. The woman challenged him: If Jesus healed in the Bible, he should be able to heal me today. If not, what use was he? So she prayed. The pastor prayed. The whole family prayed—and pleaded and begged and bargained. If God would only show mercy, the family urged, they would completely recommit themselves and come to church every Sunday. This earnest young pastor prayed with all his heart. He refused to join the ranks of those who said, "If it is thy will." It was God's will that she be healed, he concluded.

Then to his amazement, God healed her—completely. And with the physicians shaking their heads, she was sent home from the hospital. Next Sunday, the entire family was there in the front pew, dressed and sparkling. The young woman gave her testimony, praising God for his goodness. The following Sunday, the family was there again. In four weeks, it was only the woman and her husband. And after that, attendance was sporadic until they dropped into their previous pattern. Before long, the woman rationalized the entire incident. She had experienced the most dramatic sign God could give her: healing, bathed in prayer and surrounded by the church. But after only two months, its power dimmed to nothing.

This is not to say that miraculous signs have no place in the ministry of the church. They do. But [John 4:43-54](#) suggests to us that they have a limited scope and usefulness. E. Schweizer once wrote, "The false component here does not consist in that he [the royal official] is not at all interested in Jesus himself, only in something to be obtained through him. This is where the story finds its deepest meaning. Miracles were a natural part of Jesus' ministry and led people

to faith (10:38). But Jesus is more than this, and he expects more. He looks for men and women not only to believe in his ability to work a miracle, but especially to believe in him. Merely witnessing or experiencing a miracle does not mean that one has experienced a gift from God; rather, it is faith itself that permits someone to participate in the miracle he grants; it is faith that turns these miracles into "divine signs."

The royal official sought a miracle. Jesus placed himself between the request and the healing, so that the man had to act in faith and walk home without the thing he wanted. He had to decide if he would trust Jesus, not simply bring him and his reputation to Capernaum. The young woman had sought a miracle but did not seek Jesus who stood behind it. And once she had it, she could dispense with God. Anthony's library is simply a fantasy because it promotes the possibility that a miracle or power encounter will solidify faith and spark renewal. It will not.

The root problem is our fallen capacity to receive and accept things from God. We will accept gifts that benefit us directly, that heal us or profit us; but a divine revelation, a divine sign, discloses who we are and who God really is. Divine signs, like light, are painful since they disclose everything hidden in the dark (3:19). I often recall the astounding story of Jesus in [Luke 16:19-31](#), the rich man and Lazarus. When the tormented rich man asks that his brothers be warned about the doom awaiting them, the conversation between hell and heaven ends with a comment by Abraham: Even if a person on earth is given every sign, even if someone were to come back from the dead, they would not believe. The human capacity to seek after God and to identify him and worship him is entirely broken. It was as true in Galilee as it is today.

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