

# **Give Me This Water That I Thirst Not: The Woman at the Well**

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As a child I attended the Tremonton First Ward in Tremonton, Utah. The ward still meets in the building that was constructed in 1928. The chapel is among the most beautiful I have ever seen because of a large, bas-relief mural that fills the entire front wall behind the podium. The mural depicts the story from John 4 of a Samaritan woman who came to know Jesus and his mercy at a well.

The artist was Torleif Knaphus, a Norwegian convert to the Church. He was commissioned to make the mural for the Tremonton chapel as his first replica of a relief he created for the Cardston Alberta Temple. Years later, a local Church member named Bob Macfarlane painted the mural, leaving one small portion (a disciple's satchet) the original hue of the clay.

I stared at that mural every week at church. I wondered what that woman had done to deserve such a prestigious place in our chapel. Because she had the Savior's complete attention, I figured she must have been pretty important and very righteous. I had yet to learn the mighty lessons inherent in her story. Please join me in revisiting this remarkable event. To begin, however, we need some background information.

## **Geographical Background**

The event takes place in Samaria, the region just north of Judea and south of Galilee. This territory was the land inheritance given to the two tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) when the children of Israel first conquered the land. Centuries before the Samaritan woman met Jesus at the well, Joshua established the region as the first religious center for the Israelite nation. Mt. Ebal to the north and Mt. Gerizim to the south border the area.

Jacob's Well is located near the foot of Mt. Gerizim, not far from the modern Palestinian

city of Nablus. In New Testament times, the closest village was called Sychar, but it was known in the Old Testament as Shechem. Here Jacob purchased land shortly after his favorable reunion with Esau, thereby giving the well its name. Strong Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Samaritan traditions confirm this location as the site of Jacob's well. In fact, one scholar has suggested the site as "the most authentic of all the holy places of Palestine." The well is reportedly more than one hundred feet deep and seven feet wide. One can still draw sweet water from Jacob's Well today.<sup>1</sup>

## **Historical Background**

At the time of Christ, the region was inhabited by Samaritans, a people who had a nearly one-thousand-year history of contention with the Jews. Although both peoples descended from Jacob's twelve sons, a division occurred in about 975 b.c. The Israelite nation split into two kingdoms, with two separate political and religious centers. The northern kingdom survived only until 722 b.c., when the inhabitants were scattered by the Assyrians. In 538 b.c., surviving Jews of the southern kingdom returned from Babylonian exile with permission from the Persian King Cyrus to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. By that time, Jews viewed Samaritans as ritually unclean because of their tainted lineage. Samaritans were descendants from a residue of the ten northern tribes who were not deported during the earlier Assyrian invasion and foreign colonists brought in by the Assyrians from other parts of the Assyrian empire.

The Jewish Mishnah warns: "He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine."<sup>2</sup> The Jews, therefore, rejected the Samaritans' offer to assist them in reconstructing their temple. In retaliation, the Samaritans created obstacles that temporarily halted Jewish reconstruction. Finally, in 128 b.c., the Jewish high priest destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim. In the days of Christ, the enduring animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans encouraged most Jews to take an alternate route via the Jordan River Valley when traveling to Galilee from Jerusalem. By skirting the province of Samaria, Jews could avoid contact with the Samaritan people.

## **Religious Background**

Samaritan beliefs were distinctive from Jewish beliefs in notable ways. Samaritans anticipated the coming of a messianic figure, called the Taheb (meaning "restorer"), suggesting one who would restore true worship of God and the Samaritans to their rightful place in the house of Israel. Additional descriptions of this messiah were identified from the first five books of the Old Testament. These records, known as the Pentateuch, or the five books of Moses, were the only scripture accepted by the Samaritans. Most notable is the prophecy that the Messiah would be a prophet like unto Moses, as promised in Deuteronomy 18:18. Speaking to Moses, God said, "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." The Book of Mormon clarifies that this "Prophet like unto Moses" is Jesus Christ (1 Nephi 22:20–21; 3 Nephi 20:23).

## Cultural Background Concerning Women in First-Century Palestine

Every day, either in the morning or the evening (or both morning and evening), women went to the well to fetch water for their homes and families. The daily ritual required women to be physically strong and agile. Each woman walked the distance to the well carrying a lengthy rope and a leather or animal-skin vessel. These items were too valuable to be left by the well for public use. After manually drawing water from the well, each woman would carry her rope and now-heavy water pot back to her home, only to repeat the chore the next day.

Although they did much of the labor, women were generally ranked lowest in society. The Mishnah labels all women as "menstruants from the cradle," thereby making them regularly unclean. Rabbinic literature also warned Jewish men against public association with women, including their own wives. "He that talks much with womankind," the passage reads, "brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna."<sup>3</sup>

Besides these reminders of rejection from religious leaders, the woman at the well faced additional censure. In John 4:18, we are told that she had been married to five different men in the past and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. Both the Jews and her own people would have ostracized her as a result. Perhaps that was the reason she went to the well during the "sixth hour," meaning six hours after sunrise, or about noon. The increased heat at mid-day would only add discomfort to her rigorous chore. Did the woman choose this unusual hour because it was the time she was least likely to meet other women? If men showed their disdain by ignoring her, women could be even more vicious with their judgmental gazes and whispers intended to be heard. Jesus lived in this culture that discouraged public communication with women. Yet we find him at the public well, deep in theological discussion with a woman and a clearly imperfect one at that. Why? And why her?

A renowned Christian authority has observed, "The more unsavory the characters, the more at ease they seemed to feel around Jesus." He then posed a provocative question to church-going individuals: "Why don't sinners like being around us? . . . Somehow we have created a community of respectability. . . . How did Jesus, the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect? And what keeps us from following his steps today?"<sup>4</sup> As remarkable as it may initially appear, this woman is the first person mentioned in the Gospels to hear Jesus identify himself as the Messiah. But that is at the end of the story. How did she come to receive such a profound blessing?

In the same manner that the Savior interacted with the woman at the well, he invites us to come unto him. Consider a four-part process that emerges from this New Testament text:

1. The Savior meets us where we are.
2. The Savior helps us to see our weaknesses.

3. The Savior leads us to recognize him.

4. The Savior invites us to leave our sins behind and bear testimony of him to others.

Let's explore each of these steps.

The Savior Meets Us Where We Are. Jesus went where he was certain to meet the woman, traveling right through the middle of Samaria rather than taking the alternate route. He also met her before she had received any introduction either through his teachings or his miracles. He made no initial requirement that she be living a particular way. Through both his words and his actions, Jesus convincingly taught, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13). But the woman of Samaria knew none of this. She saw only a thirsty man sitting on the well. He had none of the equipment necessary to draw water to quench his thirst, so he asked the woman for a drink. Perhaps from his dialect or from the weave of his clothing, the woman recognized that the man was a Jew.

When she addressed him, her greeting was not only without any evidence of respect but filled with awareness of the animosity that separated her people from his. "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (John 4:9). Clearly the woman was on her home turf. The Jewish stranger was the one who was out of place. Initially, they did not communicate on the same level. But, just as he spoke with this woman, the Savior can speak in whatever language we understand.

She had come to the well seeking life-sustaining water. He offered her something better. He offered living water that sustains life eternally. Jesus said to her, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water" (John 4:10). As yet, the woman had no idea that she was conversing with the one Man who would selflessly suffer to make this miraculous living water obtainable. She did not yet realize the one she was facing had the power to give her eternal life. Her response shows, however, that she was gaining respect for the man and an interest in his proffered gift. For the first time she addressed him as "kyrie," translated from the Greek as "sir" or "lord." Beginning in verse 11 we read, "Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water? Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well . . . ?" (John 4:11–12).

In his answer, Jesus emphasized that the water he offered was not at all like the water in that well. No rope or leather bucket was necessary for his promised water. He alone supplies the gift. In reference to the water in Jacob's Well, Jesus said, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:13–14). I'm certain that I don't understand all that is entailed in the Savior's gift of living water. Surely it must include complete forgiveness, personal revelation, and teachings that come through the witness of the Spirit and guide us back to God's presence. To Joseph Smith, the Lord revealed, "Unto him that keepeth my commandments I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and the same shall be in him a

well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life" (D&C 63:23).

The Samaritan woman was quick to respond to his explanation. Her interest in the gift was deepening, and the awe she had for this man was increasing. "Sir," she petitioned, "give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw" (John 4:15). But one wonders what motivated her fascination. Was she drawn by the thought of escaping the physical labor and social rejection associated with the well or by an inkling that there was a better life where thirst is eternally quenched? Was the woman beginning to see that there was hope—real hope—in her world so full of misery?

**The Savior Helps Us See Our Weaknesses.** Once we see the Lord's offer of a priceless gift that endures forever, we can face sins, shortcomings, and weaknesses that prevent us from wholly partaking of his offer. I think it is instructive that Jesus did not begin this conversation by pointing out what the woman needed to change in order to come unto him. Rather he began by helping her see that he had a gift that was better than anything she had ever experienced. When her problematic lifestyle was finally verbalized, she was not offended but revered him even more. "Go, call thy husband," Jesus invited, "and come hither" (John 4:16). She coyly answered, "I have no husband." Notice that Jesus even complimented her for telling the truth before spelling out the full story: "Thou hast well said, . . . For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband" (John 4:17–18). "Sir," she immediately responded, "I perceive that thou art a prophet" (John 4:19). Again we wonder, "How did Jesus, the only perfect person in history, manage to attract the notoriously imperfect?"

By following the Savior's line of thought, we discover that he not only met her where she was physically but also met her there spiritually. He knew that she was looking for a messiah who was a "prophet like unto Moses." As a result of this interchange, she began to consider a greater identity for this man.

Her misconceptions, however, needed to be removed. Remembering that he was a Jew and she a Samaritan, she protested, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain [meaning Mt. Gerizim]; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (John 4:20). In the seventh century before Christ, King Hezekiah destroyed temple worship everywhere outside Jerusalem to curtail apostasy among the Israelites. At the time when Jesus conversed with the woman at the well, the Jews were still adamant about centralized temple worship in Jerusalem. Again, the Samaritans were excluded.

In verse 21, Jesus alluded to the temple in Jerusalem being destroyed just as the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim had been. He wanted her to understand that specific location is not what is essential to worship, particularly when that location is not founded on truth. On the other hand, incorrect information about the object of our worship and how we worship will assuredly prevent true worship. To the correct aspects of Samaritan messianic expectation, Jesus therefore added detail concerning their anticipated "prophet's" mortal origins. "Ye worship ye know not what; we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Jesus was a "Jew," born to the tribe of Judah. Surely salvation has come through the

Jews!

The Savior Leads Us to Recognize Him. Scripture consistently teaches the one way to recognize Jesus as the Savior and Redeemer. Christ created an environment that enabled the woman to learn this truth just that way. In John 4:23 we read, "The hour cometh, and now is . . ." That opening phrase suggests both a future and a present application; there is only one true way to recognize the Christ, and it is the same in every era. The apostle Paul identified the way as clearly as any. He taught that no man can know that Jesus is the Lord except by the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 12:3).<sup>5</sup> To the woman, the Savior explained, "True worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. For unto such hath God promised his Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth" (JST John 4:23–24).

Learning in spirit and in truth necessitates the tutelage of the Holy Ghost. His mission is not to speak of himself but to bear witness of Christ and guide us to truth (John 16:13). And that is precisely what the Holy Ghost did for the woman at the well. She carefully listened to Jesus, but it was the Holy Ghost who revealed the messianic thread throughout his teachings. Once taught by the Spirit, she began to put it all together and professed, "I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things" (John 4:25).

Then, and only then, Jesus unequivocally declared himself the Messiah. The King James translation records the Savior's response in verse 26 as "I that speak unto thee am *he*," with the *he* in italics. Italics were used in that translation to indicate words that were added to the manuscript by the translators when clarification was deemed necessary. We are invited to consider the verse without the italicized word if the result gives us greater insight. In this case, I believe it does.

One of the Lord's titles is *Jehovah*, which is translated "I Am," as in The Always Existing One. In his gospel, John often records statements in which Jesus bears witness of himself as the great "I Am." In this verse, if we remove the italicized *he*, the Savior confirmed his identity to the woman by saying, "I Am speaketh unto thee."

The Savior Invites Us to Leave Our Sins Behind and Bear Testimony of Him to Others. As soon as the woman received this confirming witness, she "left her waterpot, and went her way into the city, and saith to the men, Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:28–29). Perhaps the water pot signifies the woman's former life—including her dependency on a sinful world to survive. He who is both the living water and the giver of the water eliminates the need for the world's formula for survival. One drinks living water; one does not carry it. A water pot is therefore not necessary.

Now converted, the Samaritan woman's greatest desire was to share the good news with everyone in her village. She forgot about herself, her past, and her reputation. No doubt some of those who believed her message were individuals who previously had mistreated her. Furthermore, notice that she used an approach similar to the Savior's to introduce the

truth to her neighbors. She met them where they were both physically and spiritually. She went to them in the city and witnessed that she had found that "prophet, like unto Moses." "Come," she invited, "see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29).

As a result of this woman's testimony, many came to know the true worship of God. Initially, they believed because of "the saying of the woman." But after having Jesus as a guest in their village two days, they knew by the Spirit. The converts proclaimed to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (John 4:42). At a time when few Jews knew the true identity of Jesus, a little village in Samaria proclaimed the truth of truths, the declaration of declarations: "This is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world."

### The Samaritan Woman and Nicodemus

Sisters and brothers, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well is not a parable. The event actually happened. The Savior met a Samaritan woman where she was, helped her to see her weaknesses, and created an environment in which she could learn his identity through the witness of the Holy Ghost. When filled with this knowledge, she abandoned her sins and became the catalyst who brought an entire village to Christ.

In nearly every way, the woman of Samaria is an anomaly to the stereotypical recipient of revelation. The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus in the preceding chapter of John provides a nearly perfect contrast.

Nicodemus was a man—that fact alone establishes him in the upper echelons of Jewish society. The woman at the well was a *woman* and a Samaritan, a double reason to be labeled unclean by the Jews.

He was a Pharisee, well respected, among the best educated, and considered by many to be the master teacher. By contrast, she had an unsavory past and would have received no respect in any community. He was recognized as a most religious individual. She was identified with the gravest of sinners.

Nicodemus conversed with the Lord at night. No one would therefore see a prestigious rabbi being taught by a carpenter from Galilee. The Samaritan woman's exchange with Jesus was at mid-day in the midst of her daily chores.

Nicodemus sought to learn from the Savior after noting the many miracles Jesus had performed in Jerusalem. But he initially came on his terms, not the Lord's. On the other hand, Jesus met the woman where she was, without any show of miracles or previous introduction.

Nicodemus returned to his daily routine, presumably keeping his conversation with Jesus a secret. She left her water pot behind and spread the good news to all those who would hear

her.

With all his power and position and opportunity for learning, Nicodemus could not see who stood before him. But the woman at the well saw. Isn't that the miracle? This woman who doesn't even have a name in our scriptures, this woman who would never be a standout in a crowd, is known by Jesus! She who has neither title, nor position, nor formal education, nor a stainless past *sees*—she actually sees the thirsty stranger as he truly is: the Savior and Redeemer of the world.

Life-changing revelation came to her, revelation as profound as we find in scripture. But her conversion was not in the dramatic fashion of Alma the Younger or Saul on the road to Damascus. In a quiet and contemplative way, the Samaritan woman received a clear witness while in the midst of doing ordinary housework. If she can recognize the Savior and overcome her hangups to follow him wholeheartedly, certainly there is hope and an invitation for you and me.

Whenever I return to the Tremonton First st Ward, I still stare and marvel at that mural. The Samaritan woman is not only there at church every Sunday but she is also in many of our temples. Why is she there? She who suffered from spiritual dehydration was offered and received living water. And ever since that day, she has been a "light unto the nations," inviting people in every land to come unto Christ. As we drink that same living water, I pray we will be like her—trusting in our Savior and acting upon the personal revelation he pours upon us. I bear witness that through his grace, we can then do and be all that he asks.

1. Andre Parrot, *Land of Christ*, trans. James H. Farley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 65.
2. Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah* (London Oxford University, 1933), Shebiith 8:10.
3. Danby, *Mishnah*, Aboth 1:5.
4. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), 147-48.
5. Joseph Smith *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 223.