



## The Gospel of John - Chapter Four

### **II. John 1:19-12:50 - The Signs of the Messiah (continues)**

#### **II.b John 2:13-4:54 - Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, Judæa, Samaria, and to Gentiles (continues/concludes)**

##### Summary of Chapter Four

Jesus was travelling from Judæa to Galilee by way of Samaria when he stopped to rest at Jacob's well. He was joined by a Samaritan woman and through a frank exchange the woman came to know that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for. She then went off to tell her neighbours, many of whom also came to believe in Jesus, a ripe harvest indeed.

Jesus completed his journey to Galilee and was welcomed by the population, who had also been at the Passover Festival in Jerusalem and had witnessed what Jesus had done while he was there.

Jesus was approached by a royal official whose son was dying. Without travelling with the man to Capernaum, where the boy was, Jesus informed the man that the boy would live. The man had faith in Jesus' words and on his homeward journey was met by some of his servants who revealed that the child had recovered at exactly the hour when Jesus had told him he would.

#### **II.b.v John 4:1-42 - Jesus and the Woman of Samaria**

This is a remarkable passage about grace. Jesus was at the well just outside of Sychar during the hottest part of the day when a Samaritan woman who had had several husbands and was now living with another man came for water at a time when she could avoid her neighbours. She was shocked that Jesus, a Jew, should speak with her and even ask for water, as Jews historically would have nothing to do with Samaritans.

By revealing himself as a prophet, Jesus uses the opportunity to speak to her about her faith and her expectations for the coming Messiah. Jesus then drops a real bombshell by announcing that he is the one. The woman immediately goes into the town to let everyone know about Jesus.

Many of the populace also come to faith in Jesus as a result, giving Jesus the opportunity to let his disciples know that the Kingdom harvest is always ripe and that, by working together as sower and reaper, many will be brought back to God.

<sup>1</sup> Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptising more disciples than John’ — <sup>2</sup> although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised — <sup>3</sup> he left Judæa and started back to Galilee.

#### John 4:1-3

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard links to the discussion between John the Baptist, the disciples and the Jew mentioned in the previous chapter, which had clearly spread to the Pharisees and Jesus did not seek further confrontation at this stage in his ministry.

Jesus is making and baptising more disciples than John. The religious leaders had been intrigued by John and had left him relatively uninterrupted in his work, and indeed many leaders actually went to him for baptism, despite John’s strong rebuke: <<*But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’*>> (Matthew 3:7). However, with Jesus now surpassing John and rumours starting to spread that he was the Messiah, then the Pharisees would have to take action or the Romans might intervene.

It was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised. It was normal for the disciples to undertake such work under the supervision of their teacher. This is seen to some extent in the ministry of Paul as well, although his rationale was different: <<*I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name. (I did baptise also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else)*>> (1 Corinthians 1:13-16).

He left Judæa and started back to Galilee. The rest of the chapter will show that Jesus travelled via Samaria and his arrival back in Galilee probably coincides with the start of his earthly ministry, as recorded at the beginning of the other Gospels that only record Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem and the ministry of his final week.

<sup>4</sup> But he had to go through Samaria.

#### John 4:4

Jesus had to pass this way because of geography, it was the shortest route, but the words may also indicate that Jesus’ itinerary was subject to the sovereign and providential plan of God, for had to translates Greek *dei*, i.e. must or to be necessary, which always indicates divine necessity or requirement elsewhere in John.

Through Samaria was the usual route taken by travellers from Judæa to Galilee, although strict Jews, in order to avoid defilement, could bypass Samaria by opting for a longer route that involved crossing the Jordan and travelling on the eastern

side. However, when Jesus sent his twelve disciples out on their first solo mission he forbade them to go into Samaria: <<***These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans’***>> (Matthew 10:5).

The Samaritans were a racially mixed group of partly Jewish and partly Gentile ancestry who were disdained by both Jews and Gentiles. The Scripture in 2 Kings 17:24-31 describes how the king of Assyria, probably Shalmaneser (727-722BC), brought foreign people to settle in Samaria in 722BC. The Samaritans claim it was Esarhaddon (681-669BC), who was responsible for repopulating the land. This would have to have been a later influx due to the time lapse between the capture of the land and its repopulation. Over time they had intermarried with some Jews, who had remained in the area.

Many inhabitants of this region between Judæa and Galilee were descendants of the OT northern kingdom of Israel, although from the Jewish perspective these Samaritans had assimilated strongly into non-Jewish culture and had intermarried with Mesopotamian colonists. The Samaritans had their own version of the Pentateuch, their own temple on Mount Gerizim and their own rendering of Israelite history.

Copies of their Pentateuch in Hebrew and in Targumic Aramaic remain extant, as do their basic historical narratives. Tensions often ran high between Jews and Samaritans thus Josephus recounts fighting between Jews and Samaritans during Claudius’ reign in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD being so intense that Roman soldiers were called in to pacify, and to crucify, many of the rebels according to Jewish War 2.232-246.

<sup>5</sup> So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

### John 4:5

The Samaritan city called Sychar is usually identified with Askar, which is approximately two thirds of a mile or 1.2 km from Jacob’s well and on the slope of Mount Ebal. Roman-era tombs are known in this area.



Mount Ebal

The reference to the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph reflects the customary inference from Genesis 48:21-22 and Joshua 24:32 that Jacob had given to his son Joseph the land at Shechem, which he had bought from the sons of Hamor (Genesis 33:18-19), and which later served as Joseph’s burial place: <<***And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, ‘God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with***

*you from here’>> (Exodus 13:19), and: <<The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph>> (Joshua 24:32).*

<sup>6</sup> Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

### John 4:6

Jacob’s well. The probable location for this well lies in modern Nablus, known in the Roman period as Flavia Neapolis and called in the OT by the name Shechem. This well was once covered with vaulted stone and a Byzantine, i.e. 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Century AD church. It is quite deep as described in v.11, although measurements have varied over the years, possibly due to debris in the well. It was also at a juncture of major ancient roads and near the traditional sacred site of Joseph’s tomb as already noted.

The reference to Jesus being tired out by his journey underscores his full humanity: <<*Jesus began to weep*>> (John 11:35), and: <<*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), ‘I am thirsty’*>> (John 19:28). Jesus’ human nature could be weak and tired, although his divine nature was omnipotent.

It was about noon is the sixth hour in the original. It would have been hot and time to rest, and travellers would be thirsty. Normally, women would come to draw water in the morning or evening when it was cooler: <<*He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was towards evening, the time when women go out to draw water*>> (Genesis 24:11); this immoral woman comes at a time when no one else would be at the well.

<sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. <sup>8</sup> (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

### John 4:7-8

Jesus took the initiative in speaking to a Samaritan woman, an astonishing break with culture and tradition, showing his desire to save the lost.

Give me a drink links this account with that of Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath: <<*So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink’*>> (1 Kings 17:10), where a Jew asked a non-Jew for a drink, something that was normally unacceptable, as will be noted in v.9.

His disciples had gone to the city to buy food, leaving Jesus alone with the woman, something almost unheard of, for a woman would not usually be left alone with a strange man even in a public place. This was exacerbated because she was not even a Jewish woman!

<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

#### John 4:9

The comment that Jews do not share things in common, in fact, they would normally have no dealings with Samaritans explains to John’s readers outside the land of Palestine that Samaritans were considered by many Jews to be in a continual state of uncleanness, thus they would have thought that drinking water from this woman’s water jar would make a person ceremonially unclean.

The ritual impurity of the person was thought to pass to whatever he or she had contact with, like spiritual germs. There is thus an enormous religious barrier between this woman and Jesus, the first of several barriers. Jesus takes the initiative and will keep at it until all of the barriers are dealt with. For Jesus to have dealings with this woman was to risk ritual defilement.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’

#### John 4:10

The woman could not have understood in depth what Jesus was saying, as is the case with his other cryptic sayings, but she could have picked up on something in it that would point her in the right direction. The phrase the gift of God was a very common expression, a comprehensive term for everything that God bestows on humankind for their salvation. So this term should have at least indicated to the woman that Jesus was talking about God’s revelation about who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”.

Jesus’ words about living water again involve double meaning. Literally, the phrase refers to fresh spring water: <<*He shall take the living bird with the cedar wood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water*>> (Leviticus 14:6), but John 7:38-39 identifies this living water as the Holy Spirit dwelling within a believer: <<*for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water*>> (Jeremiah 2:13), and: <<*On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter*>> (Zechariah 14:8).

<sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?’

#### John 4:11

The well is deep. The well today is still over 100 feet or 31m deep, and was probably deeper at that time.

Where do you get that living water? Understandably, the woman could only think in natural terms. Without a proper bucket and a long rope, there would be no way to draw water from that well, or any others like it.

<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’

### John 4:12

The woman thinks Jesus is talking about physical water. This superficial level of reference is another barrier to her belief. Jesus uses this barrier itself as a stepping stone. Even though she thinks they are speaking only of physical water, she recognises that Jesus’ cryptic statement implies he is greater than the patriarch Jacob.

By referring to our ancestor Jacob the woman shows that she and her people still think of themselves as true descendants of Jacob. Clearly the woman does not understand who Jesus is, for then she would understand that he is greater even than Jacob, the patriarch of the 12 tribes of Israel; refer to Genesis 49:1-28.

Jacob, who gave us the well. Jacob is a major figure for both Judaism and Samaritanism, for it is through his descendants that the covenant promises of God will be fulfilled. He had provided the well so that both people and their livestock could live from the land. Yet Jesus proves he is greater than Jacob because he will provide the water of eternal life.

With his sons and his flocks drank from it. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons were nomadic shepherds and would need access to water at the various locations they brought their flocks to.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’

### John 4:13-14

The water that I will give is the ‘living water’ of v.10, identified in 7:37-39 as the Holy Spirit dwelling within believers. The provision of living water speaks of the superiority of Jesus’ revelation to that of the old covenant, for Jesus not only brings revelation of God but gives the Spirit by which this revelation is internalised in believers, giving birth to spirit (3:6). Such is the basic thrust of this story in its revelation of Jesus and what he is doing.

Will never be thirsty. A person’s deepest spiritual longing to know God personally will, amazingly, be satisfied forever.

The phrase will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life contrasts greatly with the well that Jacob had provided and is reminiscent of: <<*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*>> (Isaiah 12:3), and: <<*For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry*>>

*ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring>> (Isaiah 44:3).*

<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

#### John 4:15

Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water. The woman takes Jesus literally and misunderstands him, just as Nicodemus did (3:4). Although she remains on this superficial level, she also makes a profound movement toward faith. For even on this superficial level, by asking for this marvellous private supply of running water, something that is taken for granted in most parts of the world today, she is actually putting faith in Jesus as one greater than Jacob. While as yet her level of faith is very shallow and her misunderstanding is great, nevertheless she has begun to believe in Jesus.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus frequently speaks in terms of the visible, physical world, e.g. birth, water, bread, his body, light, etc., to teach about the unseen spiritual world. There is a full list from John in the Supplementary Material on the web site.

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ <sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”’; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’

#### John 4:16-18

I have no husband. While technically truthful, the woman’s curt statement is probably intended to close the subject. But Jesus, with gentleness and compassion, reveals both her sin and his omniscient knowledge of her life.

The woman had had five husbands who had either died or divorced her. When Jesus says the one you have now is not your husband, he implies that merely living together does not constitute a marriage. A marriage requires some kind of official sanction and public ceremony at which a man and woman commit to the obligations of marriage and the community then recognises that a marriage has begun: <<*Look, O daughters of Zion, at King Solomon, at the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart*>> (Song 3:11b).

Sexual relationships prior to marriage were without question thought to be morally wrong, for example: <<*When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife*>> (Exodus 22:16), and: <<*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet.’

## John 4:19

I see that you are a prophet. The woman did not try to refute Jesus' claims or object to his intrusion into her private life for she clearly believed that Jesus could only have known about her life through divine revelation. Jesus would also be recognised as a prophet by the ordinary people in Jerusalem following his triumphal entry at the start of Passion Week: <<*The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee'*>> (Matthew 21:11).

Her recognition of Jesus as a prophet could be a very significant statement of faith, much more so than it would be if she were a Jew. For the Samaritans, unlike the Jews, did not recognise a succession of prophets. Rather, their expected one, their Messiah called Taheb, was the prophet like Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. However, since she is not calling Jesus the Messiah, she probably does not use the word prophet in this Samaritan sense. She is engaging in ecumenical dialogue, using the word prophet more like a Jew would, to signify a holy man rather than the expected one. She is moving in the right direction, but there are still difficulties to be overcome.

<sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.'

## John 4:20-21

You say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem. You refers to Jews generally rather than to Jesus alone. It was accepted that the Temple was the centre of Judaism for it was the place where God dwelt on earth: <<*The carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to his son Solomon, 'In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name for ever'*>> (2 Chronicles 33:7).

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain. Mount Gerizim was the OT setting for the pronouncement of blessings for keeping the covenant: <<*When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that you are entering to occupy, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal*>> (Deuteronomy 11:29). The Samaritans' version of Deuteronomy 27:4 named Mount Gerizim rather than Ebal as the place for the altar; this is where the Samaritans had built their temple. When the woman mentioned the ancestors who worshiped on Mount Gerizim, she may well have included Abraham (Genesis 12:7) and Jacob (Genesis 33:18-20), who built altars in that region.

A Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was recorded in Josephus, e.g. Jewish Antiquities 11.310 and in 2 Maccabees 6:2. It was destroyed by the Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus during his reign (134-104BC). This temple has been identified by some with a large Hellenistic-era structure made with unhewn stones atop Tel er-Ras at the northern spur of the mountain, although many have suggested that a more probable location is beneath the old Byzantine, i.e. 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Century AD church atop the mountain itself. Despite the

destruction of this temple, Samaritan sacrificial worship has continued atop Mount Gerizim even until the modern era.



The Remains of the Temple on Mount Gerizim

Woman, believe me. Jesus invites the woman, as he does to all people, to put their faith and trust in what he says.

The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. Jesus is inaugurating a new age in which people will not have to travel to a physical temple in one city to worship but will be able to worship God in every place, because the Holy Spirit will dwell in them, and therefore God's people everywhere will become the new temple where God dwells: <<***Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple***>> (1 Corinthians 3:16-17), and: <<***So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God***>> (Ephesians 2:19-22).

<sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

John 4:22

You is plural, implying 'You Samaritans'.

In saying we worship what we know Jesus identifies himself as a Jew. The verse shows that John's Gospel is not anti-Semitic.

Salvation is from the Jews in the sense that the whole OT, which taught about salvation, was given to and was about the Jewish people, and the Messiah himself came from the Jews and not from the Samaritans or, by implication, from the Gentiles: <<*They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen*>> (Romans 9:4-5).

While the differences between the Jews and Samaritans were not as great as most Jews believed, there was indeed a difference between Jew and Samaritan, and the truth of Judaism over against Samaritanism is ratified by Jesus. But the hatred and the alienation are not accepted by the Son. The Samaritans do in fact offer worship, although they are in ignorance of the one they worship. However, the one they desire to worship wants their worship and comes to them, revealing himself and bringing salvation. Just like the world, the Samaritans are worthy of condemnation and yet are loved. The distinction between Judaism and Samaritanism is maintained, but individuals within both of these communities either receive or reject God's salvation. John's characteristic appreciation of the importance of both the group and the individual is evident here.

<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

#### John 4:23-24

But the hour is coming, and is now here predicts both the future event of Jesus' death and resurrection, and acknowledges that he is already in the world.

For the Father seeks such as these to worship him. The primary reason for creation was for God to have subjects that had the freewill to come to him in worship. The language indicates God's active role in seeking such people.

God is spirit means that God is not made of any physical matter and does not have a material body but has a more wonderful kind of existence that is present everywhere, hence worship is not confined to one place, is not perceived by the bodily senses, and yet is so powerful that he brought the universe into existence. Because God is spirit, the Israelites were not to make idols 'in the form of anything' in creation as did the surrounding nations: <<*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*>> (Exodus 20:4).

This new worship is characterised by spirit and truth, Greek *pneuma kai aletheia*. Like most of the key terms in this conversation, these words function on more than one level. On one level to worship in spirit could mean to worship not just with

words or thoughts or mere emotion but with one's innermost self, at one's centre, one's heart. Such worship engages the mind, emotions and body, but it is centred deeper, in the spirit. And to worship in truth could mean to worship as who one really is, with no hypocrisy, falseness or deception. Such a reference to the human spirit and integrity develops thoughts already introduced in the Gospel.

To worship in spirit and truth means to worship as one who is spiritually alive, living in the new reality Jesus offers, referred to here as the gift of God, which is living water. For behind the earthly things are the heavenly things, that is, God himself. Worshiping in spirit is connected to the fact that God is spirit. And worshiping in truth is connected with Jesus, the Messiah who explains everything. This picture of Jesus will be developed more when it is said that his words are spirit and truth (6:63), and he is himself the truth (14:6). So worshiping in spirit and truth is related to the very character of God and the identity of Christ. It is to worship in union with the Father, who is spirit, and according to the revelation of the Son, who is the truth. Indeed, it is to be taken into union with God through the Spirit.

<sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

#### John 4:25-26

Messiah (who is called Christ), I am he, the one who is speaking to you. Jesus does not often identify himself directly as the Christ, since most would then think he had come to bring instant political deliverance and thus could be considered a threat to Rome, but he departs from that pattern here in Samaria, which is removed from the centres of Judaism.

Although the Gospels give clear indication from the outset that Jesus is the Christ, e.g. <<*and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah*>> (Matthew 1:16), there was only speculation and rumour for much of Jesus' early ministry. Later on Jesus would confirm his identity to some individuals quite specifically: <<*Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.'* Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he'>> (John 9:35-37).

He will proclaim all things to us. The Samaritans were expecting a Messiah who would come and explain to them all the hidden or confusing aspects of life. Thus Jesus' initial cryptic comments did not allow her to understand who it was she was speaking with.

On the basis of such general associations, the woman could have understood Jesus to be saying, in effect, 'If you knew the Scriptures and the salvation they reveal and if you were aware of my identity as Messiah, then you would ask me as the bearer of revelation and salvation and I would give you revelation and salvation'. The woman does in fact have some knowledge of the gift of God in that she expects the Messiah. She obviously would not understand the role of

the Holy Spirit and the death and resurrection of the Son of God, but she could have understood that Jesus was speaking of the revelation of God. She could also see he was implying not just that his request for water that was strange, but that his own identity was unusual. The purpose of the conversation is to reveal something of this identity.

<sup>27</sup> Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’

#### John 4:27

His disciples were astonished that he was speaking with a woman. His followers were probably all Jewish men at this stage and for a Jewish Rabbi to speak alone with a strange woman was unprecedented; that she was a Samaritan would have exacerbated the situation. Yet they were unable to confess their doubts by addressing either the woman, ‘What do you want?’ or their master, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ There are times when they do question Jesus about his behaviour and they nearly always receive a rebuke for doing so rather than trusting in him; for example: <<*But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’*>> (Matthew 16:23).

<sup>28</sup> Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup> ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ <sup>30</sup> They left the city and were on their way to him.

#### John 4:28-30

The woman’s water jar was probably a large earthenware pitcher, carried either on the shoulder or the hip. Her purpose at the well was now forgotten as she rushes away to share this revelation of Christ with the other people.

He cannot be the Messiah, can he? A similar question would be asked by the crowd in Galilee: <<*All the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Can this be the Son of David?’*>> (Matthew 12:23). The woman connects her understanding of the Scriptures concerning the Christ with her own experience and encourages folk to come out to the well. At the heart of any true evangelism is an invitation to come to Jesus himself, not just a call to accept the evangelist’s own ideas or experiences. Her witness is effective, for in the background we see a crowd coming to see Jesus.

The significance of what is taking place in the background is explained by the dialogue in the foreground (vv.31-38). These verses reveal Jesus to be God’s agent who fulfils God’s promises for the last days, the eschatological reality now present in Jesus.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’

<sup>32</sup> But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ <sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’ <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.’

#### John 4:31-34

I have food to eat. Jesus again speaks in terms of the physical world to teach about different realities in the unseen spiritual world. The accomplishment of Jesus’ mission is more important to him than physical food: <<*He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*>> (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Surely no one has brought him something to eat? His disciples are still very ignorant of who he really is and what he is really about. They have yet to see him as the revelation of the Father. Accordingly, the disciples do not get Jesus’ point and so have more unasked questions. They repeat exactly the woman’s incomprehension concerning living water; she did not know how he could get a drink, and they do not know how he could get food. But there is an important difference, for whereas Jesus did not tell the woman what he meant by living water, he does give an explanation to the disciples: My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

To complete his work. In John’s Gospel, the term work, Greek *ergon*, both in its singular and plural forms, is a broader term than signs. While signs in John are characteristically miracles that attest to Jesus’ identity as Messiah and Son of God, and that lead unbelievers to faith, Jesus’ work includes both his miracles and his other activities and teachings, including the whole of his ministry. These are all manifestations of the activity of God the Father, for Jesus said: <<*the Father who dwells in me does his works*>> (John 14:10b). Thus Jesus is both the presence of God on earth and the template for all discipleship.

<sup>35</sup> Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.

#### John 4:35

Four months more. In the physical realm, there is a period of time between sowing and harvesting. But in the spiritual realm, Jesus’ coming has already ushered in the end-time harvest in which sowing and reaping paradoxically coincide, so that the harvest of believers is now being gathered into God’s Kingdom. The immediate reference may be to the approaching Samaritans who are going to believe in Jesus (vv.39-42).

In OT prophecy, the fields are ripe for harvesting would be an indication that God was coming in judgement, for example: <<*Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their*>>

*wickedness is great*>> (Joel 3:13). It can also be used as God gathering his people back to himself: <<*On that day the Lord will thresh from the channel of the Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you will be gathered one by one, O people of Israel*>> (Isaiah 27:12). Therefore, this image implies eschatological blessings. The crop for eternal life is starting to be gathered, as is evidenced by the fields that are ripe for harvesting, literally ‘white for harvest’, since many crops either whitened or had white flowers when ripe. Jesus may well be referring to the approaching Samaritans, who probably would be wearing mostly white clothing.

<sup>36</sup> The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

### John 4:36

The reaper is already receiving wages. The winning of souls for the Kingdom of God is described in terms of payment for work.

Sower and reaper may rejoice together. These two agricultural roles were quite distinct. However, this statement is reminiscent of Amos 9:13, where the ‘treader of grapes’ overtakes ‘the one who sows the seed’, depicting the abundance and prosperity of the new age. Hence Jesus claims that he is ushering in the messianic age in which sowing and reaping coincide. It shows that there is a unique joy that comes from seeing others come to faith.

The imagery of sower and reaper is used in several ways in these few verses. Since Jesus is completing his Father’s work, presumably the Father would be the sower and Jesus the giver. In another sense, however, here the same person is both sower and reaper, for Jesus has just spoken with the woman and already many are coming to him. But even though Jesus has functioned in these two capacities, in a deeper sense the Father is still the sower, for it is the Father who gives believers to Jesus and draws them to him.

Jesus goes on to speak of the work his disciples will do in the future (vv.37-38). He uses a well-known proverb to speak of a division of labour between sower and reaper. The idea of one sowing and another reaping is found in the OT as a description of catastrophe and judgment: <<*I in turn will do this to you: I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away. You shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it*>> (Leviticus 26:16), <<*You shall become engaged to a woman, but another man shall lie with her. You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit*>> (Deuteronomy 28:30), <<*then let me sow, and another eat; and let what grows for me be rooted out*>> (Job 31:8), and: <<*You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine*>> (Micah 6:15). The opposite picture, that of reaping what one has sown, is a description of eschatological blessing: <<*They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands*>> (Isaiah 65:21-22). Jesus, however, is describing a division of labour among those

who are part of a common enterprise. The proverb in v.37 is given as an explanation of v.36, which literally says, 'Already the one who harvests receives wages and gathers fruit unto life eternal, so that the one who sows and the one who harvests may rejoice together'. At first it seems the sower and the harvester are the same person, but then they are clearly distinguished. This ambiguity, both reflects the mystery of the relation between the Father and the Son and, along with the implication of immediate harvest, suggests the abnormality of this time of eschatological fulfilment, made clear by gathering fruit for eternal life.

<sup>37</sup> For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps."<sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

#### John 4:37-38

Although the Father is ultimately both sower and reaper as discussed, the others who have laboured are Jesus and his predecessors, especially John the Baptist and his followers, but in a broader sense all the OT writers and prophets. Jesus' followers are the beneficiaries of their work and will bring in the harvest.

You have entered into their labour. Jesus' disciples are to reap the harvest of what others have sown and laboured over. This prediction will be fulfilled specifically by John and the Samaritans: <<*Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit*>> (Acts 8:14-17). Here indeed is a harvest for eternal life (v.36). But this is just one instance of what v.38 is referring to. The general language used in v.38 suggests that the whole ministry of the disciples is in view. They are being taught that their ministry is dependent on that of earlier labourers. Others probably refers to all those through whom the Father has been accomplishing his work, the work that is now coming to a perfect completion in Jesus.

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'<sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days.<sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word.<sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

#### John 4:39-42

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony. The story concludes with the response of the Samaritans who went out to see Jesus. Their faith goes from being based on the woman's testimony: He told me everything I have ever done, to being based on their own experience: for we have heard for ourselves. There is no indication that their initial faith was false,

but it obviously needed to be deepened. They had heard about Jesus, but they needed to hear him for themselves.

They asked him to stay with them. These Samaritans wanted Jesus to stay with them for two days. The initial religious barrier that had kept the woman from Jesus has obviously broken down. These Samaritans, unlike Nathaniel, the Jews and this woman, were not put off by Jesus' origin.

And many more believed because of his word. It is not about believing the testimony of others about Jesus, it is about believing his word, as it was spoken to those throughout Palestine during his earthly ministry, and now is available in written form for all the generations that have come along since then.

Jesus is the Saviour of the world, not just of Jews. Jesus' large-scale harvest among the Samaritans marks the first indication of the universal scope of his saving mission. The early church engaged in a Samaritan mission as well (Acts 8:4-25). Hence the pattern of Jesus' mission according to John, from Judæa with Nicodemus in 3:1-15, to Samaria (vv.1-42), to the Gentiles (vv.46-54 and 12:20-33), anticipates the post-Pentecost mission of the early church: <<***But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth***>> (Acts 1:8).

#### II.b.vi John 4:43-45 - Jesus Returns to Galilee

Jesus arrives back in the region where he grew up. The people give him a warm welcome not for who he really is but because they had seen his actions in Jerusalem and wanted more miracles.

<sup>43</sup> When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee  
<sup>44</sup> (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet's own country).

#### John 4:43-44

Jesus departed for Galilee. It is at least 50 miles or 80km by road from Sychar to Cana (v.46), a journey that, by foot, would have taken at least two or three days.

A prophet has no honour tells the reason Jesus is now going to Galilee. He is going to minister where he does not yet have honour, so that people would then come to believe in him. The wording of the proverb is different in: <<***And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house'***>> (Matthew 13:57), which is virtually repeated in Mark 6:4, and Luke 4:24, and the application in the Synoptic accounts is also different.

<sup>45</sup> When he came to Galilee, the Galilæans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival.

## John 4:45

When he came to Galilee. As already noted, this arrival in Galilee most likely marks the start of Jesus' work in Galilee as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.

For they too had gone to the festival. It was a requirement for all Jewish men to attend the Passover in Jerusalem, which marks the start of the festival of unleavened bread: <<*Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed*>> (Deuteronomy 16:16), which is where they had seen all that he had done, i.e. the cleansing of the temple and the many signs and wonders not specifically recorded in John: <<*When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing*>> (John 2:23).

## II.b.vii John 4:46-54 - Jesus Heals an Official's Son

The healing of the official's son resembles that of the Gentile centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:2-10, but this is not the same incident. Both, however, are remarkable because Jesus performs the healing without encountering the sick person and does so based on the faith of the man requesting his intervention.

<sup>46</sup> Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum.

### John 4:46

Cana was the place where Jesus had turned the water into wine and was commented on in John 2:1.

Capernaum was also Jesus' Galilæan base and was commented on in 2:12.

The royal official was probably a Gentile, possibly in the service of Herod Antipas. John shows Jesus bringing the Gospel to a respected Jewish teacher (John 3:1-21), then to an outcast Samaritan woman (vv.1-42), then to an official working either directly or indirectly for the Roman government (vv.46-54), and thus, by implication from these examples, to everyone in the world.

<sup>47</sup> When he heard that Jesus had come from Judæa to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. <sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.'

### John 4:47-48

He went and begged him to come down and heal his son. This indicates that, despite the gravity of the situation, the man believed what he heard about Jesus and had some level of faith at least.

Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe is a challenge not only to the royal official, Jesus said to him, but also to the Galilæan people since you is plural. Some may become entranced with signs and wonders, fail to see that they point to Jesus and hence fail to believe in him. However, this does not mean that John views signs in and of themselves negatively. Indeed, none in the early church viewed them as anything other than a positive reflection of God's power: <<*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him*>> (John 2:11), <<*The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works*>> (2 Corinthians 12:12), and: <<*how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will*>> (Hebrews 2:3-4). On the contrary, Jesus' miracles are one of the primary means God uses to bring people to faith in him; they often lead people to follow Jesus or place their faith in him as the Messiah. Such miracles were always seen as a reason to praise God: <<*The signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me I am pleased to recount. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his sovereignty is from generation to generation*>> (Daniel 4:2-3).

<sup>49</sup> The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my little boy dies.'

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. <sup>51</sup> As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. <sup>52</sup> So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.' <sup>53</sup> The father realised that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he himself believed, along with his whole household.

### John 4:49-53

Your son will live indicates not just that Jesus knew that a miracle had happened, but that Jesus himself had healed the son, for John calls this a miracle 'that Jesus did' (v.54). As noted in the section introduction, a similar but different incident is narrated in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10.

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. This was both an act of courage and of faith, for the man recognised something in Jesus that he could trust, left Jesus and returned home, expectant of a positive outcome for his son.

So he himself believed, along with his whole household. When the man realised that his son would live and that he had recovered at precisely the time Jesus had said he would, he believed in Jesus. He obviously recounted the whole story to his household who also came to faith. This was more than an act of compassion for the dying child, for many people gained eternal life through this one act.

Other households that would come to salvation include that of the senior tax collector Zacchæus: <<*Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to*

*this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost’>> (Luke 19:9-10), the Roman Centurion Cornelius: <<He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved”>> (Acts 11:13-14), and the Philippian jailer, who had been guarding Paul and Silas: <<They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptised without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God>> (Acts 16:32-34).*

<sup>54</sup> Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judæa to Galilee.

#### John 4:54

This was the second sign following the first sign of turning water into wine performed in Cana; in the interim, Jesus had also performed signs in Jerusalem, for which John does not provide details but frequently acknowledges, providing a summary at the end of his account: <<*But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*>> (John 21:25).

After coming from Judæa to Galilee. This could indicate that the clearing of the Temple in Jerusalem (2:13-22) may not have occurred chronologically between the first miracle in Cana and the second on the way to Capernaum. However, there is no way of knowing for sure.