

## WELL NOW, THAT'S DIFFERENT...

### INTRODUCTION

THE SO CALLED 'WOMAN AT THE WELL' INCIDENT IN JOHN 4 is typically cast as Jesus resetting or ignoring the standards of behaviour between Jewish men and women of any culture. It is true that Jesus talked with (horror of horrors) a WOMAN at a WELL during DAYLIGHT hours without a chaperone in sight. All of the conversation that took place was risky, according to the theological commentators, and some of it turns out to be risqué. These two seem to flirt with each other until the disciples turn up and quietly have a hissing fit.

John does something in this scene that he frequently does, he puts in information as you go along after you need it so you have to keep going back and re-playing the scene as you acquire more and more information. Look out for the parenthetical statements, such as 'His disciples had gone into the city to buy food' which you could really have done with knowing about before Jesus starts talking to the woman (otherwise they would have got Him the water - or a bucket even).

### 5WH

**Who** do we have here? It is so easy and commonplace for many theologians to make comment about the past life of the woman albeit based, allegedly, on the information in the dialogue. How we love to judge the woman of 'ill-repute' without posing harder-to-answer questions such as 'why did she keep leaving the men she was with?' How can someone who is married be loose? Is she fickle or someone who is serially abused by bad men? With five husbands, did she have children or could she not have them and therefore was she successively divorced by them? Some people, men and women, have difficulty sustaining relationships for a multitude of reasons that so often get dismissed with a casual, care-less, complacent, compassionless nodding wink. Nicodemus meets Jesus at night, this woman meets Jesus at noon; time moves on in John and sometimes it simply charts progress of the day.

Jesus of course is also present. No one else would be there we are assured by those cultural historians who read between the lines. A woman out at a well at noon is a woman who doesn't get on with others, everyone stays at home – like the disciples did when Jesus was crucified at noon, although women managed to gather at the foot of the cross and no-one says they were of ill repute (unless you want to drag up Mary Magdalene's supposed past). We can turn this into a 'High Noon' moment if we want but we may not be justified in doing so. In I Kings 17:10 we find exactly the same words being said by Elijah to a widow but no one impugns her sexual morality.

**Where?** Jacob's well – this is the only place in the Bible where this particular well is mentioned though it seems to be well known by John (no pun intended). As a place where women meet men, a well is mentioned in the Old Testament several times, not least where Abraham meets Sarah and Isaac's future wife is encountered. Wells and women and wiving go together it seems.

**When?** At noon – see above! Maybe the only significance we should truly attribute to the time and place is that in a hot climate, noon is very hot and water is very welcome.

**What?** In his book *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* Craig R. Koester explains that for the Samaritans the Law was likened to water, a source of refreshment for those who are thirsty. He also draws attention to the use of living water (that is, water drawn from a stream or a well) 'in the use of purification from defilement caused by skin diseases or bodily discharges like menstruation' and that Jews treated Samaritan women as if they were 'constant menstruants' (one of which, of course, we encounter in another Gospel story, the woman with the flow of blood).<sup>1</sup> Living water is also symbolic of wisdom so here we have a double imagery at work – if we know all this background! It seems a shame that so much work is done to cast a shadow on the woman's character and past rather than on the trials that may have beset her.

F. Scott Spencer is a slightly more down-to-earth scholar and calls this scene the 'water, wedlock and worship' scene, or, if we prefer, the 'hydraulics, husbands and holy places' scene.<sup>2</sup>

Another 'what' in this scene is the bucket – or more accurately the lack of one. Jesus doesn't have a bucket, the woman does. As the scene gets under way it could be said that the absence of a bucket is like a modern day 'have you got a light for my cigarette?' It's a chat-up line or at very least, an opening gambit. But then again, if the well is deep and you need a bucket, then anyone with a bucket will do... But, of course, there's more to the well story than meets the eye.

**How** do they meet? Openly but with an immediate rapport.

**Why** – the obvious reason is for a drink, the less obvious one is to discuss the nature of God.

**Which** words do the work here? This begins to be obvious as you move the words and actions about. There is a verbal choreography going on here, a dance, exactly as you get when two stags are weighing each other up for a fight or when two feisty people are about to chat each other up or spar.

'GET ME A DRINK.' ' GET IT YOURSELF.'

JESUS IS TIRED. WE KNOW HE CAN BE GRUMPY when He gets tired and we'll see more of this later. Not only is He tired, He's thirsty and as, we said above, He has no bucket. A woman appears who does have a bucket and here begins the dance. How does He engage with this woman?

Give me drink now woman.

Give me a drink please

Give me drink, there's a good girl.

Give me a drink too please.

Give me a drink would you?

Immediately there are five different ways of opening this dialogue and one of them is harsh, one polite, one patronising, one pleading, one treats equally.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).187-191

<sup>2</sup> F. Scott Spencer, *Dancing Girls, Loose Women and Women of the Cloth* (New York; London: Continuum, 2004). 88-92

Her response gives the clue to His tone.

You're a Jew, why are you asking me?

Get it yourself, Jew!

You *must* be thirsty if you're asking me.

OK, I'll get you the drink but don't push your luck.

Well, you're a curious one, breaking the rules, water was it?

All of these responses by either party can be carried just by tone and body language. By reading through to the end to gather up what's going on, we may determine how the scene starts and develops. The legitimacy of this practice throughout all and any of the dialogues lies in how the Gospel was presented to different audiences. A presentation of the story would vary from congregation/audience to congregation/audience. There is no shame in describing a congregation as an audience for such they were and, in time, they might develop into a congregation of believers no less so than any group of people who 'come to see'. The variation in delivery is no less than any theatrical production goes through and, in His day, it was expected that a good 'lector' (someone who read in public) would develop and present according to the time and place and people in front of him.

Jesus' response to her is to tease. It has so many possibilities given the situation that the conversation could go anywhere. He simultaneously raises the up-front issues of the Jewish-Samaritan issue and the male-female etiquette but underlying is a directness of speech that must have been either refreshing or breath-taking (one person's breath of fresh air is another person's howling gale). 'Let me give you something' is full of innuendo to which she feistily responds – 'Sir, you have no (heavy pause) bucket and the (pause) well is deep.' Put this on any platform other than a religious one and the dialogue is dynamite. It's almost as audacious as the scene in *Richard III* when Richard the hunch-back king woos the wife of the man he's just killed over the bier that carries him! As for the body language in the scene, imagine it. Enough distance yet enough proximity to be electric. Just close enough. Add in sitting or standing, looking level to one another or her down to Him (if He's sitting) and you can charge this scene.

Jesus turns the tempo down temporarily with stuff about drinking water and then pulls the dialogue back to innuendo with imagery of gushing springs. But this 'woman of Samaria' is up for the chase, she's able to give as good as she's getting (what is it with Jesus that women feel able to respond as equals to Him?). 'OK, if you're as good as you say you are, give me the drink and I won't have to keep coming back to this living water and I can have yours instead.' It's a sarcastic response akin to that of the crucified thief – 'If you're so good, get us out of here.' She's challenging Him, give us the goods or take your drink and go.'

These two are dancing with big theological partners, a piece of perichoresis if ever there was one. Theology of place, sexuality, life, Law, interpretation, ancestral rivalry, male-female banter and more besides. Some theologians think the woman doesn't get what Jesus is talking about. I think they don't get what she's talking about.

Changing tempo but not tack Jesus tells the woman to call her husband. Heat on or off? Is she to respond by risking the 'I'm not married, I can stay with you' line or should she take her cue to cool it down? She chooses the former (I have no husband) and suddenly the water is very deep – but this woman can swim. 'So, now you're a prophet...' and it's her turn to duck and dive with a bit of cerebral banter and, just as with Nicodemus, *John* takes the moment to be serious and add a different type of content, so with the lady of the well. From a flirtatious conversation to an encounter that becomes life-changing when Jesus talks of spirit and truth. Just as with the conversation with Nicodemus and Nathaniel, there is a type of social and spiritual choreography going on in which the two weigh each other up and change positions. Nicodemus came in all self-assured, Nathaniel came in arrogant and lazy. Here the woman comes in wary and living on her (acerbic) wit – the only thing she has to counter the men who have before offered her life only to take it away for whatever reason they could find.

When Jesus tells her He is the Messiah she buys it completely and knows what He knows of her, her need to be recognised and respected, not judged but understood.

And then the disciples arrive! They take one look at the scene and stop dead in their tracks. They shuffle their feet. The ones at the back bump into the ones at the front, ask loudly 'what's going on?' then fall to nervous whistling and look intently at weeds or sand or buckets or the sandwiches they bought back from the city, wondering if Jesus would like tuna and mayo or BLT without the B. And none of them asked the woman 'what do you want?' or asked Him 'why are you talking with her?' (And how laden with stereotype and prejudice is the pronoun 'her' here?).

She leaves, leaving her water jar for the men to drink from, including the Messiah, and off she goes to play the role of evangelist.

Then, as if all this isn't enough, He plays the same dialogue out with them – 'I have food that you do not know about'. But, unlike the woman, they don't get the double-word-play and wonder if she or someone else, brought Him food ('so why did we bother to go into town after all?'). Then more Samaritans come and ask these Jews to stay a couple of days with them. All is topsy-turvy and the festive sharing of bread and wine again symbolises the presence of the Kingdom of God and the person of the Christ.