

# Three Retellings of the Samaritan Woman Story

(John 4:1-30, 39-42)



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August 1, 2024

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# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1. In 721 BC, the Assyrians conquered Samaria, deported thousands of Jews, and replaced them with Gentiles bringing pagan religions, cf., 2 Kings 17.
2. A mongrel Judaism formed (Pentateuch & Mt. Gerizim).
3. In 538 BC, Cyrus allows the Jews to return and rebuild their temple. The Samaritans offered to help but were rejected by the pure-blooded Jews (Ezra 4).
4. In 400 BC, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim.
5. In 128 BC, the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim.
6. AD 6-9, some Samaritans dropped human bones inside the temple in Jerusalem, desecrating it on the eve of Passover (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.2.2).
7. According to the Mishnah *Niddah* 4:1, all ‘the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from their cradle’ and therefore in a state of ceremonial uncleanness.”
8. A Samaritan made pious Jews unclean (whatever a Samaritan touched, saliva, urine, etc., food).
9. To call a Jew a “Samaritan” was profoundly derogatory and implied they were an apostate. Cf., the Pharisees called Jesus a demon-possessed Samaritan (John 8:48).

# INTRODUCTION

Most scholars have seen the woman as sexually promiscuous and read the entire passage through the lens of an immoral woman. To quote a summary reading of this sort, Lynn Cohick writes, “the Samaritan woman has been harshly treated by centuries of commentators who have labeled her a promiscuous vixen bent on seducing unsuspecting men, and who therefore becomes the village pariah” (Cohick, *Women in the World of Earliest Christians*, 128). Caryn Reeder runs us through the history of Christian readings of this woman and most have interpreted her as an erotic, as sexually promiscuous, and as an adulterer. She mentions Tertullian, Origen, and John Chrysostom, influential theologians of the early church. From other periods in church history, she finds the same degrading reading in John Calvin, Clara Lucas Balfour, D.L. Moody, and in the contemporary church she mentions Liz Curtis Higgs, Barbara J. Essex, and John Piper. Not many are like Mary DeMuth who see her more in terms of victim.<sup>1</sup>

Enough of the “assuming she was an erotic and sexually promiscuous woman. Not once is that suggested in this passage. Not once. Christian readers have destroyed this woman’s character on the basis of a presumption without evidence. Why would a woman have five husbands and now a man who is not her husband? Anyone who knows Judaism can think of more than the sexually-promiscuous or immoral-woman view. Her husbands could have died. Not at all impossible. She could have been passed around through the laws of levirate marriage in which if a man died, his brother took under his care his brother’s wife. Not at all impossible. She could have been divorced a time or two, perhaps especially if she was a barren woman. Not at all impossible. She could be said to “have” a man, and the word could mean nothing more than “man” and not “husband,” because she was a concubine of a Roman leader who could not marry a woman of lower class. Committed cohabitation was a known institution in that world, too. Or, more likely, she was under the care of her brother, her former husband’s brother, or an uncle. Such explanations are not only possible but should be our first instincts.”<sup>2</sup>

McKnight says, “Perhaps more telling against the traditional reading of the woman as immoral are the following: (1) Jesus carries on an extensive back-and-forth with her, (2) she becomes a witness of Jesus (3) without Jesus ever saying she needed to repent from something, (4) her story and Nathanael’s are very much alike (1:43-51), (5) no one in the village seems to distrust her as a promiscuous woman. In fact, (6) she wields powerful influence in the community. What seems most likely is that she’s a leader in the community.”<sup>3</sup>

## Marriage in the Ancient World

Most people in the ancient world got married—women often in their teens, men in their late twenties. Given the high death rate, people were often widowed and then remarried, perhaps two or three times. The Greeks and Romans did not practice polygamy, but evidence shows that some Jews entered bigamous marriages. The only legal document for marriage was a dowry document listing the property and wealth that the bride brought to the marriage. The husband could use this money however he wanted, and any profit he made was his to keep. Should they divorce, however, he must return the entire dowry—but if his wife was found guilty of adultery, he could

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<sup>1</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>2</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>3</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

keep the dowry. Couples could live together as husband and wife without a dowry contract, or even a wedding. By setting up house together, they signaled to their community that they considered themselves married.<sup>4</sup>

Divorce was an option; it was typically not shameful, unless it resulted from adultery. Women could not initiate a divorce, but they could ask a male advocate to do so and thus regain the dowry. It is difficult to determine how common divorce was, but the disciples' reaction to Jesus's teaching in Matthew 19:9–11 tells us divorce wasn't unheard of. Even Joseph considered it when he learned that Mary was pregnant (Matt. 1:18–19).<sup>5</sup>

The culture in which Jesus taught was indeed diverse and complicated. To understand his conversation with the Samaritan woman, we must examine it within its first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman context.<sup>6</sup>

### **Probably Not an Adulteress**

John 4 tells us that Jesus left Judea because his ministry was heavily scrutinized. Returning to Galilee, he decided to travel through Samaria rather than take a longer route around the territory. Jews usually took the long route to avoid interacting with Samaritans, whose false religious views they opposed.<sup>7</sup>

After walking all morning, Jesus and his disciples arrived at Sychar, the place of Jacob's Well. Jesus stayed behind while his disciples went to town to get food. What followed was a one-on-one encounter between Jesus and a religious seeker, as is frequent in the Gospel of John. Jesus is thirsty, and a woman comes along with a bucket. Some scholars suggest she was a prostitute looking for customers. **They argue that morally upright women drew water in the morning when it was cooler, not at midday.**<sup>8</sup>

It certainly would have been more efficient to get water earlier, but this value did not govern all ancient societies—nor does it today. In the village near my home in Kenya, for example, women washed and dried clothes in the hot equatorial sun. It would be more efficient to wash clothes early in the day, so that by evening the dry clothes could be folded and brought inside the house. But my Western assumptions were challenged when I saw women begin their washing at mid-

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<sup>4</sup> SANDRA L. GLAHN March 22, 2024  
<https://kregelacademicblog.com/biblical-studies/the-woman-at-the-well-was-the-samaritan-woman-really-an-adulteress/>

<sup>5</sup> SANDRA L. GLAHN March 22, 2024  
<https://kregelacademicblog.com/biblical-studies/the-woman-at-the-well-was-the-samaritan-woman-really-an-adulteress/>

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afternoon, then hang the clothes to dry overnight and into the next afternoon—hardly efficient, but perhaps more conducive to their food preparation and fellowship with neighbors.<sup>9</sup>

Notice John doesn't say why the woman was at the well at noon. Perhaps she was helping a neighbor with young children. Or maybe she needed more water to finish her tasks. John tells us the time of day to explain why Jesus would be hot and tired, not to comment on when virtuous women drew water.<sup>10</sup>

We might wonder why the woman appeared to be alone (although John doesn't explicitly say she was alone). **Most people traveled in groups, for daily chores and life's burdens are more bearable when singing and sharing with friends.** But in itself, the detail that she was alone doesn't speak to her character. It is a detail later in the story—that the man she is with now is not her husband—that seems to cast a shadow of shame on her.<sup>11</sup>

When the woman agrees with Jesus that she has had five husbands and the one she is with now is not her husband, it sounds like she is confessing sexual immorality. It sounds like she has treated marriage flippantly in the past, and is now cohabitating. But our assumption clashes with the other details John gives. He presents her as an inquisitive religious seeker who is trusted—perhaps even admired—by her fellow townspeople.<sup>12</sup>

So if she wasn't sexually promiscuous, what could explain her history and current situation? It's unlikely that she was divorced five times, each time for committing adultery. **No man would dare marry a convicted adulteress with neither fortune nor fame.** That she was a serial divorcée is also unlikely. She would have needed the repeated help of a male advocate to do so. Further, we have no evidence that anyone in the ancient world, man or woman, divorced five times. The closest parallel is the first-century-BC general Pompey the Great, who married five times; he was divorced twice and widowed twice.<sup>13</sup>

And since barrenness was not always a cause for divorce, we cannot assume she was divorced for that reason. Think of the long, childless marriage of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were blessed late in life with a son, John the Baptist. Yet if she was known to be barren, can you

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imagine five men risking marriage to a woman everyone knew was infertile? Not in their culture.<sup>14</sup>

**It is more likely that her five marriages and current arrangement were the result of unfortunate events that took the lives of several of her husbands.** Perhaps one or two of them divorced her, or maybe she initiated divorce in one case. As for her current situation, maybe she had no dowry and thus no formal marriage, meaning her status was similar to a concubine's. Perhaps the man she was currently with was old and needed care, but his children didn't want to share their inheritance with her, so he gave her no dowry document. Perhaps he was already married, making her his second wife. While the ancient Jewish culture allowed it, such an arrangement went against Jesus's definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4–6). It makes sense, then, that Jesus would say she wasn't married. Scripture doesn't tell us why she had five husbands, but exploring first-century realities helps us imagine how her life might have unfolded.<sup>15</sup>

The Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>16</sup>

I had always heard this woman described as one who divorced five husbands and didn't bother marrying the sixth. She is the picture of sexual promiscuity. A serial adulterer. It makes for a powerful story of transformation, but is it true? Likely not. Consider that in her world, girls were often married to much older men (Mary was just a girl when she married Joseph). And, the main cause of death for men was war, so they often died young. Consider, too, that women were rarely economically self-sufficient. They depended on their father's family, then their husband's. Knowing this, it should not surprise us if the woman at the well was not an adulterer, but simply had the misfortune of marrying husband after husband who died, or perhaps divorced her, until eventually no one would marry her, and she had to settle for concubine status in order to eat. Our lack of historical knowledge and our tendency to sexualize women has caused us to see this woman as someone she likely was not.<sup>17</sup>

The Samaritan Woman at the Well – John 4:1-42

Insight: This woman models honesty, faith, and unapologetic proclamation of Who Jesus is! According to Greek Orthodox tradition, her name is Photini and she was martyred by Nero. She is commemorated on February 26.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For more, see Lynn Cohick, "The 'Woman at the Well': Was the Samaritan Woman Really an Adulteress?" in Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, 249–54.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/vindicating-vixens-how-we-view-bible-women-shapes-our-response-metoo/>

<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2013/03/20/100846-martyr-photini-the-samaritan-woman-her-sons-and-those-with-them>. Also, cf., <https://ocf.org/orthodox-christian-laity/st-photini-patron-saint-of-ocf/>

Based on Jewish sense and sensibilities, Jesus' request for water from this woman would "have struck the more traditional Palestinian Jewish pietists as impious."<sup>19</sup> Keener observes, "in the late first century a prominent teacher insisted that whoever eat bread from Samaria is as if he eats pork" (*M. Seb.* 8:10).<sup>20</sup> Also, "strict Jewish men would avoid drinking after *any* woman who *might* be unclean (cf., Josephus Antiquities 3.261; *m. Tehar.* 5:8; *t. Sabb.* 1.14; Davis and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:128)."<sup>21</sup> To press the issue even more, Carson argues, "within a generation Jewish leaders would codify a law (**Mishnah Niddah 4:1, that reflected longstanding popular sentiment, to the effect that all 'the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from their cradle' and therefore in a state of ceremonial uncleanness.**"<sup>22</sup> The concept of guilt by association is of critical importance in the honor-shame and dyadic world of the New Testament. "Jesus is accused of being a 'Samaritan' (John 8:48)."<sup>23</sup>

According to Deuteronomy 24:1, "If a man's wife becomes displeasing to him, because he finds something indecent about her, he could write her a certificate of divorce, and send her away from his house." This left the woman in a vulnerable position. The reasons for a husband's displeasure were expanded over the years to include everything from infertility to the quality of her cooking. There is then the possibility that this woman had been passed around from man to man because of some defect in her.<sup>24</sup>

**There is also the possibility that the Samaritan woman had been widowed multiple times. With high mortality rates in the ancient near East, what are the odds that Photine was caught in a situation of Levirate marriage, where one brother dies and another brother is made to marry her; then another dies, and then another, and so on.**<sup>25</sup>

**A serial widow would struggle to remarry—some men might fear that a curse or a demon was associated with her, and that his own life would be in danger if they wed.** This could be why the last male of the family has refused to marry her, but has at least provided her a situation of co-habitation.<sup>26</sup>

In many ways, **Photine seems like the hypothetical woman of Matthew 22:28 personified.** Remember when the Sadducees asked Jesus about such a woman, who had had 7 husbands, all of whom had died. They asked Jesus: "Therefore, at the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be, since they all had her?"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Keener, Craig S. *The Gospel of John – A Commentary*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 600.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 600.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 600 and n 184.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John. Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1991), 217-18.

<sup>23</sup> Keener, Craig S. *The Gospel of John – A Commentary*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 601.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

Source: <https://johnmarkhicks.com/2017/03/20/st-photini-of-samaria-woman-evangelist-and-martyr/>

<sup>25</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

Source: <https://johnmarkhicks.com/2017/03/20/st-photini-of-samaria-woman-evangelist-and-martyr/>

<sup>26</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

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<sup>27</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

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Whose wife will she be? I thought about this question all week as I thought about Photine. And then it hit me. At the resurrection—at the eschatological marriage feast of the Lamb—she (like we) will be the bride of Christ, because she heard his words and, like her townspeople, believed that he really was the Savior of the world.<sup>28</sup>

If you know your Old Testament, then you know that when a man and a woman meet at a well, a wedding usually follows. Wells were kind of like ancient pick-up joints or singles bars. Moses met his wife Zipporah at a well in Midian, remember? Eleazar found Rebekah, Isaac’s future wife at a well also.<sup>29</sup>

And today Jesus meets Photine at a well, and it is the same well where Jacob met his first wife Rachel in Gen 29 also at midday, high noon. And as if to solidify the symbolism in John 4, the Samaritan woman asks Jesus whether he is greater than their common ancestor Jacob, an obvious nod to the earlier story.<sup>30</sup>

### **THE BIBLICAL TEXTS (2 Kings 17:5-18; John 4:1-42)**

2 Kings 17:5-18, 24-34

5 Then the king of Assyria invaded the entire land, and went up to Samaria and besieged it for three years. **6 In the ninth year of Hoshea (721 BC), the king of Assyria captured Samaria and led the people of Israel into exile to Assyria, and settled them in Halah and Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.** 7 Now this came about because the sons of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up from the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and they had feared other gods. 8 They also followed the customs of the nations whom the Lord had driven out from the sons of Israel, and in the customs of the kings of Israel which they had introduced. 9 And the sons of Israel did things secretly against the Lord their God which were not right. Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. 10 And they set up for themselves memorial stones and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, 11 and there they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did that the Lord had taken into exile before them; and they did evil things, provoking the Lord. 12 They served idols, concerning which the Lord had said to them, “You shall not do this thing.” 13 Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and every seer, saying, “Turn back from your evil ways and keep My commandments and My statutes in accordance with all the Law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets.” 14 However, they did not listen, but stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the Lord their God. 15 They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers, and His warnings which He gave them. And they followed idols and became empty, and followed the nations that surrounded them, about which the Lord had commanded them not to do as they did. **16 And they abandoned all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves cast metal images: two calves.** And they made an Asherah,

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

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<sup>29</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

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<sup>30</sup> Frederick, Claire. St. Photini of Samaria – Woman, Evangelist, and Martyr

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and worshiped all the heavenly lights, and served Baal. 17 Then they made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire, and they practiced divination and interpreting omens, and gave themselves over to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him. 18 So the Lord was very angry with Israel, and He removed them from His sight; no one was left except the tribe of Judah.

**24 Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel. So they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities.** 25 And at the beginning of their living there, they did not fear the Lord; therefore the Lord sent lions among them that were killing some of them. 26 So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, “The nations whom you have taken into exile and settled in the cities of Samaria do not know the custom of the God of the land; so He has sent lions among them, and behold, they are killing them because they do not know the custom of the God of the land.” 27 Then the king of Assyria issued commands, saying, “Take one of the priests there whom you led into exile, and have him go and live there; and have him teach them the custom of the God of the land.” 28 So one of the priests whom they had led into exile from Samaria came and lived in Bethel, and taught them how they were to fear the Lord.

**29 But every nation was still making gods of its own, and they put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria had made, every nation in their cities in which they lived.** 30 The men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, 31 and the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites were burning their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. 32 They also feared the Lord and appointed from their entire population priests of the high places, who acted for them in the houses of the high places. 33 They feared the Lord, yet they were serving their own gods in accordance with the custom of the nations from among whom they had been taken into exile.

34 To this day they act in accordance with the earlier customs: they do not fear the Lord, nor do they follow their statutes, their ordinances, the Law, or the commandments which the Lord commanded the sons of Jacob, whom He named Israel.

John 4:1-6

1 So then, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that He was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing; rather, His disciples were), 3 He left Judea and went away again to Galilee. 4 And He had to pass through Samaria.<sup>31</sup> 5 So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; 6 and Jacob’s well was there. So Jesus, tired from His journey, was just sitting by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

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<sup>31</sup> An Iranian friend pointed out to me another common Middle Eastern cultural rule that Jesus broke. On entering a village in that region, a person is expected to present themselves to the village leaders before going about their business. (Is this perhaps the cultural background to Jesus’ instruction to the Seventy in Matthew 10:11–14—if the village leaders reject you, don’t break cultural rules by entering there?) Jesus, however, rather than approaching the village leaders, approaches one of the lowliest and most rejected members of this village community and starts his mission to the Samaritans from this upside-down circumstance. Source: <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/samaritan-sinner-celebrated-saint-story-first-christian-missionary/>

John 7:15-26

15 The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw water.” 16 He said to her, “Go, call your husband and come here.” 17 The woman answered and said to Him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You have correctly said, ‘I have no husband’; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this which you have said is true.” 19 The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and yet you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one must worship.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Believe Me, woman, that 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, because salvation is from the Jews. 23 But a time is coming, and even now has arrived, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 The woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I am He, the One speaking to you.”

#### Comment

1. The reference to five husbands does not imply she is an adulteress. Her husbands could have died. She could have been passed around through the laws of levirate marriage in which if a man died, his brother took under his care his brother’s wife. She could have been divorced a time or two, perhaps especially if she was a barren woman.<sup>32</sup>
2. According to Morris, “Rabbis regarded two, or at the most three marriages as the maximum for a woman ( H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, II, p. 437).<sup>33</sup> Barrett states, Jesus’ words simply state she has had five legal husbands.<sup>34</sup>
3. She could be said to “have” a man, and the word could mean nothing more than “man” and not “husband,” because she was a concubine of a Roman leader who could not marry a woman of lower class.<sup>35</sup>
4. Committed cohabitation was a known institution in that world, too. Or, more likely, she was under the care of her brother, her former husband’s brother, or an uncle. Such explanations are not only possible but should be our first instincts.”<sup>36</sup>
5. Keener suggests that language “the one you have now is not your husband” indicates she is a prostitute and was giving Jesus permission to pursue her sexually.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>33</sup> Morris, Leon. *John*, 264 n 43.

<sup>34</sup> Barrett, *John*, 197.

<sup>35</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>36</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>37</sup> Keener, *John*, 605-06.

6. Factoring male-initiated divorce and loss of a husband by death, having five husbands does not imply she is an adulteress.

John 4:27-30

27 And at this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, “What are You seeking?” or, “Why are You speaking with her?” 28 So the woman left her waterpot and went into the city, and said to the people, 29 “Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is He?” 30 They left the city and were coming to Him.

John 4:31-38

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But He said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33 So the disciples were saying to one another, “No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?” 34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work. 35 Do you not say, ‘There are still four months, and then comes the harvest’? Behold, I tell you, raise your eyes and observe the fields, that they are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the one who sows and the one who reaps may rejoice together. 37 For in this case the saying is true: ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have come into their labor.”

John 4:39-42

39 Now from that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all the things that I have done.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. 41 Many more believed because of His word; 42 and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One truly is the Savior of the world.”

## SUMMARY ARGUMENTS FOR THE IDENTITY OF WOMAN AT THE WELL:

1. The traditional reading that she is an immoral woman or possibly a prostitute is historically improbable for the following reasons:

- a. **Reason #1:** Drawing water<sup>38</sup> at times outside morning and evening does not prove a woman is unholy or immoral. Furthermore, her own comment, “Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty, nor come *all the way* here to draw *water*” (4:15), may explain why she came to the well later than the more ideal times of morning and evening.
  - i. Genesis 29:4-8 (Jacob and Rachel) is an example of women drawing water a “high day” for extenuating circumstances.
  - ii. It is possible, given the late writing of John, that Roman time is reckoned here, i.e., is it 6 PM and not 12 PM. It is probably unlikely that John has a Roman view of time in mind here.
  - iii. Culturally, “midday one who temporarily break from most agricultural work; from hunting; from allowing animals to graze; and sometimes from battle.”<sup>39</sup>
  - iv. However, many people drew water at midday simply because they were thirsty. This includes watering livestock.

See Luke 13:15, “But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites, does each of you on the Sabbath not untie his ox or donkey

from the stall and lead it away to water it?”

- v. Another reason to draw water during midday, “**one of the exceptions to midday breaks was the urgency of the harvest**, which may prove relevant in this narrative (John 4:35).”<sup>40</sup>

See John 4:31-38

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But He said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33 So the disciples were saying to one another, “No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?” 34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work. **35 Do you not say, ‘There are still four months, and then comes the harvest’?**”

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<sup>38</sup> Regarding the cultural background of drawing water, note: This woman may have been required to walk about a half-mile. A single water bag may have weighed 30 lbs when full. Regarding other references to watering or drawing water in the Old Testament, cf., Genesis 24:11, “He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water when it was evening, the time when women go out to draw water.” Genesis 29:7-8, “7 Then he said, “Look, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.” 8 But they said, “We cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.” Exodus 2:16, Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. 1 Samuel 9:11, As they went up the slope to the city, they found young women going out to draw water, and they said to them, “Is the seer here?”

<sup>39</sup> Keener, *John*, 592.

<sup>40</sup> Keener, *John*, 592.

**Behold, I tell you, raise your eyes and observe the fields, that they are white for harvest.** 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that the one who sows and the one who reaps may rejoice together. 37 For in this case the saying is true: ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have come into their labor.”

- b. **Reason #2:** It is striking that she is very comfortable talking about theology and faith. This is not the language and word stock of a low-status prostitute/immoral woman.
- c. **Reason #3:** The community leaders readily accept her testimony. This implies she may have been a community leader herself or possibly a successful and respected business woman.<sup>41</sup> Samaria was a more metropolitan area under Greek and Roman influence.  
A low-status female (prostitute) would profoundly lack credible testimony. Especially if all she said was, “He told me everything I’ve done...” Everyone already knows what an immoral woman does. McKnight argues, she wields powerful influence in the community. What seems most likely is that she’s a leader in the community.<sup>42</sup>
- d. **Reason #4:** The fact that this woman had five husbands *actually proves her worth*, i.e., she was viewed as being prized or honorable woman. If she were a worthless, shameful, and immoral woman, *then four very stupid men married her*; and worst of all, is the fool who is living with her now. Therefore, it may be possible to argue that she is a high-status female not unlike Mary Magdalene. If she were a shameful and immoral woman, no honorable males would marry her. Furthermore, the accounting of her five husbands may be possibly attributed to:
  - i. High mortality rates in first-century culture.
  - ii. Levirate marriage (cf., Matthew 22:28).
  - iii. Male-initiated divorce due to infertility (barrenness).
  - iv. Demon possession.<sup>43</sup>

2. According to Greek Orthodox tradition:

- a. The Samaritan Woman’s name is **Photini or Photine (Φωτεινή)**, meaning *enlightened one or illuminated one*.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>42</sup> <https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/rethinking-the-samaritan-woman>

<sup>43</sup> According to Tobit 3:7-9, “7 That same day in the city of Ecbatana in Media, it happened that Sarah, the daughter of a man named Raguel, was insulted by one of her father's servant women. 8 Sarah had been married seven times, but the evil demon, Asmodeus, killed each husband before the marriage could be consummated. The servant woman said to Sarah, You husband killer! Look at you! You've already had seven husbands, but not one of them lived long enough to give you a son. 9 Why should you take it out on us? Why don't you go and join your dead husbands? I hope we never see a child of yours!”

- b. It is possible she and her family were included in the 3,000 who were baptized at Pentecost.<sup>44</sup>
- c. According to Therese Koturbash, at Pentecost Saint Photini received baptism, along with her five sisters, Anatole, Photo, Photis, Paraskeve, Kyriake, and her two sons, Photeinos and Joseph.<sup>45</sup>
- d. She was **martyred by Nero**. She is commemorated on February 26.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.thegoodshepherd.org.au/st-photini-and-her-almost-forgotten-apostolic-family#:~:text=Photini%20was%20the%20Samaritan%20woman,the%20Gospel%20to%20her%20people>.

<sup>45</sup> Source: <https://womensordinationcampaign.org/blog-working-for-womens-equality-and-ordination-in-the-catholic-church/2020/2/26/0lxuekybneo4kr4naxadczejdag>

# SCENE 1: AN IMMORAL WOMAN OF SAMARIA CAME TO DRAW WATER

**JESUS SAID:** Give Me a drink.

**SHE SAID:** I don't give drinks. You know that. The fact that you are talking to me tells me you are here for business. I see lots of Jews anyway, Pharisees, Scribes, you name it.

**JESUS SAID:** If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

**SHE SAID:** The gift of God? The spirit of Ishtar is on me. My body serves Ishtar. I am the gift. No man has ever given me anything but payment. You need to know something.  
I don't need men. They need me. I'm not asking a man for anything ever again. When I do, it ends in divorce.

**JESUS SAID:** Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty; but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life."

**SHE SAID:** Eternal life. Really? That's for others, not me.

**JESUS SAID:** Go, call your husband and come here.

**SHE SAID:** My personal life is none of your business. Now move. I've got to draw water. My kids are thirsty. Do you think I draw water at noon because I enjoy it? Besides, I don't have a husband. That's all you need to know. That is me telling you I'm available.

**JESUS SAID:** 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, because salvation is from the Jews.

**SHE SAID:** I don't have time for your Jewish religion.

**JESUS SAID:** The Father is seeking real worshipers, those who worship Him in Spirit and truth. I am He, the One speaking to you.

**SHE SAID:** You think You speak on behalf of God? God doesn't talk to me. The Jews say I am twice unclean. Why should I listen to you? You're probably like the other Jews. They use me and then all of a sudden they get religious and start mumbling prayers. I've got to go. Please don't follow me home.

## SCENE 2: A BITTER WOMAN OF SAMARIA CAME TO DRAW WATER

**JESUS SAID:** Give Me a drink.

**SHE SAID:** I don't take orders from Jews.

**JESUS SAID:** If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

**SHE SAID:** I'm not asking a Jew for anything.

**JESUS SAID:** Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty; but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life."

**SHE SAID:** Who do you think You are? Why do you want this water anyway? Isn't it ritually unclean water polluted by us ritually unclean Samaritans? You Jews have wanted the right to well for generations. Too bad it's not in Jerusalem. It's right here in our unclean Samaria.

**JESUS SAID:** Go, call your husband and come here."

**SHE SAID:** That's none of your business. Do you want to talk about morality? What about the fact that your John Hyrcanus and his thugs stormed our temple, leveled it, captured hundreds of my people, and turned them into slaves for the Jews? Let me guess, the Jews who did that had God on their side!

**JESUS SAID:** 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, because salvation is from the Jews.

**SHE SAID:** Oh, now I see... salvation is *from* the Jews. Like we aren't good enough to find God by ourselves. Our mountain is not good enough. Our Bible is not good enough. Like the only way to God is through a Jew?

**JESUS SAID:** God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

**SHE SAID:** Let me tell You something. If Samaritans aren't good enough for the Jews, then the Jews aren't good enough for the Samaritans. Don't talk to me again and keep your religion and your politics to yourself.

## SCENE 3: A CURSED WOMAN OF SAMARIA CAME TO DRAW WATER

**JESUS SAID:** Give Me a drink.

**SHE SAID:** How is it that You, though You are a Jew, are asking me for a drink, a cursed Samaritan woman?

**JESUS SAID:** Jesus replied to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

**SHE SAID:** If I knew the gift of God? Everything I have ever asked for has died or left me. I have no gifts. The demon Asmodeus has cursed me. Nothing is a gift. The curse of darkness is on me, Tartak of the Assyrians. Sometimes the people say I am a cursed dog, Navchaz. No one is friends with a cursed dog (cf., 2 Kings 17:24, 29-33). No one wants to be friends with a woman who haunts her husbands.

**JESUS SAID:** Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty; but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life.”

**SHE SAID:** You don’t understand, the curse of darkness is on me. I have to draw water at noon because the village women don’t want me around them. They are afraid the curse will take their husbands and children away from them like it has mine. Tartak is dark. Tartak is evil. Asmodeus is a demon.

**JESUS SAID:** Go, call your husband and come here.”

**SHE SAID:** Why do You torture me? My husbands keep dying or divorcing me. My world is dark and cursed.

**JESUS SAID:** But a time is coming when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.

**SHE SAID:** Your God of Israel can’t help me. There is no such thing as truth—only darkness.

**JESUS SAID:** I am He, the One speaking to you.

**SHE SAID:** You shouldn’t talk to me. There is no hope for me.

# THE REAL SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL

John 4:1-30, 39-42

1 So then, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that He was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing; rather, His disciples were), 3 He left Judea and went away again to Galilee. 4 And He had to pass through Samaria. 5 So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; 6 and Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, tired from His journey, was just sitting by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away to the city to buy food. 9 So the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, though You are a Jew, are asking me for a drink, though I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus replied to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." 11 She said to Him, "Sir, You have no bucket and the well is deep; where then do You get this living water? 12 You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well and drank of it himself, and his sons and his cattle?" 13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty; but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life."

15 The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty, nor come all the way here to draw water." 16 He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." 17 The woman answered and said to Him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this which you have said is true." 19 The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and yet you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one must worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Believe Me, woman, that 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, because salvation is from the Jews. 23 But a time is coming, and even now has arrived, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am He, the One speaking to you."

27 And at this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, "What are You seeking?" or, "Why are You speaking with her?" 28 So

the woman left her waterpot and went into the city, and said to the people, 29 “Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is He?” 30 They left the city and were coming to Him.

39 Now from that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all the things that I have done.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. 41 Many more believed because of His word; 42 and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One truly is the Savior of the world.”