

- e. Shechem was woven into Israel's identity and existence as the Abrahamic people and this relationship was further accented by Shechem's consecrated status. This consecration had two aspects: First, Shechem was designated as a *Levitical city* – one of the forty-eight cities set apart for the priests and Levites who served Yahweh in the ministration of His sanctuary (Joshua 21); but among those cities Shechem was also one of the six designated *cities of refuge* – places to which Israelites could flee to find refuge from pursuers (Joshua 20:1-9).
4. When the group arrived at the well (about the *sixth hour* – either noon or 6 p.m., depending on whether John was using Jewish or Roman reckoning), Jesus remained there to rest while His disciples went into the city to get food for them. While He waited for them to return a local woman came to the well to draw water. When Jesus saw her He asked her to draw some water for Him to drink (4:6-7). It seems that Jesus had sat there thirsty waiting for someone to arrive because He had no vessel for drawing water from the deep well (v. 11). This might give the impression that his request of the woman was purely pragmatic. But His subsequent response to her reply shows that Jesus had a greater concern than simply satisfying His thirst (4:9-10).
- a. The woman was shocked when Jesus addressed her, for she recognized Him as a Jew and she knew all too well how Jews regarded Samaritans. No self-respecting Jew would have any interaction with a Samaritan; in fact, the Jews regarded Samaritans, like Gentiles, as unclean, so that any close association with them would render the Jewish person ceremonially unclean. John captured this idea in his commentary in verse 9b in which he used a verb which carries a connotation of *table fellowship* (cf. Acts 10:1-29, 11:1-3). (As an aside, John's commentary highlights his design and expectation that his account would be read by Gentiles as well as Jews, for no Jew needed this explanation.)
- The woman was startled that Jesus spoke to her, but all the more because He asked her to draw water for Him. He wasn't sharing a meal with her, but He was asking to drink from *her* vessel (ref. 4:11) and this was no different from eating at her table using her dishes and utensils. Clearly this man wasn't concerned about ceremonial cleanness; what sort of a Jew would act in this way? And if this weren't enough, this Jew had no absolutely no qualms about speaking with a *female*. This woman had been to this well countless times and nothing like this had ever happened before, evident in her response. In effect, she was asking Jesus, "What is going on here and why are you doing this?" Whatever she thought about this situation, there is no doubt but that Jesus now had her full attention.
- b. Jesus' reply to her question is profound and it follows a characteristic pattern with Him in which He used a *natural* circumstance as the springboard for *spiritual* instruction. This is precisely how parables work, so that this encounter can be viewed as a sort of "living" parable. Here the parable Jesus used wasn't a story, but a present situation; the circumstance and need at hand provided the occasion for His instruction. Jesus *was* thirsty and in need of a drink from the well, but that circumstance was only a pointer to a greater need and provision.

This woman had come to the well seeking water that would satisfy her own thirst and that of others she knew. What she didn't realize is that her true need – and the need of her countrymen – was for *living* water. She had a greater thirst which called for another sort of water – water that Jacob's well could not supply. She needed first to be made aware of that thirst and then to learn of the “well” from whose waters her thirst could be slaked. And she would become aware of her need and its provision when she came to discern the One before her (4:10).

Jesus' design was that this Samaritan woman would come to realize that she had a thirst no natural water could satisfy. Indeed, no amount of water would even touch this thirst, let alone quench it. It called for a different sort of water which has its source in another world: *This water is living water which comes from the heavenly realm as God's gift poured out through the One He sent into the world.*

5. Jesus began by asking this woman to draw Him a drink from the well; now He was insisting that she should ask Him for a drink because of her need for “living water.” If she was shocked that Jesus spoke to her at all, His reply to her question left her befuddled. Yet both of these reactions reflected the same natural mindset. Jesus' behavior made no sense to her, but neither did His assertion about giving her living water. (John's grammar in 4:10a expresses the sentiment, “If you knew..., *but you don't.*”) All this woman could see was a deep well and a man with no means to extract its water; there was no way for her to correlate His words with her circumstance. But this was by design: *Jesus intentionally situated her within a quandary with no natural resolution.* He wanted her to realize that her natural perspective, perception, judgment and experiences were of no use to her. What He was setting before her transcends the natural realm and its experiences; to obtain what He offered she would have to rethink everything she thought she knew, including who this person was who was speaking with her (4:11-26).
 - a. Whatever this woman believed about this living water, it's clear she conceived of it in natural terms (4:11). Her first thought was that Jesus certainly couldn't be referring to the water in Jacob's well, for He had no way to draw it out. But there were no other sources of water nearby; just where exactly did He intend to get this special water? And why would He think that this other source of water was superior to the one right there before them? After all, this was *Jacob's* well which had been with the people of Israel for nearly two thousand years.
 - b. But if Jesus was claiming access to superior water from another source, He was implying that He was in some sense superior to Jacob himself (4:12). Did this man really intend to exalt Himself above the beloved patriarch whom God made the fountainhead of the whole nation of Israel, including the sons of Joseph to whom the Samaritans most closely tied their own ancestry (note her phrase, “*our father Jacob*”)? The woman was direct in her challenge, but Jesus didn't honor it with a direct response; she asked Him if He was greater than Jacob; Jesus answered by elaborating on His living water (4:13-14). For this reason some have charged Him with evasion, but He wasn't evading her question; quite the contrary, He answered it according to the logic behind it.

When this Samaritan woman considered the water from Jacob's well, she assessed it in terms Jacob himself; its distinction and value derived from his greatness as one of the patriarchs. Jesus recognized her logic and applied it to her question:

- She asked skeptically if He was greater than Jacob (John's grammar emphasizes her belief that He was *not*); Jesus' reply was that the water associated with His "well" differs from Jacob's in that it fully and permanently accomplishes its design: The water from Jacob's well can quench thirst for a brief season; the water Jesus provides satisfies forever because of its nature and origin. Jesus' water doesn't sustain natural life; it bestows the life of eternity – the life that characterizes God Himself.
 - Jesus' water surpasses Jacob's by *transcending* it as the heavenly transcends the earthly and the eternal transcends the temporal. Jacob had given Israel a perpetual source of water by tapping into a natural underground spring (so John's noun in 4:6). Jesus had come to provide a perpetual supply of living water which has an inward source – living water which flows out of a living spring created within the person himself.
 - Jesus' statement clarified how the water He gives surpasses that which Jacob provided. But the premise behind the woman's question was that each man's water and its source derive their value from their namesake. Thus Jesus was answering her that He *is* greater than Jacob, but in the same way that the water He gives is greater than that which Jacob gave.
- c. Jesus answered the woman's question, but she didn't "hear" it. The same natural perspective that framed her question governed her understanding of the answer; all that she heard in Jesus' words was the good news that obtaining this water would keep her from having to make constant trips to Jacob's well (4:15). She was thinking in terms of natural water and so also in terms of natural thirst.
- d. The Samaritan woman asked Jesus to give her this "living water" and He replied that she needed to go and get her husband and return with him (4:16). This response seems completely off topic, but it's clear Jesus had a purpose in it. He wasn't changing the subject, but neither was He insisting that He would not speak with her further without her husband present. Some who hold the latter position contend that the impropriety of speaking to a woman alone had now dawned on Him; others argue that Jesus was hoping that, with her husband present, He might have better success getting this woman to understand what He was talking about.

It is true she didn't grasp Jesus' meaning and intention in speaking with her, but He didn't instruct her to go retrieve her husband because He thought that might help the situation. *Indeed, the context shows that Jesus was aware she had no husband to retrieve* (vv. 17-18). But this doesn't mean He intended to embarrass or humiliate her or test her truthfulness. But neither was He trying to get her to acknowledge that she was a sinner living with a man out of wedlock.

Some have interpreted verses 16-18 as referring back to the woman's question about Jesus' greatness relative to Jacob (v. 12). By displaying His supernatural knowledge, Jesus was showing that He is *divine* and thus greater than Jacob. The obvious problem with this view is that the woman wouldn't have concluded that Jesus was divine (let alone the divine Son of God) because He was aware of her marital background; He could have learned that information elsewhere. She *did* conclude that He was a prophet (v. 19), but prophets aren't divine. If Jesus was trying to convince her of His deity, He didn't succeed. (Even her eventual realization that Jesus is the Messiah doesn't suggest that she thought He was divine; neither the Jews nor the Samaritans believed in a divine Messiah.)

- e. No, Jesus was still very much focused on the matter at hand; He was still dealing with the issue of "living water" and He gave the woman this directive in view of His goal of her grasping what it is, how it relates to Him and the God who sent Him and why she was in need of it. Jesus directed her to go and return with her husband; she responded that she had no husband. Her minimal reply shows that this was not a matter she wished to discuss. She had no choice but to admit she didn't have a husband to retrieve, but that was all she wanted to say.

Jesus, however, wasn't willing to leave it at that; He already knew she had no husband because He knew everything about her marital situation (4:17-18). Here scholars and commentators proceed down various paths, from finding symbolic significance in her having five husbands to the claim that her sin consisted in her violation of the Jews' three-marriage rule. But it seems that the point wasn't how many times this woman had been married (she may have been widowed several times) or even the fact that she was presently living with a man who wasn't her husband. As suggested above, Jesus was using her marital situation (which is basic to the pattern and practice of a person's life) as the vehicle for leading her to reassess the entirety of her life and the way she perceived it. Her marital situation played two roles: It largely defined and determined the life she lived, but for this reason it was also fundamental to how she viewed herself and her life. Jesus was concerned with how she conceived and approached this thing called *life*, not the particulars of it. This woman, like all people, was living what she understood to be life; Jesus was presenting her with life of an entirely different sort:

- life which characterizes the eternal realm, and so is not of this world;
- life which fully and permanently satisfies the intrinsic and unending longing – the *thirst* – in human beings as they exist in this world;
- life which only Jesus, the Living One, can give, but which then inheres and flows perpetually within the person who possesses it (cf. 1:4, 4:13-14, 5:21-27, 39-40, 6:24-69, 8:12, 11:1-27, etc. with Revelation 1:10-18);
- life which enlivens, renews, sustains and transforms; life which joins humans to the living God whose image they share (Colossians 3:1-11).