

Background notes to John 4:1-42. Lachie McOmish

John 4, 1-42 tells the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman with many husbands at the well.

One often recited interpretation of the meaning and teaching in this passage sees the woman as a marginalised individual, seeking water in the height of the day due to her social condition. And who can disagree. Many interpretations are possible and in our present day, with our focus on disadvantaged minorities, it is common to see the lot of all women in our society as carrying some level of disadvantage.

But the real focus of this passage is that of "living water".

In fact this image of water sits uneasily with us. We are accustomed to turning on a tap for water. Or, perhaps, purchasing a bottle of water at the supermarket. As with many New Testament images, especially those in the Gospel of John, it does not convey the same impact that it would have done to readers in the late first century

In the 1962 epic movie 'Lawrence of Arabia', this point is well illustrated. When Sharif Ali (Omar Sharif) first meets Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) it is at a well. Sharif shoots Lawrence's guide and with clear logic explains

"..He (the guide) was nothing. The well is everything. The Hazimi (the guide's clan) may not drink at our wells. He knew that..."

My recollection of living in the city of New Delhi was a life of colour and smell and an overwhelming number of people everywhere... and during the day, a circus of brooding vultures always circling menacingly overhead.

But travelling through village India, the village well was ever present. It was accessed by everyone high and low but with restrictions on the poor and the untouchables.

In the context of village life the well was a symbol of life. No well, no water. No water, no life.

Now the biblical village of Sychar near where the story unfolds was known formerly as Shechem. Jacob's Well may be the well where the event takes place. If not, it must be very close by.

Jacob's Well is where Jacob met Rachel.

After, or during, the Jewish insurrection Sychar was destroyed by the Romans but later rebuilt as Flavius Neopolis. Time has seen this clumsy name shortened to the present day Nablus. And Jacob's Well today is located within the grounds of a large Orthodox monastery there.

When Rachel died, she was entombed in a crumbling structure still visible today. The site of Rachel's tomb is sacred to Jews and Christians for obvious reasons. But it is also claimed by some Muslims as the burial place of Bilal. One of Mohammed's companions and the first Muezzin or prayer caller. Rachel's tomb has recently become an international issue with UNESCO recognising it as a Muslim site as part of the recognition of the PLO.

This affected UNESCO quite seriously and my daughter works for UNESCO

In addition, Jews especially who had fled Israel during the insurrection may have related to the image of Rachel portrayed in Jeremiah 31,15 where she weeps for war ravaged Israel as a mother

"...Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more..."

Their nation was no more. And would it be reestablished until 1948

Kabbalistic Jewish tradition (the Zohar) sees Rachel as having been entombed outside Shechem to provide comfort to Jews being taken into captivity in Babylon. This idea supposes that Jacob foresaw the Babylonian captivity. Again, this tradition sees that the road past Rachel's tomb would be used by the Messiah to return the dispersed Jews to the Land of Israel.

So if parts of the Kaballah are an authentic tradition and not the invention of the 13th century Jewish scholar, Moses de Leon, it is possible that Jesus's claim to be the Messiah may have resonated with a Jewish audience in the Eastern Mediterranean who listened to this story.

Nablus was also the birthplace of the second century martyr, St Justin, who was the theologian to incorporate the concept of the 'Logos' into early Christian thought. This is of interest in the context of John 1, 1.

So to the woman at the well. As noted, one interpretation is that she was marginalised. Yet orthodox and eastern catholic tradition sees her in a different light altogether.... as Saint Photine.

Saint Photine is celebrated as a saint of renown. As further recounted in John 4:28-30 and John 4:39-42, she was quick to spread the news of her meeting with Jesus, and through this many came to believe in him. Her continuing witness is said to have brought so many to the Christian faith that she is described as "equal to the apostles". Eventually, having drawn the attention of Emperor Nero, she was brought before him to answer for her faith, suffering many tortures and dying a martyr after being thrown down a dry well.

This is hardly the action of a marginalised woman! She was a tiger for the faith!

So is there an interpretation of this story which stress the symbolic rather than the strict literal interpretation. Well some scholars have suggested that the five husbands represent the position elucidated by Josephus that the Samaritans were composed of five different nations each having its own special God. The woman's five husbands in this interpretation represent a different God while the sixth husband is Yahweh. This seems a little complicated.

An easier explanation is that Jesus and the woman engaged in a sophisticated theological conversation. By referring to five husbands, Jesus reminds the woman that as a Samaritan she accepts only the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah.

The role of a wife then was to love, obey and honour her husband. Is it possible that this sixth husband, a metaphor for her present spiritual outlook had become unsatisfactory and she was looking for a more complete faith.

Jesus offers her living water which she eagerly reacts to. She approached the well at the sixth hour, noon, in the height of the day's heat when thirst would be most extreme. She leaves without her water jug, satiated with living water and then immediately lets the villagers know. They believe her which speaks to her standing in the village.

Finally in a very clear statement of a theological position the woman exclaims

"...Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth..."

This is a clear theological explanation not necessary to relieve the spiritual needs of a disposed woman. It is the sort of discourse one might expect a conversation with a Pharisee.

God is spirit and must be worshipped in spirit and truth. What a revelation. No wonder a spiritual woman seeking guidance would rush to her village to spread the good news.

Jesus stays for two days in the village. Now two is an important number in Jewish number symbology. It is the number of witnesses necessary to bear testimony.

So what we seem to have here is a very sophisticated dialogue between a very thoughtful woman and the Messiah.

Of course this is just one interpretation of the story of the woman at the well. Regardless as to how we choose to interpret it, the story remains one of the most inspirational stories in the New Testament. When first written right through to our present day it stands as a shining example of the spectacular gift of faith which we may all access if we have the will.