



CHRIST AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL

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The relationship of man to woman is not just anything: it is particular. It is a fullness, replete with mystery. And it is something completely different for each man and each woman.

The woman is the haunting of a man: a spiritual dimension that both Dante Alighieri and Don Quixote intuited and recognized as central to their quests for being, as men. What would the immortal Christian pilgrim be without his Beatrice? And what would the famous mad knight be without his Dulcinea? How could even the world-changing phenomenon of Christ have been possible without the participation of a mere girl in the Incarnation? "Woman intervenes in history infinitely more than is generally believed or suspected," [says José Ortega y Gasset](#). One can see this in *noir* cinema: the more mysterious the woman, the more compelled the man feels. Perhaps every woman is a potential *femme fatale* for every man is interested in seeing (*really* seeing) the reality of the woman as completely different from him, facing him and challenging, him but also intriguing him at the same time. *Vive la différence!*

But the haunting quality is one way: a man is not a haunting for a woman. Instead, a woman carries the image of the beloved in her heart well before she meets the actual man who may match it in real life. For a woman to feel "aflame with love" after a "casual contact" with a particular man, ["a secret and tacit surrender of her being to that model of a man which she has always carried within herself"](#) has to have "preceded" the event of falling in love with him. The man simply fulfils the romantic prophecy somehow instilled in the woman long ago, once she recognizes him. The man is thus always a known quantity that the woman expects and awaits. The mystery for the woman is in the romantic process of discovery of her own feelings, and not so much in the man himself. Hence the mythic scene of mutual recognition in Dostoevsky's novel [The Idiot](#) when Nastasya Filippovna first beholds Prince Myshkin, and he first beholds her: what is revealed is different for each of them. The woman understands something new about herself, while the man dwells on the mystery of the woman.

But something else happens entirely when the man is Christ.

The Samaritan woman meets Christ at the well (John 4: 1-42)—the preordained place for Old Testament betrothals known as "Jacob's Well" (Isaac with Rebecca, Jacob with Rachel, Moses with Tsiporah). There is thus a romantic expectation surrounding any conversation that takes place here—an understanding that something of life-altering import will occur precisely here, in this place of time-hallowed tradition allowing for sudden matchmaking.

The Samaritan woman is bold, flirtatious, and experienced: there is nothing innocent about her. She has not come to draw water with blushing dreams of a bridegroom, since she has had five husbands, and yet she will meet precisely that: the Bridegroom of all bridegrooms: and He will shake all of her assumptions, challenge all of her brash self-confidence, by meeting her (it would seem) on the only ground she is prepared to understand—the ground of acknowledged sexual maturity, sealed in marriage—a sacrament she has already violated five times.

The Samaritan woman's arrival at the well where Christ has paused, "wearied with his journey," must have been provocative. How or why does He say to her, "Give me to drink?" One can imagine a peremptory tone of command—a sexual note of attraction or interest—or an exhausted expression of thirst in the heat of the day, "about the sixth hour" (meaning noon or midday when the sun is at its hottest directly overhead). Perhaps all three at once.

What is fascinating about this dialogue is the length of it, focused as it is for a full twenty verses on just Jesus Christ and an anonymous woman of Samaria. There is no other conversation with a woman as long as this in any of the four Gospels. Dramatically, the exchange is unequalled because it builds on a sexual charge that explicitly includes women in Christ's ministry to the world. Like the woman taken in adultery (John 8: 1-11), Christ forgives her—for the Samaritan woman too is guilty of adultery (Matthew 19: 9; Mark 10: 2-12; Luke 17: 18)—serial monogamy is still adultery. Of all the sins in specifically female terms of experience, adultery is surely the most common. And even though it takes two to tango, it is the female partner in crime who has always been seen as bearing the full sinful brunt for both. For if Man is fallen, Woman is fallen in a more particular way. The New Testament abounds with references to sinful temptresses who become penitent, from the Magdalene ("healed of seven devils") to the Mary who anoints Christ's head and washes His feet with her tears, drying them with her hair (John 12: 1-8). But only the Samaritan woman is given a voice, a personality, in the course of a complete and sustained dialogue.

In fact, the Samaritan woman never gives Christ what He requests: a simple drink of water from the well. This ironic denial is striking. After observing that the stranger accosting her is not following the social conventions, and noticing that he does not have any water jug of his own to fill in the same way as everyone else, she begins to consider the enigma in front of her with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. Who is this strange Jew who ignores that she is from Samaria (when all Jews do not normally consort with Samaritans)? And why does he speak to her in riddles about "living water?"

*There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink.
(For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat).*

This parenthetical proof that Christ is alone by the well confirms the intimacy of the encounter. He is alone with her, a stranger to His own tribe, and He dares to address her. She is not expecting anything like this and yet she appears calm and collected—completely equal to the situation.

Then saith the woman of Samaria unto Him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

The defensive tone, together with her surprise, suggests that she is ready to cut the conversation short. She does not seem to like His attention.

But if her mysterious interlocutor has succeeded in throwing her off balance just by initiating the conversation, then the woman of Samaria will find herself still more flummoxed by the cryptic way He answers her questions.

Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

So, He is not thirsty, after all! Now He is turning the tables and saying that He has the best of all water to offer her, but she does not know it. The request for water has only served as a pretext for Him to draw her in—to provoke her as much as she has perhaps felt provoked by Him—to set aside not only the conventions but the situation of the well itself, in order to seduce her into seeing some higher truth. The echo of Moses giving his children manna in the desert and striking a rock to provide water is behind these words: the miraculous God-given water and food from above. The well is still the sign of the seduction scene, but Christ's emphasis on "the gift of God" elevates them both suddenly from the earthly to the heavenly plane. Listening to Him, the woman of Samaria is increasingly seduced. She lets herself rise up alongside Him, the better to understand the strange words she is hearing. She wants to understand now: what is more, she will address Him three times now as "Sir."

The woman saith unto Him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?

Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle.

The prompt alacrity of her response shows her to be a woman of quick wit and self-confidence. She is not afraid to confront Him with a reasonable doubt, and she is courteous with Him. Her naming of the well's creator also attests to her piety, which she seems proud to communicate. Yet the stranger listening to her in turn is steadily unconcerned with tired conventionalities, such as clan loyalties or rote pieties. The way He will steer their conversation next is calculated to deepen the woman's sense of mystery, and to appeal to the woman's truer relationship to God. He will keep her hooked on His voice because He knows she is thirsty too, in her own way, for something she has only dimly intimated in the course of her chaotic life.

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

The Johannine Gospel is especially replete with this water imagery that stands for immortality of the human soul. "He that believeth on me shall never thirst," Christ tells his disciples—explaining how Moses gave perishable gifts, "but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven," which He calls "the bread of life" (John 6). And on the last day of the Jews' feast of tabernacles, Christ again proclaims, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7: 37-38). This "living water" is of the Spirit, or the Holy Ghost, which will be released upon Christ's crucifixion and glorification after death. This is the Mystery that is in suspension, awaiting fulfilment. "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you" (John 16: 7). All of this "living water" will come to clarify and heal everything dead and dying from sin in the world, at a certain God-appointed time.

But the woman of Samaria cannot know or understand what Christ's own disciples will struggle to understand: she can only intuit "the Spirit of Truth," the Holy Spirit, as a principle of larger and enlivening joy to come. She can only guess that the mysterious stranger means what He says, and that she can perhaps profit from this vague boon that He is promising. The way she carefully extends Him credit, without herself giving anything away, is a prodigy of psychology, so true to human life: intent on salvaging self-respect by clinging to self-interest, she shelters behind a prudence which she hopes is

convincing:

The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.

She does not sound convinced: she only sounds polite. But she does not want to foolishly forfeit some benefit that seems to be in the offing, either. She also sounds firm: as if to say, all right—if you really have these goods, let's see you hand some over—do you have any samples of your wares? She is congratulating herself on her own cleverness: there, she thinks, now I've called your bluff. I hadn't come to buy this here, but I'll give your water a fair chance, if it even exists.

The response she receives to her attempt to remain cool and self-enclosed is masterful. In one stroke, the stranger touches her one weak spot that betrays all pretense of self-control or self-sufficiency. He mentions a husband as the conventional authority for her to consult in order to condone any such purchasing transaction.

Jesus saith unto her, Go, call thy husband, and come hither.

The woman is thunderstruck by the revelation that so swiftly and simply unmask her true situation.

The woman answered and said, I have no husband.

She is suddenly aware, overwhelmed with shame, and she wonders how the stranger could have known – for He immediately says to her, with startling clairvoyance and relentless honesty:

Thou hast well said, I have no husband;

For thou hast had five husbands;

And he whom thou now hast is not thy husband; in that saidst thou truly.

Her current adulterous condition, which is not even papered over with any pretense of a sixth marriage, is what cuts her to the quick. How can this stranger have known the secrets of her whole lifetime, right up to the present moment? It is as if she is standing spiritually naked before Him: there is nowhere she can hide, and no lie she can tell anymore, either to Him or to herself. She is devastated. All she can utter

is a last weak attempt at saving her self-esteem, through a jesting sort of observation that underlines the uncanniness of everything she is feeling.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet.

And then, regaining more composure by seeking some refuge in conventionality again:

Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.

By saying this, she is trying to demonstrate that she knows what the religious rules are, and that men are bound by more serious obligations that she, a weak and sinful woman, cannot be expected to observe or count for as much, seriously.

But the stranger still listening to her, watching her, and speaking to her with the utmost seriousness—He is not condemning her. He still wants to win her respect, her trust—ultimately, her love—because the only love that will save her is the love she can begin to genuinely feel for God. So, He continues to talk to her frankly, as freely and frankly as He knows she can stand, with rigor but also with tact. He sees the potential in her to change, to melt for the better, to make something honorable and true yet out of the emotional waste of her life. He resolutely keeps her whole tremulous being in view, leading her step by step to comprehend the majesty that is within her to overcome all the shame and the brokenness that she has been feeling before. But she had to be reduced to this vulnerability, for Him to be able to reach her at all, to guide her in this way; otherwise she might never have heard, never have realized, where this conversation with Him was supposed to be leading her.

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

By this He asks her to see that righteousness and redemption and worship are more independent of place and tradition than she might think: for God is a living God, not bound to the dead letter but invoked by tongues of living fire. “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you”—this is the first great step for the woman to take, into the silence and solitude of her soul before the presence of God. Then He chastises her ignorance, gently:

Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.

God made a covenant with His chosen people in the Old Testament, and it is from these roots that the new divine dispensation will be ordered and proceed. Historic time, God's sense of history, began with the Jews. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Jacob's well—all the long line of patriarchs and all their seed, who met and married at this very well—they are all silent witnesses of this very moment of their conversation, a historic and life-changing conversation for the woman listening to Him.

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.

Now the possibility of salvation is more clearly explained: just as a change is required within this woman, to die to her old ways and to embrace something new and true, so is the path to God to be cleared away and reordered in a radically new way. Nothing can stay the way it was. God is waiting, just as much as this woman is waiting; there is a suspense, a desire, for a mutual unveiling and disclosure. But the humble creature must make the first move towards the Creator, in a way so new that it could never be written down and made into the dead letter of any law. This is a movement of love, of surrender, of vulnerability on top of vulnerability, a humility that dares not raise its eyes in the presence of God, after so many offenses and disappointments and wastage of precious time—how can the soul hope for anything? And yet it must hope against hope—take the leap of love and faith, or die – abandon itself to the Father, "in spirit and in truth," because there is no other saving place for the suffering soul left to stand.

God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

This last emphasis on the Spirit—the Holy Spirit—is that last precious space to which the woman of Samaria knows she can retreat. Not even the Father anymore, nor even the Son speaking directly to her now—but the Spirit which is thoroughly in both, and beyond both. The woman accepts what the stranger is telling her because she wants to explain her own understanding of what ultimately matters, in what is perhaps her first and fully honest response to Him:

The woman saith unto Him, I know that the Messias cometh, which is called Christ: when He is come, He will tell us all things.

And then, with a disarming directness that she was not until that very last moment prepared to believe, the stranger reveals Himself:

Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he.

“I am he” (*ani hu*) is a phrase of unique power: a kind of uncloaking of divinity which brings everything dramatically to a stop. One recognizes these same words “I am he” pronounced by Christ as He is being arrested, with the immediate effect of overwhelming those who would seek to arrest Him: “As soon therefore as he said to them: I am he, they went backward and fell to the ground” (John 18. 5-6). One can surmise a similar effect is transpiring now for the woman as the Christ reveals Himself suddenly to her.

There is no gap in the narrative here, but there must surely have passed an interval for the woman of Samaria as she beholds the face of Christ—a wordless interval, a piece of eternity—a confirmation of the impossible telescoping of the infinite into the finite and back again—glimpsed and then transforming the woman forever after that glimpse.

And upon this came His disciples, and marveled that He talked with the woman: yet no man said, What seekest thou? Or, Why talkest thou with her?

As with other souls touched and changed in Christ’s wake, the disciples watch the woman of Samaria move and speak in the company of their master in an entirely new way.

The woman then left her waterpot, and went her way into the city, and saith to the men, Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ? Then they went out of the city, and came unto Him.

“Come and see”—more words of power, the first words Christ speaks to the disciples—a phrase that the woman of Samaria adopts now as her own, marks her as a changed woman imbued with a new confidence and joy. Something she never dreamed as being possible before has now suddenly come to pass, and she must now tell the world all about it.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "Christus und die Samariterin am Brunnen" (Christ and the Samaritan Woman at the Well"), by Lorenzo Lippi, painted in 1644.

