

Women in Scripture



A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament



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She appears only twice in John, here and at the crucifixion (19:25-7) where Jesus entrusts her to the care of another famous anonymous figure, the beloved disciple; she is alluded to in 6:42, but not actually present in the narrative.

ROSS S. KRAEMER

SEE ALSO Part I: Mary 1.

JOHN 4:7-42

Samaritan Woman

John 4 describes the encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. The setting is a well in the Samaritan city of Sychar, at which Jesus rests on his way from Jerusalem to Galilee. While his disciples go to the city to buy food (4:8), Jesus requests a drink of the Samaritan woman (4:7). This request initiates a lengthy theological dialogue concerning the contrast between well water, which must be drawn daily, and the living water of eternal life provided by Jesus (4:14). Also discussed is the nature of true worship, which, Jesus emphasizes, focuses neither on Jerusalem, as the Jews believe, nor on Mount Gerizim, as the Samaritans believe, but on the Father, who must be worshipped in spirit and truth. The Samaritan woman receives Jesus' words, requests the living water of which he speaks, and expresses her expectation that the messiah is coming, who "will proclaim all things to us" (4:25). In response, Jesus proclaims his identity: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (4:26).

After the disciples return, the woman leaves her water jar, for which she presumably has no further use, and returns to the city. There she urges the people to "Come and see" (4:29) Jesus, who may be the messiah. The people respond to her testimony, come to stay with Jesus for two days, and declare "this is truly the Savior of the world" (4:42).

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the story is Jesus' description of the woman's lifestyle: she has had five husbands, and her current mate is not her husband. Although some have interpreted this description symbolically, equating the five husbands

with the five books of the Torah, it may be more natural to read it as a reflection of the stereotype that Samaritan women are impure and immoral (compare 4:7, 27). Clearly, gender is not incidental to the story but central to it, as the disciples indicate when they marvel that Jesus is talking to a woman (4:27). The story may intend to stress that Jesus does not consider himself bound by traditional boundaries of gender, religion, and ethnicity, or, indeed, by related stereotypes. Such a reading would be consistent with the structure of the story itself, which recalls the biblical well-scene, in which the groom, or his substitute, meets the future bride at a well. The story frustrates the usual expectations by referring to her ambiguous marital status and by showing Jesus as offering a liaison of a divine sort, implicitly superior to the human betrothal central to Genesis 24 (Rebekah and Isaac), Genesis 29 (Rachel and Jacob), and Exodus 2 (Zipporah and Moses).

Interpreters suggest that the passage may allude to a Johannine mission to the Samaritans, to various aspects of Samaritan theology, or to the inclusion of Samaritan converts in the Johannine community. Some feminist historiographers read the Samaritan woman's active proclamation of her still tentative faith as evidence for women preachers and apostles in the early church.

ADELE REINHARTZ

SEE ALSO Part II: Samaritan Women (and Men) Baptized by Philip (Acts 8:12).

JOHN 8:3-11

Adulterous Woman

The stylistic features of this passage and its presence in some manuscripts of Luke indicate that it originally circulated separately from the Fourth Gospel. A confrontation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees over the stoning of a woman caught in the act of adultery (8:3) is resolved when Jesus challenges anyone who is without sin to throw the first stone (8:7). The crowd departs, leaving Jesus alone with the woman. Ascertaining that no one has con-