

THE WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

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JOHN

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Introduction

The Distinctiveness of John
The New Testament contains four distinct Gospel portraits of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. All four share many crucial elements; for example, all tell the stories of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on water. All contain lengthy accounts of the passion and death of Jesus. There are, however, important differences among them. For example, in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' public ministry begins in Galilee, and Jesus moves out of Galilee into Judea only once, in the journey to Jerusalem that culminates in his death. In John, however, Jesus' ministry alternates between Galilee and Jerusalem. He makes three trips to Jerusalem (2:13-5:1; 7:10) in contrast to the one trip of the Synoptics. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' public ministry lasts one year, whereas John narrates a three-year public ministry. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus often speaks in parables; in John he rarely does.

It is important to resist the temptation either to harmonize these four accounts in order to create one story out of four or to subordinate one Gospel account to the others. All four Gospels attempt to bring the good news of the story of Jesus to the faith needs of a particular community. Each Gospel grapples with the meaning of Jesus' identity and mission in its own way. The church therefore needs to allow each Gospel to have its say about Jesus in its own voice.

The formative issue for the Gospel of John seems to have been the question, Who is Jesus? The Gospel narrative is an attempt to provide fresh answers to this question. It seeks to move the reader away from overly confident assumptions, false certitudes, and complacency about

Jesus' identity. It offers each reader of the Gospel the opportunity to discover Jesus for himself or herself. This purpose, to lead the reader to his or her own experience of Jesus, accounts for the distinctive literary style of John. The "I am" sayings (e.g., 6:20, 35; 8:12, 11:25) provide fresh alternatives to the more traditional titles for Jesus. The intricate blend of narrative and discourse, the use of figurative language, and the extensive dialogues between Jesus and other characters all combine to open the story to the reader's own experience.

Historical and Social Setting

The author of the Gospel of John, like the authors of the other Gospels, is anonymous. The name "John" was attached to this Gospel by the church, and its author was identified as the apostle John. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Gospel was actually written by this apostle. Indeed, the Gospel names "the beloved disciple" as the guarantor of its tradition (19:35; 21:20-24) but does not give this disciple a name. That the guarantor of this tradition is identified by his relationship to Jesus ("beloved") and not his name is a reminder that the community offers a distinctive voice in relation to other apostolic witnesses. Neither does the Gospel of John provide a clear indication of its place of composition; it is written in Greek, which was spoken throughout the Mediterranean world.

The Gospel does provide some indirect clues to its date of composition. The story of the blind man and the Pharisees in chap. 9 shows that a key issue for John and his community was their relationship to the synagogue. Chapter 9 (vv. 18-23, 34, 35) points to a break

between the Jewish synagogue and those Jews who claimed Jesus as the Messiah. Scholars have determined that this break probably occurred in the 80s or 90s, so one could date the composition of John to that period.

The break between the synagogue and Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah is crucial for understanding the social setting of John. At times the Gospel of John speaks of "the Jews" in very negative language (e.g., 8:44). The contemporary reader must place these references in the context of the break with the synagogue and try to imagine what that break meant to John's community. It was metaphorically, and often quite literally, a rupture in a family. These new Christians were faced with an impossible choice: they could claim Jesus as the Messiah and be forced to leave the synagogue and the community that had nurtured them and given them life, or they could remain in the synagogue and deny what they believed to be the fullness of God's gift to the world. The intense language that John uses about "the Jews" is fraught with the pain of this choice. John does not speak of the Jewish people when he says "the Jews," but he uses "the Jews" as a symbol for powers and authorities who oppose and (as he describes them) are "blind" to the witness of Jesus (e.g., 9:39-41).

John's words about "the Jews" have been misused in order to support Christian anti-Semitism. Nothing could be farther from John's original use of this term. When John used the term, it was insider language—one member of the family speaking in pain to another member of the family. When contemporary Christians take over John's language and use it against the Jews, it becomes outsider language—one group speaking in indignation against another group. When contemporary Christians appropriate

John's language about "the Jews," therefore, it should not be directed against any Jewish community, historical or contemporary. Instead, contemporary interpreters can best capture the original intent of John's language by applying its critique to those powers and authorities within the Christian community itself who oppose and do not recognize the witness of Jesus.

Structure and Contents

The Gospel of John, unlike the other Gospels, begins not in story but in *song*. John 1:1-18, known traditionally as the Prologue to John, consists of a hymn to the Word of God become flesh (1:14). Details about John the Baptist are interspersed throughout this hymn (1:6-8, 15), but the primary purpose of John 1:1-18 is hymnic celebration of the grace that believers have received from God through Jesus (1:16).

The Prologue also provides a clue to the overall structure of the Gospel. Verses 11-12 read, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." These two verses help to explain the break in the narrative that occurs between chap. 12 and chap. 13. Chapters 1-12 narrate Jesus' coming to "what was his own" and his reception by "his own people." Jesus' teachings are offered to a broad public in chaps. 1-12. Chapters 13-21, particularly chaps. 13-17, narrate Jesus' teaching and ministry to those who "believe in his name," to his disciples. Chapters 1-12 are sometimes called the Book of Signs because they narrate the miracles and dramatic acts in Jesus' public ministry. Chapters 13-21 are sometimes called the Book of Glory because they narrate the passion of Jesus.

Comment

Women play significant roles in the Gospel of John. This significance is evident both in the number of stories in which women appear and in the theological importance of those stories. The opening miracle in Jesus' ministry occurs at a woman's initiative (2:1-11). Women are

Jesus' main conversation partners in three stories that reveal Jesus' identity and vocation and the nature of faithful discipleship (4:4-42; 7:53-8:11; 11:1-44). Jesus' passion is watched over by the women from its preparation (12:1-8) through Jesus' death (19:25-27) and resurrection (20:1-18). Men do not have a monopoly on

witness and discipleship in John, rather, the Gospel of John narrates a faith world that would not exist without women's participation in it.

The Wedding at Cana (2:1-11)

John 2:1-11 is the opening event in Jesus' ministry. In 1:35-51, Jesus gathers his first disciples, and in 2:1-11 he attends a wedding with them (2:2). Jesus' mother is also in attendance (2:1). This is the first mention of Jesus' mother in John.

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the wedding. He is not the host of the wedding feast but a guest like everyone else. Jesus' ministry thus opens with Jesus as the recipient of a gesture of hospitality. The beginning of his ministry is played out in an intimate, personal, familial setting.

Jesus' mother is the catalyst for the miracle in this story. When the wine at the wedding feast runs out, Jesus' mother informs him of this lack. The conversation between Jesus and his mother is important. When Jesus' mother speaks to him in 2:3, she asks nothing explicit of him, but Jesus' response in v. 4 makes clear that her words contain an implied request. She assumes that her son can remove the scarcity; Jesus' words to his mother in 2:4 seem harsh to the modern ear: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His words are not an act of rudeness to his mother, however, but are an important assertion of Jesus' freedom from all human control. Verse 4 insists that Jesus' actions will not be dictated by anyone else's time or will. Not even Jesus' mother can control what he does or who he will be.

That one should not read 2:4 as rudeness is confirmed by Jesus' mother's response in v. 5. Despite Jesus' seeming rebuff of her, his mother tells the servants with utter confidence that Jesus will do something. His mother is thus a model disciple: she trusts that Jesus will act and allows him to act in freedom.

The miracle that Jesus performs is appropriate to the personal setting of the wedding. Turning water into wine is an act of turning scarcity into abundance of enjoying the initial hospitality offered him. Jesus first miracle in John takes place in the presence of friends and family, not in the presence of powers and authorities. This opening to Jesus' ministry shows that the miraculous life-giving power of God is at work even and perhaps, especially in the intimate daily places of human lives.

The imagery of this wedding scene is picked up in 3:25-30. John the Baptist describes his joy at the coming of Jesus in the language of bride and bridegroom. Once again, intimate, personal language provides the language of faith.

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (4:4-42)

Prior to this story of Jesus' visit to Samaria, Jesus' activity has centered on the people and places of official Judaism (e.g., 2:13-25, 3:1-21). When Jesus travels to Samaria (4:4), he moves

away from official Judaism, because at the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies (see 4:9). The source of the enmity between them was a dispute about the correct location of the cultic place of worship, a problem the Samaritan woman herself puts before Jesus (4:20). Although the break between Jews and Samaritans is first narrated in 2 Kings 17, the most intense rivalry began about 300 B.C.E. The Samaritans built and worshipped at a shrine on Mount Gerizim, a shrine that competed with the Temple in Jerusalem. This shrine eventually was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 B.C.E.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, then, he meets someone who provides a striking contrast to all that has preceded. When Jesus speaks with Nicodemus in John 3, he speaks with a male member of the Jewish religious establishment. In John 4 he speaks with a female member of an enemy people. Nicodemus has a name, but the woman is unnamed; she is known only by what she is—a foreign woman.

The conversation between Jesus and the woman is thus a scandalous conversation, a scandal noted by the woman herself. She responds to Jesus' request for water with the words "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (4:9). The woman knows that a Jewish man should not talk with a Samaritan woman. Moreover, a Jew should not consider drinking water from a Samaritan vessel (4:9). The scandal is noted also by Jesus' disciples when they arrive at the well (4:27). They are amazed that Jesus speaks with the woman; Jewish rabbis (see 4:31) did not speak in public with women.

The disciples want to ask Jesus why he is speaking with her, but their question remains unvoiced. Their protests reflect traditional cultural and social conventions and expectations, however; Jesus will not be limited by such conventions and restraints. He breaks open boundaries in his conversation with the Samaritan woman: the boundary between male and female, the boundary between "chosen people" and "rejected people," Jesus' journey to Samaria and his conversation with the woman demonstrate that the grace of God that he offers is available to all. Jesus and his ministry will not be bound by social conventions. This conversation challenges the status quo by offering the water of life (4:13-14) to a Samaritan woman.

Perhaps it is not surprising that commentators on this text have more readily accepted

the offer of the gospel to the Samaritans, a despised people, than they have accepted the offer of the gospel to the woman, a despised sex. This resistance to Jesus' boundary breaking in his conversation with the woman takes two main forms. First, many commentators raise questions about the woman's moral character. Second, many commentators express doubts about the woman's ability to engage Jesus in serious conversation. Both strategies attempt to delegitimize the woman as a conversation partner for Jesus and hence as a recipient of the gospel.

The popular portrait of the woman in John 4 as a woman of dubious morals, guilty of aberrant sexual behavior, derives from a misreading of John 4:16–18. In these verses, the Samaritan woman tells Jesus she has no husband (4:17). Jesus responds to the woman's words by telling her the story of her life (4:18). The text does not say, as most interpreters automatically assume, that the woman has been divorced five times but that she has had five husbands. There are many possible reasons for the woman's marital history, and one should be leery of the dominant explanation of moral laxity. Perhaps the woman, like Tamar in Genesis 38, is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her. Significantly, the reasons for the woman's marital history intrigue commentators but do not seem to concern Jesus. Nor does Jesus pass moral judgment on the woman because of her marital history and status. All such judgments are imported into the text by interpreters. When interpreters speak of the woman as a "five-time loser" or a "tramp" (as has been the case in recent scholarship), they are reflecting their own prejudices against women, not the views of the text.

When one sets aside the prejudicial misreading of John 4:16–18 and reads the story on its own terms, one sees that the conversation about the woman's husbands serves two purposes. First, it illustrates Jesus' ability to see and know all things. This is an important theme in John (e.g., 1:48–50; 2:24). Second, it is a moment of revelation for the woman, a moment when she is able to see Jesus with new eyes. She responds to Jesus' announcement of her marital status with the words "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" (4:19). This exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about her husbands thus does not delegitimize the woman because of her supposed immorality but instead shows the woman's growing faith.

The woman's recognition of Jesus as a prophet leads her to ask him the most pressing theological question that stands between Jews and Samaritans (4:20): "Where is the proper place to worship God?" Yet many commentators have dismissed the woman's words to Jesus as a psychological ploy, as a classical act of evasion to change the subject from the embarrassing truth about her morals. Commentators doubt whether this woman would have been able to understand the substance of Jesus' words to her. Once again we see presuppositions about women [women's intellect and interests] skewing a faithful reading of the text. The text presents the woman as a character who is untrained to stay in conversation with Jesus who recognizes that a prophet is the perfect person of whom to ask her question. The woman is the first character in the Gospel to engage in serious theological conversation with Jesus. At the end of the conversation about worship (4:20–26), the woman's faith grows again, as she begins to think about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah (4:29).

The outcome of the story of John 4:4–42 itself offers a persuasive counterbalance to any attempts to diminish the woman's identity and role. When Jesus' disciples return from the city (4:27), the woman leaves Jesus and goes into the city to testify to her townspeople about Jesus (4:29). On the basis of the woman's testimony (4:30, 39), many of the Samaritan villagers believe in Jesus and go to meet Jesus for themselves. To witness to Jesus—to see Jesus and tell others about that experience—is one of the primary marks of discipleship in John. John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus and led some of his own disciples to Jesus (1:29–37). Jesus' first disciples witnessed to him, and the number of his followers grew (1:40–49). Now the Samaritan woman witnesses to Jesus, and through her words many come to faith. When the Samaritan villagers hear and see Jesus for themselves, the woman's witness is superseded (4:42). That is the appropriate pattern of discipleship and faith. The witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one's own experience of Jesus. The Samaritan woman is thus a witness and disciple like John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip.

Scribes, Pharisees, and Women (7:53–8:11)

The story traditionally known as "The Woman Taken in Adultery" has a complicated textual