

Reflection Questions: Woman at the Well (John 4)

The woman whom Jesus interacts with at the well in Samaria (whose name we are never given) is often portrayed as sinful. Her story earns the label: “Bad for a season, but not forever” in a popular Christian book.¹

1. Before you heard this woman’s story, did you have any preconceived notions about her? What was your opinion of her and her situation?

Most people concluded that this woman has actively divorced multiple men, and then chosen to cohabit or simply sleep with a sixth man to whom she was not married. However, this is one place where knowing the marriage customs of the day changes the story. While it is still debated by scholars whether or not Jewish women could have initiated divorce in the 1st Century, it would have been rare (if not impossible) for a woman to have done so on her own, let alone five different times. The idea that she chose to divorce five men is not sustainable. In addition, it was common in the 1st century for a woman to live with a man to whom she was not legally married as a concubine. A woman might have become a concubine for a number of reasons, but it was not necessarily viewed as disgraceful or immoral.²

There are clues even within the story that this woman’s life was more tragic than sinful or immoral. For instance, Jesus never condemns her for sinfulness. When Jesus states the case about her life (John 4:17-18), he states it as a fact, but he doesn’t tell her to repent or to stop sinning. The words sin, repent, and forgive never appear in the story.

There are a lot of different scenarios which might have resulted in the situation this woman finds herself. Lynne Cohick writes the following:

Because of the high death rate, many women were left widows and usually went on to remarry. We do not know whether the Samaritan woman had economic needs or was financially stable. Her history of several husbands does fit the pattern we find of women marrying in their early to late teens and becoming widows very young. The Samaritan woman is a product of her times, living with fairly simple marriage traditions, relatively easy divorce laws, and haunted by the threat that death might at any time steal away a husband or child.³

Cohick concludes that the Samaritan woman might have been widowed, divorced, remarried, and/or living as a concubine, and that all of these were within the available options to women in the 1st Century AD.⁴ Another possibility is that this woman was living in a “levirate” marriage (continued next page)

1. Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 1999).

2. Lynne Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 125.

3. Ibid, 128.

4. Ibid, 128-129.

(that ancient custom which also appears in the stories of Tamar and Ruth), in which, if a woman was widowed without a child, her husband's brother-in-law would marry her to produce a child to carry on the husband's name.

As I presented this story, I made a choice that fit the facts, that this woman was widowed five times, and that she was living presently in a levirate marriage with the brother of her last husband. Of course, this is not the only scenario that fits the story as it is presented to us; but there is simply no way to know what combination of factors might have led her to the place she was.

2. After hearing this woman's story; and the various kinds of scenarios that led to her being in this situation, did your impression of her change at all?
3. If this is not a story about sin or repentance, what themes do you think emerge from her conversations with Jesus? How did meeting Jesus change her life?

This woman is the first person in the gospel of John to learn that Jesus is the Messiah. This is unexpected, because she is of a different race than Jesus (the Jews and the Samaritans did not get along, there was a good deal of racial tension between the two groups); and she is a woman (the disciples are surprised to find her talking to a woman when they return (John 4: 27).

4. Why do you think Jesus revealed this to her first of anyone else he has met in this Gospel?

The woman becomes a preacher, who tells the people of her town that she has met the Messiah, and she invites them to come and see for themselves. We read the following:

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.

⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." (John 4: 29-42)

5. This woman seems an unlikely candidate to become a missionary or a preacher, and yet she not only goes off to tell everyone about meeting Jesus, she is remarkably effective in bringing the people of the town to meet Jesus. What kinds of things do you think stop you from sharing your story of meeting Jesus with people you know? Do you think you can learn from this woman's example?
6. Is there anything else about this woman's life that resonates with your life?

Putting it together

Choose a bead to represent the story of the Woman at the well.
What about this bead represents this woman's story for you?
