

# The Gospel of John

## Part 2

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# Source

- My source material for this series is John Shelby Spong's The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic (2013)
- The Gospel of John contrasts sharply with the Synoptics
- As Michael Goulder discovered, the Synoptic Gospels were written according to what Goulder coined the “Liturgical-Midrash” model; Mark was the original, and it covered 6.5 months of the liturgical year; Matthew and Luke each extended, in their own way, the Gospel of Mark to cover all 12 months of the year
- As we will see, the Gospel of John is completely different!
- Note: I will rely heavily on Spong's explanations
  - I am new at studying the Gospel of John and am still in the process of learning about it myself

# Timelines of the Four Gospels

- The earliest writings in the New Testament are Paul's epistles, which were written *before* the gospels; Paul was *not* a disciple of Jesus; they feared him initially
- Approximate dates (in A.D., aka CE) for the writing of the Gospels
  - Mark: 70, about the time of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans
  - Matthew: late 70-80's
  - Luke: late-80's - early 90's
  - John: start in mid-70's, more in mid-80's or finished perhaps after 100
- Notice that all of them were written long after the crucifixion of Jesus, and that John was written (or at least completed) *last*
- A critical event was the *excommunication* of Jewish Christians from the Synagogue (i.e. Judaism) which is believed to have occurred in or by the year 88
  - This split of Christianity from Judaism resulted from tensions between Jews and Christians (despite the fact that all the early Christians were Jews) that were exacerbated by the destruction of the Temple
  - Why? Because the failed Jewish revolt against the Romans prompted Jews to want to *distance* themselves from Christians. Why? Because the far older religion of Judaism, which had been stable, was considered much less threatening to the Romans than the new upstart religion of Christianity; the Jewish revolt, lead by the Zealots, was bad enough but association with the "King of the Jews" crowd made it worse

# The Gospels Contrasted

- The Synoptic Gospels set out to demonstrate, using midrashic references (“according to the scriptures”), that Jesus was the Messiah as *predicted* by their scriptures, and thus the writers tried, as best they could with *little historical information* about the life of Jesus, to *reconstruct* what they thought must have happened
- The Gospel of John does *not* try to do this
- In fact, the Gospel of John seems to be *weary* or even dismissive, of this attempt and instead chooses to convey *meaning without being literal*, even to the point of telling stories in a way that were obviously *not meant to be taken literally!*
- My understanding is (and I am new at this topic) that “Jewish mysticism” grew over the years (it started even before the Gospel of Mark was written):
  - The Jewish Christians grew tired of trying to persuade the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah and they gained only a limited number of converts
  - As tensions caused by the oppression of the Romans grew, the Jewish Christians found life more and more difficult, and some of their members became so afraid that they reverted to pure Judaism; this “gave birth” to a story in John’s gospel
  - The term “the Jews” is used frequently in John but does *not* refer to all Jews; it refers to the *Jewish religious leaders*; the early Christians were also Jews; tragically, Christian misunderstanding of John’s term “the Jews” has resulted in tremendous *anti-Semitism* over the millennia

# The Samaritan Woman (John 4)

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**7** A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink."

**8** For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

**9** Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

**10** Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

**11** The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? **12** Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?"

**13** Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again,

**14** but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

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**15** The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

**16** Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”

**17** The woman answered and said, “I have no husband.”

Jesus said to her, “You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ **18** for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.”

**19** The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. **20** Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.”

**21** Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. **22** You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.

**23** But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.

**24** God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

**25** The woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will tell us all things.” **26** Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am *He*.”

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**27** And at this *point* His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, “What do You seek?” or, “Why are You talking with her?”

**28** The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men,

**29** “Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”

**30** Then they went out of the city and came to Him.

**31** In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.”

**32** But He said to them, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.”

**33** Therefore the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought Him *anything* to eat?”

**34** Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. **35** Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!

**36** And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. **37** For in this the saying is true: ‘One sows and another reaps.’ **38** I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors.”

**39** And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all that I ever did.” **40** So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. **41** And many more believed because of His own word.

**42** Then they said to the woman, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard *Him* and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.”

# The Samaritan Woman at the Well

- So what is this story about?
  - Is it just about some Samaritans who came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah? If so, what are they to believe about Jesus?
- Who are the Samaritans?
- Does the location of this story have any significance?
- Does the well have any significance?
- Does the time of day have any significance?
- Is there any significance to the five husbands? How did Jesus know about them?
- What changes does Jesus state will occur?



# Who are the Samaritans?

- The “United Monarchy”, with kings Saul, David and Solomon, lasted approximately from 1020 BCE to 920 BCE
- Upon the death of Solomon (~920 BCE), who had forcibly held the kingdom together, the northern 10 tribes seceded, resulting in two countries:
  - The two tribes Judah and Benjamin in the south, which came to be called Judea
  - The 10 northern tribes, often called Israel (Jacob had changed his name to Israel)
- Judea included Jerusalem, and thus Solomon’s Temple, so their religious life continued unaffected; they also continued the “Davidic” kingship by maintaining Solomon’s son Rehoboam as king, and this dynasty lasted until 586 BCE when the Babylonians conquered Judea and initiated “The Exile”
- After the secession, the northern tribes were left with no temple or capital, and thus had to create a capital and new religious centers
  - They made the city of Samaria their new capital, and eventually the new country came to be called “Samaria”; their first king was Jeroboam, and Samaria had several dynasties before being conquered by the Assyrians in ~721 BCE
- Each country had approximately 20 kings during their period of independence (400+ years for the Davidic monarchy, and 200 years for Samaria, spread over several dynasties)

# Who are the Samaritans?

- The Samaritans are the people of Samaria (aka Israel), who from ~920 to ~721, were Hebrews, just like the people of Judah
- But life changed dramatically for them with the Assyrian conquest; the Assyrians deported some of the people, who became known as “the ten lost tribes of Israel”; and the Assyrians imported foreigners in a deliberate bid to break apart the Jewish culture, and thus curtail religious/nationalist fervor
- These imported foreigners intermarried with the Hebrews, producing people of *mixed race (the Samaritans)*; the Jews of the south began to look down on these mixed race people since pure bloodlines were important to them
- The foreigners also brought in their religious beliefs, considered “pagan”, and these *pagan worship rituals* and religious beliefs were considered by the Jews in Judah to contaminate the religion of Samaria; the people of Samaria, having rejected the Davidic monarchy because of the harshness of Solomon’s rule, still claimed to be descendants of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph)
- The people of Judah thus thought of Samaritans as inferior in two ways: (1) mixed race; and (2) contaminated religion, impure worship
  - Impure worship is considered awful because Judaism stresses “holiness” and proper worship of God, as if God is a fickle deity who is difficult to appease

# The Well

- In Jewish tradition, a *well* is seen as a place *to find a wife*
  - In Genesis 24:1-61, Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac, with faith that God will provide the right woman to be the wife. Abraham's servant finds Rebekah at a well; she is selected, comes to Abraham, and marries Isaac. Five chapters later in Genesis, their son Jacob repeats the event and finds Rachel at a well, and they marry. Centuries later, Moses finds his wife Zipporah at a well.
- Jesus, traveling alone, comes to Jacob's well. The woman comes to the well at noon, in the brightness of daytime, unlike Nicodemus in the story before this one, who comes in the darkness of night. Nicodemus is symbolic of those who do not understand Jesus: darkness => lack of understanding
- In another prior story, in which Jesus turns water into wine at a marriage ceremony in Cana (the first "sign"), Jesus is cast as the bridegroom
- In this story, Jesus is subtly cast as the *bridegroom*, because he goes to a *well* and waits for a woman to come; in John's telling, *Jesus is inviting the Samaritans to become a faithful part of the "new Israel"* (the new Christian covenant). Like Abraham's servant, Jesus asks her for a drink of water, and her response will indicate her suitability for being becoming part of the new Israel. The woman replies". How is it, that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?". How can he even speak to her? John 4:9: "Jews have no dealing with Samaritans"

# The Samaritan Woman at the Well

- The Samaritans and Jews shared a hatred of each other. Both race and religion were barriers to unity. But the Samaritans did continue to claim their ancestry of Abraham, providing one common link. After the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE, the Jews later returned with determination to remain ethnically and religiously “pure”. This included strict Sabbath observance, kosher dietary laws, and circumcision. They saw themselves as distinct from, and superior to, the Samaritans. The Samaritan woman’s asking Jesus how he could ask her for a drink is loaded with centuries of prejudice, hatred, and discrimination. Spong writes “from this moment on, the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is *a deep theological conversation about human boundaries and what role Jesus would play in the world of human tensions.*” The author of this gospel is deliberately *concocting a fictional story* to create a scenario where Jesus can address this directly by what he tells this woman. It is not a story that actually happened, but it is *full* of meaning!
- Jesus replies to her by offering her “*living water*”, *a synonym for the spirit of life that binds human together*. But she thinks he is being literal, and says that he has nothing to draw water with. Then she asks “are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?” Jesus speaks on a plane above the one she is speaking on: he says those who drink from this well will thirst again, but Jesus is offering “living” water that allows people to become *whole* so that they will never thirst again. Suddenly the woman understands!

# The Samaritan Woman at the well

- The woman then tells Jesus to *give her this water*. She is receptive
- Jesus, upon hearing this, asks her to call her husband; to this, she says “I have no husband”. Jesus, in one of these instances where he shows knowledge of a person who he has never met (which is OK since she, like many others, is a fictional character), says that she has had five husbands, and the man with whom she now lives is not her husband. Those who read this literally think she is showing sexual immorality, but that misses the meaning.
- Spong writes: ***“This is a symbolic conversation about how the unfaithful region of Samaria can be incorporated in the new understanding of Christianity that Jesus is believed to present and about how ancient religious divisions in the human family can be overcome in the new human consciousness that Jesus comes to bring.” The good news of Jesus is that God loves all people.***
- She replies by saying “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” and she wants him to settle the matter of where God should be worshipped. Jesus replies that God is beyond that sort of human limit. God is an unbounded and *permeating spirit*, and God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.
- ***The woman is symbolic of Samaria itself.*** Jesus is saying that *even the despised Samaritans are to be included in the realm of God.*

# The Samaritan Woman at the well

- Why the five husbands? II Kings 17:24-34 tells the story of the King of Assyria bringing foreigners from five countries to live in Israel after he conquered it, and he intended for them to intermarry with the Jews who remained in Israel. This was simply for the political reason of breaking the solidarity of the conquered people to make it easier to rule over them; this is what produced the mixed race Samaritans whom the Jews despised as both impure people and people who corrupted the religion of Judaism.
- Then the author has Jesus make his first “I AM” statement, using the name of God as revealed to Moses (the Synoptics never have Jesus say this).
- This story is about a God who draws us beyond human barriers. The woman became an evangelist, spreading the good news in Samaria. Jesus returns to Cana, the place of the marriage (where he turned water into wine. He had been there just before meeting this Samaritan woman, and now he goes back, which “sandwiches” this story with references to *marriage*. Jesus is both the bridegroom and the barrier breaker. he reaches across religious barriers to marry everyone to the news of God’s love.
- Symbolic connections: the marriage at Cana, the well (where one can find a mate), and the five “husbands”; living water gives eternal life

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# The Fourth Gospel (Chapter 1)

- The first few chapters of Spong's book make the point that the Gospel of John is fundamentally different from the Synoptics, and ***should be read much less literally than Mark, Matthew, and Luke (which are frequently not literal themselves!)***
- The more I come to understand John, the more I realize that one should start with a "clean slate": don't assume anything about Jesus; don't come to John with preconceived notions about Jesus learned from the Synoptics; ***be open to a completely different type of gospel***
- Even Spong had to undergo this change of thinking; he admits he was put off by the Gospel of John for a long time: Why? Because in John:
  - Jesus's humanity was no longer intact: he claimed pre-existence; he was pictured as being clairvoyant, knowing about people he had never met; he was crucified without suffering pain; he showed no anxiety; he is portrayed as coming to earth for the purpose of dying
  - I agreed with Spong's initial assessment: I consider Jesus to be fully human. I believe that he can thus serve as a role model for us because ***he is fully human, and not divine***, and, like Spong, I was put off by the picture in the Gospel of John of Jesus being miraculously non-human; this destroys his ability to be a role model for us
  - But John is not saying Jesus is miraculous; the stories are symbolic